

GiveWell – PMC phone conversation, July 19, 2011

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GiveWell: After reading PMC's website and seeing the research, my main questions are on PMC's activities and some questions on finances.

I'd like to understand more about PMC's specific activities, since I didn't find a lot about this on the website. What I mean is not the types of programs, but more precisely how PMC is involved in the production of the programs. So, can you tell us about how PMC contributes to the radio programs? Do you have the same kind of involvement / same model of involvement in all countries, or does it vary a lot from place to place?

PMC: PMC uses entertainment media to change cultural attitudes and individual behavior with regard to health and social issues. To achieve this, PMC adopted the Sabido methodology, which uses long-running serialized melodramas. Characters are created that gradually evolve into positive role models for the audience. The idea is that people are more likely to change if entertained than if they're just lectured to. If you're able to convey the message in an entertaining story line, you're more likely to be able to grab peoples' attention.

We have a standard approach but we also base our programs on a country's specific needs. For instance: is HIV a big concern? Is maternal mortality a big concern?

What's different about PMC is that we always hire country nationals. They know their way around, the culture, the nuances we don't know. As headquarters, our job is to administrate and find the money, and support good people in the work that they do.

We're involved throughout the process. A prototypical program would be 3 years. We're there in terms of gathering funds, administrative capacity building, hiring nationals, project accounting and support. We bring in trainers who are well-versed in Sabido methodology to do intensive 3 week training workshops.

In terms of research, we tend to subcontract research to local firms, but we'll establish research protocols.

GiveWell: Are you contributing to shows that would exist otherwise, or are you bringing shows into existence which wouldn't otherwise exist?

PMC: We're making them come into existence. We are creating entertainment material for local broadcasters..

GiveWell: So, how do you get things on the radio? Do the stations want programming, which you provide?

PMC: Local broadcasters want entertainment content, but we usually must pay for the privileges for broadcasting on commercial stations. In some cases, we get reduced rates or it is free.

GiveWell: Why wouldn't the stations pay for content?

PMC: Traditionally, that's not exactly the model in the countries where we operate. Instead, we are buying what is essentially a long 15-30 minute commercial slot. We don't have pauses in our show where there are commercials inserted. For our shows, we buy prime-time slots when people are available to listen. We're then able to promote the show as being on at a particular time.

GiveWell: Have you thought of putting commercial slots in to compete as profitable television show?

PMC:

We have recently developed a corporate sponsorship package, where – at varying levels of support – brief commercial spots may be inserted in the broadcast or characters may use the sponsor's products or demonstrate behavior consistent with the sponsor's business (for example hand washing where our sponsor is a soap manufacturer.)

GiveWell: Do you do TV as well as radio?

PMC: We currently only have radio programs. We are trying to make leap from radio to TV. Another thing we're doing is starting production of a web novella. This gives some opportunity for having ads online.

GiveWell: You mentioned promotion of a radio show. How do you promote shows?

PMC: We have a variety of methods. In Rwanda, we had some on-air contests to gather interest. We use paid advertising and jingles, 20 sec slots throughout the day. Sometimes we'll use theme music with popular musician. Sometimes we have launch event with the local press or we do Tshirt giveaways or cell phone giveaways. If we could make our budgets bigger, we would put more money into promotion.

GiveWell: How do you recruit in-country writers?

PMC: We have a couple of ways. We do an open call for writers with some writing experience, particularly writing melodrama. We do the calls in places like the capital where there is a higher level of education, theatres present, etc. With people who are writers already, we'll do an open call, and we invite them to a workshop where the people who come are taught Sabido methodology, and we tell them that not everyone will be hired. From that group, we choose a group of about 5-7. It's a step up for a number of them to take part in our programs.

Another thing we do sometimes is first hire the producer and then tell them what we're doing and ask them to look for people that can do it. One of our trainers pushes really hard for female writers; in a lot of countries where women don't have opportunities, we're fighting to involve them.

GiveWell: How do you decide which messages are appropriate for a particular place?

PMC: It's often driven by the donor preferences. For instance, one UN agency we are working with to develop new programs has specific interest in contraceptive use prevalence in West African countries.

Other donors have particular issues they are concerned with, like harmful traditional practices, food security or environmental concerns. Fortunately, we're able to relate a lot of our concerns to these themes, for example, we believe population affects environment.

We also do a lot of research a particular country before we produce the program. In the 4-6 month beginning phase, we do a literature review and media analysis; we study the constitution and the laws in place in a country to make sure that our messages are not inconsistent with local laws. Generally we keep out of controversial issues; there are plenty of issues to focus on.

We also do formative and baseline research. We ask: what are the predominant attitudes and behaviors in country. We use on the ground focus groups. What do people say is important to their life in this country? The baseline is a part of our before and after quantitative research.

We create a values grid from the formative research. These values are already reflected in the countries. The values grid is used to train the program producers and writers. This technique goes back to Sabido in Mexico where he talked to people in the Catholic Church and asked if they had any problem with his approach, and they said that they didn't.

In northern Nigeria, which is a predominantly Muslim population, we go the stamp of approval by the religious leaders in that area. We can work with cultural and religious sensitivities and get our message out there.

GiveWell: What's the process for giving feedback to writers? Do program officers give ongoing feedback or do other people do this?

PMC: When the show is in English, program officers can give feedback. If it's not in English, we gather script summaries (in English). Listeners groups also give direct feedback to writers. We are always producing ahead of broadcast so that we have time to get feedback. The listeners groups may say "I don't like this character or I do like this character." We also have an in-country advisory committee which includes experts in health, such as members of health ministries. They check to make sure that there are no errors in medical facts. We try to rely on local resources as much as possible. The headquarters involvement is more just to check whether they're writing compelling dramas and sticking with the story line.

The training set up is pretty intense – it is 3 weeks long. Then we produce 4 pilot episodes and focus groups listen to these episodes. When we start a show, messaging doesn't begin for 30-40 episodes; first we want to hook the audience on the fun part.

GiveWell: How do you decide which countries to go to? Is this also donor-driven?

PMC: Our president keeps a list of 50 countries in the developing world where we would like to work. But yes, where we end up is largely donor-driven. As long as we're going to population hotspots, we are willing to go there (i.e., those where total fertility rates are high, where maternal mortality is high, where becoming pregnant carries a big risk to your life.)

GiveWell: Would it be possible to look at a break-down on what you spend your money on? What I'm thinking of is: salaries for writers, fees to stations, money spent on promotion.

PMC: Absolutely, we can send you a proposal that we wrote for a recent West Africa project. In general, our radio programs have total expenses just shy of \$2 million each.

GiveWell: Does PMC pay for all the expenses in the show or are there other players that have to fund other parts?

PMC: It mostly comes through us. Sometimes the donor agency will pay a supplying vendor directly instead of passing it through us. We have also received discounted airtime in certain countries where the government may have been funneling funds to that radio station to keep them running. That didn't have to pass through our budget. For the most part, all the dollars would pass through us. Sometimes they'll go directly to the in-country office, but typically through headquarters.

GiveWell: Is the country list which appears on the PMC website more or less comprehensive a list of the shows you've done?

PMC: Yes, the country count is up to 25 now. The only one that we have been in for the entire life of PMC is Ethiopia, where has been with us for over 10 years. This is our most mature program, and our most diverse and longest-lasting. They have not just radio dramas but also have radio talk shows, books, workshops, etc., and they've really stretched it out to touch the people of Ethiopia in a number of ways. There are also 9 Caribbean island nations represented.

GiveWell: What would be an analogue to what you are doing, in Hollywood?

PMC: I would say an independent producer that brings a show to the market is similar to us.

GiveWell: Do you have ratings data for the shows, akin to ratings that we have for TV here?

PMC: Part of our evaluation research is random sample of population; one main question is "did you listen"? We also ask other questions to try to see if we're having an influence on behavior. In these countries, though, there's no really formal rating system that we can rely on.

GiveWell: If you were to receive additional funding for donors coming from a GiveWell recommendation – let's say \$2 million or \$5 million – what do you think PMC would spend it on?

PMC: For our existing programs, additional room in the budget would allow us to be more hands on and to scale up our involvement, for example having our staff spend time with people who we have helped set up in the countries, and to spend more time there. For instance, helping them through issues they encounter.

There's a huge list of new projects we'd like to do. A fully funded radio serial drama may cost up to \$2 million. At the other end of the scale, it costs \$30-50K for an exploratory mission. In Rwanda right now we need \$300K for a rebroadcast, and we raised only half that.

GiveWell: Other things that would be good to see, if you could send this to us, is as many country budgets with allocations to specific things as you can send, so that we get an idea for how this looks. And also your overall expenses with spending going to countries versus headquarters.

PMC: Yes, we can send those.

GiveWell: Do you ever think that there's a country where you've been 10 years and there's some area where we haven't scratched the surface, where it would be better to work instead?

PMC: We prefer to work in places with stable political environments. In most places we go, it's a relatively good experience and we're happy to repeat them. I don't think there are many places we would consciously extract ourselves from if there was funding to continue.

GiveWell: OK, but do you think that there are countries that are stable and could use these types of shows? Maybe the question comes down to whether the funds are targeted to a specific country.

PMC: Right now our portfolio is country-specific. UN and Foundation grants tend to be country-targeted. We've been around long enough in certain countries to say we can make this work, so we're going to be looking at foundation/orgs that fund that country. We don't want to make it harder for ourselves by working where no one wants to fund.