Engaging communities for development action: The theatre for development (TfD) approach

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Abstract

Community engagement programs offer the opportunity for community members to reflect on the development avenues and potentials in their local communities which have not been fully tapped and utilised. Behavioral change and local level conscientisation geared towards community development is a shared responsibility. This shared responsibility is achieved when community members engage with each other on a common platform to find solutions to their challenges. Active participation process enables people to raise their own issues with outsiders and encourages them to take responsibility for their own development. This paper examines the use of the Theatre for Development (TfD) methodology as a community engagement tool. Theatre for Development presents a flexible process of collating and using data about community development project for live performances. The paper further discusses how the TfD approach has been utilised for youth mobilization against unemployment in a rural community.

Keywords: Theatre for Development; Unemployment; Community Engagement; Behavioral Change; Community Participation

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1. Introduction

Several communities are seeking to escape from poverty and oppression in order to gain control of their local level development. The provision of basic social services and amenities are all taken from the hands of these local communities. In effect most of the development plans of these communities are executed by "outsiders" who may not be directly affected by such plans. Most of these communities become dormant as far as their development processes are concern. Local level development programmes appear to be an abstract to those whose lives are expected to be influenced directly by such programmes. Arising out of these unfortunate circumstances, governments, organisations and other development agents interested in promoting the quality of human life have adopted the top-down approach to development. By so doing, they dump some specific projects and programmes on local communities without first consulting them or involving them.

Research has made it evidently clear that the top-down approach to development agenda mostly fails to encourage local capacity building and sustained interest at the community level (Chambers, 1997). Constantly ignoring community members in the choice of projects and programmes purported to be of benefit to them breed contempt and an unconcern attitude. Truely, the projects and programmes being done in a community at a particular time may be very tangible and well thought of, but the question one needs to ask is 'at that point in time, is that project a felt-need of the community? To address this seeming anomaly in community development, there must be a conscious effort to involve community members in the quest of taking development decisions for their communities. Asiama (2011) makes it clear that, when community members are part of the development process, they protect and give their blessings to the project and that apathy towards the project is totally eliminated. The community members see themselves as being part of the development process.

Theatre for Development otherwise known as *participatory theatre for development* has been suggested as one of the viable means of engaging communities in setting the development action. Theatre which has been described by many as a representation of life, a slice of life or imitation of life before an audience has been in existence right from the creation of man. (Wilson, 1994). The use of costume, dialogue, the urge to communicate to others, to share an experience and to stimulate a reaction in others, are the basic elements of theatre and these elements have been with man since creation. The focus of theatre according Beacon (2006) is human beings- the need to tell a story, imitate, play, and perform repeated acts that ensure the continuation of a community are so vital to the human psyche that cultures everywhere have developed some form of enactment to preserve their history. Theatre for Development (TfD) is a community engagement tool which many rural development workers both local and international have described as *a democratic way of building societies* (World Bank, 1994). This approach is opposed to elitist models of communication; it seeks to empower small, poor and less developed communities by using their culture to strategize solutions to their problems (Asante, 2016).

2. Statement of the problem

Power and control remain key aspects of development in many communities. When community members have control or are given the chance to partake in the development process of their communities, they feel a

sense of ownership of that change process; they are able to contribute willingly to the success of such processes. However, most engagement approaches used in the rural communities by development partners do not grant community members the full level of participation mostly due to educational standard of most of the rural folks. Theatre for Development is a democratic platform where all community members can meet and share ideas irrespective of one's educational background or status in society.

2.1. Research questions

- How can theatre be used as a tool for initiating a development process in a community?
- Why is TfD a community-based methodology for addressing community issues?
- How viable is the TfD approach as a community engagement tool?

2.2. Objectives

- To use TfD as an approach for initiating community development process.
- To project TfD as a community based methodology for addressing issues.
- To explore the effects of TfD as community engagement tool.

3. Review of related literature

3.1. The social relevance of theatre

The evolution of theatre has religious rituals and ceremonies as core value. The early forms of theatre practice among the Greeks, Romans and Egyptians have religious underpinnings and connections. According to Cassady (1997), by the 6th century BC, theatre had become part of a massive religious festival celebrating the god Dionysus among the Greeks. Rituals and other religious practices involve the imitating actions and are mostly human-centered and therefore has been linked with human existence for a very long time.

The ancient Greeks insisted on state sponsored theatre and in return used it to enforce then classicist world view of conformity or non-deviation to the status quo. During the medieval period, the church used theatre as the main means of propagating its doctrines. The church thus used theatre to serve in its evangelism work. In recent times, countries like India, South Africa and Ghana have used theatre extensively in the fight for freedom. The above instances, chronicles how theatre has been a part of human existence and therefore its relevance cannot be under estimated.

Despite the fact that theatre has been able to survive through all these ages and times, it has been faced with series of opposition and oppression as an art form.

Many are those who have perceived theatre in its entirety as only for entertainment and that it cannot serve any other purpose. This unpleasant notion about theatre can be traced back as far as the classical periods.

Whiting (1954) observed that;

> *"To the Romans, theatre was a little more than a degraded pleasure; a project by slaves for the titillation of their masters. To the early church, a theatre was an evil to be crushed along with thievery and prostitution. To many entertainers such as strolling players and television comedians, theatre has been regarded as a means of carving a living through a few jokes and antics to catch the momentary fancy of the general public. To some parents, theatre is evil bound to wreck the personality of a child who succumbs to its lures."*

The observation by Whiting shows the negative attitude people have towards theatre as an industry and as a means of learning even in the past.

During the medieval era, after the church had lost grip of theatre and secular theatre became more dominant, the church described theatrical events as paganism. Actors were seen as idol worshippers. From the classical periods through to Restoration and English renaissance, women who acted on stage were branded prostitute, some were even stoned to death (Brocket, 2007). This shows clearly how theatre has received bad publicity over the years. Playwrights, dramatists, theatre theorists and practitioners have over the years tried to correct these wrong impressions but have not succeeded. These negative impressions about theatre have thus trickled to these modern times and many see theatre as an affront to development a case which is rather the opposite.

Not just theatre, arts in general have not received favourable recognition from the majority of people. But arts and for that matter theatre has other influential roles it plays in the society.

In traditional African societies, Art is closely integrated with the social life of the community (Yirenkyi, 1992). Theatre is art. It is therefore logical to say that theatre is integrated in the social life of the African. Theatre plays crucial roles in the social life of an individual and his/her community

Mackey and Cooper (2000) have argued that good theatre is the kind of theatre that has both entertainment and enlightens. It is both enjoyable and has something valuable to say. They go on to say that, what is witnessed in theatre should not only engage the audience but also comment somehow on what it means to be human.

The following arguments and positions will reiterate the fact that theatre is essential to our socio-cultural, political, economical and religious lives as a people.

Theatre has been seen and described over the years as a potent social force (Kerry, 2000). It is the collective and the public nature of theatre that has made it such a strong factor of public force. Theatre plays relevant roles in the development of the individual and the society at large. Through theatre, many sensitive issues, which otherwise may be too delicate or dangerous to discuss openly in the society, can be explored. Playing the role of a different character allows people to say things that would not be possible in their own voices (Asante, 2016). Humour which is an aspect of theatre can sometimes help to share difficult or sensitive issues in ways that do not cause offence. Theatre thus performs sensitive roles in the society. Theatre therefore must be incorporated in the daily activities of every community because it serves as a voice to the vulnerable in the society.

In his book *Literature and the Pressures of Freedom*, Osofisan (2001) has outlined good reasons as to why a community or an individual should imbibe theatre and its studies in their way of life.

Osofisan (2001) clearly states in his work that, "theatre has been proven to be a means of building and enhancing community relations and national cohesion in Africa". This assertion he backs by the fact that, Africans have a kind of theatre which is more popular and central to the community. Popular theatre takes the peoples own culture and turns it into performative art and given back to the people for their appreciation and enjoyment.

Mdoe (2006) defines popular theatre as; 'peoples' theatre, speaking to the common man in his language and idiom and dealing with problems of direct relevance to his situation'.

A peoples' theatre should concentrate on awakening the latent capacity of the people to take part, and to make their own decisions, and to organize themselves for common action. The interaction between the performers and the community members to whom the performance is presented is always seen to be a mutual one, especially in community theatres. The interaction brings a kind of cohesion and affinity between the performers and the community folks. Theatre thus becomes part and parcel of a people's cultural heritage and common culture. This form of indigenous theatres found in the people's cultural heritage according to Abah (2007), has the elements of education, preservation and conservation of the people's values, as well as the promotion of knowledge of all forms.

Theatre serves as bond that brings people in a community together as one people. Theatre productions have been used in diverse ways to put an end to conflicts among warring communities. It helps bring together antagonistic groups through discussions and theatre games. Osofisan (2001) gives an account of how Sonyinka through his play *The Beautification of the Area boy* brought a lasting peace among two warring youth groups in Kingston, Jamaica. By this theatre has been seen as a social force for releasing tension among disparate groups by acting as a congenial means of dialogue.

In theatre many people come together and work together to achieve a common goal which is meant to have an impact on some other people (audience). An actor joins hand with other actors and other professionals before their product (play) can be ready for consumption. This in effect brings out teamwork and personal development of an actor (Wagner, 1979). The artist by virtue of his profession has to learn to work with others, negotiate his ways among conflicting desires and erratic personalities and yet harmonize all these into one single product, one collective vision (Arnold 2000). It can be appreciated from this fact that theatre nurtures and produces individuals with a sense of team-playing and collective responsibility in the society.

3.2. Theatre and community engagement

Theatre is one branch of the performing arts that wields the power of community engagement. Abah (2007) argues that; It is the branch of the arts which is no respecter of language. It has the ability to engage all manner of people and wide range of issues. Theatre as an art, is an expression of human feelings and activities to an audience, reader or observer. It draws inspiration from society and its follies so as to correct

them or make statement on them. The sole purpose of drama geared towards development is to arouse emotion within the audience and to compel him or her to reason deep about the issues it brings to fore (Prentki and Claire, 2001).

The creative artist, the director, the playwright, the actor, the musician, the painter, the event planner/ manager, the sculptor, the designer and the rest rely on his ardent skills and dexterity to always create something that is unique. He/she is dispensed with certain ingenuity that makes him/her stand out in all fields of endeavor. The creative artist must first form in his or her mind the image of an external object to which they attach an impression. It therefore presupposes the involvement and inclusion of an audience or spectator before the work of a creative artist will be complete.

The creative artist, through his work, has the power of arousing the emotions of a spectator (Pickard, 2009). To convey this power through his artistic expression, the artist or creator must first have had within himself a highly developed gift of being deeply moved emotionally and intellectually by some objects in life. This object is what Boeren (1992) explains that in drama there is usually man in relation to his environment or events and his reaction to these circumstances. Having the greatness to be moved, the artist, then has in turn to move the society. This means that any work (research or otherwise) embarked upon by the creative artist will need the final approval of his environment, thus, community, before the process can be deemed complete. Audience or spectators coming to see the creative artists' work cannot be overlooked.

The day to day activities of the creative artist includes looking for ways to reach out to the communities. His or her intuition, spontaneity and capacity to live truthfully are his/ her ability to empower the disadvantaged in the society which leads to total freedom from all forms of dependency. It also makes frantic effort to lay a platform for self-reliance which will, in turn, induce development in the host community.

3.3. Theatre for development (TfD)

Theatre for Development (TfD) is relatively a new way of using theatre to enhance development in the real world. It is an art in which community theatre is used as a tool for community mobilization, education, awareness, sensitization and consientisation all for the purposes of effecting change either in individuals or the community as whole. Asiama (2001) sees theatre for development as an avenue where community members get the opportunity to identify their own problems and issues that concern them and through discussions and consultations lay down strategies to overcome them. The framers of theatre for development sees theatre not only as a literary art but as a medium of communication which employs other literary elements like songs, mimes, dances and dialogue to cause a change in behavior (Mda, 1993). Theatre for Development thus becomes an interactive process utilizing reality and fiction to create experience of performance in the framework of community development.

Theatre for Development (TfD) as a community engagement tool has a wider advantage over other engagements approaches. It entertains as well as educates (Salhi, 2000). Through entertainment, issues are brought up and possible solutions are suggested. Theatre for Development employs the use of using indigenous language of the community under engagement. This feat raises the level of inclusiveness among most community members; who most often feel a sense of ownership of the development process. Theatre

for development promotes a true democratic and participatory approach to development which augurs well for smaller and rural communities (Asante, 2010).

Theatre for Development is capable of integrating indigenous and popular systems of communication that exist already in the rural communities through which engaging the community at any level and time becomes less cumbersome than other community engagements approaches.

3.4. The process of theater for development

The nature of Theatre for Development (TfD) is said to be of two main kinds; either, the performance is prepared outside of the community and 'dump' on the community or the performance is done with and performed by/for the community. In describing the dual nature of TfD, Byram and Kidd (1977) opined that;

> *"The first type is that which is created out of researching in the community but performed by the outside artists. The second type is that which is investigated and created with the community and performed jointly by the professional artists (outsiders) and members of the community (insiders). In both cases the presentations take place in the community itself, and the venue does not require any special requirements of the theatre"* (Byram and Kidd, 1977).

Theatre for Development is often made up of music, drama, dance, and puppetry found within the community. TfD dwells on indigenous community materials which are recycled it into different forms. It presents the opportunity for the indigenous art forms of a community to be used for development purposes. Because of its democratic and fun nature, it can be used both to investigate and probe issues within the community as well as to stimulating discussion on issues to find solutions. TfD therefore plays a critical role in identifying and discussing community based issues.

Practitioners in the field have come out with a chain of process around which a typical TfD project may revolve. These processes are research, reporting back, creating the story, rehearsing the play, performing the play and after performance discussion. It is necessary to state that evaluation and impact assessment are also part of the process but always lie beside the normal project period. The evaluation normally happens sometimes after the whole processes have been completed.

3.4.1. Research

The process of Theatre for Development starts with research. This kind of research is `informal' in that it is not structured and does not have a clear cut procedure. During the research stage, the facilitator becomes conscious with the beliefs and cultural practices of the lab site. This stage promotes direct interaction and communication between the facilitator and the community. This is where the researcher/facility immerses him/herself into the cosmology of the community under study. Material and information learnt or gathered during such research provides:

- Messages upon which the play will be created.
- The way the play will be performed.

- The venue which the community feels more suitable for the play.

When a facilitator and a theatre team go into a community, they become a part of that community. It is therefore appropriate to dress in a manner that is in line with the communities.

3.4.2. Reporting Back

Information analysis is usually done when members of the research team return to base. During this stage, they prioritize the issues and work out a drama based on the issues or problems identified on the field. There must be a process of sifting and identifying which problem had the right to go first, which issue has precedents over the other and which must be given the utmost priority. Information gathering can lead to so many problems and discoveries that must be addressed but the catalyst has to be careful as to what a felt need is in order not to address so many issues in a play of about thirty minutes. Failure to address the felt needs of the people will constitute the imposition of prejudiced ideas on the people which may breed apathy.

3.4.3. Creating the story

Material gathered during the research should give a clear picture of what the position of the issues of concerns are in the village. It may include stories of individuals, families or sections of the community showing concrete testimonies of how they relate to the issues. The story created is fiction. But it is built on actual life experiences that the community for whom and with whom the play is being developed will recognise and sometimes even identify with it, depending on how well the dramatisation is done.

3.4.4. Sketching the play

Improvisation is the basic tool in TfD however, it is important to always have a sketch of the dramatic piece. In sketching the skit, select themes around the issues as discovered during the story creation stage. Create the skit in scenarios to allow for proper improvisation. After sketching the scenarios, examine situations in the story that will be accepted by the people. The facilitator should think about characters and situations that will reflect the themes. The facilitator should also try work with images that will not directly tell the people what the situation is, but will force them to think. Putting the ideas into scenarios is a kind of mapping out the storyline in a book. After which the play can be ready for rehearsal and performance.

3.4.5. Rehearsing the play

This is the stage where the facilitator schedules with his casts (community members) on the days they think will favor them to come for rehearsals. It may be at their leisure times but it depends on the facilitator to let them understand the concept of the play and also the timeframe for the project. This is the most difficult and disciplined part of a TfD project because it is based on improvisation and has to be rehearsed well to bring out the characterization, perfection and also bringing out the working theme clearly. The rehearsal is made open to the community members because, during that time some give out comments that might be of help to the facilitator. It is at this stage that the facilitator look at the timing of the project, the facial expressions of

the character, also makes sure that almost all the characters can play the roles of every character in the play. This is to ensure that in case of any casualty or disappointment on the part of a member of the the cast, the show can still run as scheduled. TfD rehearsal must be done in the open and allow criticisms. As much as possible, allow members to exchange ideas, experiences and roles as this will help them to develop their minds and skills in creating critical awareness and behavioral change-thus creating a learning process.

3.4.6. Performing the play

The performance serves as catalyst for probing the minds of the people involved in the community project as the audience. It must, therefore, be as brief as possible unless it contains comic situations and dialogue that will sustain the interest of the audience. The performance must be nurtured in a way that leads to discussions, and it must encourage audience participation. For example, actors must ask the audience questions that will compel them to contribute either through dialogue or action. The facilitator must make sure to take note of the audience participation and contribution, because these may contribute to the meaning of the story created. A suitable venue and time that will facilitate community participation must be a critical concern to the facilitator; this should have been realised during the period of the research.

4. Methodology

Theater for Development as a community engagement approach to rural development is built on the principles of Integrated Participatory Communication (IPC) which according to (Bessette, 2004) are, involving the local community in identifying a development problem (or a common goal), discovering its many dimensions, identifying potential solutions (or a set of actions) and taking a decision on a concrete set of actions to experiment or implement. This work was built on the principles of Participatory Performance Practice (PPP) which is one of the key concepts underpinning community development approach. The researchers also used the method of Integrated Participatory Communication (IPC) as an a tool to engage the community folks.

4.1. Theatre for development (TfD) project sample

 A typical example of how Theatre for Development (TfD) has been used to engage a community to address the issue of youth unemployment is discussed below.

　Project - *Gomoa Nyakoadze Theatre Experience*

　Project Title: Empowering the Youth through Mushroom cultivation: the Theatre for Development (TfD) as a medium

　Project Site: Gomoa Nyakoadze, Central region.

　Date: February-May, 2015.

　Facilitators: Eric Kwamina Ansah and Fiti Bernice.

4.2. Project overview

4.2.1. The issue

Research had revealed that the youth in Nyakoadze area were all migrating to other areas to seek greener pastures. Those who did not travel engaged themselves in social vices in order to make a living. The simple reason was their inability to find jobs in their community.

4.2.2. The objectives of the project

- To help create employment opportunities for the youth through mushroom cultivation.
- To provide platform for the youth to bring out their initiative to help reduce dependency ratio.
- To equip the youth with entrepreneurial skills through the production and sales of mushroom.

Youth empowerment has been seen as a foundation for a democratic development, as an essential preparation for specialized vocation in advancing technology as a way of facilitating the intellectual and moral growth. Through the power of participatory theatre, a training programme was designed to train the youth of this area of the need to become self-reliant and resourceful. By participatory we mean *working with* and *by* the people as opposed to *working on* and *for* the people (Singhal et. al, 2004).

The entire project period lasted for about three months. The process of TfD was used as the main tool for engagement through which the idea of mushroom cultivation was advertised to them. *Through forum theatre* and other participatory arts, the youth in the community understood the idea of self-empowerment and the need to go into mushroom cultivation.

Three different community performances were held, each depicting the issues of unemployment after which the *real* discussions followed. Through the discussions, the youth were able to express their concerns and shared ideas on how to find common solutions to their predicaments. Self-empowerment through mushroom cultivation became one of the options for librating themselves from their situation. As was expected, some were skeptical but the few who bought into the idea got themselves involved and received the training.

4.2.3. Project Results

- About forty-five young people were engaged and trained on mushroom cultivation.
- Other supporting stakeholder who joined gave the people in the community free resources to begin their own mushroom farms.
- Two separate mushroom farm houses were created with and for the youth in the community.
- Through the project, the youth formed "the youth in mushroom cultivation Association.

Figure 1 and 2. Scenes from the performance.

Figure 3 and 4. The youth constructing the farm house

5. Findings and discussions

According to Kerr (1991), theatre for Development is a creative approach which is used with and by communities and groups to collectively research and critically analyse their own situation, develop and perform scenarios that reflect their context, and actively engage participants in dialogue, analysis, planning, and action towards positive social change.

The TfD approach used in engaging the community brought the members, leaders and stakeholders together and provided them a common platform to share ideas on the issue of unemployment. The community had the opportunity to express their views, ideas, fears, questions and concerns on finding feasible means of addressing the unemployment situation in their community. The stakeholders and other

community functionaries were also provided the platform to answer questions posed at them by the community folks. Hitherto, there was a wider gap in communication between the community and the development partners. This approach thus becomes a bridge between their community and their stakeholders and other development partners. This impact goes a long way to fulfill Kidd (1984) assertion that 'the poor depend on those in power yet there has been a breakdown in communication between them. Theatre for development will help to re-establish their communication'

Theatre for Development has obviously proven to be an effective approach to community engagement for the realization of a developmental change. The flow of information and reaction from the audience goes a long way to support this assertion. This was achieved through the careful use of audience related languages and mannerism plus the use of local language.

The highest potential of this approach is theatre being a democratic medium in which the people, i.e. the community members can play an active part in the making of the content and issues presented. The TfD approach provides an opportunity for rural folks to meet, think, share ideas about a common problem. The rural folks for whom the change is sought become integral part and stakeholders of the change process.

Theatre for Development raises consciousness through the use of local or indigenous art forms. The use of indigenous art forms presents the audience the chance to be more identifiable to the situations as presented in the performance and the entire engagement process.

During the information collection stage (data gathering), the facilitator must keep these key points in mind;

1- The average educational level of the community.
2- The community's power structure- the relationship between the authorities and the community members
3- The cultural life of the community.

The content of any theatre performance with the aim of promoting social change should be derived from a practical assessment of the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of the prospective audience.(Collins, Barber & Ricard, 1997) The content should also be based on analysis of barriers which the audiences believe hinder their development. Giving the audience time to debate, ask questions and role plays enable them to try out how well it would be like to live in the changed lifestyle they seek.

It has been observed that a one-time theatrical presentation in a community can stimulate and create some sort of awareness but does not have the capacity to sustain behavioral change on long term basis. To reinforce the impact of theatre presentation in the communities, frequent follow-up workshops should be organised. Theatre cannot create change on its own; it presents the messages or set the agenda to the targeted groups. It requires the support of civil societies, public agencies, non-governmental organizations to push forward the agenda set through theatre. Theatre for Development (TfD) projects should be part of overall development action or as part of other non theatre development activities in order for its impact to live beyond just individual/group performance(s) for mere entertainment.

In spite of its numerous advantages as a community engagement method, individuals and organizations who wish to employ it in their community work must be cautious of its rules and possible limitations.

Theatre for Development (TfD) can be used to create a rich picture interpretation of the existing society although it is dependent on the effectiveness of the facilitator or joker to help people to analyse the dramatic situation. There should be very well trained facilitators to handle Theatre for Development (TfD) projects especially in semi-educated communities. Good facilitators create group confidence within the working communities. Developing a behavioral change in a community is a gradual process and it requires proper community facilitator to carry them along the path of change. A good community facilitator does not lecture or impose but rather interacts and discusses ideas with his/her people. A good facilitator is always sensitive to the feelings and reactions of his people.

Facts about issues presented in the theatre piece must always be accurate so as not to feed the community with wrong information; community folks most often tend to believe 'outsiders'.

6. Conclusion

When people are involved in a participatory process which mirrors their very lives, the corrective process is easier since they have the opportunity of fuller participation to criticize themselves, analyse situations and draw conclusions leading to effective change. If the problem of unemployment is tackled on community basis through such engagement programs, the situation will be lessened. There is clear indication that, there exist a new approach to community engagement which is more democratic and involving in the quest for social change and development. In the praxis for TfD, the practitioner seek to use theatre democratically to build to educate, to inform and challenge the status quo; in community development. It is a community-based democratic tool with concepts of development, improvisation and performance for a target group of people. It is imperative that a well-defined framework for the operation of Theatre for Development (TfD) be put in place so as to make it more attractive to work with. TfD offers a practical and theoretical exploration of the ways in which the arts can be used by communities to create social transformation on their own terms. The underlying components of all TfD work are democracy, participation and sustainability.

Acknowledgement

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