

Soaps Clean Up Image and Fight Tribal Conflict

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Soap operas, typically watched for their popular entertainment value, have taken on a new role in the developing world where they are introducing social change and fighting tribal rivalries in African countries. In Kenya, a popular series called *The Team* centers on a soccer team forced to overcome diversity and cooperate to advance in the standings. John Marks, president and founder of Common Ground Productions, discussed the show at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., June 15.

The show, which is partly funded by USAID, has spurred debate in Kenya about gender issues, in part because the team in the television series is co-ed and coached by a woman, according to evaluations conducted by the producers. The soap opera also sparked discussion about inter-tribal marriage.

Marks pointed out that shows like *The Cosby Show* in America were examples of media as an instrument of change.

A documentary about *The Team* aired at the Wilson Center during an event on media as a tool for social change in Africa sponsored by NGO Search for Common Ground and the International Center for Journalists. One actress said the show has allowed Kenyans to dream and think as one in order to transcend tribal disconnect and focus on the problems of illiteracy, education, and bad governance. The series, which will ultimately be produced in 18 countries, focuses on issues of tribalism, violent conflict, leadership, and corruption and is typically shown in Kenyan cities to a targeted audience followed by a discussion session. According to Marks, the show has consistently ranked highly among viewers and incited constructive dialogues.

Sylvia Vollenhoven, a Knight Development Journalism Fellow and founder of the Vision in Africa media organization, said that though soaps may be “dressed up in this commercial and superficial facade,” they have a much deeper meaning rooted in human emotion and mythology.

Still, she called for more complexity in future shows.

“What the good [soaps] have in common is that...the characters have to have a full range of emotion, some sort of complexity.”

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