

***Si Mchezo!* Magazine Educates and Entertains Rural Tanzanian Youth**

Personal stories and reader involvement provide role models for behavior change.

Makete District, Tanzania – Nehemia Sango made a bold statement: “*Nimeachana na ngono*” – I am abstaining from sex. But he didn’t just mention it to a few friends; he proclaimed it on the cover of *Si Mchezo!* magazine.

“By the time I was 17, both my parents had died. There was no money for my school fees, and I had two younger brothers to take care of,” explains Nehemia, a young man from Makete district in southern Tanzania, one of the areas hit hardest by HIV/AIDS.

“Once I was no longer a student, my relatives expected me to find a wife. But I knew I wasn’t ready. I already had enough responsibility taking care of myself and my brothers, and besides, I had other goals for my future.”

In order to focus on his goals – and avoid HIV – Nehemia decided to abstain from sex before marriage. “I had sex when I was younger, but it was a mistake,” he says.

“I always read *Si Mchezo!*, and I wanted to share my experiences with others like me. My advice is, don’t rush into sex. Temptations are there, but abstinence is possible.”

Si Mchezo! targets rural, out-of-school youth – a huge proportion of the youth population in Tanzania – with information about sexuality, reproductive health, and other issues, including HIV/AIDS and risky behavior. The editorial development and production is currently supported by YouthNet/Tanzania, with funds from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief through the U.S. Agency for International Development/Tanzania. Other donors contribute to print runs and distribution in other parts of the country. “*Si Mchezo!*” is a popular Swahili phrase that means “no joke.”

The format is designed for youth who are not strong readers. Articles are written in simple, direct Swahili. Cartoons and photographs add to the appeal, and a four-page photo-novel is the centerpiece of the magazine. Testimonials like Nehemia’s provide role models for positive change. Published bi-monthly, the magazine has a national circulation of 98,000.



Magazine Involves Readers

Si Mchezo! gives a voice to people who normally do not have a chance to express themselves to a large audience. After Nehemia’s story appeared, a young man from Tunduru district wrote to *Si Mchezo!* editors: “Many youth think it’s impossible to abstain, especially if you’ve already started having sex, but this is wrong. We should follow the example of people like Nehemia. Thank you, *Si Mchezo!*, for giving him room to speak.”

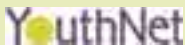
A young man from Lindi region wrote, “Nehemia’s story has saved my life! I used to have sex with every beautiful girl I met... After I read Nehemia’s story, I decided to follow his example. I have not had sex for the last three months, and I am planning to go for an HIV test.”

Letters such as these offer valuable insight into the thoughts of readers and reflect the effort of *Si Mchezo!* to involve readers in the production process. Editors travel to different regions

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of Tanzania with laptops and digital cameras to gather the voices and images of rural youth in their own environment. This high level of interaction with readers helps to encourage their emotional investment in the magazine and to increase its credibility. This involvement helps support the “edutainment” approach, an entertaining yet honest reflection of the world of rural Tanzanian youth.

The *Si Mchezo!* editorial team has developed a poster to go with the magazine called “A B C mpaka Z” (Beyond ABC). The poster presents ways for young people to protect themselves from HIV, with more choices than an ABC message (abstain, be faithful, use condoms). The poster encourages people not to rush into sex and to explore other ways to express affection (see poster segment, at right).

Like the magazine, the poster encourages people to “*cheza salama*” – to play safe. While HIV is a serious threat, youth can enjoy life in a responsible manner. *Cheza salama* means embracing a healthy lifestyle from many angles: relationships, education, employment, avoiding substance abuse, spirituality, and more.

The many letters to the editors reflect the magazine’s impact. One young man wrote, “*Si Mchezo!* has helped me to stop drinking alcohol. I used to be well-known in my community as a heavy drinker. But after reading *Si Mchezo!*, I’ve seen the dangers of alcohol, of unprotected sex, and other risky behavior. Today I’m a completely new person.”

Another wrote, “I can say without a doubt that *Si Mchezo!* has helped me change my behavior. I used to go out with any man who approached me for sex, and I had no worries. After reading several issues of *Si Mchezo!*, I realized that my behavior was putting me at risk. I’ve stopped sleeping around, and I’ve gone for an HIV test. I’ll always read *Si Mchezo!* because it has had such a big impact on my life.”

While youth are the primary target, *Si Mchezo!* also reaches parents, religious leaders, teachers, health workers, and others.



Boy: ... Let's take it slow. There are lots of things we can do to show our affection...

Girl: I agree! Why don't we go to the disco today?

It is distributed free of charge via community-based partners such as nongovernmental organizations, large-scale employers (tea estates, teak plantations, etc.), peer educators, and government officials. Issues often focus on a particular topic and serve as a resource that is passed among family and friends. Topics include HIV prevention, living positively with HIV, home-based care, stigma, prevention of gender-based violence, orphans and vulnerable children, and others. It focuses on individual behavior and a positive social environment, such as emphasizing open communication about HIV/AIDS.

Meanwhile, Nehemia continues to beat the odds in Tanzania. Today he is a successful 21-year-old businessman. Since his story appeared in *Si Mchezo!*, he says, girls often try to flirt with him. “They want to test how serious I am about abstaining! But I haven’t changed my mind.”

— Rebecca Arnold

Rebecca Arnold works with Health Information Project MultiMedia Initiative, run by the East African Development Communication Foundation, based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This initiative includes *Si Mchezo!*, FEMINA HIP magazine, FEMINA TV talk show, www.chezasalama.com, complementary printed materials, and community mobilization programs.

YouthNet Briefs is an activity of YouthNet, a five-year program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to improve reproductive health and prevent HIV among young people. The YouthNet team is led by Family Health International and includes CARE USA and RTI International.