Using Participatory Processes to Develop SBCC Materials

SBCC practitioners can benefit from using participatory processes in the development of SBCC materials. Involving members of the intended audience in the development process results in more effective materials and activities with content and media that are understandable, relevant, and accessible to the intended audience. This *C-Bulletin* highlights one participatory approach, the Action Media Methodology, which systematically integrates audience perspectives in the development process (see Module 3 of the *C-Modules*).

What Is the Action Media Methodology and Why Use It?

The Action Media Methodology emerged in the mid-1990s in South Africa. It was based on social-change thinking and provided an alternative approach to top-down communication development processes that positioned people at risk of HIV as "target" audiences to whom information was directed. Such initiatives were usually led by practitioners from socio-economic and knowledge contexts far different from the communities they sought to reach, and as a result, materials produced often did not resonate with the intended audiences.

The Action Media Methodology is based on participatory action research and learning processes. It engages members of intended audiences through active participation in a series of workshops where communication needs, perspectives on communication products, and concepts that speak to members' experiences and their social, cultural, and economic environments are explored. The methodology encourages members of the intended audience to reflect on issues that affect their lives.

SBCC practitioners who use the methodology can gather rich qualitative data that inform strategies and interventions. Through this approach they can:

Role play during an Action Media workshop with lower literacy participants in South Africa

- determine health and development priorities

- understand health vulnerabilities and risks

- understand language and aesthetic preferences of audiences

- understand appropriate and relevant communication mediums

- develop SBCC materials and activities that are relevant and context-appropriate

The Action Media Methodology has been applied with such diverse groups as AIDS-affected groups in South Africa, injecting drug users and youth in China, and men who have sex with men (MSM) and sex workers in island populations in Africa and the Caribbean.

Lessons learned by engaging audiences through this methodology include:

- People make meaning of information in relation to the context in which they live

- Culture and social networks influence people's behavior

- People can't always control the issues that determine their health vulnerabilities and risk behaviors

- People's decisions about health and well-being compete with other priorities

- Engagement contributes to a clearer understanding of the audience's vulner-abilities and risks in relation to health and development, along with the language they use, and aesthetic and channel preferences they consider to be relevant and appropriate

Why Use the Action Media Methodology with Lower Literacy Audiences?

Audiences with lower literacy often have difficulty interpreting written messages and printed images. They also tend to be hesitant about disclosing these difficulties and sharing their opinions of written communication materials.

Action Media's participatory setting and its multiple sessions offer a comfortable environment where participants with lower literacy skills can express their ideas and needs and how they want them to be addressed. At the same time, the sessions allow SBCC practitioners to learn about literacy-related barriers, including how participants interpret information, words, symbols, and images in communication materials. Materials resulting from this process are less likely to be misinterpreted by lower literacy audiences.

How Does the Action Media Methodology Work?

- Instead of consulting audience members for a few hours of pretesting, the Action Media Methodology engages members of audience sub-groups in a series of workshops held over two to four days that lead to the development of SBCC materials and related activities. Each session lasts for only a few hours. This helps participants to focus and interact in a group process that is novel and appeals to them. They gain greater insight into the benefits of group work, including its potential to address group-related problems after the workshop.

- During the sessions, SBCC practitioners guide participants through structured activities and discussions. This requires the creation of an environment of trust between group members and SBCC practitioners. Workshop sessions start off with more general conversations and progress to more sensitive topics.

- Participants lead small discussion groups, engage in role plays, and are encouraged to speak freely about issues and contextual factors that affect them. During small-group discussions, key points and themes are documented on flipchart paper and these are then shared during larger group discussions. The discussions lead to consensus about problems, potential solutions to problems, and ways to communicate about solutions.

- Critical-thinking skills and understanding of how communication materials and activities are created, including how symbols, slogans, phrases, and images are translated into communication materials, are strengthened. As this process unfolds, participants and SBCC practitioners discuss the formats and content of communication materials, as well as the channels through which they usually receive information. These sessions lead to the development of draft communication concepts and prototype materials for further development. An artist or designer may be included in the workshop to help expand on the concepts as they are developed. Alternatively, the concepts can be expanded into a communication brief that can be used to further develop and refine the concepts.

- Emerging materials can include print materials such as stickers, posters, or leaflets; concepts and scripts for radio or television broadcasts; concepts and scripts for theater; among others.

- More recently, Action Media workshops have identified approaches to using communication technologies such as cell phones, as well as engaging with social media and other internet-based approaches.

- The review of draft products is included during a final workshop session to allow participants to provide their feedback on how their ideas were captured (see *C-Bulletin 8* for more on concept testing).

RECRUITMENT OF APPROPRIATE PARTICIPANTS

Action Media workshops require between 15 to 20 participants. This allows for smaller sub-group activities and a wider range of participant perspectives. Participants need to be carefully recruited for Action Media workshops. SBCC practitioners need to ensure that participants are representative of the intended target of the anticipated communication materials. As with focus group discussions, group members should share similar backgrounds (such as age, gender, socio-economic status, self-identity, and living conditions). Literacy issues may be addressed by seeking assistance from local organizations to identify suitable participants. Because very few people are completely illiterate, participants can be selected based on certain criteria, e.g., an individual finds it difficult to read longer texts or navigate specific information formats.

PLANNING AN ACTION MEDIA WORKSHOP

Practitioners versed in organizing workshops or focus groups need to take into account a few additional considerations and steps when planning an Action Media workshop.

- *Develop the workshop objectives and design.* This outlines what practitioners want to find out: the main health or development challenges faced by the specific audience and ways to address these challenges.

- *Ensure the workshop agenda has carefully detailed session plans.* In addition to outlining the schedule, practitioners need to describe activities that promote interaction and participation and follow the Action Media process.

TIP: *The facilitator should leave the room when participants discuss issues in pairs or small groups. This allows participants to use their own language and to have more open discussions.*

Discussions are recorded by participants through note-taking, but can also be digitally recorded to ensure that information is not lost.

- *Identify a skilled facilitator (or more than one).* Facilitators of Action Media workshops must be experienced in using participatory methods and in working with audiences who have lower literacy. They must be true facilitators, rather than trainers.

- *Recruit workshop participants who adequately represent the intended audience.* This can include working with relevant stakeholder organizations.

- *Include technical specialists such as artists and designers in the workshop process.* Findings can also be used to develop briefs for the development of communication materials.

- *Review draft concepts and materials with Action Media participants.* Draft concepts and materials should also be tested with audience members unfamiliar with the materials (see *C-Bulletin 7*).

CASE STUDY: ACTION MEDIA WORKSHOPS WITH LOWER LITERACY PARTICIPANTS

In 2009, C-Change conducted separate Action Media workshops with a group of 20 low and semi-literate participants in Elandsdoorn, a rural community in the Limpopo Province of South Africa to explore issues related to HIV/AIDS and communication. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 62 and included 11 men and 9 women. From the workshops, C-Change developed a participatory Community Conversation Toolkit for HIV/AIDS that could be used with lower literacy and other audiences. Workshop objectives and a sample workshop schedule for each of the three groups is presented below.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- Identify areas of low or poor knowledge about HIV/AIDS
- Explore understanding of key risk factors for HIV transmission
- Explore acquisition of knowledge of HIV/AIDS through communication
- Explore general approaches to knowledge acquisition for low literacy groups
- Explore accessible methods of communication
- Explore formats and content for HIV/AIDS communication of key drivers of the disease.

DAY 1, SESSION 1 (2 HOURS)

- Overview of the workshops and an introduction game. *(A key element of the introduction is to build trust between facilitators and participants, and between participants themselves. Where small groups are formed, these are maintained with the same participants throughout the four sessions, to allow for trust and cooperation to be sustained.)*

- Introduction game: Choose a partner and draw their face without looking. Find out their name and something unusual about them. Introduce them to the group. Write the person's name on the picture and pin up on the wall. *(The exercise allows facilitators to get a sense of visual and written skills, and is also a fun way for participants and facilitators to get to know each other and to create a relaxed and creative atmosphere.)*

- Large group discussion about literacy and where people obtain information on HIV/AIDS. *(This is led by the facilitator with comments from participants. This expands understanding of the participants in relation to literacy and also provides insight into sources and mediums for HIV/AIDS information.)*

- Small group discussions around "What do you not understand about HIV and AIDS?" followed by a large group discussion on knowledge gaps. *(Instead of asking what people already understand, the question allows for an open environment of learning. Participants are encouraged to answer the questions themselves, and the group process leads to an unfolding answer. The facilitator avoids giving answers. This allows participants to understand that they are able to problem-solve and find answers to questions without external help. Some questions were kept for an overnight exercise to stimulate critical thinking and information seeking. Participants were asked to return with answers the following day.)*

DAY 2, SESSION 2 (2 HOURS)

- Introduction and warm-up game. *(The game played is "Line up," where participants form a line based on arranging themselves in sequence according to characteristics such as sex, age, shoe size, height. This allows for more learning about each other and reinforces the fun and informal aspects of the workshop process.)*

- Review of homework questions. *(Some participants were unable to find complete answers for questions about HIV/AIDS raised in the previous session discussion. Others found complete answers. Sources included health workers in the community, family members, and HIV/AIDS materials. The exercise leads into a discussion about information sources as well as literacy.)*

DAY 2, SESSION 3 (2 HOURS)

- Small group discussion (one group per theme) on examples of HIV information that participants had learned from various sources: 1) other people, 2) radio and television, and 3) billboards, booklets, and posters. Larger group report-back and discussion. *(This activity and discussion is used to further explore relative trust in sources of information, accessibility for lower literacy groups, and general capacity to obtain knowledge on key aspects of HIV/AIDS).*

- Discussion on HIV risk, with a focus on multiple and concurrent partners. *(This allows for the focus of the workshop to shift to HIV/AIDS and risk, and links to information needs.)*

- Poster making. Participants work in small groups to make posters on key prevention themes using flipchart sheets and markers. These include visuals and slogans. Participants who have better ability to write are able to include the slogans and other wording. The themes identified were 1) Intergenerational sex, 2) the risks of sex while drunk, and 3) women and multiple sexual partnerships. These themes were linked to previous discussions about focal risk areas. *(The poster drafts are not meant to be used as chosen materials formats, but rather use the exercise to allow for an understanding of the aesthetic, linguistic, and creative orientations of participants.)*

- A warm up game identified by participants.

- Discussion of sources of information on any topics, and also HIV/AIDS-related topics, including mediums liked – for example, popular radio stations, television stations, specific radio and television programs. Access and preferences in relation to cell phones is also explored. *(This exercise deepens understanding of preferred mediums and formats of information.)*

- Review of existing HIV/AIDS materials, from a resource archive, that have been placed around the room. Participants are asked to look at various examples of existing materials, select ones that appeal to them, engage with the materials, and then report back to the larger group for wider discussion. *(For practical reasons, materials provided are mainly print based, but can include interactive items such as "talking books" or materials that include photographs, illustrations, and text of varying length and complexity. The discussion allows for deeper insights into aesthetic preferences, as well as the extent to which text and visual elements can be engaged with and interpreted.)*

- Role play exercise around problems identified in poster exercise from previous day. Participants choose an HIV-prevention topic from the previous day, and work together to "script" a role play, which is then acted out by the group in front of the larger group. Emerging issues, comments, and questions are discussed. *(This exercise follows on from various other creative activities and allows participants to further illustrate their linguistic and aesthetic approaches and preferences for communication including storytelling sequences. It is also a fun exercise that explores humor.)*

- Wrap up discussion. *(Here the facilitator and the group discuss what has been learned through the sessions and the plans for development of communication materials based on the ideas that have been discussed. Participants are asked for their comments on the workshop process and these are discussed. The comments are relevant for understanding the design of future workshops with similar groups. Participants typically find the process empowering as a result of recognizing and applying their potential to solve problems and translate these into creative activities including communication. The group work generates an interest in sustaining group processes in the community in the future and potentials for doing so are also discussed.)*

The series of Action Media workshops allowed groups to share understanding of their lives and challenges, as well as processes for making meaning in relation to HIV/AIDS in the context of lower literacy. Recommendations from the workshops that guided the development of the Community Conversation Toolkit were:

1. To incorporate indigenous language into tools, or the tools are used with processes where it can readily be integrated.

2. To focus on textual and visual literacy and ensure that communication is clear and direct.

3. To include games and activities that allow for critical reflection and that support interactive activities and problem-solving as a way to address literacy barriers.

4. To note that participants depicted sexual risk-taking more graphically and openly in images and role plays than was expected by the facilitators.

5. To use some of the role play scenarios used by participants in material images.

6. To understand that some older male participants have never used condoms in their lives and have not been exposed much to HIV prevention information.

The facilitators of this workshop went back to Limpopo a couple of months later to concept test the material and format drafts they had developed based on these recommendations with the same group of people.

What is the Value Added?

- Participants think critically and improve their understanding of issues affecting their health and well-being.

- Researchers and communication practitioners derive information that helps them address real health-related vulnerabilities and risks.

- SBCC practitioners become familiar with participants' use of language, imagery, and aesthetic preferences and overall processes of interpretation of content.

- SBCC practitioners identify communication mediums appropriate for the audience.

- Communication products are relevant to the context and health challenges of the intended audience.

- A core group of informed participants can share the knowledge gained with others who are similarly vulnerable and marginalized.

Communication**Bulletins**

Feel free to make copies. We welcome the sharing of resources.

Resources for More Information

Parker, W. 2009. Action Media: Consultation, Collaboration and Empowerment in Health Promotion. In T. Gokah, ed., *Contemporary Discourses on IE&C Theory and Practice*. London: NovaScience.

Parker, W. 1997. Action Media: Consultation, Collaboration and Empowerment in Health Promotion. *Africa Media Review* 11(1):54–63.

Parker, W., 2009. *Low Literacy Materials for HIV Education: Action Media Research to Determine Communication Needs and Opportunities*. Washington, DC: AED/C-Change. Unpublished.

Quiroga, R. et al. 2002. *Developing Material on HIV/AIDS/STIs for Low-Literate Audiences*. Washington, DC: Program for Appropriate Technology in Health and Family Health International.

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