

Venturing into Madagascar



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The Media Action Plan (MAP) on HIV and AIDS and Gender has become part of the Southern African Media landscape. But so far it has mainly been restricted to the English speaking countries.

It's a well known joke in GL that the mind of the Executive Director works overtime. When Madagascar joined the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the wires in her brain started to do gymnastics. What was to be done about Madagascar, she asked the Executive Committee? The ED knows only too well that venturing into Madagascar is also a stepping stone to another Francophone country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It has long been a dream of Gender Links to venture into the DRC.

It did not take long for the mouse in the ED's brain to click on the right key. Mauritius, she reckoned, is the perfect bridge between English and French speaking countries in SADC, given our own peculiar colonial history. As it turned out, I had also been approached by the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) to mount a training programme for journalists of Mauritius, Seychelles, Comores and Madagascar on reporting on HIV and AIDS. The first thing I did was to tell them about MAP. Dr. Renaud Ng Man Sun, Head of the HIV and AIDS Project for the IOC, had helped with in-house workshops to implement HIV and AIDS and Gender Policies in Mauritius. He listened carefully.

All the experiences and materials from Gender Links came in handy. Media monitoring had not been heard of until we came on the scene. Although media monitoring sounded like Greek to the African Bank of Development, the main funder of the IOC project, they found the idea so innovative and creative that they wanted to know more. Dr. Ng Man Sun did most of the explaining.

The other GL innovation I introduced was the idea of producing a supplement as part of the training. Our programme, which included media monitoring, field work and the production of a supplement, attracted so many participants that even doctors in Madagascar wanted to be part of it! In an e-mail, Dr. Renaud Ng Man Sun, said *"ton programme est unique en son genre et maintenant même les médecins malgaches veulent participer à l'atelier de formation."* (your programme is unique and doctors in Madagascar want to participate in the training workshop)!

This workshop gave my colleague, Marie Annick Savripene and I both the landing gear and the wings. As soon as we set foot in Madagascar to organise the workshop and to collect materials for media monitoring, we visited a few newsrooms. The Director General of L'Express of Madagascar, Jérôme Boule, not only agreed to publish the supplement but showed great interest in MAP.

As a follow up to the workshop, participants have to write regularly on HIV and AIDS. A monitoring of their articles will be done and findings sent to the IOC. We therefore seized the opportunity to talk about MAP and encouraged them to talk to their Directors and Editors on implementing policies on HIV and AIDS and gender.

The experience obtained in Madagascar and the collaboration of the IOC is a springboard for Gender Links to extend the MAP policy project to francophone countries that are members of SADC. I am delighted that as I write Sida, the main funders for MAP policy work, have agreed to extend the project to Madagascar and DRC. We will no doubt have more to report on this next year!

