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A day in the village with "positive people" or "*nenojoma nigi kute ayaki*"

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• Introduction

The account that follows draws on experiences with the Apondo Youth Group near rural Ahero. This is part of CARE Kenya's CRUSH -Communication Resources for Under 18s on STDs and HIV - project on HIV/AIDS in Kisumu District, Kenya.

Dramatic action

The scene opens with twelve HIV-positive people who are at an HIV/AIDS counselling centre. Members of the community take roles as their counsellors. The project uses familiar, traditional story-telling techniques. The people choose whose story they want to hear first and whom they want to counsel first. It is a 'battle' as the facilitator mediates the different groups that want to hear different stories.

The central questions on the storyboard highlight each character's dilemma. These reflect the dilemmas of particular people in the community who seek and insist on investigating these particular characters. They begin to lay on the table their own personal feelings, prejudices, fears and hopes for investigation within the safety of their role-play as counsellors.

A sceptical old man who does not believe in the existence of AIDS suddenly clears his throat. He can neither read nor write. He is attracted to the storyboard symbols representing the story of the village carpenter who, on his elder brother's death, is forced by the elders to inherit the widow.

A sudden hush falls on the 400 members of the community who are present. Here is a village sage, whose word on custom and tradition is faultless and is revered to the point of becoming law. He explains the philosophy behind wife inheritance slowly but firmly, citing from a wealth of ageless ancestral wisdom that no man or woman present dare dispute.

His peers nod knowingly, as the younger men in the audience look at him in awe and amazement. The women sit passively. No expression of any sort is shown on their faces: their "proper" place is defined by marriage. This makes them communal property to be passed over to the next man, together with cows, land and houses. The old man sits down after 20 minutes and there is no doubt in the minds of the people that wife inheritance is blameless, as far as AIDS is concerned.

The carpenter begins to tell his story to the keen and curious community. There is nothing unusual in his life. His story is the community's story. But then he narrates how he discovered that his elder brother, whose wife the elders forced him to inherit, actually committed suicide after he was diagnosed to be positive with AIDS. Without pathos, he declared that he has since tested positive, together with his first wife, their last born baby, and the second wife he inherited from his late brother.

Nobody speaks for a long time, until a teenage schoolboy begins to point out the contradictions in the practice of wife inheritance. For the next half hour, the debate is tossed backwards and forwards between the youth and the elders. What was accepted

before the drama as wise judgement is slowly reconstructed in the light of HIV/AIDS.

There seems to be an impasse until a woman coyly steps forward. The facilitator is quick to notice her, for rarely do women stand to give their opinions in such weighty matters in this village. She brings a different angle to the stand-off between youth and elders. She challenges the assumptions of tradition and custom about the place of a woman in a marriage, in society. AIDS is for a moment, but only for a moment, put on one side, as the spotlight is turned full glare onto the rights of women to inherit property, including land.

A fourth school of thought quickly establishes itself. This is presented by middle-aged practising and retired professionals. They attempt to reconcile 'tradition' with the harsh realities of existing with AIDS. People listen, people argue, people venture into the performing area to wear the caps of different characters, as well as to wear the cap of the carpenter at the cross-roads of his life. Attempts are made at changing the outcome of events.

There is a moment of instantaneous applause when the elder who first opened the door on this Pandora's box declares he is convinced by a doctor (another member of the community in role) that AIDS does exist. The applause is like a signal from an invisible orchestral conductor. Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, the young, the middle-aged and the elderly call out to each other. An elder moves to a corner that is predominantly occupied by middle-aged women. Three youths engage their school teacher in animated dialogue, challenging him, teasing him. They say things to him things that would earn them immediate expulsion if they were said in a classroom. At the far end, a red-eyed youth asks a bemused village chief to immediately arrest all wife-inheritors!

• Reflections

In six months, no single performance has been like the other. The audience is always bringing into the dramatic situations new and exciting possibilities. This gives them a feeling of strength and success where they previously felt powerless and confused.

The programmes do not present a particular point of view. Initially, some sections of the community, after many hours of reflection and practical action in the drama, would turn to the facilitator for his opinion. This is a legacy of traditional teaching systems and uninformed, individualistic theatre. Only when the value of the doubt and confusion has been pointed out to them by their neighbours, do they seek out friends, neighbours, or family in the audience to slowly start their short journey home. Others stay to chat with the actors/teachers, helping to bring down the set and load it onto the waiting vehicle.

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FURTHER READING

Chamberlain, Roger, Mindy Chillery, Lenin Ogolla and Ochieng Wandera (1995) 'Participatory Educational Theatre for HIV/AIDS Awareness in Kenya', PLA Notes 23.