Radio is changing lives in Ethiopia. Using specially produced serial radio dramas that highlight key health issues, the Population Media Center (PMC) has made significant contributions in Ethiopia toward improving reproductive health and family planning, including reducing HIV/AIDS, since 2000. The serial dramas’ impact on changing behaviors and attitudes has been considered exemplary in Africa.

Ethiopia has the second-largest population in Africa—79 million—and with an annual population growth rate of 2.6 percent, estimates show its population doubling in 29 years. Yet it is also one of the least developed countries in the world: Close to half the population lives below the international poverty line. One of the key reasons for this is the imbalance between population growth and the development of life-sustaining resources. Although Ethiopia has made tremendous progress in recent years to advance economic and social development, alleviate poverty, and improve the lives of its people, the combined forces of adverse climatic conditions, a low level of technological development and a rapidly growing population are working against it.

Due to inadequate family planning services and prevailing beliefs and practices that inhibit contraceptive use, Ethiopia’s fertility rates are among the highest in Africa, at about six children per woman. In addition, of all African countries, only South Africa and Nigeria have been more affected by HIV/AIDS than Ethiopia. In 2003, there were an estimated 1.5 million Ethiopians living with HIV/AIDS. Projections indicate that the number of Ethiopians living with HIV/AIDS will increase to between 7 million and 10 million by 2010, and that adult prevalence will be between 19 percent and 27 percent.

A dramatic approach
PMC, with offices around the world, works with mass media outlets to encourage the use of effective family planning, elevate women’s social status and promote gender equity. Experience in population and health communication projects has shown that behavior change is the bottom line for both family planning services and the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS. There is strong
At health clinics, of new clients who cited radio programs as a motivation for seeking services, 96 percent said that they were motivated by one of PMC’s programs.

Evidence that mass media, particularly entertainment broadcast media, have played a significant role in a number of countries in bringing about changes in reproductive behavior and in promoting adoption of other health measures. Independent researchers have documented the significant impact that radio and television soap operas in Mexico, Brazil, India, Kenya and Tanzania have had on audience attitudes and behavior with regard to HIV/AIDS avoidance and the use of family planning.

That is why PMC has given a research-based radio serial drama approach special consideration in countries like Ethiopia. Dramas of this kind are culturally and linguistically sensitive to people’s needs and appeal to audiences by portraying real-life situations. They help create a positive attitude and encourage the adoption of behaviors displayed by characters that play exemplary roles. Unlike documentaries or single-episode dramas, serial dramas allow the audience to form bonds with the characters over time as the characters evolve their thinking and behavior at a gradual and believable pace in response to problems that have been well illustrated in the story line.

An Ethiopian success story
It is in line with this approach that PMC produced two social-content radio serial dramas. PMC–Ethiopia conducted a literature review that identified the gaps in reproductive-health communication activities in the country and then formative research concerning audience attitudes, behavior and beliefs, which served as the basis for the two serials.

One of the major reasons for the success of PMC media communication projects in general and the radio serial dramas in particular is the extensive use of formative research, sophisticated audience research methods, pretesting and multiple media to target the message, monitoring and evaluation. The formative research for this project was completed early in 2002, and production and broadcast of the serials—in two national languages, Amharic and Oromiffa—went on the air in June 2002.

In two and a half years, 257 episodes of the Amharic Yeken Kignit (Looking Over One’s Daily Life) were produced and broadcast twice a week over Radio Ethiopia, with repeat airings over FM channels. A total of 140 episodes of the Oromiffa Dhimbiba (Getting the Best Out of Life) were broadcast once a week, with repeat airings over Ethiopia Radio National Service.

The serials addressed issues of reproductive health, the status of women, HIV/AIDS, family planning, harmful traditional practices, girls’ education, spousal and parental communication, and other social issues. The serials were closely monitored through 50 groups of listeners from a variety of backgrounds and locations; quarterly organized focus group discussions; 48 clinics, hospitals and health stations (client exit interviews); and analysis of listeners’ letters.

The programs generated a huge audience response, with more than 15,000 letters coming in from listeners who wanted to share the personal impact the programs had on them. More than 6,000 questionnaires were completed and sent from the listener groups to PMC. Based on 14,000 new-client exit interviews conducted as of November 2004, 63 percent of new clients seeking reproductive health services at 48 clinics in Ethiopia reported that they listened regularly to one of the PMC serial dramas. In fact, 27 percent of new clients cited one of PMC’s programs by name as the primary motivating factor for seeking services. Of new clients who cited radio programs as a motivation for seeking services, 96 percent said that they were motivated by one of PMC’s programs.

Key survey findings
To evaluate the impact of the serial drama project, PMC conducted a post-intervention survey, which showed significant results in terms of family planning, HIV/AIDS knowledge and, most important, behavior change, notably in the use of...
family planning methods or in seeking tests for HIV. In most cases, there were significant differences in these knowledge and behavior-change measures between listeners and non-listeners of *Yeken Kignit* and *Dhimiba*.

For example, among married women who listened to *Yeken Kignit*, use of any family planning method increased from 12.3 percent to 43.5 percent—a 31.2 percentage-point increase. Among non-listeners, use increased only 18.8 percentage points.

Other findings from the post-intervention survey included:

**Number of listeners**
- Approximately half the population of Ethiopia listened to one of PMC’s radio dramas. This equates to approximately 40 million listeners.

**Increased HIV/AIDS prevention**
- Male listeners sought HIV testing at four times the rate of non-listeners.
- Female listeners sought HIV testing at three times the rate of non-listeners.
- There was an increase in the belief that a woman can negotiate condom use: 15 percentage points among women and 26 percentage points among men.
- There was a reduction among listeners in the stigma against people affected by HIV/AIDS.

**Increased use of family planning**
- Demand for contraceptives increased 157 percent during the period of broadcast.
- Listeners were five times more likely than non-listeners to know three or more methods of family planning.
- The number of people who currently use modern family planning methods increased 31.2 percentage points among married women between baseline and end line, and 24.3 percentage points among married men between baseline and end line.
- Respondents who believe that smaller families have a better standard of living increased from 77 percent to 91 percent.
- The desire for more children dropped from 64 percent to 56 percent.

**Education of female children**
- The percentage of men who recognized the importance of educating girls increased 51.7 percentage points.
- The percentage of women who recognized the importance of educating girls increased 20.8 percentage points.

**Gender equality**
- There was a 37.4 percentage-point increase among men and a 13.1 percentage-point increase among women in the belief that women are fit to hold public office.
- There was an increase among both men (11.8 percent) and women (18.5 percent) in the belief that women should be allowed to marry the man of their choice.

A multiple regression analysis was done to eliminate any effects that factors such as income, educational level, age, marital status, urban or rural place of residence, ethnic group, or language may have had on family planning use and HIV testing, and the results continued to show significant effects of the serial dramas.

Much of the popular appeal of the PMC radio serial dramas stems from the fact that audiences identify with the programs’ characters (above)—who for the most part are written to be like average Ethiopians, dealing with complex social issues in a straightforward, logical manner over time.
Serious social issues call for dramatic action

If you are considering using a research-based radio serial drama to address social issues, follow these important steps.

1. **Conduct a consensus-building workshop** as a start to developing your strategy. Invite concerned government, nongovernmental and media agencies, including experienced media and theater arts experts, scriptwriters and radio program producers.

2. **Conduct a literature review.** This will help you identify research and information gaps, explore the effectiveness and capacity of other implementing agencies, understand the status of social-content radio serial dramas in the country, and determine whether any audience research has already been conducted.

3. **Conduct a media assessment** to explore the strengths and weaknesses of existing social-content radio and TV drama programs. Check the appropriate audience’s preferred broadcast time.

4. **Conduct formative research** to assess the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding, for example, reproductive health and family planning, HIV/AIDS and other social issues among the target audience. The research can also be used to identify the primary and secondary audiences for the serials, and determine socioeconomic and cultural issues to be addressed.

5. **Conduct a capacity-building workshop** for scriptwriters and program producers. Train them on the methodology and skills of radio serial drama scriptwriting, and present the sociocultural aspects of the issues to be covered.

6. **Establish a technical advisory committee** composed of scriptwriters, radio program producers, a creative arts adviser, a senior research officer, a gender expert, a communication expert and a representative from the Ministry of Health. The committee should help check the accuracy of material presented, keep the balance between entertainment and education, and refine the scripts, as necessary.

7. **Develop and discuss the story line,** including characters’ profiles and settings, based on the issues identified in the formative research.

8. **Develop and discuss the plots** for each scene before starting to write the full script. Make sure the cliff-hangers are well done at the end of each scene and in particular at the end of the episode.

9. **Write an epilogue** suitable for each episode.

10. **Pretest the pilot episodes** with target audiences using standard pretesting tools.

11. **Conduct a baseline survey** as a benchmark for the final evaluation of the radio serial dramas.

12. **Monitor programs** through an analysis of listener letters, listener-group diaries, quarterly focus group discussions and a health facility assessment.

13. **Conduct a post-intervention survey** for impact evaluation.