

CASE STUDY

RE-ENACTING THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT: EXAMINING THE UNIQUE ROLE OF THEATRE IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The concept of development communication is a clear pointer to the interrelationship between communication and development and the fact that the process of communication can be effectively applied to achieve development purposes. In development communication, the major aim of communication is to bring about the process of development. Theatre as a communicative art is a highly dynamic and powerful conscientisation medium, and as such, integral to communication, as it is to development, establishing its importance and unique role as an invaluable development communication instrument. Anchoring on the truism of the above statement, and reinforced by the participatory development communication model, the paper refocuses the Esuk Ewang and Ibaka Communities of Mbo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria's Environmental Theatre for Development Project, to highlight the true nature of theatre in the context of development as well as the interrelationship between communication and development.

Keywords: communication, development communication, development, theatre, theatre for development

Introduction

Development communication emphasises the use of communication for the promotion of development in human society. It refers to the practice of a systematic application of the processes, strategies and principles of communication to achieve positive social change (Srampickal, 2006). It is an attempt at informing, creating awareness, educating, and enlightening the people so that they can improve their lives in every possible way. Therefore, it places people at the centre of development and galvanises them to work out their development. The concept of development communication is a clear pointer to the indispensability and indisputability of the interrelationship between communication and development, and the fact that the process of communication can be effectively applied to achieve development purpose.

Communication is the key to human development. It is necessary for development because it helps to mobilise people's participation in the development process. In development communication, the major aim of communication is to bring about the process of development. Nora Quebral (1975) defines development communication as the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a

country and the mass of its people from a state of poverty to a more dynamic state of economic growth which makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of the human potentials. Quebral sees it as the art and science of human communication as directed towards the transformation of society. Coldevin (1987) also defines development communication as the systematic utilisation of appropriate communication channels and techniques to increase people's participation in development and to inform, motivate, and train rural populations, mainly at the grassroots level. He recognises the potentials of development communication in mobilising people to participate in development activities, and as such corroborates Balit's (1988) definition which sees development communication as a social process aimed at producing a common understanding or a consensus among participants in a development initiative.

A critical consideration of theatre as a communicative art and a highly dynamic and powerful conscientisation medium, will reveal the fact that theatre is indeed integral to communication. It is unequivocally integral to communication as it is to develop, thus establishing its importance and unique role as an invaluable development communication tool. This study in theatre for development (TfD) is, therefore, anchored on the participatory development communication model which emphasises a two-way communication process and focuses on encouraging community participation with development initiatives through strategic utilisation of various communication strategies. This participatory model is a departure from the one-way communication approach that involves disseminating messages, transmitting information, or persuading people to change their behaviour, in preference to a horizontal approach that encourages dialogue among stakeholders in development initiatives with a focus on problem analysis and search for solutions. The model emphasises the involvement of target recipients in the creation, content and conduct of a project or policy designed to affect their lives, and involves conscious planning of activity based on participatory processes built around a common development problem or goal, intending to develop and execute a set of activities geared towards its solution or realisation.

The Place of TfD in Theatre and Communication

The interrelationship between theatre and communication is inseparable. Theatre is a unique communicative art. As a communicative art, and indeed a highly dynamic one at that, theatre in its intrinsic behavioural nature as a social phenomenon, established itself as a veritable communication tool in the human society, one with a long history too. For instance, the Classical theatre from which today's theatre emerged was a veritable medium of expression and communication in the Athenian society. Greek theatrical developments were in firm connection with the feasts in honour of Dionysus (the Greek god of wine and fertility) through which the people were able to come together and forge a common bond of unity to tackle their problems with communal spirit. This, perhaps, may not have been made possible without the inherent communicative rhythms that suffused the evolving process. Theatre also served as a significant communication tool in the medieval era "as long as Latin remained the universal language of Christendom", which made the continuous use of "liturgical or ecclesiastical play" inevitable as "the chief means of religious instruction for a largely illiterate" Christian population (Hartnoll, 1980, p.35) of the period. The African setting is not exceptional in this historical highlight on the communicative role of theatre. In Africa, the theatre played a remarkable fundamental role in religion, ritual and social practices of the people, not only as an art form but also as a medium of communication and expression of thoughts among the people.

Hence, Theatre for Development (TfD), an increasingly burgeoning development practice, especially in contemporary society, remains a significant aspect of the theatre. Its evolution, while effectively filling the gap of the failures of the mass forms of communication to reach the rural populace, was in conscious response to the imperative need to take theatre to the grassroots – the people, majority of which were hitherto alienated from its abundant transformative potentials on the conventional platform as in the mass forms of communication. In other words, unlike the conventional theatre which people have to access by themselves for performance nay communicative experience, TfD is a people-oriented theatre that accesses the people right where they are by itself for a participatory communicative experience to address their needs. It is a development model that emphasises marked shift from a top-down approach that had characterised hitherto development plans towards a bottom-up approach which, according to Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2012), "recognises the 'creative' potentials of the people, their worldview, cultural background, and experiences, and the necessity to engage them in active

participation to chart the course of their collective destiny" (p.692). It was an attempt not only targeted at representing the common man's reality, but also the genuine interest of the majority. Its pre-occupation was the promotion of development ideas among the people and to enable them to participate in the development process. Although the majority of Tfd's activities seem to have been directed toward the rural populace, Tfd can be applied in a broader development context spanning "across sections, categories and classifications of human settlements – rural, urban, cities, metropolis or megapolis" (Ingang and Ime, 2016, p.123). Tfd, therefore, remains a powerful communication tool, drawing on its communicative potency to arouse the consciousness of the disadvantaged in the society, to the challenge of their limit situations, and in leading them to take steps for the solution. The paper, carefully examines the unique role of Theatre for Development in Development Communication discourse; and explores relevant case study to highlight and affirm the theatre's invaluable communicative role in this context.

Nature of Theatre for Development

Theatre for development is a development practice that utilises performance as a participatory tool in awakening the consciousness of the disadvantaged in the society for real action in finding the solution to their problems. It is a burgeoning performance tradition and a virile conscientisation medium, that seeks the awakening of the consciousness of the disadvantaged towards their understanding of "societal configurations", empowering same also to "have faith in themselves as vectors of change" (Gbilekaa, 1997, p.v). For any Tfd effort to be considered successful, its capacity to effectively impact the target audience is non-negotiable. It must be able to arouse enough critical consciousness and sensitisation in the audience as to understand their situation and the need to take action to redress it. It is integral, therefore, that such an effort must satisfy the concept of conscientisation. This term which is widely used by Paulo Freire in the developmental context, as Daniel Knight Were observes, means:

The active participation of people in transforming themselves. It is largely dependent on participatory methodologies that promote dialogue. This is because communities need to dialogue and through that identify their problems and reflect on why the problems exist. The outcome is community engagement in decision-making on the course of action to take to solve the problems. Conscientisation is, therefore, the outcome of this process where people emerge with a deepened attitude of awareness over a particular issue and a commitment to change. (p. 7)

The implication of the foregoing is that conscientisation is a process by which the people try to understand their present situation concerning the prevailing social, economic and political relationships in which they find themselves. Hence, any Tfd effort that falls short of triggering conscientisation among the people, could not be said to have satisfied the true essence of Tfd. Documentary shreds of evidence abound, therefore, regarding the conscientious and unrelenting efforts of Tfd practitioners in utilising this potent development medium to bring positive transformations in the lives of individuals and community groups over the decades, both in the African continent and beyond (Ebewo and Sirayi, 2010; Obadiegwu, 2009; Nwadiuwe, 2007; Abah, 2005; Kerr, 1995; Mda, 1993; Kershaw, 1992; Etherton, 1982).

In using performance as a participatory tool in Tfd, the central focus is on the performance production process with emphasis on the inclusive nature of this process in integrating the target community. Consequently, in the light of the foregoing, Tfd's efficacy in engendering transformation or development in its ramifying dimensions is what invariably underscores the essence of its impact in any theatre for development process, since development as construed in this context emphasises "a comprehensive process of change that is primarily concerned with people's freedom, their social, economic, environmental and political relationships" (Iorapuu, 2008, p. 4). In other words, this transformation, this change, this development is people-oriented, and relates, "to the widening of the people's intellectual horizon, the raising of their consciousness and encouraging dialogue and participation among them in addressing issues that relate to their economic, political and social realities within their environment" (Gbilekaa, 1990, p. 28).

It is instructive to note that Tfd's transformational nature in involving the people is never a process that just terminates after the raising of critical consciousness; rather it is one that leads to the subsequent action. What this means is that Tfd is a process of awakening of consciousness aimed at galvanising the people towards real action in finding the solution to their problems; but for this transformation to occur, the real action, as Boal (2000) argues, lies with the people, for whom this "theatre" is certainly a powerful "weapon, and it is the people" themselves "who should wield it" (p.122). This is to say, therefore, that this theatre is an empowering process; while the people's liberation and development are only consequent upon their action based on their awakened consciousness.

Methodology and Process in Tfd

A pertinent point worthy of note in discussing methodology and process in Tfd is that there are no rigid blueprints of operation, as methodology and process have largely been determined by the approaches to development adopted by the individual practitioner (Daniel and Bappa, 2004), or practitioners as the case may be. They are only products of constant experimentations by practitioners. Okwori (2004), however, has approximated an approach which incorporates the following steps: preliminaries, community research, data analysis, scenario building, rehearsals, performance and post-performance discussion, and follow-through which could be applied in a wide range of Tfd experiences. These steps would be thoroughly analysed and emphasised.

Step one is the preliminaries which involve the theatre animateurs (or facilitators) linking with project communities to discuss the project, its modalities and logistics. Once the consent for the project is certified by the community given all considerations in communication channels, tradition and cultural factors that may impede on its realisation, the organisational and operational arrangements are also determined and handled by the people or jointly with the group. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2012) observes that in contemporary practice, the necessity to raise a representative group of the community at large to work in conjunction with the resource group also arises at this inception. This is important to ensure participatory representation and eventual continuity in the process.

Step two is community research which is invariably borne out of the necessity to appropriately articulate the problems and issues in the community as seen by the people themselves. It involves a rather informal research and homestead approach in which the team of participants associating freely with the people, living with them, eating with them and sharing in their daily activities, engaging them on one on one discussions while observing and respecting their traditions and values in the process. It is a participatory approach in which the people are involved in their research rather than outsiders coming to determine their problems for them.

Generally, this is a period of information gathering and perhaps the most crucial in any Tfd process. It is the primary source of data collection which helps to achieve a broad understanding of how problems manifest in society. It also helps to stimulate involvement on the part of the community and ensures the presentation of a balanced view, a level of community consensus, a sense of involvement and participation by all beneficiaries (Daniel and Bappa, 2004, p. 20).

Apart from the above homestead approach, through which trust and confidence are established between the research team and the people, others such as interview and flooding can also be employed.

- Interview: This is rather a journalistic approach as information or electronic gadgets are often brought to the disposal of resource persons to conduct and record interviews with members of the community to find out what their problems are. It involves a series of formal targeted interviews with individual members of the community.
- Flooding: In this method, resource person flood or spill into the target community in large numbers in search of information that relates to the problems of the community. They interview people anywhere they can be assessed in their houses, farms or other locations with each resource person assigned a particular area of coverage.

Daniel and Bappa advise that whatever method of research chosen should not be such that intimidates, but rather that which elicits and sustains participation in generating as much useful information as possible for and about the development of the community.

Step three is data analysis where information gathered from the research are presented at an open community forum and extensively discussed by everyone as to how the issues came about, their effects, what can be done and possible consequences. Through this process, the people come to a critical understanding of their problems, prioritise them, and articulate strategies that may be used to overcome them.

Step four is scenario building where the outcome of the data analysis forms the bedrock for play creation and anchored around stories that will highlight and link the problems in a dramatic way, using appropriate cultural forms as determinants for the style of performance, such that it provokes discussion and challenges the people to take action. Care is always taken to allow the story to evolve from the sensibilities of the people. The scenario is also seen as a plan of action which is amenable to change at any time according to the changing perspectives of the people.

Step five involves rehearsals. The process which normally takes place in the open involves the people trying out how to play the character and dramatised the story. They are encouraged to discuss actions and ideas being tried out as well as play [exchange] roles, with the problems being dramatised being blended with the artistic forms of expression used to formulate them. In doing so, they increase their awareness and understanding of the issues at stake; are conscientised/educated and empowered. Hence, the rehearsal process is a process of collective creation and articulation which is capable of forging group solidarity and throwing up challenges in provoking action among the people.

Step six is the actual performance and post-performance discussion. As soon as the play-making process crystallises, performance ensues. It is an extension of the rehearsal process, and also allows for intervention from members of the community. The performance draws the audience into the play as participants by engaging them regularly, as actors throw actions and debates to them, ask questions, call them as witnesses, request their support for arguments, and conspire with them. Actors are always encouraged to lead the audience: tell them what they are about to do, distinguish between their personal and characters they are portraying, ask for their comments and opinions over an issue, reach out in their mist, touch them and take sides with them. At the end of the performance, issues of the play are re-examined by all and strategies are planned for action.

Through the relationship between the drama and their lives, the consciousness's of the community members are awakened to new realities about their problems, and from the discussions, they are made to realise their potentials and ability to initiate action to improve their situation (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012, p.694).

The seventh and last step in the list is follow-through (or follow-up). Because the initial enthusiasm that usually greets such theatre experience is easy to just fritter away, perhaps, out of lack of will or motivation or resources to carry through with action-strategies agreed upon, there arises the need to revisit the communities to encourage and re-motivate them; as well as examine new areas of cooperation; or assess the impact of previous or on-going action.

It is instructive to note here that there appears to be a debate on the appropriate term (follow-through or follow-up). Follow-through proponents argue that follow-up connotes a strictly supervisory stance while the former indicates a more participation stance. However, this involves going back to the community to assess the steps taken to address identified problems of the community or assess the steps taken to sustain already initiated efforts at addressing the people's problems.

Case Study: The Esuk Ewang/Ibaka Environmental Theatre Project

Background

This case study is an environmental communication theatre intervention that focused on water pollution carried out in Esuk Ewang/Ibaka Community, Mbo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria between 2011 and 2013, employing theatre for development as a medium of participatory learning and action as reported by the facilitator, Ofonime Inyang (Inyang, 2015; Inyang and Ime, 2016). Esuk Ewang and Ibaka villages are twin settlements located just off the riverine coast of the Mbo River, flanking and adjoining each other. The population estimate of Esuk Ewang and Ibaka is put at 1000 households with higher female ratio to men. The Esuk Ewang/Ibaka environment like most coastal communities was seriously challenged by many environmental problems, among which included fuelwood exploitation, the rise of sea levels, invasion of water hyacinth, gully erosion, oil spillage and soil fracking from extractive activities and water pollution. The causes of these environmental problems are, therefore, attributable to a combination of years of neglect by the government, the ignorance of the people about their poor environmental attitude and the utter state of poverty that is prevalent in the area, all of which contributed to the extent of the prevailing devastation. However, Inyang has particularly noted that the environmental attitude of the community is undesirable as it contended with different dimensions of water pollution, ranging from direct defecation into the river (which also served as a source of drinking water), dumping of plastic materials including net accessories in the river, harvesting of raw wood for firewood, use of the harmful chemical in fishing, indiscriminate and careless handling of petrol (which had resulted in several deaths in the community) and excavation of sand and gravel for commercial purposes. It was the urgent need, therefore, to address these challenges anchoring on the imperative to integrate development communication using theatre for environmental awareness targeted at water pollution that prompted the facilitator to embark on the project. This motivation is borne out of the facilitator's conviction that drawing the attention of the members of the community to the need to take action to protect and safeguard their environment from degradation will go a long way to forestall the development crisis of the future.

Preliminaries

Several preliminary meetings were led by the facilitator with the leadership of the community before finally mounting the project with his team consisting of students of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo and the project management officers. All the meetings generated further insights into the project while also expanding knowledge of the culture and way of life of the people generally.

Players

According to Inyang, some community members volunteered and took on the different roles they created along with the students. Being a story that emerged out of the familiar context of the community as a fishing enclave with relative closeness to what had been experienced in the past; it was therefore not difficult for the people to express the nuances of the characterisation to suit the thematic goals of the performance. The use of local cultural idioms further enhanced the aesthetic particulars of the play and guided it down the heart of the people. There was also active sensitivity to gender configuration as some female members of the community took active roles playing along with the men and enjoyed the atmosphere of creative interaction without any form of hindrance. That the community members themselves handled the casting and decided on who would best idealise the characters aided their assimilation of the roles and produced committed and nuanced portrayal of the characters and the events in the performance.

Scenario Development

The performance was not structured on a written script, rather it was based on an improvised scenario developed by the students and community volunteers, while the facilitator only acted as a guide. The atmosphere of this collective imagining of the script and the obvious collective ownership of its copyright energised the process in tremendous ways and set the stage of expectancy in other community members who did not only identify with

their relations involved in the project but were also eager to see them perform for the community. The key component of the project – participation – began to increase in tempo from day to day to such a level that even the few selected days of rehearsals graduated into mini-performances.

The Story

The story was a simple narrative which revolved around a clan member who went missing while on a fishing expedition. This development threw the entire community into disarray and created deep fear in the environment which affected the economic life of the community for weeks as fishermen refused to go on a fishing expedition for fear of meeting the fate of their kinsman. As was usual with such development in the community, soothsayers and witchdoctors were consulted to find out the cause of the man's disappearance and all of them were unanimous in declaring that the man's boat was capsized by an angry water goddess who felt maligned and disrespected by the community by denying her of regular sacrifice. This narrative was popular with the community as they considered it an age-old practice tied to the very foundation of the community. The community offered the needed sacrifice as directed by the local priests, but a surprising development took place two days after the communal feast in that the purportedly drowned man returned to the village to disclose that he was not taken by the water spirits but rather that he was arrested and detained in a distant island by patrolling naval officers who caught him harvesting fish with harmful substances in addition to defecating into the water. This created some confusion in the community as some people believed the man was released by the marine powers while others believed he was truly detained by naval officers and so they should desist from polluting the river. This open-ended structure of the story offered a good template for discussion in a community meeting styled arrangement.

The Play

The dramatic scenario was improvised from the story above and executed with dialogue, dances and songs drawn from the local cultural repertory. The storyline was deliberately made simple, straight forward, short, captivating and arranged to be open-ended (unresolved conflict).

Rehearsal

The rehearsals and general packaging of the play took three weeks of intensive activity, with Inyang playing the role of guide-facilitator. However, since it was an improvised performance, a little premium was placed on rehearsal as is the practice in a formal theatre set up. The context of rehearsal, according to Inyang, was not actually "rehearsal" in the sense of the word as applied to conventional theatre practice; but more of "playing" nuances. So, the more the participants advanced in their "playing", the more they realised the need to integrate issues that would capture the issues in more graphic details as well as situate the problem on the public space to be confronted in that sort of way, knowing that most "life-relating" issues touching on matters like defecation are seldom given very broad and open discussion as it is seen as humanly debasing.

Performance

The performance dates and venues were agreed upon by the facilitator, the participants and the leadership of the host community. The performance proper took place at the community playground in Esuk Ewang, with an invitation extended to the councillor representing the ward and community members at large. There was a direct correlation between the issues highlighted in the play and the environmental practices regarding water pollution in the village. The various moments of pointed reference to some polluting practices resulted in open courts of self-appraisal as community members turned to ask each other if they truly had been engaging in such practices without seeing anything wrong about it. There were also openly expressed diehard positions of unwillingness to change by persons who reasoned that defecating into the river was an age-old practice that had not done any harm to the river but a world of good as fish fed from the excreta. This presented a mixed bag of issues that formed topical subjects for the post-performance evaluation.

Post-Performance Discussion and Evaluation

The end of performance activated diverse dimensions of reactions to the scenario depicted in the play. Community members could not hide their excitement about the presentation and opinions across various spectrums of the community including women, youths and leaders registered the impact of the communication initiative and particularly the acceptance of the fact that there were environmental problems in the community orchestrated by poor attitudes as well as the need for change. There was also a noticeable extension of discussion touching on issues like drug and substance abuse, infant mortality and teenage pregnancy which crept into the discussion even when they were not part of the original focus of the project. The community discussion session, which the facilitator moderated, extracted commitments from community members to implement actions and behaviour that would ensure environmental sustainability in their area.

Consequent upon the level of engendered interactive discussion, the community was able to contextualise the outcomes of the performance into three areas of response namely: personal behaviour change, corporate responsibility and government intervention. Against this background, community members unanimously accepted their complicity in the situation and resolved to make amends. Hence, each family was admonished to desist from excreting into the water, dump materials incessantly into the water and or fish with chemical, failing of which they would be heavily fined. A decision was taken by all the men of the community to construct a latrine for each household and to dispose of excreta carefully and in the most hygienic way possible. On the corporate level, the leadership of the community resolved to take responsibility for the protection of the water, the community as well as be committed to the best possible practice in safeguarding the health of community members, especially the most vulnerable. An environmental task team was constituted to ensure the implementation of the agreed resolutions while appeals were made to the government for assistance in terms of transportation, health facilities and bridge construction to enhance access to the communities.

Inyang reported that findings from a follow-up/monitoring visit to the community yielded the following results:

- Community members' behaviour of defecating on the beachfront had ceased. Tremendous progress had been made in disposing of human waste in a manner that enhanced the safety of people by way of construction and usage of family latrines.
- The use of harmful substances had been outlawed as there was clear evidence of cessation of practice reinforced by a huge fine imposed on defaulters by the village council.
- The dumping of plastic materials into the water continued as some of the materials were still spotted on the beachfront.
- There was noticeable awareness of environmental issues in the community marked by a signpost erected by the community youths to call people's attention to the issues raised during the campaign.
- The local government was yet to fulfil any of the demands presented to it by the community as a measure of enhancing environmental health in the community.
- More commitments were implored from the community members to keep their environment in good condition and to intensify efforts in completely mitigating incidences of water pollution.

Conclusion

Unarguably, the concept of development communication is a clear pointer to the inseparable linkage between communication and development. In development communication, the major aim of communication is to bring about the process of development. This reinforces the fact that the process of communication can be effectively applied to achieve development purpose. Communication is indeed the key to human development. It is necessary for development because it helps to mobilise people's participation in the development process. Theatre, therefore, as unique communicative art, and a highly dynamic and powerful conscientisation medium, is unequivocally integral to communication as it is to develop; thus establishing its importance and unique role as an invaluable development communication tool. In the light of the foregoing, the unique role of theatre as a veritable development tool in development communication has been firmly established in this paper as

reinforced in Theatre for Development – a development practice that utilises performance as a participatory tool in awakening the consciousness of the disadvantaged in the society to take real action in finding possible solution to their problems, as evidenced in the x-rayed case study.

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