

Scotsman's comic capers provide vital lessons for the Bash Street Kids of Kenya

'Shujaaz' has won a top media award after reaching 80 million youngsters with its mixture of laughter and advice. **Mike Wade** reports

Based on the *Beano* and produced in a Nairobi garden shed, a cartoon strip offering teenage Kenyans life-changing advice on health and welfare has been such a success it has earned an international prize.

Shujaaz, launched in 2009 and drawn by a team of young African artists, was described last night by judges in the One World Media Awards as an outstanding project, demonstrating the power of the media to tackle fundamental development issues. Its founder, Rob Burnet, from Edinburgh, received a special award from Alan Duncan, the International Development Minister.

The monthly comic strip — whose title translates as "heroes" — addresses contentious issues facing Kenya's youngsters by having its four cartoon characters offer practical advice on issues ranging from work and health to animal welfare and farming techniques.

Supported by a daily five-minute radio show, which brings the characters to life across 22 stations, *Shujaaz* has achieved astonishing market penetration.

Its first edition was published in February 2010; the 16th hit the streets on Saturday. In total about 8 million copies have been printed since its launch but it has reached an estimated 80 million readers.

"These comics are endlessly passed along," said Mr Burnet. "It's like saying, 'Do you want a sweet?' Every single child says 'Yes'. They have never seen anything like this before: 'In my language? With pictures of people who look like me?'"

"It's a no-brainer. There is nothing else in that space for young people. They eat it up and then they do the things they see the characters do."

Mr Burnet, 42, has lived in Kenya for 18 years and was employed by the Ford Foundation, a trust dedicated to progressive social change, to run its media, arts and culture programme.

His experience on the fringes of development projects inspired him to try and transform attitudes to politics and society.

Shujaaz aims to break rules and addresses contentious topics head on.

Among the issues highlighted are what citizens can demand of government and how different people can live together.

"It was about creating a conversation with millions of millions of people," said Mr Burnet. "There are no barriers with this. You have to be able to read a bit, but not perfectly; there's no money. You have fun, but it's useful too. Radio and Facebook and texting just add layers. It's driven by a laugh, a good story, but it is deadly serious."

Mr Burnet said the initial challenge was to give teenagers important life messages without being patronising.

He found the answer in Hunt Emerson, a cartoonist, who had redrawn Little Plum for the *Beano*. In 2008, Mr Emerson ran a three-day workshop in Nairobi with a group of self-taught Kenyan cartoonists and *Shujaaz* was born.

The next two issues, sponsored by Galvmed, a veterinary charity based in

'The kids eat it up and do the things they see the characters do'

Edinburgh, will subtly advise readers to have their chickens vaccinated against Newcastle disease, an infection that can wipe out a flock.

It might not sound like the stuff of cartoon comedy, but Mr Burnet said he was confident his audience would take the message on board.

On the radio show, the characters discuss the issue, he said. "Is it true about the chicken vaccine? We thought all the chickens would die?" says one. An expert replies: "Yes don't let your chickens die — they're worth \$5 each."

Mr Burnet added: "In the comic, we give the explicit information about where to get the vaccine, how much it costs and who to ask. People understand, they follow suit."

Mr Duncan said he had been hugely impressed by the comic strip. "*Shujaaz* is an incredibly effective way of communicating information to young Kenyans," he said. "It has provided vital guidance on farming techniques that can directly improve people's lives. I'm delighted it has won."



Offering practical advice, *Shujaaz*'s four characters have picked up a huge following among young Kenyans