



International
Labour
Organization

Taste of life: How a soap opera brings trafficking awareness home (Cambodia)

BACKGROUND

Classroom awareness-raising has its place in terms of reaching young people to provide them with information and warning messages on the threats of human trafficking. However, considering the numbers of young people who drop out of secondary school and at-risk youth who are too old for school, it is missing a huge segment of the vulnerable population. Even awareness-raising in village meetings has its limitations, especially if messages are not passed along. So how can warnings and information assistance be reliably delivered to large numbers of young people in a developing country?

Fifty-two percent of the rural population owns a TV in Cambodia and eighty-five percent of the overall population has media access, therefore, mass media would be an effective channel for relaying messages. After reading about the success in weaving social messaging on the dangers of HIV infection into a popular and original Cambodian soap opera called “Taste of Life”, the PEC Mekong Subregional Project to combat trafficking in children and women (TICW), approached the producers. The producers – working for the BBC World Service Trust – were very keen to take on a new theme, i.e. human trafficking.

The BBC World Service Trust is the independent international charity of the British Broadcasting Corporation and innovatively uses media to advance development worldwide. The Trust has been working in Cambodia since 2003 and has been producing the “Taste of Life” telenovella as part of a multimedia package that includes TV and radio public service announcements, three weekly radio phone-in programmes and accompanying print materials. The messages in the programmes were created in collaboration with many partners from government ministries, UN agencies and relevant NGOs.

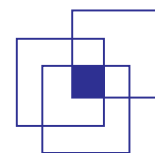
ACTION

With input from TICW Project, the Trust, in order to test its potential, touched on human trafficking situations in two episodes of the first season storyline. The drama, which used Cambodian actors, relied on real-life stories documented by the ILO and others to create the trafficking stories and dramatically portray the link between migration, trickery and exploitation. The episodes were followed up with audience surveys and proved memorable.

Based on that small but successful collaboration, the TICW Project staff agreed to fund a longer and more detailed storyline to run in the second season of “Taste of Life”. Again in close cooperation with the TICW Project staff, the Trust created a detailed storyline about the relationship between a woman trafficker and Cambodian street children whom she tries to recruit for the purposes of labour and sexual exploitation in Cambodia. The trafficking storyline ran for 21 of a total 100 episodes from late 2005 to March 2006. The first and second series were broadcasted for free on two of Cambodia’s national TV stations, shown at primetime and with repeats on both channels. Both series have been re-run by the two TV stations. Messages were rolled across the bottom of the TV screen during the soap opera’s broadcast, largely posed in the form of a question, and viewers could send a text message response using their mobile telephone.

The Trust conducted audience research for its storylines and each episode was pre-tested to evaluate the impact of the messages and to determine if the viewers liked the “right” characters. The Trust conducted audience

Good practice



“The beauty of a drama, you have more chance of reaching more people. Viewers follow characters for months and they identify with them and their situations... Viewers also liked the “real society” aspect of the Taste of Life dramas.”

Explained Charles Hamilton of the BBC Trust.

surveys, face-to-face interviews, questionnaires and telephone surveys and created four “audience panels” that answered questions regarding selected episodes. For the sampling frame, five provinces with a high risk of trafficking incidence were chosen. Purposive sampling was used to gain an urban/rural balance, select villages and choose respondents.

The Trust, in collaboration with TICW Project, then embraced cinema to reinforce the trafficking messages. Minutes of the telenovella were re-cut at a relatively low cost. To give the film a fresh look, some new characters and scenes were added. The new film called “In the dark”, featured many of the same stars in the soap opera but added a new element – a young boy who was very nearly trafficked across the border to Thailand to work on a fishing boat. The same “evil” character – a woman trafficker, who in this case was acting as an agent and who had escaped punishment in the TV soap opera – finally meets justice when she is arrested for trafficking. The choice of a young boy to play the character of a potential victim reinforced the fact that trafficking is as much about exploiting people in abusive labour situations as it is about forced or coerced prostitution.

Upon general release, admittance to the cinema was free. After the closing credits, the audience members were approached while exiting (and offered incentives to participate) and asked a series of questions. They also were asked if they would provide their phone number for further interviews. A second follow-up survey was conducted four weeks after viewing the film to determine lasting impressions. “In the dark” was re-released for television in early 2008.

The multimedia campaign surrounding the “Taste of Life” telenovella and the “In the dark” film, included TV and radio public service spots with trafficking-awareness messages and 200 radio phone-in programmes on the leading FM radio station. The Trust also developed a comic book named “Popular Magazine”, which replayed the telenovella storyline and reiterated the key messages. It was distributed throughout the country, including to school libraries.

ACHIEVEMENTS/ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The second-season programme had a declared audience reach of more than 4 million households, and follow-up research found significant recall among viewers regarding both the characters and the trafficking messages.

The feature film “In the dark” reached some 4,471 viewers in the cinemas: 69% of them between the ages of 11 and 20. Of 200 survey respondents, some 59% of them liked the film “very much”; women favoured it more than men; the strongest messages recalled were about trafficking. According to the viewers’ responses, the film was widely understood to be warning audiences not to be easily fooled by traffickers, and the depiction of “real society” issues and how to handle them were also understood.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Television producers are very open to unsolicited approaches by civil society advocates, such as the UN agencies or NGOs, because they can provide fresh story ideas.
- Making stories based on real-life testimonials helps bring authentication to dramas.
- A popular TV drama about real society is a good foundation for a film about trafficking.
- It is difficult to touch on issues that might seem critical of a neighbouring country or government.
- Although producing a TV series can be expensive, when free air time and repeated airings are factored in, it proves to be cost-effective in the end.

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