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The use of community theatre in project evaluation : an experimental example from Zimbabwe

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• Introduction and background

ENDA-Zimbabwe (Environment and Development Activities), an indigenous Zimbabwean NGO, has been running a community woodland resource management project in Southern Zimbabwe since 1987. The project places an emphasis on community research and aims at a participatory framework in implementation. The following account relates to a workshop that was held at Mototi Township, the area where the project originated. Locally based project staff, a community worker and village researchers, facilitated the workshop, which had as its broad aim the creation of a piece of community theatre reflecting perceptions and concerns about the project and trees in general.

Our objectives in holding this workshop were the following:

- to highlight key concerns of the community regarding the current tree population of the area;
- to look for solutions from the community and evaluate the role of ENDA in facilitation of this;
- to expose obstructive factors to the attainment of these goals;
- to work these issues into a short piece of theatre which exposes conflicts over trees and could be used to stimulate discussion in community workshops, as representative of community concerns; and,
- through drama, to involve people more closely in the issues which emerged and strengthen motivation.

• Methodology

- The groups were selected by the community workers from the main household clusters, over a wide age-range and with roughly equal numbers of men and women, so as to represent the community as fully as possible.
- In order to bring about fuller participation in discussion, the groups were divided into single-sex sub-groups of 5 or 6 people. This was also intended to allow women freer expression and to expose the different concerns of women and men where they existed.
- The sub-groups selected a representative to present their points of discussion to the group as a whole. General discussion followed presentations, centring on the issues raised.
- Four animators were involved in going to the groups to stimulate and channel discussion, where necessary. Their role was to be active only where the group remained hesitant about discussing (in the context, this was superfluous). General discussion was facilitated by the community worker and there were four observers, who took individual notes on the proceedings which were compared and discussed in the evaluation session after the workshop.

• Structure of the discussions

- The groups were given five questions to debate, these having been formulated by the community worker and team of animators

prior to the workshop. Once they felt that they had pooled their views and ideas they were asked to return to the group to present them, upon which a general discussion was held.

- Moving to the specific issues of the value of and threats to trees, the sub-groups each chose 6 important trees by calling out a name in rotation. Discussions in the sub-groups focused on these themes and presentation and general discussion followed.
- To the group as a whole the question was asked: “When did these trees start to disappear?” People shouted out dates and were asked the reasons for their choices.
- General discussion centred around ENDA’s role in improving the situation and how the community perceived this.
- The group decided to focus on three areas in which trees are found and threatened, to emphasise their value. These were:
 - around the home
 - in the field
 - in the forest

For each of these areas a short sketch was created, with people personifying the most important trees selected by the group as a whole and others posing threats to the trees.

- Throughout the emphasis was on what the group felt was the best approach; they made decisions about using the small-group format again after it was tried out in the first discussion and on the structure and content of the play. The facilitators were very much on the side-lines; the structure of the workshop seemed to allow people to participate fully without needing any encouragement.

• **Content of the discussions**

Discussion one: Evaluating current status of trees and stating goals

- 1 The 5 questions posed were:
 - what is the present situation with trees in this area?

- how did this situation come about?
- what is the situation we would like to bring about in the future?
- what are the obstacles to achieving this?
- how do we overcome these obstacles?

- 2 The present situation was seen as being that there were few trees and that they were decreasing in number.
- 3 The causes of this situations fell into three broad categories:
 - a) drought and its consequences: infertile seeds, less potential for growth;
 - b) over-population and increased demand for wood; fuelwood, fencing, building etc.; and,
 - c) mismanagement of resources: destumping from fields, burning to cut down trees, carelessness.
- 4 The goal was seen as increasing the number of trees and, at the same time, awareness of conservation of resources; to plant trees to replace one cut by three planted, for example; to replace dead trees; to leave stumps and cut rather than burn, so that the stumps can sprout; not to cut large trees which can yield seeds; not to be careless and cut trees without a good reason.
- 5 Obstacles to these goals were seen as identical with points 3 a and c.
- 6 Overcoming these obstacles requires heightened awareness and, to counter the effects of drought and encourage community management of resources, the setting up of village nurseries run by the community.
- 7 These two aims were seen as being tackled by ENDA. Firstly, by Mathou Chakavanda, the community worker, in encouraging people to take more care, and in giving people ideas and assistance on where and how to plant trees. Secondly, the nurseries will allow people to overcome the problem of infertile seeds and enable them to replant areas which they observe have become deforested.

8 There were no distinguishable differences between the concerns and solutions articulated by groups of men and women.

Discussion two: Important trees and their uses

The trees were chosen in rotation, a) being first choice, not necessarily first preference.

Group one (of women):

- a) mutarara gives shade, good for crops
- b) mupfura gives shade, good for crops, cure for toothache (as a gargle)
- c) musuma fruits for birds, animals and peoples
- d) mupanda browse for cattle and donkeys
- e) muonde fruits for birds and people, good for crops
- f) rrunhengeni fruits, leaves used for wounds, root used for diarrhoea, 'good for oxygen'

Group two (of men):

- a) munyii fruits, bird's food, yokes, good for craft-making, bark used for dying baskets, cure for diarrhoea
- b) muuyu fruits, bark for making string for mats, roots used for washing children after birth
- c) rrubhondo firewood, browse
- d) rrunveva browse, making doors, washing infants after birth
- e) muzeze twiglets used to chase away ngozi (avenging spirits), roots used if the placenta fails to be expelled after delivery and as an abortifacient, gargles to preserve teeth
- f) muvunga browse for goats, fencing for fields and home

Group three (of women):

- a) muchakata fruits keep healthy, for dovi, a source of protein, fruits

- pounded and eaten as dovore (especially good for children)
- b) mutohwe fruits, to make sticks for porridge, it doesn't affect crops when in fields
- c) mutsviri for building, ashes used for decoration of walls
- d) mugaragora food for birds, good for shade
- e) munyambo fruits, cure for sore eyes
- f) mususu yokes, pestles, cure for sore eyes

Group four (of men):

- a) mupani for poles, roofing, firewood, caterpillars found on it
- b) mutamba fruits, porridge
- c) musvimwa fruits, birds depend on it
- d) munyera can chew the roots, browse for goats
- e) mukwakwa fruits, food for baboons
- f) mukosvo fruits, poles for building

It was interesting to note that there was little in the way of differences between the uses suggested by the groups of men and of women. Men's knowledge about issues which could be labelled 'women's affairs' by an outsider, observing the sexual division of labour in the cultural context, is often as extensive as women's knowledge.

Discussion three: the disappearance of trees over time

- 1 Three questions were asked:
 - when did you notice that trees were starting to disappear?
 - what caused it, how did it come about?
 - what made you notice it at that time?
- 2 The group called out the years in which they noticed that trees were disappearing.
- 3 The years mentioned and reasons given were:
 - in 1961- with the introduction of lines, many new homes were built; increased

- population meant an increased consumption of fuelwood.
- in 1969- the winters very cold and there were severe rainstorms.
- in 1970- trees were being used for fencing in the lines; one participant remarked that he had walked 10km before find poles adequate for roofing.
- in 1975- people were cutting down trees in the waterways.
- in 1981- new homes were being built, trees were cut down as fodder during drought; it was observed that before this time the business was dense.
- in 1982- drought again, donkeys depended on trees for their survival.
- in 1987- trees were being cut for fencing and firewood; it was remarked that it was impossible as cover was sparse.

- 4 The group discussed places where trees were still plentiful, places far away such as Gokwe (in the far north-west) were mentioned, in stark contrast to this area.
- 5 People felt that 'with people's desire' and the help of ENDA the situation could improve.

• **Preparation of the play**

- 1 Three scenes were decided upon to show the conflicts over trees in:
- the home
 - the field
 - the forest

For each scene people chose to either act (as trees of those threatening trees) or observe and direct.

- 2 After discussions on which trees should be included, people got up and started to improvise scenes, prompted by the occasional comments from onlookers. At first, five or so trees were suggested for each scene, but after trying this out it was felt that it made the play too long and the point had already been made. Some of the threats

people suggested were also laughed out as being irrelevant. Three trees were decided on for the first two scenes and four for the third, the issue of firewood cutting in the forest being seen as the most important one.

- 3 As people began to improvise the scenes, a director stepped forward and acted to channel the comments which were being thrown in and to suggest where people stood and so on.
- 4 In an hour or so the play was completed to everyone's satisfaction and the performance received lively applause and laughter. From the comments made after the workshop, it seemed that people felt they had created something that they felt good about and really enjoyed themselves in the process.
- 5 In the first scene, a man is sitting at home when he is approached by his two wives who moan about the trees in the homestead - for example, that people are always coming to eat the fruit and then hang around to be fed a meal (it is customary to feed visitors, unavoidable if they appear at mealtimes!). He protests and refuses to give them permission, but they carry on complaining and eventually ignore him and go off to do it anyway. This is repeated for each tree, with a different reason (happening over a period of time), the man getting more and more despondent at their lack of respect for his authority. When they try to cut down the tree, it protests, saying 'Don't cut me down! I am tree X and I give you ...' This has a lot of humour value - firstly because if a man refuses, a women is supposed to obey him (but if he is an old man, they don't) and also because men are always complaining about the perseverance of women in complaining about something so that they can get their own way.

In the second scene, a man is sitting at home, quite drunk, when his two wives come to tell him about the hassles of the trees in the field - for example, children come to take fruit and trample all over the crops. He is totally disinterested and say they should do what they want. The same pattern is repeated as in the first scene. By the time the women ask permission to cut the third tree down, he's asleep and wakes up complaining about his hangover, saying "Go on, run and cut it

down, I don't care, I have a terrible hangover". This again has a lot of humour value, especially for the women.

In the third scene, two women go out to look for firewood and in two of the instances, do what has been discussed previously as being wrong. They attempt to cut down a huge tree, needing a man to help them and they try to set fire to another tree at its base. As they go through the forest, the women make jokes which keeps the audience amused. The last speech from a tree is long and impassioned, appealing to people to realise the effects of what they are doing.

- 6 (In subsequent performances, people changed roles, others came in, different trees were suggested - the play was essentially quite fluid and was adapted by the actors who improvised as they went on.

Whenever I had used drama before I found that people quickly created the play and could improvise freely. This is bound up in the way people interact in that cultural context and therefore may not be so readily repeatable elsewhere).

• Discussion

- 1 Two features of the method used for the workshop merit comment:
 - The division of the larger group into sub-groups of men and women allowed fuller participation. This was especially relevant to the participation of women, who had a chance to air their views more freely for example, in joking competitiveness, group one, of women, was applauded for raising the best points.
 - The structures given to discussions seemed to enable them to move more rapidly and remain centred on the key issues. Together with general discussion, in which comments sparked off further unstructured exploration of the issues, this seemed an effective approach.
- 2 We feel that the play could be a useful tool to generate discussion and concern at a more

personal level if used in larger community workshops, as well as having use in community evaluation.

• Conclusion

The outcome of the workshops was a piece of community theatre portraying conflicts over communal resources in a form that the representatives of the community taking part felt could help promote awareness and concern. Through dramatisation of their own concern, the participants may have identified more closely with the issues raised and experienced enhanced motivation to tackle and resolve these problems.

It is through identifying with and taking responsibility for such issues that a community can be self-motivating and that a project such as this one can be sustained in the absence of outsider intervention. Drama is a powerful tool in facilitating reflection and stimulating personal involvement in such areas of concern, often enabling people to see things from a new perspective.

Participating in the drama as an onlooker, by internalising the issues, or as an actor, by expressing them in role-play, can lend this new perspective and engender greater personal commitment to a cause or project. The involvement of local community members can act to legitimate the message and to articulate it more clearly to the target audience. As an exercise in itself, the creation of a piece of theatre of this nature can be valuable. Each area has its own problems, and perceptions may differ as to where priorities lie: locally based theatre allows people to develop ideas and solutions themselves, rather than see outsiders to the community articulating their perceptions.

Using a structured format, with small groups, this type of workshop virtually runs itself. The group of animators can be appointed from local people and facilitate the proceedings, as minimal direction is required. Participation in this form of workshop can lead, as it did in Mototi, to the group taking control of the proceedings, creating the drama for themselves. It does not require a skilled facilitator, but does require for participants to be chosen from the livelier people in the community - in every group some people will attempt to lead, directors can present themselves to the group

rather than a director being imposed on them. A possible approach is to ask for volunteers from the group as a whole to act as facilitators and for this sub-group to take part in discussions on the way in which the workshop will be run and briefed on their role as facilitators. In this way people will come forward rather than be chosen by the people responsible for running the workshop, which could potentially work better.

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