

Of big pharmaceuticals, preventable deaths, and wonder pills

Evelyn Groenink writes about Africa's first trans-national investigation

This year, the Forum for African Investigative Reporters (Fair) embarked on a trans-national pan-African investigation conducted by 10 Fair members in five African countries. The topic – “the pharmaceutical industry in Africa” – is certain to result in interesting, perhaps even shocking, findings by the team. The results of the investigation will be announced at the Fair pan-African Investigative Journalism summit to be held at the University of the Witwatersrand in September. Fair will also publish a hard copy dossier of the trans-national investigation report.

The team consists of investigative reporters of repute in their countries, Zambia, Kenya, Malawi, the DRC and South Africa.

Together, they are digging into such questions as:

- Why are much-needed medicines still too expensive for Africans?
- Why are cheaper medicines often blocked from reaching the African public?
- What medicines have been tested in Africa by the pharmaceutical companies but have not become available to the African public?
- Who are the peddlers selling quack remedies for real diseases and why are they free to do what they do in many African countries?
- Which anti-Aids programmes focus on abstinence-only and does this help?

There have been diverse reports on and complaints about the current practice of pharmaceutical companies, which conduct more and more of their clinical trials in Africa, because volunteers are easily found and medical staff salaries are cheaper, while simultaneously pricing the resulting medicines so high that they can never be accessed by most Africans, not even those guinea pigs who helped develop them.

This situation has left the African market wide open to “wonder pill” peddlers of the type of Dr Matthias Rath in South Africa, who claim that their concoctions can cure Aids and other diseases. The Fair team is looking into these reports and conducting its own surveys, interviews and data search to investigate the actual situation and its consequences. In addition it is investigating whether the efforts of African governments, foreign donor organisations and local NGOs help counter this situation.

The investigation follows a collaborative format that has been tried and tested by the US-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (leading to trailblazing international investigations into such issues as the international arms trade and water privatisation), and has been adapted and modified by Fair to suit African circumstances.

The undertaking is project-managed by renowned Dutch investigative author Eveline

Lubbers, who led team-based investigations into multinationals and the arms trade in Europe. This is Lubbers' first investigative foray into Africa. “It is a challenge,” she says.

“There is so little information and expertise available locally in the participating countries that background data from international sources often needs to be fed back to the local team members, so that they get to know under which rocks to look. There is also a lot of misinformation distributed by traders of untested drugs as well as by some religious groups, that our teams have to wade through with the people they interview. At the same time, as the central co-ordinator who is not on the ground at the level where people are dying, I am often shocked by the reports that reach me. Jointly, we are unearthing important stuff.”

It is indeed a challenge – and one of Fair's *raison d'être* – that little news and information reaches African countries to begin with. That is, not information that one can work with. The flood of disjointed data that one accesses through the Internet is of little use without the institutional capacity and the expertise to sieve this flood for local priority issues.

As a result, media workers in Africa often see their efforts channelled, filtered and sometimes dictated by the international headlines from big press agencies, government propaganda, corporate advertising, the odd NGO publication and local political news – often concerning political rivals accusing each other of such things as corruption and mismanagement.

Even if one were to search, pro-actively, through databases (like the company registry, or tenders that are on offer in a government department), archives are very often in disarray and information is regularly simply refused when asked for. There is still no proper access to information legislation in any African country outside South Africa.

Interestingly, in the months that Fair conceptualised this cross-border investigation, this disadvantage in a certain respect became an advantage. If the people on the street are all one has to go on, the people on the street have great influence in what one prioritises as a topic! Fair members, in website correspondence that took months, and in which many possible subjects were considered, finally decided on the topic of accessible medication because “people participate in medical experiments in pharmaceutical clinical trials but they don't get the medication when they need it – people are dying”, as Malawi Fair team member Mabvuto Banda put it.

According to international news reports about Africa, the news on this continent seems to be all about corruption accusations, but the Fair team opted for the very simple question: where are the medicines?

The answer to this question, of course, will touch on corruption, as well as on the practices by “big pharma”. But by tackling the consequences of the lack of affordable medicine in Africa on a grass-roots level, the various powers to be held responsible will each have to answer as to their role in the problem, and conclusions will be drawn regarding the capacity and political and corporate will of each of these, in the face of tens (or hundreds) of thousands of unnecessary deaths of mothers, fathers and children in Africa.

A consequence of the lack of real medicines is, of course, the avalanche of wonder pill peddlers who exploit an already desperate public even further. On the streets of Africa, the Fair team members have encountered a sizeable number of such unscrupulous people and their often damaging, even poisonous, products.

Half-way through, without much local access to state and corporate information, the Fair team has already succeeded in building and tapping sources, and a picture is starting to emerge. Deeply hidden and sometimes astonishing examples of injustice, wrongdoing and bad faith have been uncovered in all five participating countries.

The team members have supported one another by making their interim results available to the rest of the team, so that issues they came across could be checked in the other team member countries. Lubbers has consistently helped search through relevant international expertise, channelled helpful data from there back to the team members and has kept everyone in their respective countries focused and on track.

As Fair co-ordinator, I am certainly looking forward to the headlines when the investigation is complete.

The Fair Pan-African Investigative Journalism Summit will take place in conjunction with the Power Reporting Conference 2007, organised by the University of Witwatersrand's Investigative Journalism Workshop in Johannesburg.