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## Learning at leisure: Using entertainment education to empower the poor

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By **Mahmoud Mohieldin** – Special to CNN

What does a TV program showcasing Bollywood film songs have to do with India's development? Viewers don't typically sit in front of the television expecting to be empowered with knowledge that helps them improve their lives. But if writers and producers are provided with substantive information about critical topics, could television be transformed into more than just entertainment? Could popular programs be used to subtly yet effectively deliver information

that convinces audiences to change their behavior and improve their lives – or, in the case of same language subtitling, helps them learn to read?

That was the idea behind The World Bank's Development Marketplace grant program in financing an innovative pilot led by Brij Kothari at [PlanetRead Literacy for a Billion](#). The pilot added Hindi subtitles to a popular television program that showcased Bollywood film songs, with striking results. As compared to a control group, levels of illiteracy were cut in half, and the percent of children who were learning to read and became good readers more than doubled.

At the recent [Conference on Entertainment Education held at the World Bank Group](#), thought leaders in behavior change made it clear that communications experts, educators and behavioral psychologists have been successfully employing this strategy in the field of health as well.

Essentially, entertainment education is a communications strategy that works through mass entertainment media by incorporating information into popular programs to change people's attitudes and behaviors. It is usually part of more comprehensive communications strategies that can include public service announcements and more direct forms of informational communications such as websites and text message reminders—all of which are used by government policymakers, development professionals, civil society and NGOs working in development.

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Examples of the development impact education entertainment can have extends beyond television to other media. Take for example the case of [Taru](#), a 52-episode radio soap opera broadcast in four Indian states between 2002 and 2003. Developed as a joint project of [All India Radio](#) (AIR) and the NGO Population Communications International ([now PCI Media Impact](#)), and closely coordinated with rural health practitioners in the villages where it aired, *Taru* promoted gender equality, reproductive health, informed family planning, caste and communal harmony, and community development. Impact evaluations showed that communities that listened to *Taru* started to discuss the need for girls' education and informed family planning, creating an enabling environment for villagers to seek family planning services that were available to them but which had been underutilized. Sales of condoms, contraceptive pills, and pregnancy test strips more than tripled in villages where *Taru's* impact was closely monitored.

Entertainment education is expanding its reach to a few other development topics. Recently in both Kenya and South Africa, popular television dramas have dealt with a variety of financial issues including over-indebtedness, opening a bank account and financing a small business. In South Africa, the [National Debt Mediation Association](#) is a partner in one of these efforts, and the show it is collaborating on will publicize the NDMA's services for consumers who find themselves in over their heads in debt.

The potential to scale-up the use entertainment education for development has never been greater than it is today. More than a billion households worldwide have a television. Television penetration rates in emerging economies like Vietnam and Algeria are as high as 80 percent and over 95 percent in Mexico. In India, more people have cell phones and televisions in their home than have indoor plumbing. And those homes lacking television sets almost certainly have at least one radio or mobile phone, as telecommunications technologies continue to expand,

reaching even the most remote and challenging environments. Indeed, mass entertainment media captures people's attention regardless of culture or context.

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However, even after many decades, entertainment education has yet to reach its potential. It is still applied to a relatively narrow set of issues, missing opportunities in many areas of development, such as gender equity, violence prevention, sanitation and environmental protection. Entertainment education has also tended to be done through one-off projects targeting specialized programming rather than via mainstream shows and partnerships with commercial media that capitalize on the skills and resources of leaders in the entertainment industry. In their current form, entertainment education initiatives are costly and are not delivering as many messages to as many audiences as they could.

Here is how to scale up entertainment education so that it produces significant progress towards society's economic and social goals:

1. Leverage partnerships among governments, civil society and the commercial entertainment media sector, both globally and locally.
2. Extend entertainment education techniques beyond health education to treat a range of pressing development issues: financial access and capability, water and sanitation, nutrition, gender equity, and violence prevention, to name just a few.
3. Link entertainment education to development programs and projects at the community-level to increase impact.
4. Take a transmedia approach that employs traditional and new media in concert so that SMS messages, Facebook entries, Tweets and comic books support and reinforce the educational information broadcast through popular TV and radio programs.
5. Build a research base for entertainment education and proving its efficacy: This means that each pilot intervention should incorporate a rigorous monitoring and impact evaluation framework and new funding sources should be made available for such evaluations.

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When implemented properly, entertainment education can create deeper and more effective interactions with intended beneficiaries yet at a scale unmatched in many other development initiatives. The international development community should seize this innovative opportunity to work toward our shared goals.

*The views expressed in this article are solely those of Mahmoud Mohieldin. Read more from the [Global Innovation Showcase](#) created in partnership with the [New America Foundation](#).*

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