

MAKUTANO JUNCTION: INFLUENCING IDEAS ON POVERTY?

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS: KEY FINDINGS

The focus groups

Four poverty related storylines were incorporated into Series 13 of Makutano Junction, a soap opera screened in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda expressly designed to both entertain and educate. To examine whether and how the episodes in Makutano Junction influence thinking about poverty, a series of six focus group discussions were carried out in Kenya with people not currently living in poverty. The focus groups were timed immediately after the screening of the series.

A total of 56 men and women (in equal numbers) took part in six, single sex, focus group discussions held in urban, peri-urban and rural settings. Discussions were facilitated by the use of a topic guide combined with showing of extracts from the relevant episodes of Series 13 of Makutano Junction.

People's views about Makutano Junction

Participants liked the fact that soaps are both educational and entertaining (incorporating love, politics and crime stories). They understood that the soaps provided substantive information, for example, on politics, banking and how to vote in elections and enjoyed the fact that their content made suitable viewing for the whole family and that they offered a pretty realistic portrayal of community life.

I like Makutano Junction because it enlightens public views...whatever happens among people, we get it in Makutano....

It's real it's something that affects each and everybody in the society or community.

Participants were more critical of the gaps in broadcasting (just once a week with no option for viewing a missed episode) swapping between topics and story lines, unfinished plots and the same actors playing different characters.

Responses to the poverty and shame story line

When the poverty storylines were viewed in isolation, respondents recognised core messages to do with the need to treat people in poverty with respect and, to a lesser extent, the sense of embarrassment and shame experienced by those in poverty.

Moderator: *Are there people who talk to poor people like that? (as depicted in the episode)*

Participant: *Yes, don't even go far, try to cross the road over there, someone driving his or her car will hoot for you insulting you to get your poverty out of the road.*

Participants appeared in their own lives to be aware of the embarrassment associated with poverty although there was little evidence that many changed their behaviour or moderated their language in the light of their awareness:

For me I have seen that even though people are poor they don't like to be told they are poor, they don't like it; people feel embarrassed because they are poor...

If I am not in an position to feed my children and do not want my neighbour to know about it, so I would wash them well and apply them "Kimbo" oil so that they can look shining as though they have eaten, because you do not want your neighbour to be aware of the situation, so that s/he may not say that gossip about us while saying that we are financially stretched to the point of sleeping hunger, because you do not want people to see this , you can't let even a neighbour to know...

Participants cited examples in the episodes which were either explicitly or implicitly shaming including the election campaigner forgetting that people who are poor can also vote or wealthier people publicly giving people money, thus revealing their poverty. That said, views about whether or not there should be a poverty 'register' were ambiguous. While respondents talked about the importance of changing the attitudes of others and of politicians, they also stressed that people in poverty should work hard and not depend on handouts. The scheme to provide coffee seedlings in one episode was widely praised by participants, though the importance of careful prior consultation with potential beneficiaries was thought to be imperative. They also took home messages about the need for collective, community action; the importance of not judging others; finding ways to combat poverty, exploitation and insecurity; and respecting rather than mocking or denigrating those people encountering poverty..

The poor people have also their own rights, they are human being, and they deserve their dignity.

However, three of the four poverty storylines did not appear particularly memorable compared to other themes covered in Series 13. They were, though, generally all considered to be realistic representations of the Kenyan experience. Some respondents explained their failure to remember the poverty storylines in terms of watching the programme for entertainment rather than to be educated; they enjoyed the programme rather than thought about it.

Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents interpreted the poverty storylines in terms of their prior values, women in particular seeing poverty to be the result of personal failings rather than structural factors. Equally, while they often believed that people in poverty were exploited by 'the rich'; they generally did not acknowledge that they ever contributed to the stigmatisation of people in poverty – despite the evidence of their own words.

In terms of their interactions with people in poverty, respondents spoke of meeting people in poverty in church, at work, in the market, at funerals and 'only when they (the poor) need you'. They spoke of a lack of interaction between those with wealth and those without unless there was something to be gained by the wealthy by such interactions. Generally, the rich were thought to talk about and laugh at those in poverty and while they had many friends, those in poverty had few.

If I am rich I will not take my tea here, I will go to ... I will go and meet people of my class. So, there is no way I am going with the poor guys here, down here.

When asked how relatively well off people treated those living in poverty, respondents talked about the belief that they were lazy, used bad language and were always asking for things. They spoke of how those in poverty, despite working hard, were frequently insulted, ostracised or exploited.

The causes of poverty cited by respondents were on the whole individualised – a lack of education or skills, lack of capital or know how to establish a business, laziness, ignorance, not wanting to work or take jobs considered to be too low status. Other reasons identified, however, included exploitation, corruption (particularly regarding women), not knowing the right people, oppression and nepotism.

Overall conclusions

Respondents appreciated the key take home messages of the programmes. In particular, groups reported on how to approach, speak to and respect people who are living in poverty. To some extent the messages heard were about helping, giving advice to and including those in poverty as part of the wider community. In the general discussion on poverty respondents talked at length about who is poor and the reasons for people being in poverty. They were, however, less voluble about potential remedies for poverty, although this could be because it was perhaps debatable as to whether all members of the groups felt that they were in the 'rich' category.

Overall Makutano Junction appears to be a well-liked programme with the potential for influencing attitudes about specific topics and themes, including poverty and its associated shame. However, it is important not to overburden the series with too much edutainment and to link key messages with star characters to whom the audience relates. The focus groups both confirmed earlier findings from the poverty and shame research concerning the ways in which people in poverty are treated by others, while at the same time demonstrated the potential of edutainment type activities in influencing attitudes and behaviour.

On the basis of their public utterances, respondents would appear willing to support, or at least not to oppose, policies that were designed to treat people in poverty with respect. Whether in reality they would support, or actively campaign for, such policies, is perhaps less likely in the light of their views on the individualistic causes of poverty