



Use of soaps containing mercury in Africa – how to fight it

Peter W. U. Appel

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TemaNord 2008:538

© Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen 2008

ISBN 978-92-893-1689-7

Print: Ekspresen Tryk & Kopicenter

Copies: 0

Printed on environmentally friendly paper

This publication can be ordered on www.norden.org/order. Other Nordic publications are available at www.norden.org/publications

Printed in Denmark

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Content

| | |
|--|----|
| Preface..... | 7 |
| Summary | 9 |
| 1. Introduction | 11 |
| 2. Brief description of mercury toxicities | 13 |
| 3. Project description | 15 |
| 3.1 Forum Theatre | 15 |
| 3.1.1 Preparation | 16 |
| 3.1.2 Script writing..... | 18 |
| 3.1.3 Performing | 18 |
| 3.2 Information campaign on schools..... | 24 |
| 3.2.1 Methodology | 24 |
| 3.2.2 Achievements..... | 28 |
| 3.2.3 Challenges..... | 29 |
| 3.3 Press and VIP's | 29 |
| 4. Evaluation tour | 31 |
| Outline of the programme for the evaluation campaign..... | 31 |
| Summary of scene..... | 32 |
| 4.1 Conclusions | 33 |
| 4.2 Comments on how the use of theatre has worked for the audience | 33 |
| 5. Conclusions | 35 |
| 6. Future initiatives..... | 37 |
| References | 39 |
| Sammendrag..... | 41 |
| Appendices:..... | 43 |
| Appendix 1..... | 43 |
| Concept of Forum Theatre | 43 |
| Appendix 2..... | 44 |
| Appendix 3..... | 46 |
| 6 minutes TV feature..... | 46 |

Preface

On 25th February 2005 a UNEP conference was held in Nairobi entitled:

Action on Heavy Metals among Key Governing Council Decisions

Several of the Nordic Ministers of Environment participated and signed an agreement to seek ways to reduce the use of mercury and the release of mercury to the environment.

Numerous women in sub-Saharan Africa use soaps containing mercury to bleach their skin. The mercury goes through their skin and reduces the melanin of the pigmentation. Mercury also causes damage to the body e.g. the nervous system, and is particularly dangerous for the nervous system including the brain of the foetus. One of the most severe consequences is that during pregnancy the foetus will concentrate the mercury from their mothers. Children born by mothers using skin bleaching soaps have therefore a high risk of being mentally and physically disabled.

The use of mercury for skin bleaching thus not only cause severe health problems for sub-Saharan Africa, but also adds to the ever increasing amount of mercury in the drainage systems and the oceans.

The present project is a step towards reducing release of mercury on the African continent.

Copenhagen February 2008

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Summary

Soaps containing mercury have been sold for decades in sub-Saharan Africa where mainly women have used it for bleaching their skin. Most of these soaps were produced in UK, Spain and Italy and were exported to Africa. At the turn of the century the Danish Minister of Environment Sven Auken tried to raise awareness in the European Union in order to ban production of these soaps, with little immediate success (1). Recently, however, production has been banned in Europe. However, new producers have entered the market e. g. Dubai.

Very few of the users in Africa have any idea of the toxicity of these soaps, and it was decided to initiate a campaign in order to inform black women and men about the health hazards caused by the mercury in the soaps.

One of the best ways to inform people in Africa, many of whom cannot read, is to use theatre. There is a long tradition on the African continent for using the theatre for learning and information purposes. It was thus decided to use theatre and the Ugandan theatre group International Anti-Corruption Theatre Movement (IATM) was chosen.

IATM wrote a play and used what is called Forum Theatre. This is a theatre method which actively engages the audience in solving the problems in question.

IATM carried out Forum Theatre performances across Uganda with great success. This part of the information campaign took place during the months of June-August. The performances took place at market places and attracted several hundred people. It was obvious that bleached women watching the plays became deeply worried. Many of them consulted the actors after the performance on what to do?

During the first weeks of December a second campaign (evaluation tour) was carried out. At these plays a maximum number of 30 people had been invited most of who had seen the first play. The result of this campaign was interesting. It was obvious that most of the audience not only remembered the play in great detail, but also remembered the characters of the play and the message on the toxicity of mercury soaps.

The audience at the evaluation tour concluded the following:

- The message on toxicity of mercury soaps was well understood.
- The only way to prevent men and women to use mercury soaps is information aimed directly at these groups.
- Information campaigns over radio are another good way to reach people over wide areas.

- Many in the audience suggested that they are the ones to continue the information and bring it out to the communities. Several in the audience told that they indeed had communicated the message to friends and relatives.
- Forum theatre is a very efficient way to convey important but complex messages to the public.

Due to the serious flooding in Northern Uganda in the autumn of 2007 several of the planned sites for the information campaign could not be reached. It was therefore, with the permission of Nordic Council of Ministers, decided to continue the project into 2008. Performances were carried out in the towns and villages during the months of January and February as listed in Appendix 2.

Another campaign was focussed on school children. This was carried out by the NGO group Conflict Resolution by Youth (CRY) – Uganda. This dealt with school children 12 to 20 years of age in an awareness campaign on the toxicities of mercury and the health hazards by using these soaps. This is a particular important target group since they are on the brink of starting to use these soaps. A number of schools have been visited during the project.

After the successful campaign in Uganda, The Danish Embassy in Tanzania has decided to support a similar campaign in Tanzania. This will take place in 2008.



Bleaching soaps containing mercury

1. Introduction

Millions of African people, mainly women are dissatisfied with their black skin. In order to obtain a fair complexion they use different methods. One method is to use soaps containing mercury. They wash their face, hands or whole body in the soaps and leave the foam on their skin overnight. The mercury penetrates the skin and reduces the melanin content in the pigment. Thereby they obtain a brown to light brown colour. The colour does, however, not last so the process has to be repeated at intervals. Other skin lightening methods are creams containing hydroquinone. A further very peculiar skin treatment which is widely used in Uganda comprise intense rubbing of the skin with a mixture of Jik (chlorine bleaching agent used for cleaning of toilets) and OMO washing powder in hot water. This process is sometimes followed by treatment with soaps containing mercury.

This present project was initiated during an investigation carried out for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DANIDA) in 1999, on the use of mercury in gold extraction by small-scale miners in southern Tanzania. It was discovered that many Tanzanians, mainly women use soaps containing mercury in order to bleach their skin. At that time the soaps with mercury were produced in the European Union, mainly UK, Spain and Italy. Production of those soaps was legal, but it was illegal to sell the soaps in Europe. The soaps were exported to third World countries, mainly Congo D.C.R. and distributed throughout Africa and parts of Southeast Asia. Some of the soaps were even smuggled back to Europe and sold to black communities there. Recently production of soaps with mercury has been banned in Europe. That has, however, not reduced the amount of soaps with mercury for sale on African markets. Some of the soaps are still labelled as being produced in UK whereas other soaps are labelled as being produced in Dubai.

It was regarded as not feasible to try to stop production of the soaps. Tanzania has banned sale of soaps with mercury, but enforcement of the law is lacking. An information campaign aiming at the users of the soaps was initiated in order to inform black women and men about the health hazards of using the soaps. One of the most serious hazards is the risk of giving birth to mentally and physically disabled children by mothers having used soaps containing mercury.

The project consists of two parts. A part where a group of actors IATM (International Anti-Corruption Theatre Movement) carried out Forum Theatre performances in various towns throughout Uganda. Another part was information focussed on school children. This was carried out by the NGO group Conflict Resolution by Youth (CRY) – Uganda.

The project was jointly financed by Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland (GEUS) and Mellempfolkeligt Samvirke Uganda (MS Uganda).



Posters as background on the scene of performance

2. Brief description of mercury toxicities

By: M.D. Rasmus Køster-Rasmussen

The body of evidence describing the toxicity of mercury is large and well established. In order of importance, the principal organ systems affected by mercury poisoning are the central nervous system and the kidneys (2,3). Poisoning may lead to tremor, sensitivity disturbances, reduced memory and intelligence, sleeping disorders, aggressive or apathetic personality changes and even death in severe cases. Especially the unborn child is vulnerable and exposed as mercury up concentrates in the foetus. A high content of mercury in the pregnant woman is known to considerably increase the risk of permanent brain damage and may lead to acrodynia (pink baby syndrome). The evidence comes from the 19th century mirror and hat industries where workers were exposed to mercury over decades and from the disasters in Minamata, Japan, in the 1960'es and Iraq in the 1970'es where large populations suffered serious neurological damage and birth defects were widespread and well documented. Furthermore a 10 year old epidemiological study from the Faeroe Islands documents reduced learning skills and intelligence in a cohort of seven years old children of mothers with a relative high hair concentration (but within the limits considered safe, < 20 ppm) of mercury during pregnancy (4).

One of the conclusions that were drawn from this report was that "safe" concentrations were not necessarily safe as the relation between exposure and damage is probably linear so that even tiny concentrations of mercury may produce minor neurological changes.

Soap containing mercury has the ability to disinfect and whiten skin. Further more it is known to be a skin irritant and frequent use may cause a rash. It can contain different mercury compounds typically with iodine or phenyl-borate.

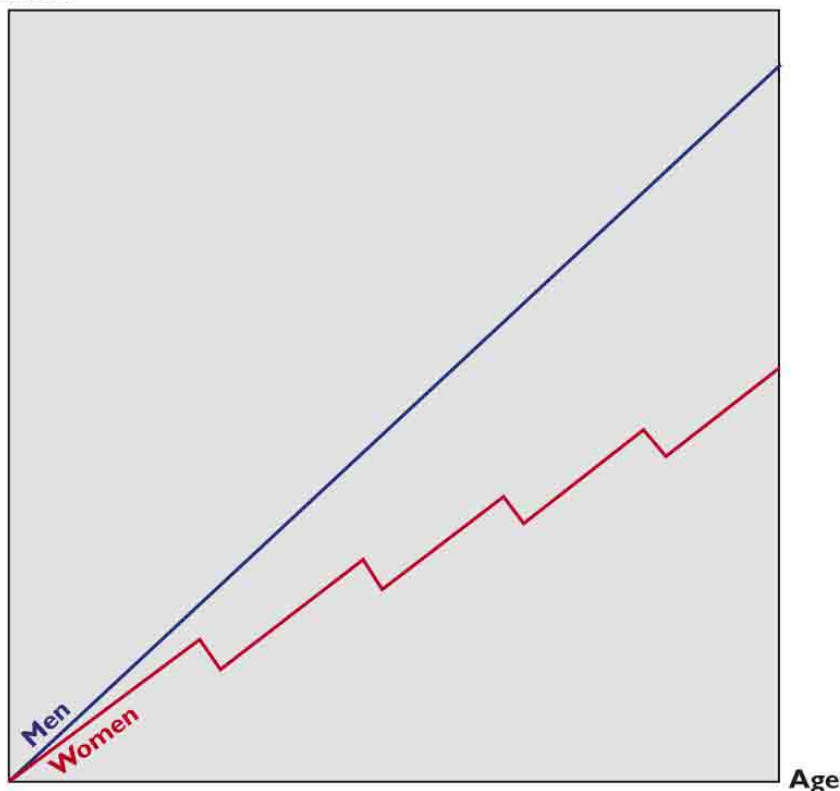
Mercury is accumulated in the body throughout life and is absorbed through inhalation (inorganic compounds) and through ingestion (organic compounds). Traditionally absorption trough the skin has been considered to be limited. The soaps, though, are typically used in the evening and left on the body overnight to be washed of in the morning. Besides the long exposure time directly on the skin, also bed sheets, hands and food that is handled, unintended may be polluted. Also inhalation of mercury soap vaporising during the night may contribute to poisoning.

The most convincing documentation of mercury soap being absorbed in the body is a French controlled and blinded, but not randomised, trial

of 128 professionals daily disinfecting their hands. In the group using mercury soap the urine concentration of mercury was 3 times higher than in the control group (5). An epidemiologic study from Pakistan found that the majority of cases exceeding the recommended maximum limits of mercury in hair samples were young females from the middleclass. The authors explained this surprising finding with the use of mercury soap (6). A case-report described a child with a range of typical mercury induced birth defects and a documented extensive use of mercury soap by the mother during pregnancy and lactation (7). Several such case-reports and smaller publications do exist in the medical literature.

Conclusion: The toxicity of mercury is well documented. Even though the degree of absorption through skin is still debated, there is probably no doubt that the use of mercury soap leads to accumulation of mercury in the body. That is very unfortunate as the users are often young fertile women and mercury is known to up concentrate in the foetus where it may cause permanent brain damage. Exposure to even small amounts of mercury may result in neurological damage to the developing child.

Mercury content



Schematic presentation of mercury contents in man and women during lifetime. The more children the woman gets the less mercury does she accumulate. The foetus sucks the mercury from their mother.

3. Project description

3.1 Forum Theatre

The concept of the project is sensitizing by means of Forum Theatre.

In Africa there is a long tradition for using theatre to sensitize about all kind of issues, for instance nutrition, hygiene, HIV/AIDS, corruption, sexual abuse etc. It can probably be traced back to the fact that in Africa - stories - storytelling has been used very much in the bringing up of children teaching them about right and wrong. In much of the pedagogical theatre that has been around, the message can be narrowed down to: *'Look this is bad – don't do it – this is what you should do'*

Forum Theatre is a participatory theatre method whereby the audience is involved in finding or at least discussing solutions to the problems staged in a given play. More information on this type of theatre is given in Appendix 1.

How does Forum Theatre Work?

I hear it – I forget it

I see it – I remember it

I do it – I understand it

Quote Kung Fut Ze

This quote in a simple way expresses the whole idea with Forum Theatre.

The audience is not only hearing about and watching the theatre that depicts their reality. No - they are invited to come on stage and try to influence what is going on there. You may say that they train for changing the reality itself. If you can make an impact in this 'virtual reality', maybe you can also influence the 'real reality'.

Another way to see it, is that once someone has tried to do something else than you normally do in a given situation (like for instance seeing a friend do something that you know is bad for the person, but you choose to keep quiet) then you yourself have already changed.

Augusto Boal – the father of Forum Theatre – talks about changing the audiences from being spectators, to being spectators! Meaning spectator and actor at the same time

The basic forum technique is that someone from the audience will come on stage and try to change the situation.

The audience will 'fight' with one of the characters who are part of the problem or create the problem, and try to make them change their mind, change their attitude and finally change their behaviour. The role of the actor in this character is to resist the change, to make the audience

work real hard to make this change, because as we all know, in real life you don't just change people with a snap of the finger. But by the end of the day you want the audience to succeed with his or her aim to change the situation. Because what you really want is to encourage people that it is possible to make changes; that you actually can influence your surroundings – your situation – your life.

Forum plays are always based on real life problems/situations that are well known to the audience, so the stages of preparing a Forum Theatre project will be as follows:

3.1.1 Preparation

3.1.1.1 Research

The play is based on real –life- stories, therefore you have to talk with people who are users, people who are traders.

You want to get to know how they do it, why they do it, if it has given them any problems. You want to talk to a variety of people: young, old, well educated, not so well educated, rural women, city women etc.

Interviewing bleaching women and dealers

As a preparation for writing the play, the core team members went out and interviewed a number of people in the 3 regions where they were going to perform.

They were asked a number of questions:

What is your perception of beauty?

Here are some of the answers:

- Beauty is God-given, but still you need to treat your skin.
- Everyone is beautiful but you have to improve on your skin.
- Beauty is caring for your skin – bleaching
- Beauty is someone who has lightened her skin
- Beauty is good moral, nice and natural looks
- Beauty is smooth skin
- Beauty is to maintain yourself by lightening and smoothening your skin
- Beauty is good dressing, discipline, the way you talk, and applying soaps
- Beauty is good morals.
- The conclusion was that the majority of the people interviewed take beauty as skin lightening, skin bleaching.

Why do people bleach?

- People bleach because it is a trend to be brown
- Because they are copy cats

- People bleach out of peer pressure
- We bleach to stand out – for competitive reasons.
- It is classier to be light skinned, it gives a higher status.
- The chances for getting men are many when you are brown and small when you are black, both in the sense of marriage and in prostitution
- It is an attempt to break the cycle of poverty, to look less poor than you are, and their by lift yourself out of poverty.
- People bleach to show others that they can afford it.
- People bleach out of ignorance; they don't know it is dangerous.

What exactly are they doing?

The users are mainly women; there are very few men who bleach.

- They rub the soap into the skin, so that the pores will open and the soap has a better impact.
- If they are short of money they use a mix of Omo and jik.
- Some will leave the soaps on for more days, and stay inside the house for a week to increase the impact.
- Some say that they use the bleaching soaps every day, some that they use them once a week.
- Some claim, that once you have started, you'll have to continue, or else your skin will get even darker.
- Those who can afford it use the soaps on the whole body, those who can't spend that much, use it on the visible parts only face, hands and arms. Thereby the expression Fanta face – Coca Cola legs

What effects does the bleaching have?

The effects that we have met either in the research or in connection with the performances, where women have come up till us afterwards and talked with us, are as follows:

- Lighter skin complexion – sometimes tending to be reddish
- Greyish skin colour
- The skin gets a cold surface
- The skin gets smelly
- Black pimples in the face
- Spots where the skin is darker
- Rough hands
- Scars – especially in the face
- The skin gets somehow fragile and difficult to repair in case of accidents.
- Eye problems – sore and itching eyes

3.1.2 Script writing

On the facts and on a mix of the personal stories you base the script. With Forum Theatre it is very important that the audience can recognize themselves and even identify with the characters so that they will be engaged in the play, and participate in the forum-work.

3.1.3 Performing

Weeks or months before the performance in a given town or trading centre, the tour manager has been there and has made agreements with local authorities about when and where to perform.

On the day where the group arrives at the place, they simply put up the gear, and then they put on music – loud music that is. The music attracts the audience, in the beginning mostly children. When the music has been on for a while then the actors begin walking around on the stage talking ‘We are going to perform here for you the performance Omulungi Yaniiiiii – come and join in’

More people get attracted, and when the actors find that there are about to be enough audiences then starts the dances. They have two dances, and one karaoke number, and after that, usually there is a ‘full audience’ and the performance can begin.

The performance itself falls into two parts:

- The Play
- The forum work



The performance attracts many people



3.1.3.1 The play: Brief outline of the play

The play, which is carried out in luganda (one of the main languages of Uganda), is in what is called Forum Theatre consisting of two parts. The play itself, followed by a the forum part where the audience takes part and discusses the problems laid out in the play and suggests what to do about the problem

The main character, Patience, is a married woman. She has discovered that her husband Billy has a mistress and confronts him with that. Billy denies, and tells her not to interfere with his life. Patience has also another problem. She needs money for her small beauty saloon which she has together with a hairdresser. Billy says that the financial part is her problem not his!

Patience is deeply worried about her marriage and asks two of her friends for advice. How can she get her husband back? Her friends have one advice. Prossy, the mistress, is "brown" and not black. She bleaches her skin. They tell Patience to do likewise. If she bleaches her skin she will certainly get her husband back.

The plot starts. The mistress arrives at the hairdresser's part of the saloon. And a fight on songs starts. Patience sings the song "Spare Tyre" indicating that Prossy is the spare tyre in Patience marriage with Billy. Prossy sings a song saying that the man belongs to both of them and that Prossy has something which Patience hasn't. Both songs are on the hit list of Uganda.

Two months later: Patience has obtained a fair complexion, but also some skin problems in her face. Beside that she is pregnant. One day the local medical doctor is having his hair done. He listens to the talk between Patience and her friends about the bleaching soaps. He starts a small lecture on the dangers of the soaps. The women do not care and asks whether the soaps have harmed them. The discussion develops into

an argument about who is beautiful (The title of the play). The doctor goes on and tells that the soaps may be harmful to unborn children. Patience, being pregnant, gets really worried. But her friends claim that if she stops using the soaps now she will be even blacker than she was before. They say: First you get your husband back then you can decide. One of her friends has just bought a particular efficient soap which Patience reluctantly accepts.

3.1.3.2 The forum work

The play stops and the forum part starts. The following is a description of how the forum work works:

The play ends when Patience's dilemma has become very clear: She has been warned by the doctor that the soaps she uses may harm her unborn baby, she does not have money for the rent of the saloon because she has spent money on soaps, but she has not yet got her husband back and her friends advise her to go on with the bleaching, or else she will become even more dark. What should she do?

The joker opens up the forum work by asking the audience what they have seen, what happened in the play.

The audience usually seems to agree with the message in the play, they'll say that bleaching is bad, that we are supposed to stay in our natural colour, that was how we were meant to be. They will often refer to it as a 'God-given' colour.

They will also talk about the marriage, that the man is causing the problem by abandoning his wife and taking a mistress, and some will blame the wife that she should not interfere with the husband's affairs and talk to him in that way. She should discipline herself.

Then the joker will ask who is causing the problem and who is most affected by it. Patience, the wife is nominated as the one who has the problem, and as the trouble causer, Billy the husband comes in as number one, followed by Jin and Joy the friends who advise her to bleach, but even Patience is mentioned as someone who is creating problems for herself.

So who can do something to stop Patience from bleaching, the joker asks.

3.1.3.3 Summary of the interaction with the audience

Now the audience begins coming up with ideas to what could be done, and the joker invites them to come on stage and try out their ideas. Someone from the audience will come on stage in the role of different characters:

- Some choose to talk with the husband, and they may come as his father, as a brother or a friend.

- The audience will talk to Billy about why he has taken a mistress, what bad effect this has on his wife and his marriage, that he should stop seeing that other woman, that he should tell his wife that she is beautiful.
- The audience will also come on stage to talk with Patience. They will come as a brother, a friend or a counsellor and they will try to persuade her to stop bleaching. Billy – as well as Patience will resist as long as it makes sense, and they will give in to the audience's attempts when it is reasonable to do so.



The audience gives their contribution to solve the problems



The more bold spectators go on stage and present their views

Here follows some statements made by the audience during the forum work:

Billy (the husband) should be more discrete with his affairs so that he does not make his wife unhappy, a man advice

Bleaching is bad for you – just look at Michael Jackson

The ones who bleaches wisely, don't get damages

George – hairdresser – is a hypocrite; he sells the stuff but speaks against it.

Women bleach to compete for men.

Bleaching is like spicy food – you want it more and more spicy.

Always read the labels to find out what is in the soaps you buy. If you can't read, get a friend to read for you.

You can admire other colours, but you can't change your own.

We can never be mzungu's (Mzungu is a white person)

Have you ever seen a mzungu wanting to be black?

Men should refuse to be with women who are bleaching.

The more you keep yourself clean the better

Bleaching means diseases and bad economy.

Questions to Patience:

Now that you have bleached, have you got your husband back?

If your husband had a mistress with a big bum – would you grow one?

Were you not black when you met your husband?

Advice to Patience:

Patience spends money on unnecessary things, she invites poverty that way.

Patience should discipline the way she talks to her husband.

Patience should improve her code of conduct towards her husband.

Women should keep their fingers off men's telephones.

Bureau of standards should look into the selling of the soaps.

The government should forbid selling of things that are not herbal

Male audience:

I simply forbid my wife to go to the saloons; if she comes home with any bleaching soaps I flush them out the toilet.

Matoke plants should be taken care of and watered (meaning women)

Men are more interested in warmth than in colour. They don't like a cold woman.

Question from a male audience: Are there no beautiful black women in the audience?

A loud YES is the answer.

Adjustments in the forum work

After a while it was realised that challenging the audience a bit more might bring more input. It's easy when you see the play to agree, that bleaching is bad, and that Patience should stop, maybe a bit too easy.

When you have chosen theatre as your media it's of course because you believe that it has an impact on the people who watch, but we wanted to bring the message / the discussion even closer to people's lives

So after a period of working with the fiction the joker started asking the audience: What do you think is *your* responsibility as a woman / as a

man when you meet people who bleach? Please talk with your 'neighbour'. It was not so easy to persuade people to talk with one another there and then, but after some few attempts the joker succeeded and that gave some interesting reflections like

- Man and wife must discuss this issue at home
- Women bleach because their men don't take care of them
- We men must say no to go out with bleached women
- The men ought to buy the soaps for the women

3.1.3.4 A performance in western Uganda

Once upon a time in Mityana.

Description by the forum theatre advisor Lena Bjørn of a performance.

We arrive in Mityana (1½ hour west of Kampala) late in the afternoon. We have performed in the morning in Mubende, so it's now to day's second performance.

The first audiences to arrive are the children. As soon as they see the bus, and see people taking things out of that bus, they are there – like out of the blue. Sometimes many, sometimes just a few.

Today at the taxi park in Mityana it's moderate.

As soon as the gear is up and running, the music starts, loud music (to a European ear at least), but it serves a purpose: to attract people.

Now the grown ups are coming. In the beginning they keep a distance, they watch – their arms across. More and more people are coming, and now is the time to begin the final way to attract audience: The dances. Our 8 actors and actresses dancing in "leopard-coloured" costumes. People draw closer, more people gets attracted. They now form almost a whole circle – they are around 300 - I estimate. It's five o'clock and Mityana taxi park is packed with people. The performance can begin.

I myself have a special treat this day – I have a chair – and even better this chair is placed in the shadow. Great, I think, this is perfect. That is until I realise I have placed myself next to a "cinema".

I turn around – "Soccer and Nigerian Film" it says on the house, and from this house a loud sound track is streaming out. It must be from some action film I reckon.

We have now come to the episode in the play, where the first pop song "Spare tyre" begins, and the audience is cheering happily and sings along, and for a while we can compete with the Nigerian sound track.

I take a walk around the audience – I've seen the performance many times already – and it is interesting to watch the audience. They are very engaged, and time after time they burst into laughter, especially about the competition between the wife and the mistress.

The balcony of the nearby "Ave Maria Take Away" is crowded with people, and I come across an astonishing sight: a young man has parked his bicycle behind the audience, and since he can't see anything he has climbed his bicycle and is standing on it. I'm impressed of the act of balance.

One day we had people sitting up in a tree, another day some children were sitting on the poles of a high fence. The Ugandans are prepared to walk an extra mile to be able to watch theatre.

I go back to my seat. Three small children have conquered part of the stage; they run around shouting and laughing until our joker chases them away.

The Nigerian sound track is very loud, but it does not seem to bother the Ugandans at all. We now come to the place where the husband comes on stage to confront his wife, and it seems that the Nigerian film also has reached a moment of suspense, and for 20 happy seconds the two sound tracks are together. A cat has placed itself in the beauty saloon.

The play has come to an end, and the forum work can begin. What have you seen, the joker asks.

1-2-5-8 people raise their hands. The dialogue has begun.

3.2 Information campaign on schools

An information campaign on 20 institutions which included secondary schools, primary teachers' colleges, nurses' training schools and universities in the districts of Kumi, Soroti and Lira was carried out. This campaign was particularly hampered because of the extensive flooding in northern Uganda. Thus the campaign could not be finished before early February 2008. The campaign could not be carried out in January 2008 because of school holidays, but was finalised early February.

The reason for targeting school children is that many of them use bleaching in order to impress the others. It was intended to get the young girls to realise that using mercury soaps is dangerous to the health of them and also to the foetus if they become pregnant. It was also the aim to teach the young boys that black girls are beautiful. Too many boys may encourage the young girls to get brown.

The objectives of this campaign were:

- To create awareness on soaps that contains mercury to 1500 people in six (6) months' time.
- To build the self esteem of at least 1500 young people.
- To build confidence and integrity among the 1500 young people.

The project was meant to create awareness to groups of youth both in and out of school. Most of them were not aware of the dangers of using soaps with mercury and they furthermore rarely took the trouble to read the labels of the soaps.

3.2.1 Methodology

- Debates – These were carried out in only two schools and these were Ngora high School and Maraka College.
- Talks – Most of the time we talked to the various audiences that we were given permission to talk to. This was carried out amongst all the institutions that we reached out to.
- Radio Talk shows – These were carried out in Kumi, Mbale and Tororo districts.

The campaign proved successful. Several of the students told that after they had learned about the hazards of using the soaps, they went back to their rooms and got rid of all the mercury soaps they had. Many of the students also suggested that a good way of distributing the message on the mercury soaps was to use the door to door method. They would go back and inform their sisters, their friends and their relatives.

An evaluation of the impact was carried out in form of a short questionnaire with the following questions:

1. What did you like about the information given to you on Beauty VS Health?
2. Did the information change your view on beauty?
3. What have done in respect to skin bleaching?
4. What would you suggest to be done about these products that contain bleaching agents?
5. Was this information important to you? Give reasons.
6. What would you suggest to pass this information better?

Question 1

All the students who filled the Evaluation forms liked the information given to them about Beauty Versus Health because most of them were ignorant about the soaps that they have been using.

The students also appreciated to obtain the information that most of them came to learn or got to know the dangers associated with bleaching such as skin cancer, bearing of dormant children and loss of skin resistance.

They liked it in that they got to know the list of the soaps that contain mercury and also the fact that they are bleaching agents.

Students liked the information given to them in the sense that most of them learnt that Black is beauty other than using cosmetics that destroy their lives such as mekako, jaribu and they also learnt that one should always be proud of her /his colour.

They learnt that God given colour is always the best. People should stop imitating other people's cultures and ways of life. So they should be proud of what they are.

Students also liked the information in that they learnt the examples of dangerous soaps and also the examples of good soaps such as herbal products that even cost less money in the market instead of the costly bleaching products.

Question 2

Yes the information changed most of the students' view of Beauty because it made most of the students realize the dangers of bleaching and believed that being dark or black is beautiful and that they should maintain their African Beauty.

The information also changed most of the students' view of Beauty in the sense that students have become very keen on reading the ingredients that the product contains before buying it from the market, not as it was before they had got this information where by they could just buy what they find in the market because it smelt nice.

The students view of Beauty has changed in that they are no longer being taken up by their friends (peer groups to buy what the friend uses because it's doing good on his / her face

They say that after receiving the information, most of them started using the right soaps and they are seeing that they are looking beautiful and healthy thus they appreciate the information that was given to them at no cost.

This information also changed the students view of Beauty in that they came to learn that other than using these bleaching products, there are alternative ways that one can maintain him / her self as away to looking beautiful other than using these products such as eating a balanced diet, bathing regularly, dressing smartly, maintaining our hair styles and by keeping a smile on our faces which is less costly than the bleaching products.

Question 3

In Respect to skin bleaching, most students went back to their communities as they got holidays to sensitize them about the dangers of bleaching.

Most of them have done away with the cosmetics that they had been using and they have resorted to using herbal products that can't do any harm to their lives after learning the dangers of bleaching.

The students have also gone back to their families to educate them on how dangerous bleaching is and even discourage their family members who have been using these products and comforted them that immediately they stop using these products; they are going to gradually regain their natural beauty.

In Respect to skin bleaching, when they went back for their holidays, the students played a role of sensitizing people to first read the ingredients that the product contains before taking it for consumption from the market

Question 4

Most of the students' suggestion about the products that contain bleaching agents is that the government should put restrictive measures upon these products in that the manufacturers should stop exporting these products.

Students suggested that heavy taxes should be imposed on these cosmetics so as to limit them from imported.

Most students' suggestions about the products that contain bleaching agents are also that the public should be restricted from using these products and if found using them, one should be using it at his / her own risk.

Their suggestions about the products that contain bleaching agents is also that if the manufacturers want to continue manufacturing these products, they should reduce the ingredient that cause bleaching that is mercury.

Most students also suggest that these products containing mercury, their prices should be hiked in the market so as to reduce their consumption by the public.

Most students suggested the government should get involved and save people's lives by carrying out adverts that enlighten people on the dangers of these bleaching products. And adverts should be carried out in various Radio stations and in various languages so that all Ugandans get to learn the dangers of these products.

The students also suggested that restrictions should be put on whoever they get selling these products. And once a person is got selling such products, such a person should be sued or heavily charged as that person is dealing in things that destroy people's lives.

The students finally suggested the Uganda Bureau of standards should be very strict on the products that enter the country and take precautions on how well or bad those products are going to be to the lives of the people who consume them.

Question 5

All the students answered that the information was important to them because of the following reasons:

They learnt the dangers of bleaching products or agents; Such as skin cancer, loss of skin melanin making cells and development of spots on their faces.

They learnt other ways of being beautiful other than using these products such as regular bathing, washing clothes, and eating well.

They were educated and informed about all the soaps and lotions or creams that contain such dangerous chemicals.

They learnt a lot about skin bleaching most especially when they saw the poster that was showed to them by the facilitators; it really threatened the lives of those practicing bleaching.

Most of the students learnt to appreciate the inner beauty in them other than the outer beauty.

Students learnt that beauty is not achieved through bleaching as they had thought before the sensitization but through maintaining one's body.

Lastly, the students found the information vital in the sense that they came to learn that the cosmetics that they have been ignoring in the market are very good to their health such as herbal products like samona jelly, movit herbal products which are relatively cheap as compared to the expensive bleaching products.

Question 6

The students suggested that the information should be passed on better through the following measures:

- More people should be employed to create awareness to the entire public.
- Demonstrations and Billboards would be the better way of passing on this information about the dangers of bleaching.
- Radio talk shows and health magazines should be introduced weekly. This information should also be passed on better through public assemblies and occasions to really sensitize the whole public.
- At schools and tertiary institutions organizing adverts and seminars would be the best method and also Drama on bleaching so as to draw attention of more students.
- Through Television adverts showing the affected people who bleached and by holding workshops on the theme health and Beauty through these means, information can be passed on well.
- News papers also can carry on the information well by publishing an article on Bleaching or show pictures of bleached and non bleached people.

Students also suggested that the people working on this sensitization should carry on and reach the whole country (Uganda) because people have gone astray because of ignorance.

Students also suggest that for the information to be passed on well video firms should be got to real show people how dangerous these products are.

The information should be communicated in various local languages because in most cases, it's found that those people who can't read are the ones who are more affected.

Finally, Students also suggested that to pass over this information well, the sponsors should put in activities such as essay writing or competitions and at the end of a given period of time, a winner walks away with a prize with a topic related to skin bleaching.

3.2.2 *Achievements*

As part of the achievements, our target was to create awareness to at least 1500 young people but from the registers that we had, we informed a number that was bigger than that. The question in point here included situations where we thought that we could talk to only a particular section of the school but the administration on learning what exactly we intend to do feel that we should inform the entire school. In such cases, we fail to turn down such a situation but take the opportunity because people are anxious for information.

We also aimed to reach 20 schools both secondary and higher institutions of learning and we were therefore able to reach 17 schools and had three talk shows on three different radio stations in three districts.

We were therefore also able to change the mindset of young people and the rest of the generation on what they use, some of the students in the schools sensitized disposed off of what they had as beauty products that were harmful. The case in point here is Bukedea Core Primary teachers' College in Bukedea district.

Many of the people we talked to later on pledged to read the ingredients of the products they use from hence forth.

3.2.3 Challenges

There were several challenges that we face and these included;

- Our schedule of operation depended entirely on the school program and time.
- The time allocation for some places was limited and therefore the methods that were originally planned as strategies to use would not apply.
- We were working according to the schedules of the schools and therefore we could not do everything as we pleased.
- As much as we planned to use youth friendly methods, we were not able to because of the time slot we were always given at the institutions we visited.
- We did not get to all the districts planned because we realised that those areas do not really care about using these products. These include lira and gulu.
- The floods that hit our area of operation also affected our timing in terms of implementation and by the time we thought we should go and do it, and then we could not be permitted to do so. The project could thus not be finished until February 2008.

3.3 Press and VIP's

During the Forum Theatre touring of Uganda local and regional TV stations, radio stations and newspapers attended the performances and interviewed the actors and some of the audience. A 6 minute TV feature from a commercial TV channel (Ugandan Wavah Broadcasting Services (WBS)) can be seen in Appendix 3.

In Kampala two performances were held. At the last performance which took place early July a minister from Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (Hon. Madada Kyebakoze Sulaiman) attended. Furthermore ambassadors from three Nordic Embassies: Denmark, Swe-

den and Iceland attended. The Norwegian ambassador was unable to come, but sent another representative instead.



Skin problems caused by bleaching with mercury soaps

4. Evaluation tour

The initial campaign with the touring of the Forum Theatre took place during the months June, July and August. Then the campaign stopped for some months during which period it was considered how an evaluation of the impact of the campaign possibly could be carried out. When we came back to do the assessment, it was 4-6 months since the participants had seen the performance.

The evaluation campaign had several purposes:

First and foremost to assess whether the audience during the first campaign with the Forum Theatre had understood the message.

Second purpose was to present additional information and give the audience better possibilities to ask questions.

The final purpose was to evaluate how appropriate the Forum theatre is to convey a fairly complicated message to people in Uganda.

Seven of the places visited during the first campaign were selected and 25 to 30 people who had attended the first campaign were invited by letter.

Outline of the programme for the evaluation campaign.

The programme is a combination of questioning, group work and a small performance. It is grouped in three sections.

1. Section.

Questions

- Do you remember the play “Omulungi Yaani”?
- What do you remember from the performance?
- What do you remember about the characters?
- What – if anything – have you been talking about in connection with the performance?

2. Section.

Action – interaction

- The participants are divided into groups of 4-5 people to discuss.
- The actors play the very last bit of the original play.
- The joker (facilitator) asks. What do you think has happened a year after this took place?
- They discuss in groups, and come up with suggestions. Some of the suggestions may be acted out.

3. Section.

The new scene. 13 years after.

- The actors play a scene that takes place 13 years later, and from there the audience is led into discussions about responsibility.
- Patience now has the saloon alone, and she has divorced. Her son Joshua is now 13 years old.
- George the barber has become a businessman, selling cosmetics even bleaching soaps.
- Jin, Patience's friend is now a teacher.

Summary of scene.

Patience is in her saloon, she wears a scarf that almost covers her face. Jin is coming to have her hair done. Jin is a teacher where Joshua (the son of Patience) goes to school. Jin is telling Patience that her son has many difficulties in school. He does not work well in the class; he is slow and cannot concentrate. Patience is worried and wonders why it is like that. Jin suggests that it is because he takes after the father Billy.

Suddenly Patience is struck by a thought. Could it have anything to do with the bleaching she has been doing since before the child was born? In a flash back they remember, what the doctor said about "the mercury that could harm the unborn baby".

Now George comes in. We learn from his telephone conversation that he is now a big man in business.

He is teasing Patience by suggesting Jin, that she should start bleaching and become as pretty as Patience. They ask if George's wife is bleaching. He says no – he will not let her, because he knows the dangers of it.

Why you are then selling the stuff, they ask. George says that he actually tried to warn Patience back then when she started, and also warn others, but they refused to listen. He knows how much the women want these products, so now he is selling them.

Jin suggests that Patience stops bleaching. Her husband – for whom she did it – is anyway gone.

Patience gets very upset and says: "You were the one who talked me into doing it in the first place"

George says that she must continue, in order for her customers to buy. Jin and George are arguing. Finally Patience shouts at them:

"Look at me: I have no husband, I have a mentally disabled child, and my face is completely spoiled, I'm the topic of the talk"

She throws all the soaps down from the shelf, and then she takes off her scarf and uncovers her face, and we see that her face is filled with bruises and large dark spots.

4.1 Conclusions

At all seven villages and towns the audience had a very good recollection of the initial campaign.

The result of this campaign was interesting. It was obvious that most of the audience remembered not only the play in great detail, but also remembered the characters of the play and the message on the toxicity of mercury soaps.

The audience at this second campaign concluded the following:

Using message on toxicity of mercury soaps sank in.

The only way to prevent men and women to use mercury soaps is information aimed directly at these groups.

Information campaigns over radio would be another good way to reach people over wide areas.

It was significant, that at almost all the assessment events, there was a high level of energy. Many stated that they had been talking about the issue after the performance was in their community and the audience suggested that they now are the ones to continue the information, and bring it out to the communities.

Forum theatre is a very efficient way to convey important but complex messages to the public.

4.2 Comments on how the use of theatre has worked for the audience

In a country like Uganda people don't want to sit and listen to some one talking for a long time – talking without action. With the theatre you get a chance of having three things at the same time: The message, action and entertaining education.

Things we see, we don't forget. The theatre paints strong pictures that will stay in your brain for a long time; it's much stronger than the talks.

Theatre works well for local people – its fun and entertaining, but at the same time you learn something.

We would not be so taken by the problem, if it was only teaching.

With the theatre you come to learn in a happy way.

The theatre has helped us to see the consequences of the problems (with the bleaching)

This is the best way you can come to understand a problem and its consequences.

The theatre can help people to know the root of a problem, and its solution.

The theatre creates emotions, and thereby the message goes straight to the brain. You feel like crying when you see real life things happening on stage.

The theatre is like getting a long stick with a hook so that you can get the fruits from a tall tree.

5. Conclusions

The evaluation campaign of the performances showed beyond doubt that the message was understood and was remembered by the audience. During the group work and discussions it was clear that the audience realised that it was now up to them to disseminate the message of the health hazards caused by the mercury soaps. They used expressions such as door to door campaign.

However they also suggested that radiobroadcast would be a valuable method of distributing the message over large areas. TV shows were considered to have less impact since TV is not widely distributed outside the bigger towns and villages.

The school children were also receptive of the message. Several of them went back to their rooms and cleared the soaps with mercury which they had used. They also agreed that the mouth to mouth method between them and their relatives/families and friends would be an effective method of distributing the message.

The project has also caught the interest of the media. Several local radio and TV channels have brought interviews and clips from the performances.

6. Future initiatives

The Forum Theatre brought the information on the dangers of using soaps with mercury to about 30 towns and at each performance an average of 200 people watched. The awareness campaign at schools brought the messages to many hundred school children. Uganda has a population of more than 28 million. There is thus a long way to cover the whole population.

Next step in the information campaign is to get the message across to a larger number of people. There are two possibilities 1. television shows or 2. radio theatre. Since TV is not widely distributed in the rural areas it will be better to broadcast the information via the radio network. There are a large number of local and regional private radio stations, several of which already distributed clips and interviews from the Forum Theatre performances.

The radio theatre has to be done in the three main languages of Uganda maybe in English as well. There are still more languages, but the three languages are dominating in Uganda. The number of radio theatre broadcasts will be determined by the amount of funding available. The content of the radio theatre broadcasts will be determined from the feedback gathered at the Forum Theatre performance across Uganda.

Funding this second phase of the project has not been determined yet. MS Uganda has, however, already indicated that they are interested in the project and are presently deciding how large part of the project they can finance. The estimated costs of radio theatre on four languages are in the order of 550.000 DKK.

MS Uganda has decided to allocate 100.000 DKK for the radio theatre project, but further funding is needed.

The Danish Embassy in Dar es Salaam has indicated that they will support a campaign against use of mercury soaps in Tanzania in 2008. The Tanzanian group of actors will be trained by one or two of the actors from International Anti-Corruption Theatre Movement.

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Sammendrag

Kviksølvholdige sæber til blegning af hud har været solgt i mange år, på det afrikanske kontinent syd for Sahara. Det bruges hovedsagelig af kvinder, men der er dog også enkelte mænd der bruger det. Sæben bliver smurt godt ind i huden og sidder ofte natten over. Kviksølvet trænger gennem huden og nedsætter melanin produktionen i hudens pigment. Afhængig af ens økonomiske formåen sæbes kun ansigt og hænder ind eller hele kroppen. De fleste sæber kun ansigt ind, deraf det afrikanske udtryk: *Fanta face - Coca Cola legs*.

Udover at reducere hudens pigment har kviksølvet en række andre skadevirkninger på organismen. Det ødelægger specielt nervesystemet og her er det specielt farligt for fostre. En gravid kvinde, der blegger huden med kviksølv sæber har stor risiko for at få et mentalt handicappet barn.

Kviksølv sæberne blev i en årrække produceret i England, Spanien og Italien. Det var fuldt lovligt i EU. På det seneste er denne produktion blevet forbudt. Nu produceres sæberne imidlertid blot andre steder. En del sæber er markerede som kommende fra Dubai. Handelsruterne er angiveligt at det meste sæbe bliver eksporteret til Congo D. C. R. for derfra at blive smuglet ind i de øvrige afrikanske lande. I de fleste afrikanske lande er import og salg af sæber med kviksølv ulovligt, men landene har ikke kapacitet til at håndhæve forbuddet.

Meget få af de kvinder, der bruger kviksølv sæberne, er klar over de helbredsmæssige risici. På baggrund heraf bevilligede Nordisk Ministerråd penge til en informations kampagne i Uganda.

En af de mest effektive måder at informere befolkningerne i Afrika på, er gennem teater. Derfor engageredes en teatertrup IATM (International Anti-Corruption Theatre Movement, i Uganda) til informationskampagnen. Teatertruppen benytter det såkaldte Forum Teater, der aktivt involverer publikum til løsning af de forskellige problemer (se beskrivelse af den teaterform i Appendix 1).

I juni, juli og august gennemførtes en turne over store dele af Uganda. Teaterstykket blev opført på markedspladser, og der var både stor tilslutning og engagement fra publikums side. Efter forestillingerne deltog publikum aktivt med mange spørgsmål og en del af tilskuerne blev så engagerede at de kom op på scenen og diskuterede med skuespillerne.

Det var interessant under teaterturneen at betragte unge piger, der tydeligt havde bleget sig. I begyndelsen hvor stykket er morsomt ler de, men da det går op for dem hvad det drejer sig om bliver de dybt bekymrede. Flere af dem kom hen efter teaterforestillingen og spurgte om man kunne gøre noget ved de eventuelle skader de havde pådraget sig.

Der var også stor interesse fra den lokale såvel som den regionale presse. Både TV, radiostationer og aviser mødte op til mange af forestillingerne. De nordiske ambassadører mødte sammen med en Minister for Gender op til en af forestillingerne i Kampala.

I de første uger af december gennemførtes en evaluerings turne til syv af de steder hvor den første turne havde spillet. Til opfølgningen blev hvert sted skriftligt inviteret 25 til 30 mennesker, der alle havde set den første forestilling.

Under den anden turne konkluderede tilskuerne:

- Farligheden af kviksølvholdige sæber var forstået
- Den eneste måde at forhindre brug af disse sæber er ved informations kampagner direkte til brugerne
- Informations kampagner via radio er en effektiv måde til at komme langt ud til brugerne.
- Mange af tilskuerne indså at nu var det deres tur til, på lokalt plan at informere om kviksølvsæbernes farlighed.
- Forum Teater formen er en effektiv måde at udbrede komplekse budskaber til befolkningen.

Derudover gennemførtes en awareness kampagne for skolebørn i puberteten, som undervisning, rollespil og små teaterstykker til oplysning for de unge. Det er specielt vigtigt at få de unge piger til at indse at deres sorte farve er flot og at brug af kviksølvholdige sæber kan give store problemer for dem selv og deres kommende børn. For de unge mænd er det vigtigt at få dem til at indse at sorte piger er attraktive.



Young girl bleached by mercury soap. Initially she is having fun over the performance until the message of the health hazards dawns upon her.

Appendices:

Appendix 1

Concept of Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre was invented and developed by the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal back in 1960's. He was already using theatre in the political struggle against the military regime, when he realized that if you want to make theatre that serves the interest of 'the people' it's better to give people a voice, a possibility to express themselves, and deal with their own problems.

Boal worked in Latin America up till 1976 where he was exiled by the military regime. That brought him – and the Forum Theatre - to Europe where he eventually opened Centre des theatre des Opprime in Paris. Through the 1980's and 1990's Augusto Boal has been active in many countries all over Europe, especially has he worked a lot in Sweden, and made an impact on many social workers there.

Forum means square, and the name refers back to ancient Athens that - at least in Europe - is seen as the cradle of democracy. Here, at the forum, all free men would meet and discuss important matters, and when one man spoke the others should listen without interrupting – such were the rules.

The basic idea with the Forum Theatre is to create a space where everybody has the possibility and the right to be heard and to express themselves. You make a play, which should always be about some problem that is well known to the audience, it may be short or it may be long, and after the play you break and involve the audience in dealing with the problem.

The basic belief is, that the spectators are the ones who know, and the idea is to train people, the audience, to speak up and try out new ways and new solutions to their problems.

In this way Boal wanted to use the theatre to empower the disempowered and thereby change society.

The aims of the Forum Theatre are:

To change the spectator from a passive body to an active participants

To train and enhance participation

To share ideas about a given issues of concern in a given society

To encourage and train dialogue

Appendix 2

List of places performed by IATM

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Date: | 04-06-07 |
| Place: | Kasese |
| Number of audience: | 250 |
| Date: | 04-06-07 |
| Place: | Hima |
| Number of audience: | 200 |
| Date: | 05-06-07 |
| Place: | Fort Portal |
| Number of audience: | 125 |
| Date: | 06-06-07 |
| Place: | Mubende |
| Number of audience: | 175 |
| Date: | 06-06-07 |
| Place: | Mityana |
| Number of audience: | 300 |
| Date: | 08-06-07 |
| Place: | Kibuli (Kampala) |
| Number of audience: | 150 |
| Date: | 18-06-07 |
| Place: | Malaba |
| Number of audience: | 250 (100 of them children!) |
| Date: | 19-06-07 |
| Place: | Naluwerere |
| Number of audience: | 350 (100 of them children!) |
| Date: | 20-06-07 |
| Place: | Mbiko |
| Number of audience: | 150 |
| Date: | 21-06-07 |
| Place: | Lugazi |
| Number of audience: | 125 |
| Date: | 21-06-07 |
| Place: | Seeta |
| Number of audience: | 200 |
| Date: | 02-07-07 |
| Place: | Kimombasa |
| Number of audience: | 130 |
| Date: | 03-07-07 |
| Place: | Kiyaaye |
| Number of audience: | 150 |
| Date: | 04-07-07 |
| Place: | Mulago |
| Number of audience: | 75 |
| Date: | 05-07-07 |
| Place: | Bakuli |
| Number of audience: | 150 |
| Date: | 06-07-07 |
| Place: | Kyebando |
| Number of audience: | 300 |
| Date: | 23-07-07 |
| Place: | Lyantonde |
| Number of audience: | 150 |

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Date: | 24-07-07 |
| Place: | Kinoni |
| Number of audience: | 250 (many of them children from secondary school) |
| Date: | 25-07-07 |
| Place: | Nyendo |
| Number of audience: | 110 adults and 300 children |
| Date: | 25-07-07 |
| Place: | Lukaya |
| Number of audience: | 220 |
| Date: | 26-07-07 |
| Place: | Kakiri |
| Number of audience: | 160 |
| Date: | 06-07-07 |
| Place: | Jinja |
| Number of audience: | 500 (almost all of them primary school children – not a good idea) |
| Date: | 07-08-07 |
| Place: | Buyikwe |
| Number of audience: | 100 grown ups and 200 children |
| Date: | 08-08-07 |
| Place: | Nkokonjeru |
| Number of audience: | 300 |
| Date: | 09-08-07 |
| Place: | Katosi |
| Number of audience: | 300 |
| Date: | 10-08-08 |
| Place: | Kisoga |
| Number of audience: | 130 |
| Date: | 13-08-07 |
| Place: | Kitimbwa |
| Number of audience: | 150 |
| Date: | 14-08-07 |
| Place: | Kayunga |
| Number of audience: | 210 |
| Date: | 15-08-07 |
| Place: | Kangulumire |
| Number of audience: | 200 |
| Date: | 16-08-07 |
| Place: | Njeru |
| Number of audience: | 400 |
| Date: | January 08 |
| Place: | Bombo |
| Date: | January 08 |
| Place: | Luwero |
| Date: | January 08 |
| Place: | Nakasongola |
| Date: | January 08 |
| Place: | Lwampanga |
| Date: | January 08 |
| Place: | Mijeera |

Appendix 3

6 minutes TV feature

Title: *Use of soaps containing mercury in Africa – how to fight it*

TV feature on an information campaign in Uganda against use of soaps with mercury for bleaching black skin. The campaign was sponsored by Nordic Council of Ministers, Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland, and MS Uganda. The feature was made by Wavah Broadcasting Services, and broadcasted in the autumn 2007.

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