

Sara: A role model for African girls as they face HIV/AIDS

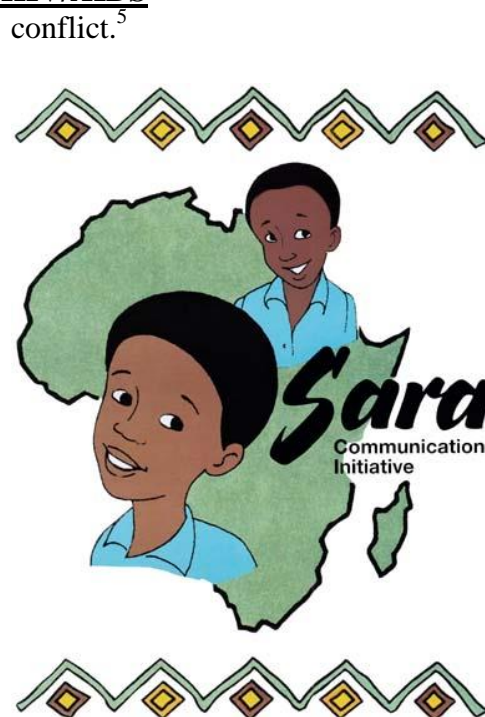
by Neill McKee with Mira Aghi, Rachel Carnegie and Nuzhat Shahzadi
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Abstract

This chapter describes the Sara Communication Initiative (SCI) of UNICEF. The SCI is primarily aimed at delaying the age of sexual debut for African girls and empowering them to handle sexual advances from boys and men, including “sugar daddies,” and other forms of sexual exploitation. Sara has great potential to be recognised as a symbol for girls’ empowerment in the face of HIV/AIDS in Africa. The SCI involves formative research and production of an expanding set of communication tools, including animated videos, comic books with users’ guides, posters, and a radio series. These tools were conceptualized, researched, and implemented in 12 African countries between 1995 and 1999. An independent, mid-term evaluation, completed during 1999-2000, provides evidence that girls are positively influenced by Sara to delay sexual debut, or avoid situations of sexual abuse and exploitation. UNICEF, governments, NGOs, and private-sector partners should continue to use Sara tools and expand SCI implementation through partnerships. Sara is popular in many countries and has the potential to represent a “brand” for girls’ empowerment throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Sara: A role model for African girls as they face HIV/AIDS

One of the fundamental causes of the spread of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa is gender inequality within a context of income disparity and poverty.^{1,2} Not only is the female biologically more susceptible to infection with HIV³, women are more at risk because of socio-cultural conditioning. In many parts of Africa, the manifestations of this inequality can be seen at an early age. Girls have fewer opportunities than boys. Their primary role is seen as future child bearers and nurturers.⁴ At an early age, girls are socialized to perform subservient roles. When older, they often lack crucial psychosocial skills, such as the ability to communicate assertively, to think critically, to make decisions and negotiate, to solve problems in social relationships, to resist pressure, and to cope with emotions and African girls enter into relationships with the opposite sex as unequal partners. Many interventions and much research have focused on adolescents, yet the gender-based socialization of boys and girls continues to create unequal power in sexual relationships, putting young women



at a disadvantage.⁶ This has grave implications for young girls, given the rapid spread of HIV.

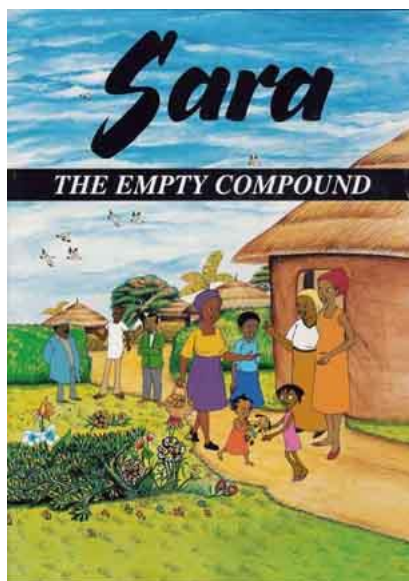
In 1994, UNICEF decided that in order to support other programs for the fulfillment of the rights of children to survival, protection and development, a far-reaching, regional, communication strategy was required. The Sara Communication Initiative (SCI) was designed as a set of communication tools that would fit UNICEF's own programs, and those of other partner organizations.⁷ The complexity of factors required for behavior change and positive behavior development warranted a multi-media, entertainment-education approach⁸ that would capture the imagination and attention of adolescent girls and be acceptable to their male peers and their parents. With proper formative research, a set of characters, backgrounds and story lines could be designed in animated film and comic book formats that would "strike a common chord" across Eastern and Southern Africa – a large region with diverse cultures. Later, the same materials were tested and introduced successfully in Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana.

UNICEF concluded that animated film in video format, and comic books could be used as regional communication tools to communicate difficult social issues, portraying them in sensitive, non-threatening ways, without losing message impact.⁹ Sara's creators built on the experience of Meena (a young South Asian girl), another UNICEF communication initiative in South Asia that started in 1991 and which has popularized a dynamic, younger, girl role model who stands for gender equity and the rights of the girl child. Meena, very popular in many parts of South Asia, is used to address discriminatory attitudes and behavior toward girls.¹⁰

The Sara stories had to address a range of factors that influence the behavior of African adolescents, aged 10 to 19 years. Stories had to be informative, while motivating people to change; they also had to address the skills to act, while reflecting environmental factors that might facilitate or impede positive change.¹¹ In addition to broadcasting Sara videos and a radio series, the use of Sara print materials in formal and non-formal educational settings was deemed equally important. It was recognized that group processes, including interactive learning methods, are required to develop psychosocial lifeskills.¹² With gender inequality driving the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, the challenge for SCI creators was formidable.¹³

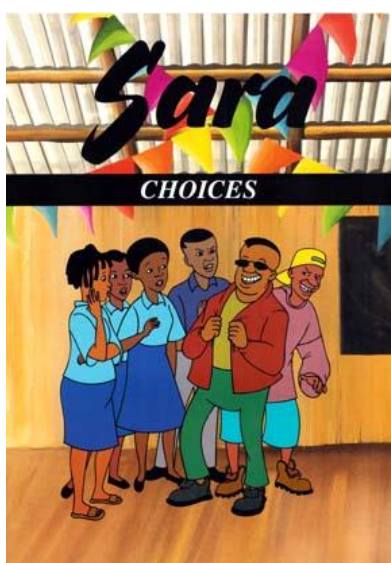
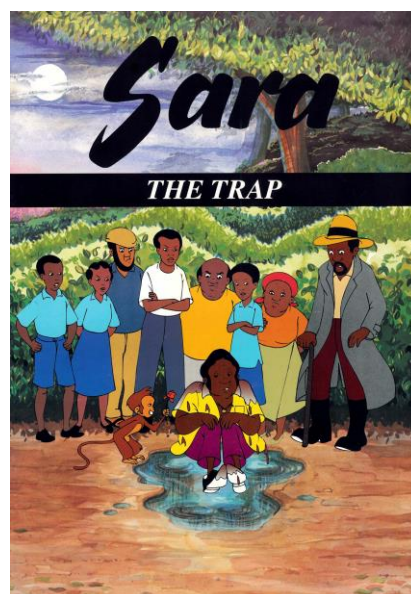
Sara Themes and Stories

Based on UNICEF's regional priorities and the needs identified in communities, the SCI involved the development of communication tools to address the causes of HIV/AIDS. Although most efforts in HIV/AIDS prevention in the mid-1990s were focused on older, so-called "high risk groups", the Sara team believed that adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa were at great risk, and interventions should begin at a young age. Girls, in particular, had to be empowered, recognizing their unequal start in life. The reality of HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy and gender inequity in Africa is woven through the Sara stories, as is outlined briefly below.



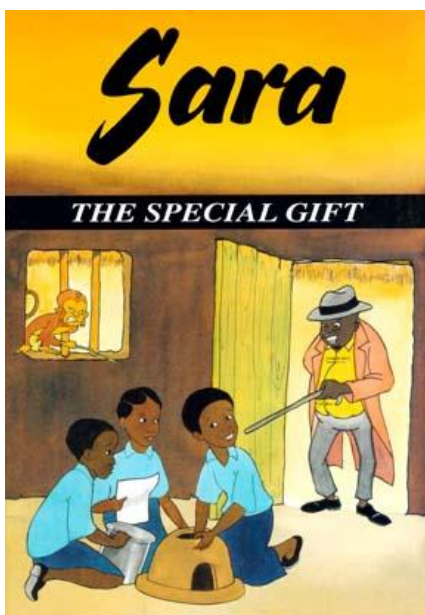
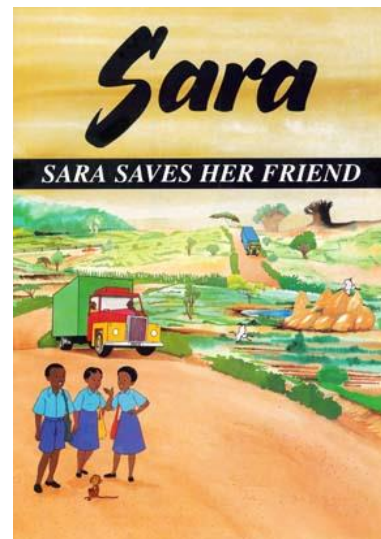
The Empty Compound: Sara's cousin has died, leaving his young wife, Sofia, and their baby son. Although Uncle says his son died of cancer, everyone knows he died of AIDS. Then Uncle starts blaming Sofia for his son's death and banishes her from his compound. Sara is pleased when Sofia comes to stay with her family but whenever Sara and Sofia go out together people whisper and point at them. Some even call Sofia a witch. Sara and her family show how and why it is necessary to confront prejudice and acknowledge the reality of Aids.

The Trap: Mr. Mbuta, the shopkeeper and local sugar daddy, tries to trick Sara into becoming yet another of his 'girlfriends'. Sara's mother is away and so Sara cannot turn to her for help. Then her grandmother tells a story about men who turn into monsters. Sara realizes she has to take decisive action against Mr. Mbuta for her own safety and that of her friends. With some quick thinking and help from her friends, Sara turns Mr. Mbuta's trick around....

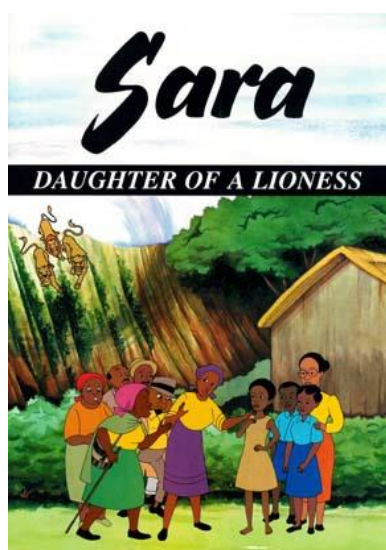


Choices: Sara really likes Musa and Musa is more than a little attracted to her. But it seems that most boys are only interested in having sex with girls; being friends is not enough. And the more girls they sleep with, the more boys feel they can prove that they are "men". Sara wants to wait. As her teacher says, why throw away your education and your future just to please a boy? Then Sara's friend Tamala falls pregnant and the story takes an adventuresome twist as Sara deals with the responsibility of boys and the community in setting a new social norm.

Sara Saves Her Friend: Sara is very worried about her friend Amina. Since Amina's parents died, there has been no money, and she will have to leave school even though she is top of her class at math. She plans to find a job, perhaps in the city or at the bar where her sister, Grace, works. But the customers are men who sleep around and spread diseases like HIV/AIDS. Amina finds herself in a dangerous situation when she goes to visit Grace at the bar, and it is up to Sara and her resourceful pet monkey, Zingo, to rescue her from two truck-drivers.

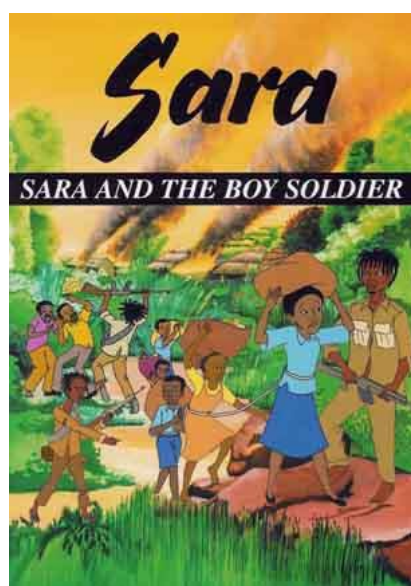
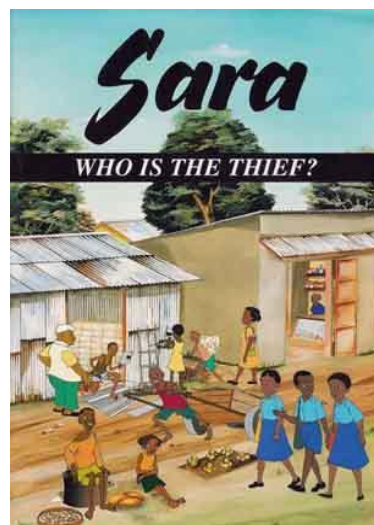


The Special Gift: There is no money to send Sara to secondary school, even though she loves school and is doing well. To make it worse, most of her family thinks that girls should stay at home to cook and clean. But with the help of her school friends and some inspiration from a book, Sara manages to change all this. (Keeping girls in school has been cited as one of the most important strategies in combating HIV/AIDS in Africa, as long as the schools are safe.)



Daughter of a Lioness: Sara learns that her grandmother and uncle intend to get her circumcised. Sara is determined to refuse, but her grandmother is equally determined that Sara will not be a 'whole woman' without circumcision. Sara is aware that female genital cutting (FGC) can lead to many health problems, including an increased risk of HIV infection later in life. An adventure unfolds, taking Sara through many conflicts and nightmares. Sara uses her critical and creative thinking skills, and her recollection of a science experiment to save herself from this predicament and make the community reconsider the age-old custom. While some people are shocked by Sara's behaviour, her mother has come round to support Sara's position and defends her daughter's decision. "Our customs should bring life, not death," she says.

Who's Afraid of the Thief? Sara is delighted when her sophisticated aunt invites her to come and live with her and attend a good school in the city. It's the chance of a lifetime to get a good education! However when she gets there she finds that instead of going to school she is expected to wash and cook. She also has to contend with the sexual advances of an uncle. It seems that she is destined to be a child slave like other children she meets in the city. Then some money goes missing and Sara is accused of being the thief. Her determination and resourcefulness prevent her from becoming one more victim.



Sara and the Boy Soldier: Sara and her friends Juma and Maya are abducted when rebel soldiers attack their village. Later, in the confusion of another fight the children are able to escape, but Maya's leg is badly wounded by a landmine. Sara manages to be reunited with her family in a camp for displaced people, although she faces sexual harassment from a camp official. Sara needs help to overcome the trauma of her abduction, and she also learns to help Maya to come to terms with her injury. In the end, the boy soldier who first helped abduct Sara and her friends, is returned to the community. Following counselling and a traditional cleansing ceremony, he is helped to reintegrate at school.

Addressing young adolescents, particularly girls, as a main audience in HIV/AIDS prevention appears to be important. In Uganda, where HIV incidence has declined substantially, the accumulated work of many community-based, faith-based, and media-based initiatives has helped to increase the age of sexual debut, and reduce the average number of sexual partners of young people.^{14, 15} In Uganda, programs aimed at young people -- and particularly at young girls -- helped build their skills to resist unwanted sex, and led to community norm-setting through the mass media, interpersonal, and community channels.

The creators of Sara also recognized that boys and parents should not be left out since any proposed changes in girls' lives would have to be supported by them. Therefore, the research process and the creation of Sara stories involved boys and adult community members. Various male and female characters of different ages serve as protagonists or antagonists for the cause of

girls' rights. The modeling of positive gender relations, starting at an early age, was especially important. So Sara's friend, Juma, his older brother, and Sara's father and younger brother all play key, positive roles in her life. For example, in "The Trap", Juma and his older brother help Sara to effectively ward off sexual harassment by an older man. In "Daughter of a Lioness", Juma helps Sara get away from the ceremony for female genital cutting. In "The Special Gift", Sara's father strongly supports her right to education, while her younger brother provides emotional support.

Formative Research Process

The formative research process¹⁶ was the foundation of the SCI. The whole process began in October 1994 through a participatory consultation in Machakos, Kenya, with over 60 researchers, writers, and health and gender specialists from 10 African countries. This consultation led to the development of the Sara story themes, plot lines, characters, and their names. Subsequently, in two sub-regional workshops, researchers were trained to carry out a common research process in their own countries. For the pilot phase during 1995, 572 focus group discussions were conducted with over 5,000 respondents in 10 Eastern and Southern African countries. Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana were added later. Approximately 3,000 more respondents were involved in subsequent research. The formative research involved girls and boys, ages 12 to 18, and their mothers, fathers, or guardians, as well as key members of the community. This massive undertaking provided a holistic understanding of the social pressures put on girls, contributing to their vulnerability.

Formative research also established the names, attributes, and appearance of the cast of Sara characters, including the protagonist. The name "Sara" was found to be acceptable in both Christian and Muslim communities across Africa. The other names on the short list were given to Sara's family and friends. Formative research was carried out on two to three stories at a time by the national research teams. The research process followed three cycles: first, concept testing, to understand perceptions of a specific educational issue; second, research on a draft story line; and, finally, testing on the revised story with color illustrations. The researchers examined each story's entertainment value, relevance to local situations, credibility, realism, clarity, comprehension, characterization, cultural acceptability, potential to stimulate discussion, as well as potential impact. Research was undertaken with color illustrations to check the suitability of character appearances and locales in each country.

The national research teams produced detailed reports at each stage. Each cycle of research concluded with a regional workshop in which the researchers, writers, and artists met to discuss the research findings, further refining the stories and designs. Formative research helped the creators of SCI to gauge how communities perceived problems relating to the exploitation of the girl child, including identifying solutions that were credible and achievable. During the research process, the respondents themselves became partners in the creation of the stories¹⁷.

The pilot package for episode one – a Sara video, comic book, posters, radio series, and users' guide -- was assessed for acceptability in eleven countries: Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In

each country, the research teams conducted 14 to 20 focus group discussions among respondents in different cultural and urban/rural settings. The purpose was to assess whether adolescent girls are motivated and encouraged by Sara's experiences, whether they identify with Sara, and how the community members accept the stands taken by Sara. The research results on the pilot package led to the following conclusion:

Sara was seen as a universally acceptable, entertaining symbol for the adolescent girl throughout the region. The story and its objectives were well understood. Sara was seen as a credible source of education on the themes. Most audiences consider the situations portrayed as real. The use of animation does not distract from the reality that the story puts forward. Sara was seen as a daughter or the girl next door in diverse cultures. The characters are acceptable in all cultures, including the animals that are seen as thematically intrinsic to the stories. The Sara materials were viewed by target groups as having great potential for behavioral change and behavioral development of children. The story not only describes the situation of girls in Africa, it offers realistic solutions.¹⁸

The results of the pilot testing were fed back into the development of subsequent Sara materials. Each video episode of the Sara series followed a similar research process to ensure quality and relevance.

Formative Research for "Choices"

The "Choices" episode addressed several educational issues: trying to avoid teenage pregnancy and coping with its consequences when it occurs; school-age mothers returning to school; developing positive relationships between boys and girls through modeling lifeskills, including resisting peer pressure; and coping with stress and emotions.

The main plot follows the story of Sara's friend, Tamala, who is impregnated by Sara's cousin, Jackson. Jackson believes that to prove his manhood he has to have sex with girls. But he does not share the responsibility for Tamala's pregnancy. Sara discovers Tamala's problem and helps her. The sub-plot reveals Sara's own emotions towards Musa, an older boy, who is in love with her. Pressured by his peers, Musa tries to push Sara into having sex with him. Although she likes Musa, Sara is shocked by his behavior and rejects his advances. The story reaches its climax when Jackson, afraid to face his father, tries to run away across a flooded river and almost drowns. Sara and Musa, together, help Jackson out of the river, and he decides to return to his village and face the consequences. Jackson's father agrees to pay for the maintenance of Tamala and the baby. With her teacher's support, Tamala returns to another school after the baby's birth. Sara and Musa also work out a mutually-respectful way forward for their relationship.

The formative research process led to fine-tuning the characterizations of the various protagonists to enhance their credibility with an adolescent audience. It showed:

- Sara needed to show more vulnerability and human emotion in her relationship with Musa;
- Musa needed to show greater internal conflict so that his mistake was more understandable, and his regret more credible. Only then would the audience believe that his relationship with

Sara might have a future;

- Tamala's character needed to be made more likable so that she could evoke greater empathy. Also, audience members wished to see her as being "wiser" after her experience;
- Jackson needed to be further exposed for his weakness and hypocrisy. Audience members wanted him to be unfavorably contrasted with a reformed Musa in order that he would not become an anti-hero for adolescent boys.

Pre-testing showed the near final version of the story, with the above refinements, strongly communicated the educational issues, but it still scored low on dramatic content. The storm scene and Jackson's harrowing rescue from river waters were added to build dramatic tension, and to provide Jackson a reason to reflect on his actions.

Program Implementation

In mid-1996, Sara was launched through a 13-episode radio drama series in English, French, Swahili, Portuguese, and Hausa. The radio series was produced in collaboration with the BBC World Service, and broadcast across Africa. The radio broadcasts led to the official launch on September 13th, 1996 at the Organisation of African Unity's Conference on the Empowerment of Women through Functional Literacy and the Education of the Girl Child, held in Kampala, Uganda.

Over the next five years (1996 to 2001), episodes two through eight of Sara were completed, involving the same artists, writers, and communication researchers from the region. All participating countries were helped by the regional Sara team to disseminate materials through mass media, government, NGO, and commercial channels. The following spectrum of activities were carried out in implementation countries¹⁹:

- national training workshops on the use of Sara materials;
- development of local Sara materials;
- formation of core Sara groups for dissemination and utilization;
- wide use of Sara materials by government partners and NGOs;
- training of facilitators for effective utilization;
- establishment of Sara clubs and/or peer educator programs;
- distribution of Sara materials to schools;
- broadcast of Sara videos on national television networks;
- rebroadcast of the Sara radio series on national stations;
- local language translations of materials;
- screening of Sara videos to its audiences through video outreach systems;
- training of local artists and writers;
- Sara advocacy festivals

The Sara Communication Initiative did not function as a single, centralized project with an overseeing director. Since UNICEF is set up as a decentralized, country-based organization,

regional communication projects are unusual. Therefore, no country was required to devote human and financial resources to use Sara materials. Utilization depended on the ability of the Sara teams in each country, with support from the regional team, to integrate the concept and materials into new and existing programs. As the problem of adolescent girls are similar throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and as Sara materials were developed in a regional context, several countries found them to be relevant and cost-effective to use.

Mid-Term Evaluation

A mid-term evaluation for Sara was conducted by independent research experts,²⁰ and the results are summarized below. The first component of the SCI evaluation was a study of the implementation process itself. By documenting the differences in the way that SCI was implemented in different countries, the variations in project outcomes could perhaps be explained. Since the SCI was not a stand-alone project but depended on integration in UNICEF country programs, the main questions guiding the evaluation study were: (1) How have UNICEF policies influenced the implementation of the SCI? (2) How has the UNICEF country program acceptance of the SCI influenced its implementation? (3) How has UNICEF worked with inter-sectoral partners to implement the SCI?

In a number of countries, the demand and impact of Sara materials was tremendous. In some other countries, UNICEF and its partners were slow in adopting the Sara materials. The following key elements were identified for the success of Sara: (1) An enabling environment within UNICEF country offices, with strong leadership providing support for the SCI, including a forceful advocate for Sara within UNICEF to move the program forward. The interest and influence of the UNICEF country representative was especially important. (2) The SCI was intensely adopted where the people responsible for Sara in each UNICEF office did effective internal marketing to gain support across different program sections. (3) The SCI was especially effective in countries where there was a broad sense of ownership of the program; where the implementing partners felt that the initiative belonged to them.

The second component of the evaluation was a study of outcomes, with both quantitative and qualitative components. Since undertaking statistical research in all implementation countries was expensive, it was decided to purposively choose a country where SCI had been used widely, as intended, in order to determine its overall impact. A sample survey was conducted in 25 districts of mainland Tanzania, where the SCI had been implemented for two years. Mbago and Sichona²¹ found that out of 635 girls interviewed, 32 percent could correctly identify Sara when shown an illustration of her; 18 percent said that they had read the comic books, and 15 percent had shared a story with others. Some 10 percent of the respondents had heard about Sara through the radio show; 15 percent had seen a Sara video; and 9 percent recalled a Sara poster. After only two years of programming, Sara was identified correctly by one-third of the girls in these districts of Tanzania.

The third component of the evaluation was a qualitative study of the SCI outcomes in Kenya and Uganda. This study was conducted to provide insights about the role of the SCI in changing

attitude and behaviors, especially in assessing how Sara influenced the development of life skills among girls. An attempt was also made to determine how well the Sara materials were incorporated into the programs of different organisations. The research involved discussions with users, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with girls who were well exposed to Sara through educational processes, usually with trained facilitators. The present analysis is restricted to a content analysis of data with direct reference to: (1) sexual harassment and abuse, and (2) perception of Sara as a role model for girls.

The outcome evaluation in Kenya²² revealed some interesting findings in an urban setting. A focus group discussion at the GOAL drop-in center for street children in Nairobi demonstrated how children are applying Sara's experiences and behavior in their own lives, while still being acutely aware of their own difficult circumstances. The research revealed a range of lifeskills being developed, including risk assessment, and critical thinking. The adolescents were able to relate the Sara materials to real-life situations. They talked about their own encounters with truck drivers, for instance. They said that girls should learn to say “no” to the sexual advances from older men. While Sara emerged as the respondents' favourite character, some thought she was rather “green”, whereas, in reality, most of the girls living on the streets are sexually active and experienced. Teachers noted that the girls at the GOAL center were inspired by the character of Sara, as she reassured them of their own abilities.

In Uganda, qualitative research was carried out with girls who attend school. In one area of Uganda, nine key informant interviews and five FGDs were carried out with members of lifeskills clubs, established by the Forum of African Women Educationists (FAWE). Of the 63 lifeskills clubs operating in six districts²³ in 2000, Nuwagaba and Neema²⁴ randomly selected Mukono district. Two schools in the Mukono district were selected which were mixed (where gender relations could be assessed) and which had functional lifeskills clubs. Respondents for key informant interviews were selected based on the following criteria: the girls had to be of various ages between 10 and 19 years, from different peer groups, and must have been exposed to the SCI and life skills through group work. The respondents were shown an image of Sara, and were asked if they knew the girl's name. In all cases the girls knew Sara. When they were asked what kind of a girl Sara was, the following responses were compiled:

Sara is an adolescent girl; Sara is the cleverest girl in the world; Sara is a girl who set her eyes on higher education; Sara gives advice to her friends; Sara is a critical thinker; If you know about Sara, you will never have any problem that you cannot solve; Sara is our Bible; Sara is a girl who solves problems; and others.

A comment from FGDs in Mukono High School gives more insight into how Sara played a part in resolving relationship problems with boys who pressure girls to have sex:

A boy whom we study with at school came and exactly told me that same thing as we learnt in Sara life skills club. He said that even if it meant dying, he was determined to die for me because of his great passion toward me. His words seemed so sweet but that good heart inside me kept haunting me, saying; ‘do you remember what you learnt in Sara and

the life skills club?’... I decided to put the boy off, telling him that if he loved me, there was no problem but that he had to wait until the right time.

There were similar findings in the analysis of the results of the nine key informant interviews in Mukono schools. One 16-year-old-girl reported how she had modeled her sexual avoidance behavior after Sara, especially cautioning that going out with “sugar daddies” will spoil their futures:

I have learnt how to make decisions. I first see what is right and wrong then I act accordingly. I have learnt to think critically before I do something. I have also learnt to advise others, to stop going with sugar daddies. If not, you land into trouble. I have learnt how I can protect my life. Sara gives me courage to be hard working and get better results. Also, to help others if possible....If I begin going with men at this age, I will get STD or become pregnant. I want to study hard and be well off. I want to be a lawyer or a journalist.

In all of the interviews, this theme emerged as a major lesson learned by girls. They advised others to avoid discos and blue movies; avoid things that they could not afford, and avoid relationships for purposes of economic gain. They also commended Sara’s role in advising and helping others, such as when she saved her friend Amina who was tricked into drinking alcohol, and was nearly driven off by truck drivers.

Another 19-year-old girl from Mukono High School first heard about Sara when the lifeskills club started at their school. She reported that in the club, when they talk about Sara, they discuss how to make decisions, create plays, songs, poems and debates. She stated what her reaction has been toward unwanted, sexual advances:

I was going to market to buy things; then I found a group of teenage boys. They started calling to me. I did not respond. They tried to touch me. They asked me to be their lover. I refused and ran away and went back home....I want to have education with the aim of getting a job in the future. I do not want to get involved in sex when I am not ready for it. I have three choices: I want to become a journalist, a lawyer, and failing those, I will be a teacher.

The above indicate that girls are influenced by Sara to use various life skills to delay sexual debut, and to avoid sexual abuse. Girls who were interviewed reported not only being exposed to the Sara stories, but reported discussing these stories, and relating the issues to their own lives. Thus they were developing their life skills through a process of critical thinking and self reflection.

Participants explained that they usually talk about Sara when they meet in their life skills clubs. Here they talk about critical thinking, peer resistance, self-esteem, and having the self-awareness to stand for what you are, and do what you think is right for you. They reported being inspired by

Sara and applying what they learned to real-life situations. Throughout the interviews, what girls liked most about Sara is the way she was innovative. For example, in “The Special Gift”, after learning about fuel-efficient mud stoves in science class, she made one for her Uncle, thereby convincing him that she should not be taken out of school.

Another investigation gave some insight into how Sara was being used in classroom settings by teachers. In Uganda, the Straight Talk Foundation carries out media and school-based programs aimed at behavior development of adolescents through newspaper magazines, other print materials, radio programs, and school-based initiatives. Their newspaper magazine, called Young Talk, has incorporated Sara since the mid-1990s. It has a monthly print run of 280,000 copies. Some 16 copies of Young Talk are distributed in English to each of 12,000 primary schools in Uganda where the language of instruction is English.

A survey²⁵ of 1,380 children in upper primary classes, conducted in 2000, found that 83 percent had read Young Talk, and that 23 percent of respondents spontaneously recalled Sara from the magazine. The magazine contains a problem page, letters for young adolescents, personal stories, etc.; and Sara represents 12 to 25 percent of total space in each issue. The spontaneous recall of Sara in the year 2000 study represented a two-fold increase over the 1999 recall, indicating Sara’s growing popularity. Teachers were using Sara for interactive, skills-building purposes, as evident from the following comments:

We dramatize role-plays so that we do not forget the children who are not so comfortable with English....So now we are going to do a role play, playing a man who is drunk, trying to befriend a child....

... (in counseling children) we find most of the time we also refer to some of the things that happen, which appear in *Young Talk*... For example, when we are counseling girls, [we discuss] the case of Amina [Sara’s friend].

Teachers need to take a special interest in the Sara material, become familiar with its content, and think about ways it can be used creatively. One teacher from Mubunga Primary School, Kisoro, talked about the importance of the “Sara Saves her Friend” story:

...for example, about Sara and Zingo, children like the story and it is educative. It conveys a message to them because in our locality, this kind of business is common where grown men take these young girls from bars and the girls get problems from there.

The conclusions of the Straight Talk study were: (1) Sara continues to be a very popular children’s educational comic strip, especially for young adolescents. Sara characters were spontaneously identified by at least one out of four of the youngest children surveyed. (2) Children and adults can both appreciate the educational qualities of the Sara animated cartoon and can successfully use it in different learning settings. (3) Sara cartoons are effective communication tools even with children who have low English proficiency. (4) Sara is used in a variety of ways to guide children through interactive learning methods, including discussions and role-plays. (5) Teachers and children both find Sara portrays characters who are like themselves. The Sara materials directly speak to the children about friendships, relationships, and problem-solving.²⁶

Sustaining Sara as a “Brand”

Mid-term evaluation results suggested that UNICEF should capitalise on the Sara investment and expand the SCI in other countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In some countries, there is good evidence that Sara materials are beginning used by various organizations. When Sara was conceived, it was recognized that the Sara products would have a potential to be marketed beyond UNICEF, and that SCI should be made into as a self-sustaining enterprise²⁷. Beginning in 1996, a search was undertaken for a regional publisher that would have the capacity to market, distribute, and sell Sara products throughout the sub-Sahara. Ultimately, a co-publishing and marketing agreement was signed between UNICEF and Maskew Miller Longman (MML), South Africa, a regional educational publisher with wide reach throughout Africa. Sara readers and teachers’ materials are being developed by MML for broad distribution in educational systems across Africa.

Very often, communication programs start and die quickly with no trace, except, perhaps, in libraries and repositories. Sara is now being adopted by other program implementation and donor groups because Sara products are available through a commercial channel. Recently, Sara products were purchased by the USAID-funded *Health Communication Partnership* in collaboration with UNICEF. This bodes well for the growth and sustainability of the SCI. These moves toward commercial sustainability make the SCI a unique project in development communication.

Conclusions

Sara has the potential to be recognised widely throughout sub-Saharan Africa as a symbol for girls’ empowerment in the face of HIV/AIDS. Where a reasonable attempt has been made to carry out good programs with Sara stories and tools, Sara becomes a supportive, positive role model for girls. However, to be realistic, a communication initiative cannot solve the HIV/AIDS epidemic by itself. It must be designed to support changes in the overall environment, such as access to youth-friendly and high-quality health and educational services.

The SCI has demonstrated that engaging cartoon characters, when well researched and programmed, can engender discussion in communities, and help shift individual behaviors and community norms. As noted previously, evidence from Uganda, a country that has experienced a decline in the incidence of HIV, points to the importance of delaying sexual debut among adolescents. This was the main issue in Sara stories, in addition to boosting of self-esteem among young girls, and avoidance of sexual exploitation.

Sara is being adopted by many user groups in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa. Her added value is that she appeals to all age groups and triggers discussion between generations. The SCI’s promise lies in that it represents a set of communication tools that have a wide research base and are applicable across many cultures. The commercialization of Sara materials through an educational publisher (and potentially, a foundation, or NGO) bodes well for future sustainability. Sara stands side-by-side with African girls to address the inequality they face by virtue of their gender.

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