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Theatre for development, participatory monitoring and cultural feedback

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'The prodigal returns' or 'how to bring up your children'

Resplendent in city clothes and wearing sunglasses (props made from millet stalks), a village youth struts home from his adventures in town. He even has a radio. He bears no substantial gifts for his parents who had waited so long for his return. They had laid curses on him and used the same magic to bring him back, but they were not pleased. They fell to fighting with one another. The man accused the woman of being soft: 'Whenever I tried to beat him you never let me, that's why he went away' and the woman countered with 'it was you who let him go to school, that's where he went astray!' The play ended with the prodigal's tears.

'The Food Aid Play'

A happy village. There is music and dance, there is rain and a promising millet crop (represented by reeds stuck into the sand of the village yard where the performers are dancing). Everyone is looking forward to a fat year - until the rains fail. The reeds are laid down and the music stops. In despair, the farmers ask the audience what to do. They are told to approach the district commandant to seek food aid. The play ended with the arrival of sacks of rice to fill the empty millet granaries.

• Beginnings

The performers of these spontaneous improvised plays were Bobo youths in the East of Mali during the early days of their

partnership with SOS Sahel's Community Environment Project. The Bobo are an isolated minority group, threatened by declining crop yields and creeping desertification. Literacy is low and clinics far away. The SOS project offers technical support with particular expertise in soil and water conservation and agroforestry. As part of that project, SOS Sahel set up a drama unit to explore the use of Theatre for Development (TFD) as a way to listen to the village performers and monitor the mood and views of the community. The TFD provided an ongoing feedback system.

The process is rooted in the assumption that two way communication is inherently developmental and that any dialogue between project and partner will lead to new action and any confidence to a new relationship of increased trust and co-operation. We have left behind the traditional perception of theatre as a handy tool for the transmission of development messages in top-down communication with a 'target' group. This Theatre for Development is concerned not with didactic accounts of how water should be boiled, or trees planted, but with the social constraints that interfere with the implementation of change.

Neither the content nor theme of these plays was solicited by project staff. Theatre was treated as a language to be shared with the community performers who, as artists, could use it to express whatever they wished. Outside forms of theatre were not imported, the performers with the TFD facilitators evolved a culture-specific form of theatre based on local performance practices.

The returning prodigal was a very early theatrical exploration. It spoke about the rural exodus and the elders' fears on that score. However it also showed that in spite of the elders' agreement that their children should attend the not-so-nearby school in another village, they viewed the imposition of 'modern' education with mistrust.

The 'Granary Play' was their first real use of the language of theatre to explore serious issues, signalling their perceived helplessness in the face of the drought and their preferred solution - food-aid. Between the lines, however, we could read a deeper reality.

During the performance the audience was asked what the actors should do about the dying crops. It was the audience that sent them to the authorities. When asked later, in an after-show discussion, whether the Commandant's offer of grain was realistic, actors and audience alike agreed that it was not. Challenged as to whether they would still recommend the same action they replied 'What else can we do? We can do nothing for ourselves.' Yet this was the same community, and among them the same individuals, who had been sweating in the fields. They had dug two hundred-odd crescent-shaped basins - anti-erosion measures - designed to catch rain and save precious topsoil, allowing at least some millet to grow in those arid fields.

Neither performers nor audience referred to the anti-erosion measures as something they could 'do'. Instead they asked for emergency grain, food-aid. Digging basins was somehow for the project, it was not 'owned' by the community. It was early days in the project, so this ambivalence was not surprising, but the play gave material to the field-workers to address the situation in subsequent discussion. Later on, other plays could be solicited to monitor progress in this respect. Through spontaneous improvisations like these, attitudes are revealed which may not feature in the polite formality of village meetings.

As they became more comfortable with the TFD (performance) programme, they had courage enough to complain, through their plays about the oppressive, paramilitary forestry service and even aspects of the SOS project itself.

'The driver and the sheep'

This play portrayed the demise of a villager's sheep under the wheels of a passing vehicle. The driver is shown to get out and far from apologising or offering to make amends, he does not even seek out the owner of the sheep or the Chief of the village. Instead he proceeds to give a lecture against free ranging livestock, blaming the community for the mishap. Then he climbs back into his vehicle and storms off in a cloud of dust. This outburst is delivered in the Bambara language, the language of the ruling majority in Mali, whereas these villagers are part of the tiny, marginalised Bobo minority.

It turned out that one of the project's drivers had been involved in such an accident. He had been conveying a local government official on an urgent mission in the region. By taking the trouble to speak the driver's part in Bambara, the players were also pointing out that there was a further dimension to the breach of protocol. Expression of this grievance through theatre allowed it to be aired and subsequently laid to rest by the field-workers. The project gave an assurance that the driver had been cautioned and would no longer be speeding recklessly along the bush tracks.

Ownership from the start of both the form and content helped the players to explore themes of their own selection. Sometimes frivolous and sometimes serious, almost all of the plays reflected current community concerns and attitudes. The Drama Unit within the SOS Sahel programme was set to last the duration of the project. The early plays monitored and amplified base line information (that may already have been gathered using more conventional means) about the community and in some cases gave a handy metaphor for field workers wishing to refer to topics aired in this way. Later on, when the performers became proficient in improvised performance, field-workers could solicit plays about particular themes. In the spirit of dialogue, the content of these plays would always be provided by the performers. The project listened to their opinions and responded.

• Solicited themes and feedback

I borrow the term 'feedback' from the terminology of electronics: Collins dictionary defines it as 'information in response to an enquiry, experiment etc.', and more specifically as 'the return of part of the output of an electronic circuit .. to its input, *so modifying its characteristics*'. Without constructive response from the project workers, it would not be true feedback but merely the collection of more colourful data than conventional enquiry may reveal.

The authors of the Food Aid Play went on to do well with their erosion control work. However in the second year of the project, their participation in the second round of diggings was grinding to a halt. We asked them to show us, in performance, what could be holding them back, given that they still pledged their support verbally. The play they produced showed how they had to struggle to make ends meet, to pay their taxes and the inordinate fines imposed upon them by the paramilitary forestry service. They had to make artefacts to be sold in the market and could not afford the extra time.

We asked another community, with similar problems, about their situation. They also produced a play about the forestry service, signalling their (real) fear about a (hypothetical) danger.

'The forestry plays'

Some village women are in the forest gathering wood when they catch sight of a pair of forestry agents coming their way. They hide behind a baobab tree and watch as the Agents deliberately set fire to the dry grasses. Later, the agents turn up in the village, feigning anger, demanding to know who broke the law by lighting forest fires. They fine the protesting villagers. Since there are witnesses, the courageous villagers refuse to pay and are taken before the Forestry Chief. The agents are fired and the Chief exhorts the villagers to report any such cases.

Happily, when we told the real Forestry Chief about these plays, his reaction was positive. He made a visit to the village, referring to the SOS methodology as a move away from

repressive measures. This in turn made an impression on the village who said afterwards that they had never had anything but punitive visits from the Forestry Department. On the basis of this, the project management and Foresters came to an arrangement whereby the Forestry officers would stay away from those villages who were working with SOS Sahel and exploring a participatory approach to Development.

• Group mapping and other TFD workshop processes

Working in a later project with RISE Namibia and OXFAM, circumstances led to the evolution of further evaluative processes within the TFD methodology. The youth group in Berseba, with whom we were working, was experiencing internal conflicts which threatened the continuation of their garden-project activity.

It should be stressed that all of the cases described in this paper were not drama groups as such, but activity groups who were using TFD as part of their own process. Much of the work in Namibia was rooted in the workshop process itself, while their (interactive) performances were less regular and tended to be on a regional rather than local level.

We imported an exercise from psychodrama. Since it bears some similarities with PRA exercises, I have called it 'group mapping'. Workshop members are asked to position themselves around a set of objects (in this case garden tools), symbolising the centre of the group. The position they settle into must indicate their relationship, not only with the centre, but also with one another. This may take some time as all positions are relative to each other. There is some jostling for position and moving around as a result of each person's adopted pose.

Once positions are established, the group is invited to take stock of where they have ended up, or they may go on to a next step, which is to vocalise their feelings in that position. 'In this position I feel' and 'where I would like to be is' or 'what I need is'. After this there may be some discussion, or the participants may be invited to try to move to where they would like to be and in what

position. Further verbalisation may be invited according to what has transpired thus far.

We saw the corporate expression of what informal chatting had led us to believe. The self appointed leaders had seized the centre position and had spoken of their (innocent) pride in having started up the group. They had not intended to exclude the others and now the effect of their assumed leadership was clear. In this case the exercise ended with a move towards the centre, with all hands joined in ritual, and perhaps clichéd, expression of where they wanted to be.

There followed much discussion. Of course, nobody suggested that this nascent ritual was going to transform the group's nature, but those hidden attitudes had now been uncovered and explored. Reflection had laid the way for new action.

A similar problem of internal group conflict within the Gibeon Youth Group, also in Namibia, led to a workshop under the trees at Vrystaat, a piece of land that the group had annexed for their communal farm. The group had not met for some time. Together with Johannes Jansen, we adapted a word game. A group of people speak one word at a time, in turn. They string... sentences.. and.. can.. formulate.. composite .. ideas.. together. If these thoughts are expressed in answer to judicious questions, then the group may begin to reveal some of its suppressed opinions.

After setting up the game with random questions, we asked 'What should the group do now?' The answer they constructed recommended a play about a chicken farm - the chosen activity for some of the members in Vrystaat. Jansen and I then also formed a team and began to construct questions for the rest of the group. We aimed to reveal what could get in the way of the success of such a project. The group constructed their answers in response to our constructed questions.

We found that it was allegations of isolation, unfairness and even dishonesty that began to surface. No one person had made any personal allegations, but the thrust of the content was accepted and the group sat down to discuss and resolve their differences. At least, they resolved to make a contract with one another

to work together and not destroy what they had built.

• **The PRA connection**

Community artists should always be free to create works on whatever topic interests them. Random monitoring is essential, reviving issues the project may have forgotten, pointing out grievances and enriching the base-line data. If used in conjunction with PRA techniques, the feedback system can be made more focused. TFD scenarios can be solicited to add colour and tone to the potentially dry PRA findings. This may also be reversed with PRA exercises being brought into post performance discussions, amplifying and verifying information touched on by qualitative references and signals within the performance.

• **TFD feedback works alongside formal monitoring**

In another project in Mali, an initial topic led to a series of plays on a theme, evolving the discourse across several performances. Alternatively two groups, either from the same community performing group, or from two separate communities, could be invited to prepare a play on the same theme and based on the findings from PRA or any other facilitation method. In this way, a dialectic would be created offering two (or more) points of view on the same issue. Synthesis could be sought either within the same workshop for presentation to the community audience and further exploration in discussion. Alternatively, synthesis could be achieved by bringing the performers from the one community into the other to perform their piece.

All of the TFD processes described here depend largely upon the presentation of scenarios by the village performers in an ongoing and regular participatory performance programme. It cannot offer the rigour of formal monitoring, but it can fill in the gaps with a colour and subtlety that politeness and formality may miss.

• Conclusion

This form of TFD or Listening Theatre (as it was called by OXFAM when they supported the RISE Namibia project) is not the dominant model. It's rationale is that constructive dialogue leads to action. This parallels the dictum of the late Paulo Freire, that action should lead to reflection which is then followed by a new action. This is the feedback system envisaged in this approach to Theatre for Development.

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NOTES

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A fuller account of the Drama Unit's work may be found in:

Mavrocordatos, A. & Martin, P. (1995) 'Theatre for Development: Listening to the Community', in *Power and Participatory Development*, edited by Nelson, N. & Wright, S. London: IT Pubs.

Mavrocordatos, A. (1997) 'Tied up in a Rope of Sand. TFD: Cultural action or Development Utility', in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Spring 1997.