Communicating for Health

Steve Smith

A film about teenage pregnancy

An outline is given of the making, distribution and initial evaluation of a film intended to discourage the very young in Africa and elsewhere from engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse.

In 1985 the Pathfinder Fund, an American foundation concerned with planned parenthood, especially in developing countries, decided to support the making of a film on teenage pregnancy in Africa. The idea was to make an entertaining film that would carry the right message for African teenagers on this very sensitive subject while not offending them, their parents, or the people holding the keys to the distribution channels of television, nongovernmental organizations, and government bodies. It was important to ensure the widest possible dissemination of a film that would be fun to watch and would hold the audience’s attention. A commitment was made to work in Africa with African cast and crew, and to achieve international standards of technical quality.

What messages?

The present author and producer John Riber visited four countries in Africa during 1986 with a view to discovering as much as possible about our intended audience, working out the messages to be conveyed, examining the prospects for production and distribution, and deciding where the film should be made. Focus group discussions and interviews were held in each country. A design team of African film and family planning experts advised us.

It should be borne in mind that we were a small company, with no institutional support. We received help from the Girl Guides in Zimbabwe, Africa Consultants International in Senegal, the Planned Parenthood Federation of Nigeria, and a consultant, Dr Khasiani, in Kenya. They helped us to obtain government approval, find group discussion facilitators, and involve teenagers and parents in focus group discussions. We had less than a week in each country, yet averaged four such groups and some twelve interviews with senior officials.

We learned that the key requirement was to tell teenagers the full story, including the repercussions of pregnancy, and this was why Consequences was chosen as the title of the film. We asked members of each focus group to tell us about someone they knew who had become pregnant. In almost all

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cases the pregnant girl went away from home. Teenagers often denied that such a terrible thing could happen to them, in part because they did not appreciate the whole story. We felt that perhaps we could help in this area, by getting them involved with the characters, showing the mistakes that were made, and explaining the full consequences. The audience might even see parallels between the characters’ actions and their own, appreciate what could happen, and either not have sexual relationships or use contraception.

At first we thought the main message should be to use contraception, but quickly found that this could be offensive. However, we felt obliged to mention condoms as a means of preventing the spread of AIDS. It was decided to include a scene dealing with this subject in such a way that it could be removed for television broadcasting without spoiling the story line.

RICHARD: Uh... Don’t you ever get worried about... uh... you know...

SONNY: Diseases?

RICHARD: Yes, diseases!

SONNY: Sure, I do! Especially with this new one — AIDS. It’s a killer, man. With this one, there’s no cure. And it’s spread through sex. Even respectable people are getting it — you know, doctors, lawyers, teachers... (laughs)

RICHARD: So you’re planning to die soon, are you, Sonny?

SONNY: Hell no, man! I’ve got protection! Dying is one thing, and being a daddy is another! I don’t have much time for either, so I’ve got protection.

RICHARD: Protection, huh?

SONNY: You know, condoms, tubes, rubbers... Whatever, a bit inconvenient at times, but hell, they do the job. The girls don’t get pregnant and neither of us gets diseased, so with condoms you’re covered, man. You get the joke... Covered!

We also thought that teenagers should be encouraged to seek advice from their parents or other adults. Unfortunately this is not always possible in Africa. The message was included but was not the main one.

We debated whether our teenage heroine should become pregnant by a “sugar-daddy” or another teenager. We decided on the latter, as this would help to create a comparatively positive, balanced relationship, and a “sugar-daddy” might be offensive to some people who could block the distribution of the film.

We also had to decide how to handle the abortion issue, which arises in any teenage pregnancy. We did not want to anger the powerful forces on both sides, especially among the donor community, so we decided that our heroine should reject abortion as too dangerous and illegal. Two American reviewers made the point that legal abortion is not dangerous. They would have preferred that we said it was illegal first and dangerous second, but that was not how African teenagers would see it. In situations like that depicted in the film, abortion is illegal throughout Africa.

Script-writing and summary
A story line was developed with the help of Harriet Masembe, a Ugandan folklorist.

A film that is interesting and entertaining involves audiences in the experiences of its characters.

Olley Maruma, a Zimbabwean, wrote the dialogues and directed the film. We sought comments on the draft script from Segun Oyekunle, a Nigerian scriptwriter, and others. It took about eight months to
assemble ideas from many sources and develop a script that delivered the messages yet was interesting and entertaining.

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The story goes like this:

— Rita is 16 years old, living in an urban area of high population density in Africa. She is bright, talented, and has a steady boyfriend. She will soon graduate from secondary school and plans to go to university. Life is good — until she discovers that she is pregnant. Her relationship with her boyfriend, Richard, breaks down, and her performance at school deteriorates. She becomes confused and depressed. Within a few months they are both expelled from school. Rita is turned out of her home in shame, and is sent to her mother’s village to bear the child. Her life changes profoundly as she acquires responsibilities and faces hardships that had never been part of her youthful dreams. Returning home a year later, she obtains employment to provide for herself and her daughter. However, she finds it difficult to relate to her former friends. She is reluctant and indeed afraid to establish new relationships. Her boyfriend, who disappeared soon after his promising academic career came to a fruitless conclusion, suddenly returns home. At the end of the film, which lasts for 54 minutes, we are left wondering what will happen to these two young people.

Shooting the film

The shooting of the film took about three weeks. Each working day started at about 5 a.m., when the actors, crew and equipment were assembled. Shooting started just after dawn. In the evening we packed up and began to prepare for the next day: organizing the locations, learning lines, preparing equipment and planning the catering, transportation, logistics and other matters.

They were gruelling days of takes and retakes, trying everyone’s patience. The Zimbabwean actors and crew were very professional and were always punctual. Things went so smoothly that it was hard to believe that the 50 people involved, who had never worked together before, made such an effective team.

Editing, pretesting and finishing

It took two months to piece together the best takes and sound tracks, add the music and put together a rough version of the film. We pretested it with about 250 teenagers in Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and with our donors and key people in London, Washington and Boston. They suggested a few small but important changes. Dr Ayo Ajayi, from the Pathfinder Fund, suggested a change in a monologue to make the account of Rita’s delivery complications medically correct. Also, we did some simplifying to make the story easier to follow. The pretest audiences responded favourably, 99% saying that they enjoyed the film, 91% that they liked the music, 97% that they would like to see the film again, and 98% that they would recommend the film to their friends.

So we went back to the editing table, cut the negatives and mixed all the sound tracks (voices, music, sound effects and ambience). We had the script translated into French,
Sindebele and Shona, and corresponding sound tracks were made. A version in Swahili is now being prepared. Most of the work was done at Central Film Laboratories in Harare. The final version was sent away for the making of film and video copies for distribution. This was done in the USA for reasons of cost and because it was easier to distribute the film from there.

**Distribution**

We are placing the film with nongovernmental organizations and other agencies with access to projectors/videos, television and film distribution companies, mobile van systems, home video sales/rental firms, and official cinema halls.

Launching the film required massive publicity. Major premières were held in Zimbabwe and the USA. We sent out a mass mailing and distributed several thousand leaflets. Articles were placed in many magazines and newsletters, and the film was entered in contests. It has won three international awards. Various members of the cast and crew were interviewed on three different radio networks, and radio programmes dealing with *Consequences* were broadcast throughout Africa. We sent videos for review to hundreds of key people and had the film shown at conferences and workshops all over the world.

Parts of the film, together with interviews with the director and a shot of teenagers coming out of a cinema hall, were shown on German television. We are endeavouring to have the film shown on several other television channels in Asia, Europe and North America.

The Ford Foundation sponsored a visit to various African countries to promote *Consequences*. We were able to hold mini-premières in Botswana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and Zambia. The film was promoted with many leaders of government and nongovernmental organizations and with people responsible for commercial film and video in those countries and in the Côte-d’Ivoire, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. We have visited nine African countries so far and held promotional showings in several others.

Since distribution began in May 1988 we have sent out some 300 films and 600 videos. There is a film with each of the 45 agencies affiliated to the International Planned Parenthood Federation in Africa, and films and videos are going to nongovernmental organizations and government agencies in almost every African country, as well as in many countries of Asia and Latin America. We have also engaged four commercial distributors who specialize in placing films like ours in Australia, the Pacific area, Europe, Latin America, and the USA.

Videos of broadcasting quality were distributed in October 1988 by URTNA, a pan-African television broadcasters’ union, to 40 national television networks throughout Africa, all of which, we think, have already used the film.

A midnight showing was given at the Liberty Cinema Hall in Harare to over 2000 paying customers, who found the film highly enjoyable. It was subsequently booked for a run of regular daytime shows along with another film. *Consequences* is also being shown in Nigerian cinemas and Ghanaian video halls.
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We are beginning to place copies of the video in lending libraries. In Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe we have started distribution to video clubs. We printed a cover in colour and a colour poster, and obtained plastic boxes of good quality for the cassettes. It is important to package *Consequences* just like other commercial videos.

We are extremely pleased with the reception the film has been given. We believe that *Consequences* is rapidly becoming the most widely distributed African film ever released in the sub-Saharan countries. If, as expected, at least 20 000 000 Africans see *Consequences* in the first five years after release, the cost per viewer will have been about US$ 0.01.

We are compiling statistics on the utilization of the copies that have been distributed. Preliminary evaluations show that the film is enjoyed and that audiences are able to follow and understand its messages. However, a more comprehensive analysis of its impact is needed, together with a reliable estimate of the numbers of people reached in diverse African settings.

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We have found that a film can be both entertaining and educational. A film that is interesting and entertaining involves audiences in the experiences of its characters. Viewers absorb important lessons more completely than from less powerful media. Social film makers have to ensure that the messages they convey are inoffensive and carefully designed to be just right for the intended audience. Hence the importance, in the present project, of having Africans making a film that was aimed primarily at fellow Africans.

Our main problem was that of funding. The Pathfinder Fund, the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the Ford Foundation were generous in their support, yet their contributions only covered three-quarters of the costs. However, it is worth noting that, after vigorous initial promotion and distribution, a good film sells itself.

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**Travelling health promoter**

*Travelling in a London taxicab the other day Minerva was struck by a certain irony. Above the “Thank you for not smoking” notice the driver had stuck up a newspaper headline giving the annual death rate from lung cancer in the United Kingdom. On a recent visit to her general practitioner’s surgery, however, the walls were bare save for a couple of faded Impressionist prints.*

— *British Medical Journal, 299: 404 (1989).*