



Merck Foundation and Sesame Workshop: *Zhima Jie* Project in China

Project Summary

Sesame Workshop and Merck Foundation are working together on *Zhima Jie*, a comprehensive new educational multimedia project in China. It includes a new television series, *Zhima Jie's Big Bird Looks at the World*, which centers on science and discovery. The TV, which launched in December 2010, is complemented by a website, print materials, and reading corners in selected Shanghai classrooms. The project also includes a two-phase community outreach project that addresses the important issue of emergency response and preparedness. The first phase, which launched in April 2011, provides resources to help communities cope after a natural disaster. The second phase, slated to launch in September 2011, will help families be better prepared for potential emergencies. Further information on each project element is included in the subsequent Project Elements section. As further detailed below, this project meets three of the four themes of the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) Innovation Fair, including:

1. Access to education for marginalized groups and those in rural and hard-to-reach locations;
2. Education in crisis situations (conflict, post-conflict and disasters);
3. Information and communication technologies (ICT) for education

Project Elements

I. The TV Series: *Zhima Jie's Big Bird Looks at the World* and Merck Foundation Science Messages

The new Chinese *Sesame Street* co-production, *Zhima Jie's Big Bird Looks at the World*, developed with Shanghai Toonmax Media, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Shanghai Media Group (SMG), launched in December 2010 on Haha and will launch around June 2011 on Toonmax. We are also working on syndication through provincial terrestrial channels to further the program's reach, particularly to more rural areas. *Zhima Jie's Big Bird Looks at the World* targets children ages 3-7 and focuses on fostering children's natural curiosity about their world and science, and encouraging children to experience hands-on exploration as a way of learning and gaining knowledge. Children learn to ask questions, make observations, and form conclusions.

The project's television and outreach content have the potential to reach areas that are relatively underserved. Disparities in educational attainment and access between rural and urban areas, and between the eastern and western region, are well documented.³ There is also indication of rural-urban differences in teacher qualifications in favor of urban areas.¹ These data suggest our program can provide early learning experiences currently unavailable to many children, particularly in rural areas.

Before each episode, we are airing five alternating Merck Foundation 30-second original educational problem-solving messages that enhance the learning experience of the TV show. Each message presents Elmo and children engaging in a science-based craft activity that viewers can also do at home, with a goal of encouraging children and parents to discover their world and engage in scientific inquiry and exploration

¹ Corter, C., Janmohammed, Z., Zhang, J., & Bertrand, J. (2006). Selected issues concerning early childhood education and care in China. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, Strong foundations: early childhood care and education

in their everyday lives. Examples include creating a bird feeder from a juice carton, making a rain stick, and writing a “secret message” with lemon juice.

II. Additional Components

- **Shanghai Kindergarten Reading Corners:** Posters, books and DVDs are featured in the *Sesame Street* Reading Corners that are present in 125 kindergartens in Shanghai.
- **Sesame Street China Website** www.sesamestreetchina.com.cn: In addition to other elements, this website features extended 60-second versions of the educational problem-solving messages, along with PDFs with further instructions on how to perform the activities at home.
- **Print:** A two–page section featuring *Zhima Jie* content was provided each month in *For Children* magazine in 2010. We are currently working on establishing a new partnership with another leading magazine to continue to feature educational *Zhima Jie* print content.

III. Emergency Response and Preparedness Community Outreach Project

In recent years, China has experienced several natural disasters, including the devastating Sichuan earthquake in 2008, as well as smaller scale earthquakes, flooding, and mudslides. In times of crisis, regular educational activities can provide children with stability and a sense of normalcy that can be invaluable in healing the emotional trauma associated with living through an emergency situation.² However, in times of emergency, few organizations provide appropriate learning materials that are educational, easy to use, and help caregivers and young children return to a routine during trying times. Further, there is little information available to families as to how they can prepare themselves for potential emergencies.

In response to these needs, we are creating a two-phased project on emergency response and preparedness, working with China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), best known for its largest program, Project Hope, which helps children in rural regions go to school. CYDF is also well-known for disaster relief projects: After the 2008 earthquake, they built over 200 temporary Earthquake Relief Hope Schools and over 200 permanent Hope Schools in Sichuan province.

The first phase, which launched in April 2011, helps to serve the immediate needs of communities after natural disasters and emergency situations. We are distributing 1,050 kits for classrooms, reaching 42,000 children, in six provinces impacted by recent natural disasters: Gansu, Hebei, Guangxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan. The materials include a health board game, a floor mat literacy game, caregiver guide, children’s activity books, and 50 activities for children (activities for educators serving children in crisis zones with few resources).

The second phase, which will focus on emergency preparedness, will include 75,000 kits for individual families containing a DVD, a parent /caregiver magazine, and a children’s activity book. We are planning to distribute these materials to 15 provinces that are underdeveloped and have been impacted by crises, such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Jiangxi, and Henan.

Evidence to Date

Although the project has just recently launched and thus we do not yet have extensive impact information, initial data have been quite promising. Recipients of the first phase of outreach materials have responded extremely enthusiastically. Additionally, *Zhima Jie's Big Bird Looks at the World* show has been performing

² Subramanian, M. (2007). Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises, and Early Reconstruction: Issues and Debates on Quality, Impact, and Accountability: Editorial Introduction. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*. 9(2)

incredibly well so far, and is the number one show among children 4-6. It significantly out-performs all competitors, including Dora the Explorer, SpongeBob and Pleasant Goat and Bad Wolf.³

Project Investment

Merck's total investment for the *Zhima Jie* project is US\$2 million.

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³ Eurodata TV Worldwide/ CSM Media Research