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PROJECT MASILULEKE

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South Africa: Using Cell Phones To Combat AIDS

Written by [Juhie Bhatia](https://globalvoices.org/author/juhie-bhatia/) [https://globalvoices.org/author/juhie-bhatia/]

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South Africa has found a new weapon in its fight against HIV/AIDS – cell phones. A new initiative will be sending free text messages daily to encourage South Africans to get tested and treated for the disease.

The project, called Project Masiluleke or Project M, was [announced](http://www.poptech.org/blog/index.php/2008/10/24/project-masiluleke-tackling-hiv-with-technology/) [http://www.poptech.org/blog/index.php/2008/10/24/project-masiluleke-tackling-hiv-with-technology/] last week at the [Pop!Tech 2008](http://www.poptech.org/conferences/) [http://www.poptech.org/conferences/] conference in Maine, U.S.A. It takes advantage of the popularity of cell phones in South Africa, using them to fight the country's high rates of HIV and tuberculosis (TB). The first part of the project will send the general public approximately one million free text messages daily for a year, urging them to call HIV and TB call centers. These messages will be sent as part of “Please Call Me” messages, a type of text messaging widely used across Africa.

White African [elaborates](http://whiteafrican.com/2008/10/24/frontlinesms-clay-shirky-and-project-masiluleke/) [http://whiteafrican.com/2008/10/24/frontlinesms-clay-shirky-and-project-masiluleke/] on the project and this technology:

“Gustav Praekelt – one of the most knowledgeable mobile phone specialists in Africa – is helping to run the program. It’s done using the 120 character free space in ‘Please Call Me’ SMS system that’s used in South Africa. They tack on messages to get people to come to get HIV treatment in private, so that they don’t have to worry about what stigma is attached to that treatment.”

Stigma, along with misinformation, are [believed](http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fthe%5Fchallenge/) [http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fthe%5Fchallenge/] to be the main reasons why so few South Africans get tested and treated for HIV. Even though [roughly 5.7 million people](http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Countries/south_africa.asp) [http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Countries/south_africa.asp] in South Africa are living with HIV, according to the project's organizers just [5 percent](http://www.poptech.org/blog/index.php/2008/10/24/project-masiluleke-tackling-hiv-with-technology/) [http://www.poptech.org/blog/index.php/2008/10/24/project-masiluleke-tackling-hiv-with-technology/] of the population has been tested for the virus. South Africa also has one of the [highest numbers of TB cases](http://www.who.int/tb/publications/global_report/2008/key_points/en/index.html) [http://www.who.int/tb/publications/global_report/2008/key_points/en/index.html], a common killer of people with HIV.

Project M was created to help combat both of these diseases. It grew out of the [Pop!Tech Accelerator](http://www.poptech.org/accelerator/) [http://www.poptech.org/accelerator/] program and brings together an [international coalition of partners](http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fpartners/) [http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fpartners/], including iTeach, the Praekelt Foundation, frog design, Nokia Siemens Networks and the National Geographic Society. [3 Sheep points out](http://www.3sheep.co.uk/2008/10/25/south-africa-texting-health-care/) [http://www.3sheep.co.uk/2008/10/25/south-africa-texting-health-care/] that this project's use of cell phones shows how embedded they are in South African culture, adding:

“Many countries do not have an established hardwired infrastructure and are looking to the mobile network as means of mass communication...Previously other media, such as radio, would have been used for such work but the South African project demonstrates the importance of considering all channels for outreach.”

Though this is [not the first](http://mobileactive.org/cell-life-update-using-mobiles-fight-hiv-aids) [http://mobileactive.org/cell-life-update-using-mobiles-fight-hiv-aids] of such projects in South Africa, organizers [say](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/7688268.stm) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/7688268.stm] it's the largest use ever of mobile phones for sending health information. And so far the project holds much promise. Early testing of this text messaging campaign [helped triple](http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fthe%5Fsolution/) [http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fthe%5Fsolution/] the average daily call volume to the National AIDS Helpline in Johannesburg. If the project is successful post-launch, it's hoped that this model can be expanded across Africa.

ahellgeth, commenting on a post on *African Globalization*, [believes](http://africanglobalization.blogspot.com/2008/10/texts-tackle-hiv-in-south-africa.html) [http://africanglobalization.blogspot.com/2008/10/texts-tackle-hiv-in-south-africa.html] that this project has a lot of potential.

“Using technology is a great way to get a strong message across to a mass amount of people. The use of text messages offer people to view the message over and over, compared to seeing the message on a commercial or a flyer one time. A text message usually sits in a phones mailbox for a couple of days, allowing that person to go back and view it. I think the message would truly stick with people allowing them to act on it...These texts are PSA's [public service announcements] for cell phones.”

Dave, blogging on *Design in Africa* [agrees](http://designinafrica.posterous.com/project-masiluleke) [http://designinafrica.posterous.com/project-masiluleke] that this project will likely be a success:

“An important issue is being addressed, a simple, easy to understand solution has been designed by combining the resources of stakeholders, there are measurable benefits for people and communities and the cost of the incoming message is free. Brilliant.”

But lablady, blogging on *Wise Advice*, finds it unsettling that technology has taken center-stage in the fight against HIV/AIDS. She [says](http://wiseadvice.wordpress.com/2008/10/27/puzzling-aids-news-item/) [http://wiseadvice.wordpress.com/2008/10/27/puzzling-aids-news-item/] :

“At what point in time did society make it an easier, more obvious and appealing choice for an impoverished population in the grips of an HIV epidemic, to buy a cell phone rather than a condom? I find it paradoxical that technology has now become the default vehicle to initiate what would have been at one time, a grass roots blood testing and education campaign. Is it arrogant of me to wonder why an entire population acquired cell phones before they had access to a successful public health strategy for a preventable disease?”

Catherine Forsythe, blogging on *DogReader*, [adds](http://www.lockergnome.com/forsythe/2008/10/24/health-text-messages/) [http://www.lockergnome.com/forsythe/2008/10/24/health-text-messages/] that these messages may eventually be seen as “health spam.”

“The question may be ‘how long will this methodology be effective?’ After an initial viewing, these public health messages may be deleted as quickly as the usual text spam.”

Project M certainly hopes not. [Future phases](http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fthe%5Fsolution/) [http://www.poptech.org/project%5Fm%5Fthe%5Fsolution/] of the project involve distributing at-home HIV testing kits, developing “virtual call centers,” and using text messages to provide personalized healthcare information for those being treated for AIDS.

Photo of [Cell Phone Close Up](http://flickr.com/photos/jonjon_2k8/340305918/) [http://flickr.com/photos/jonjon_2k8/340305918/] by [JonJon2k8](http://flickr.com/photos/jonjon_2k8/) [http://flickr.com/photos/jonjon_2k8/] on Flickr.