

Healthy Home, Healthy Life Final Report

Mother Africa and Washington Department of Ecology



Figure 1: A Mother Africa program participant receives their new cookpots.

In 2022, Mother Africa and the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) formed a partnership and conducted a pilot project to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach materials, approaches and resources regarding safer personal care products. Building upon the initial pilot project, Mother Africa and Ecology co-developed curriculum for a train-the-trainer approach.

Reflecting on Project Goals

What were the goals of the project?

1. Co-design curriculum and materials with Mother Africa staff to create culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach materials. These materials will support a “train-the-trainer” approach to empower Mother Africa to continue to hold workshops, building upon the 2022 pilot project.
2. Mother Africa staff will advise Ecology on the development of culturally appropriate materials to convey technical knowledge related to safer personal care and household products to their communities.
3. Increase the number of people who have received tailored information on toxics reduction through two workshops that will build upon the pilot project.
4. Contribute to behavior changes that support a reduced exposure to toxic chemicals, such as PFAS, that are found in homes and household products to support a healthier living environment.

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- Increase Ecology’s capacity in supporting culturally appropriate outreach and equitable toxics reduction work by collaborating with and learning from community-based organizations working to improve the lives of diverse communities who may face disproportionate exposures to toxics in consumer products.
- Engage Mother Africa’s partner organizations to build Ecology’s partner networks for collaboration on projects, increase audience reach during public comment periods and informational webinars, and meet potential participants for future advisory committees for Ecology’s work.
- Receive feedback on co-developed materials to be prepared for other workshop opportunities.

Goal 1, 2, and 7 achievements

We translated two Ecology publications, called [Healthy House, Happy Home](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/UIPages/SummaryPages/2204031.html)¹ and [Keeping Your Home and Family Healthy: Reduce Your Exposure to PFAS](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/2004043.html),² into French and Arabic. We also created a presentation about common chemicals of concern found in households. It was based on Mother Africa’s feedback about the information most relevant to their communities. Mother Africa presented about per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), mercury, lead, formaldehyde, and bisphenol A (BPA) and other plasticizers. We worked with the Washington Department of Health (DOH) to identify the health impacts from these chemicals and prevention activities to reduce exposure. The content was translated into French and Arabic by Dynamic Language.

The Arabic translations needed a lot of changes to make it work. It was important to ensure the translations were clear for community members with less formal education. Three of Mother Africa’s staff members spent several hours deciding on the best way to communicate this information. We updated the translated publications to reflect these changes.



Figure 2: A page from the Arabic translation of Keeping Your Home and Family Healthy.

Goal 3 and 5 achievements

This project had three workshops with 59 members from Mother Africa’s community. The workshops included a presentation for Mother Africa staff in English and two presentations for their clients in French and Arabic. Mother Africa built and maintained relationships with these community members and invited them to the workshops through dedicated outreach. Ecology cannot do this outreach due to time, resources, and expertise constraints. Without Mother Africa's efforts, we probably wouldn't have reached this audience.

¹ <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/UIPages/SummaryPages/2204031.html>

² <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/2004043.html>

Mother Africa reached out to newcomers in the United States who hadn't used their services before. They focused on people who needed the information the most and who might not get it from other sources. Some participants arrived recently and lived in hotels. This outreach aimed to expand Mother Africa's and Ecology's impact by reaching a different group, not just those who had already been part of Mother Africa's programs.

Now, Mother Africa can link these community members to various programs, such as helping them sign up for health insurance and Puget Sound Energy assistance. These are just some of the lasting advantages that come from the funding support from Ecology and the National Estuary Program.

Goal 4 achievements

Ecology and Mother Africa had weekly meetings in September and October of 2023. We talked about chemicals in everyday products and how to avoid exposure to them. Many chemicals were covered, and Mother Africa staff chose the ones they felt were most important for their communities. Ecology provided information about each chemical. Mother Africa educated their community about the risks, where these chemicals come from, and the common products they're in.

Once the chemicals were chosen, we worked with DOH to figure out the best way to talk about the health effects from exposure to the specific chemicals. The chemicals selected were: PFAS, lead, mercury, formaldehyde, and BPA/plasticizers. We came up with a list of things people can do to prevent exposure to these chemicals. Mother Africa had questions about these actions, shared how their community members might follow them, and we talked about possible challenges.

We focused on these prevention activities to reduce exposure to the listed chemicals:

- Regularly dust and vacuum your home (lead, mercury, PFAS).
- Wash things more often (lead, PFAS).
- Leave your shoes at the door (lead, PFAS).
- Use exhaust fans or open windows to ventilate (mercury, formaldehyde, PFAS).
- Maintain a healthy diet (to prevent health issues from lead exposure).
- Consume low-mercury fish (mercury).
- Wash hands frequently (PFAS and other heavy metals).
- Be cautious with plastic food storage and when heating plastic (PFAS, BPA and other plasticizers).
- Choose safer consumer products with certifications like EPA Safer Choice and Cradle to Cradle (formaldehyde, mercury, PFAS, lead).

The first 30 minutes of each presentation covered the chemicals of concern, where they are found, and health impacts associated with exposure. After a break, we presented the activities and took questions from the attendees.

Educational kits were given to participants to support the prevention behaviors. We identified that nonstick pots and pans were a source of exposure to PFAS. Many of Mother Africa's community members use them multiple times daily. Mother Africa advocated to use some of the grant funds to purchase stainless steel cookpot alternatives for participants to facilitate a cookpot exchange. The educational kits also included EPA Safer Choice certified hand soap, dish soap, and laundry soap.

The Mother Africa staff who participated are African immigrants and refugees just like their clients. They were hired to be advocates within their communities for Mother Africa's priorities (health, leadership, youth development, civic engagement, and more). Staff learned about harmful chemicals in everyday products and viewed examples of safer alternatives, like alternatives to nonstick cookware. This training wasn't just for

them to learn, it was a chance for them to become trainers themselves. Now, they can share this information with their programs as they help community members with different needs. They also use the cookpots to show program participants how they prepare culturally appropriate food. For example, they found that the stainless steel alternatives work well, but they require more oil and a lower temperature for cooking.

Mother Africa tracked the size of each family who participated in the cookpot exchange. To protect the entire family from exposure, they distributed a stainless steel cookpot set based on the family size (6 to 10 pots).

Without this incentive to change cookpots, it would be tough, slow, or maybe even impossible for them to make the change to a safer alternative. The cost of buying new cookpots and the challenge of finding safer options (like cookware without PFAS) makes it difficult for many community members.



Figure 3: Mother Africa program participants picking up their new cookpots.

Goal 6 achievements

Mother Africa invited Ecology to attend the annual event for all their partner organizations. At the event they collaborate, connect with their network, and share information about their work with community members.

Ecology staff is interested in participating in future informational webinars for Safer Products for Washington. Safer Products for Washington is a program at Ecology, with DOH, that works to reduce the use of toxic chemicals in consumer products by restricting or eliminating those chemicals when safer alternatives are available.

Additional achievements

This project helped us better understand Mother Africa's communities and gain a deeper appreciation for the power of community-based organizations. They know a lot about what their community wants and needs.

We learned from the pilot project and made improvements for the next one. This means we have a smoother and more straightforward process to reach our goals. We started by figuring out what reports we needed. Then, we created a template for project reports. We also used tools like Canva to make designed materials (for example, posters) for educational sessions.

We started a cookpot exchange to go along with the distribution of educational kits. We collected over 50 nonstick cooking pots and made sure they were disposed of properly. We consulted with Ecology's Solid Waste Management program and King County's Solid Waste Division to handle the disposal correctly.

We took a transparent approach when talking about Ecology's processes and requirements with Mother Africa. We worked closely with them to advocate for clear and simple contracting processes. We were

proactive with communication and took the lead to ensure everyone involved at Ecology understood the nature of the project and Mother Africa's priorities. As a result, we got rid of unnecessary reporting requirements that didn't match Ecology's goal to include everyone in Washington fairly.

Participant feedback

Are there any stories or testimonials that came from the event?

After the educational sessions, participants were really interested and had lots of questions. Mother Africa plans to share more information with community members after the session, even with those who might be hard to reach within the contract's timeframe and scope. This highlights Mother Africa's commitment and enthusiasm for this work.

Outreach staff will follow up with participants about the program and the stainless steel cookpots. They'll keep answering questions even after the official scope of the contract is completed.

Testimonials

1. A workshop participant's husband loved a nonstick cooking pan they had at home. He was very hesitant to stop using the pan because it was his favorite one and he used it to cook every day. The participant shared the reasons why nonstick pans were hazardous and the benefits of switching to another material (e.g., cast iron, stainless steel). Her husband was willing to make a change to a safer pan after hearing about the benefits. This helped lower the risk for a family that might have been exposed to PFAS chemicals several times a day through their food.
2. A family that participated in our workshops brought cookpots to the United States that were passed down generationally. They held a lot of sentimental value. These pots were a staple of their kitchen and had many memories attached to them. This family had a tough choice to make about their special, sentimental cookpots. Even though it was hard to part with them, they decided to bring all the pots to the cookpot exchange. They made this choice for their health. Mother Africa staff provided them with new stainless steel pots, reducing their exposure to lead and other heavy metals.
3. One family had just purchased new, expensive, name-brand nonstick pots. They were saving the pots for when their current ones were no longer usable. After the workshop, they got rid of the new, unused pots because they learned that they were potentially hazardous. They also got rid of the old nonstick pots to reduce their daily exposure to hazardous chemicals. This was a hard decision, but making a healthy choice was the priority for this family.
4. Mother Africa staff liked the information about low-mercury fish options because many people in their community rely on fish as their main source of protein. They'll use this information in their health-related programs.
5. A participant called Mother Africa to thank them for the new cookpots after the exchange. Mother Africa helped some participants with transportation to the cookpot exchange, but some participants traveled for more than 3 hours on public transportation to receive the pots. Mother Africa supported those community members by providing a ride home. Mother Africa strives to address and reduce barriers to making healthier behavior changes and they go above and beyond to do so.

How would you describe learning about this subject matter?

Learning about the prevalence of toxic chemicals in our environment for the first time was shocking for many participants. This was especially true for PFAS, and how these chemicals are common in many places. It was helpful for staff and participants to learn how to reduce exposure.

In a chat group, Mother Africa staff share videos and articles about PFAS and sometimes discuss toxic chemicals in everyday products. They've started to discuss other products that could contain PFAS, such as tampons, menstrual pads, or foods and beverages, and how this could be risky for their families.

Some participants resisted learning about these risks during the workshop because they were certain that they were already making the safest and smartest choices. One participant shared that they ran plastic through the sanitize cycle in their dishwasher because they thought this was the best method to reduce germs and stay safe. The length of the presentation, the depth of the information, and the conversational and relational approach from Mother Africa helped to encourage participants to think beyond any initial reactions to this information.

What are ways Mother Africa and Ecology could expand our partnership in the future?

Mother Africa staff, potential community leaders, and youth are interested in supporting and leading the process to regulate toxic chemicals in products. They see the need to expand this work to public policy change to make larger impacts beyond the workshop participants and their families.

Appendix: Survey results

Pre-workshop survey

1. What type of cookware is the safest to use?

Response (23 total)	Percentage
Stainless Steel	56.5%
Non-stick Pans	43.5%
Aluminum	0.0%

2. What type of cookware do you use?

Response (23 total)	Percentage
Stainless Steel	39.1%
Non-stick Pans	52.2%
Aluminum	8.7%

3. Are all types of fish healthy and good to eat?

Response (23 total)	Percentage
Yes	21.7%
No	78.3%

4. Do you microwave your meals in plastic containers?

Response (23 total)	Percentage
Yes	26.1%
No	73.9%

5. Do you leave your shoes at the door before entering home?

Response (23 total)	Percentage
Yes	82.6%
No	17.4%

6. Do you read the ingredients or look at special labels before buying cleaning products or self-care products?

Response (23 total)	Percentage
Yes	69.6%
No	30.4%

Post-workshop survey

1. What type of cookware is the safest to use?

Response (17 total)	Percentage
Stainless Steel	94.1%
Non-stick Pans	5.9%
Aluminum	0.0%

2. What type of cookware do you use?

Response (17 total)	Percentage
Stainless Steel	52.9%
Non-stick Pans	29.4%
Aluminum	17.6%

3. Are all types of fish healthy and good to eat?

Response (17 total)	Percentage
Yes	0.0%
No	100%

4. Do you microwave your meals in plastic containers?

Response (17 total)	Percentage
Yes	0.0%
No	100%

5. Do you leave your shoes at the door before entering home?

Response (17 total)	Percentage
Yes	100%
No	0.0%

6. Do you read the ingredients or look at special labels before buying cleaning products or self-care products?

Response (17 total)	Percentage
Yes	100%
No	0.0%