Voices aloud: making communication and change together

by OGA STEVE ABAH

Introduction

People are always talking; talking about many different things (work, joy, pain, freedom, etc.). But it is also a common observation that people's voices are always ignored and not heard when they are crying against injustice, against oppression and suppression of freedom. Authorities would normally prefer to ignore voices when they are calling for change. And, based on our experience of working on issues of development failures and on issues of disenchantment with political practice, we have come to understand the difficulty of communication, especially when the aim is change. The manner and structure of popular communication for change must therefore respond to the context in which the work is taking place; for it is determined by the nature of the society, community and target groups in which one is working.

The context of communication and change in Nigeria

One of the reasons why making communication in Nigeria is a difficult enterprise is that we probably live where the tower of Babel broke! There are about 474 officially categorised languages in a country of approximately 140 million people. It is believed that unofficially there may be over 500

Illustration from cover of *PLA Notes* 39. Popular communications

Cartoon: Regina Faul-Doyle
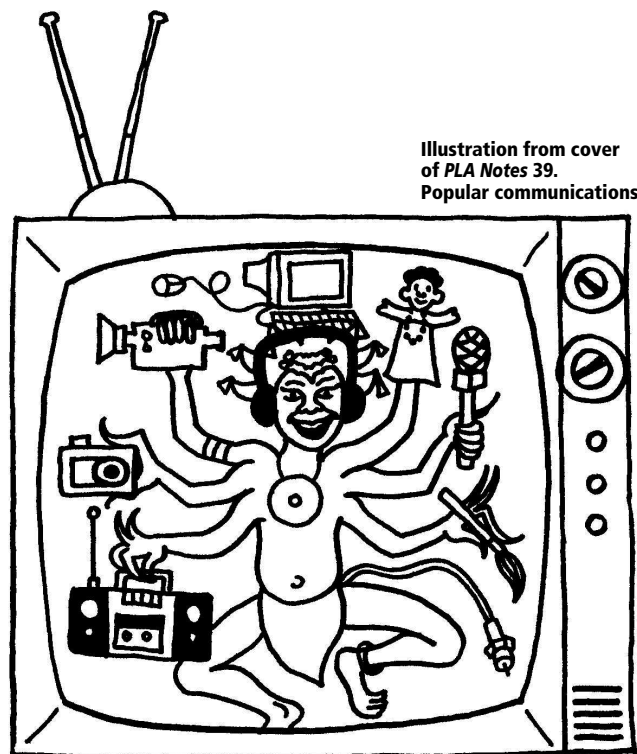
languages. In official circles we speak English, which was bequeathed to us by the British people who colonised us. But once outside of such official environments, and especially in the villages, it is a different story. Secondly, the very multiplicity of languages tells of different nationalities and cultures that have been aggregated to form the country Nigeria. In this common plate where beans, maize and rice, etc. are mixed, each one still remains its own self. The colo-

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nial legacy of amalgamating different parts and peoples of the region into one country called Nigeria has also created a legacy of difference that nationhood has not yet been able to obliterate. There is one more factor that makes communication in Nigeria difficult. This is the fact that the majority of Nigerians, about 60%, is still non-literate. So, citizenship, language and education remain points to negotiate in the choice of tools and methods to employ in discussing development, participation and rights.

Very often we go for a methodology that has roots and resonance among the group we are working with. This means that the communication forms, which may include different performative modes, are employed. We also deal with issues that are of concern to them. Although very often these issues may be of national importance, they must have relevance and significance at the local level. Democracy, governance and citizenship have been some of the areas of concern. These have relevance to every Nigerian in broad terms. But when we pull them down to what they mean in the lives of the ordinary men and women in rural communities and urban slums, we are talking about the lack of basic amenities and infrastructures such as drinking water, roads, electricity and blown roofs in village primary schools. In talking about all these, moving from the abstract to the concrete, we have employed a combination of participatory approaches such as Theatre for Development (TFD), Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) and the traditional survey method of questionnaires (or checklists, as we prefer to call it) to make communication with people on issues of development and change in their lives. So how does one really do communication for change?

Making communication and change together

The work that we have done with communities, both from within the academic environment and as members of non-governmental organisations in the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance/Theatre for Development Centre, has been characterised by collaboration, negotiation and talking aloud through the performance arts. Increasingly also we have been asking the different methodologies to converse with each other. One critical feature is collaborative development and use of accessible communication strategies. However, as outsiders we are not offering a ready-made package for 'low intelligence people' to use. We take from what already exists, adopt and adapt them collectively. Perhaps the first level of communication in this exercise is between community members and facilitators who have come from the outside. The first step is learning from each other to set the agenda. The first line of educators that this learning consists of are the community members, and the learners are the animators from outside. One of the thrills of this learning for me has always been the collapse of intellectual and knowledge arrogance when we go into the communities as 'experts' with all our baggage of preconceived notions of the nature of rural people and their problems. This arrogance is best exemplified by the objective and indeed a declaration of superiority when the students say '*We are going to conscientise the villagers. We will educate them on their problems and teach them how to solve them!*' And of course, many of us who teach the theory of engagement and change have conditioned as well as premised the students' understanding in prejudice and lack of experiential knowledge by some of these same scholars! So, Freire's concept of dialogics, out of which emerges conscientisation (knowledge/consciousness and action) is taken only to mean information and alas we fall victim to the banking system!

The joy of this conscientisation crusade is that it works in reverse in the field! The students are the ones who end up being educated. For one, they do not understand the community issues and must learn from the people what these are. Secondly, they are hardly able to answer the questions which the community members raise concerning their neglect by government. So, they have to learn more about the relationship between government, the people and development. However, what the students know and are able to do is to improvise drama on the basis of existing information about the community joys and problems. Even with this skill the students and TFD animateurs have to acknowledge that the dynamics of theatre in rural and urban squatter communities is a different one from that in academic campuses.

Such learnings have shaped our practice of TFD; so the practice now follows a process of research, of negotiation and of performing in communities in which power play that shapes community life is understood. Over the many years

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that we have done this, we know that in broad terms there may be a common agenda between animateurs and communities. However, there may be differences in the way the issues are perceived and understood. There may be variations in opinions on how best to talk about the issues, and there may also be differences in how to reach the people in power who should hear the voices. To make communication for purposes of change it is therefore imperative to arrive at a common understanding. This demands negotiation. The strategic direction is how the common agenda developed by facilitators and communities would lead to communication with people in power (PIP). So, we need to first agree with each other.

Stage one: what are the issues?

The first step in understanding the community concerns is to generate information from community members. Our approach is to first identify community-based organisations (CBOs) that have respect within the community. Such CBOs would then be our guides as well as the core group of people who will constitute the resource team to undertake follow-through actions. The approach that we have evolved, and which has worked quite well, is the combination of approaches which I have called methodological conversations. All of these approaches engaging in the conversations may be put under the homestead label. The array of instruments/approaches has included focused group discussion, participant observation and interviews, transect walks, mapping and storytelling. I have always enjoyed this combination because of the many layers of conversation that goes on and the amount of information

it is capable of generating. The next step is for the community, with the input of the animateurs, to prioritise the issues that have emerged. The issues that they consider to be the most critical are the ones that the drama will focus on.

We have passed one level of conversations. The conversations here have been between community and animateurs. It has also been between and amongst animateurs debating some matters that are not quite right, and arguing over what to do next. One such debate that I have always witnessed and contributed to is the confrontation between textbook prescription of the number of people with whom to conduct focused group discussions and the reality of the village, in which passers by would stop and join in the discussion through the duration of the exercise or move on after one or two interjections. The textbook says not to allow such interjections or uninvited members. But the community experience tells you that exclusion may alienate and jeopardise your project. I never cease to marvel as well as enjoy myself at the many contradictions that normally emerge and the discomfort of the 'experts' that they got it wrong!

Stage two: TFD, PLA, *et al.*

The drama creation is the next stage in the process. However, we see it as a continuation of the first section. It is also another level of the conversation in which drama and performance will serve several purposes (research, analysis, community engagement and entertainment).

After my parents had taught me how to talk, to communicate, respond to instructions and run errands, I think the other milestone in my knowledge of communi-

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cation was as a young boy sitting at sessions of folk tale performances in the village. The story sessions allowed communication between the story performer and the 'audience' on the one hand and between the characters in the fictional world of the story and every one at the event on the other. Both the performer and the audience knew the characters, corroborated their knowledge and existence by declaring at different points in the performance that they were present at the events the storyteller was describing! But they also challenged the performer when his performance of the story they all knew threatened to abort the harmony of the cosmos that the story had been devised to uphold. This threat was very often perceived by the 'audience' when the narrative plot and the content that support the message began to deviate from the norm. The difference between this old age moral position and TFD is that the one affirms while the other problematises. Nonetheless, what interests me, and what I believe TFD has learnt from storytelling performances, is the provision of a site for tapping community wisdom and information. The other lesson is the democratisation of participation by allowing others to enter into the performance to engage in a critical change of course and, the collective ownership of the story and the performance. I believe that TFD and PLA have used these lessons well.

Take an example: it is 2000 in Birnin Kebbi and the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance is conducting a capacity-building workshop for about six community-based organisations on their capacity needs to engage in governance, as promised by the new democratic dispensation after the withdrawal of the military from politics in 1999. It was a desire to enter the political as well as the development spaces that had opened up. We began by asking what sort of capacity the groups needed and for what purpose. The list ranged from 'We want to talk to government, we want to claim our rights, we are not getting the promises and development that the politicians promised us at elections'. The catalogue that came out was a combination of problems and intentions. So we needed to unpack these to actually know what capacity the CBOs were looking for. We broke into small groups to discuss some of the issues generated above. When we discussed and clustered the many issues that emerged, we arrived at five key concerns as follows:
• forced marriage and gender discrimination;
• the culture of silence and the attendant lack of self-esteem among ordinary members of various communities and CBOs;
• lack of freedom of choice, and of association and action;
• poor education; and
• absence of accountability and transparency in governance.

As the group discussions continued, the stories were about the non-performance of government. It also emerged quite strongly that the community-based organisations, and the many ordinary persons they represented, had no voice in the decision-making process in the state. Furthermore, after a session of brainstorming around these core issues, the consensus was that there was a serious implication of denial of rights. Therefore, the capacity the CBOs wanted was the ability to mobilise and to advocate. It was also about the skills to do a critical analysis and to be able to package an argument that would help their case.

There was enough information coming from the participants on the poverty of the ordinary people in Birnin Kebbi town and the state in general. So we said, let us see how some of these issues manifest around town. We did a transect walk. We came back and downloaded what we saw onto a map. In the process of interrogating the map the participants were engaged in analysing the issues they had earlier enumerated. They also mapped out relationships, studied locations of different groups and classes in the city and the significance of such spatial difference in relationship to the question of where development was taking place and where was left out. The drawing of the map was itself eventful. Everyone was on their feet arguing, debating in order to reach agreement on the location of features and the sizes of objects to represent them. One of the reasons for the eventfulness of the mapping exercise was the realisation by the CBOs that they were all from in or around Birnin Kebbi and yet did

not interact much with each other, and so they did not know what different groups were doing. The map made the CBOs see each other's locations and the spread of activities.

Stage three: interrogating the map and dynamising the issues

There were two points of interest for me from the exercise. One was the dynamisation of the issues (rather than the dynamisation of sculpted stories) from inside the map. Participants were asked to locate on the map of Birnin Kebbi the different sites where each of the core issues predominated. Forced marriage was located in the spaces inhabited by the non-literates who were also mostly not enlightened on the issues of rights and choices. Although this phenomenon also took place in the elite locations among the rich and highly educated people, it was euphemistically referred to as matchmaking. When the parallel was drawn between forced marriages and match-making, some of the women at the workshop who lived in the DG quarters where the practice of match-making was prevalent, vehemently objected to the comparison arguing that match-making was different and far more preferable to forced marriage because, in the former, the girl's consent is at least respected. The women also argued that parents know what is good for their children. When reminded that part of the rights which we just discussed had to do with freedom of choice, the women insisted that doing what is right for the child was not a negation of that freedom.

The spaces where the ordinary men and women lived their daily lives and where the very grassroots CBOs engaged in their activities were indicated as notable sites for 'shrunken' personalities. The participants said that this was the case because people in such spaces were constantly downgraded, their knowledges rejected, and their needs ignored. As a consequence they no longer have confidence in what they know and what they are capable of doing. This sense of low worth is further aggravated by the lack of freedom of choice, which authority structures impose on their subjects. Such authority structures were named as the palaces of traditional rulers, government and the elite in the society. One participant observed that, 'They downgrade us so that we do not have the mouth to challenge what they are doing wrong'.

The discussions and analyses coalesced in various drama pieces that focused on the issue of accountability and transparency. They argued that the focus on account-

ability and transparency was important because they were features of good governance. Secondly, they also said that at the centre of their marginalization and poverty is corruption which is the antithesis of good governance. The participants worked in small groups to tell stories of their experiences as marginalized citizens. They also performed corruption and from within the dramas outlined their ideals of a good government and how that would promote development. A significant point about the dramas was that they performed good governance from two levels. The first level was an internal examination of the operations and administrative strategies of the CBOs themselves. The central question in the drama was, 'To what extent do the CBOs themselves practise a transparent system of governance?' The question demanded that the CBOs tell the truth about themselves. This was difficult as it was too close to home. The members adopted a creative escape of making their dramas about 'other' organisations that did not practice good governance. It was clear that these 'other' organisations were similar to, if not the same ones present at the workshop. But it was safe and comfortable to talk about their organisations from a fictive and third person remove. Then at the second level they brought government down for shredding, based on their knowledge of being either civil servants or unemployed youths with frustrated aspirations.

As part of the examination of participants' organisational and administrative practice, the facilitator asked everyone to turn the searchlight on themselves and to ask whether we are accountable and transparent in our homes, to examine how we relate with our wives and family, etc. Then it dawned on people that the oppressions and problems they complain about may not only be about those in government, but that they could be about each and every one of us. It therefore became clear that we could not separate ourselves, our attitudes and behaviours from the issues we identified. Thus when participants were asked to indicate what was gained from the drama-making exercise and what happened to them in the process of doing the map, they gave the following responses:

- It helped an understanding of the issues.
- It made us to think deeply – something you must do with your brain.
- We had to concentrate.
- The thinking together and making the drama in groups encouraged group participation.
- As we talked and worked together it revealed patterns of cultural values and behaviour.

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• The map provided good knowledge of the area.
• It made it possible to locate sister organisations and key features in the town.
• The social map enacted the story of Birnin Kebbi in terms of issues of democracy and development.
• Holding the chalk and making the map on the floor made me feel like a good designer; I had a feeling of satisfaction.

This process of communicating and making change as reflected here has two parts to it. One is the process of understanding the issues and the second is building capacity for action.

In this process TFD and PLA were both engaged in enacting communication for change. What was also being heard were the voices of the CBO members drawn from different parts of the state. They were speaking to each other, first as a group with a common predicament. They were also interested in speaking to government about their concerns as citizens of the State. In the dramatisations that critiqued both government and CBO practices, drama was telling the story of development and its failures. The map was an outline of the geography of poverty in Birnin Kebbi. The interrogation of both the map and the dramas was interested in pointing out directions that might be useful for the CBOs in both their desire and attempt to talk to government about participatory governance and development.

It is in this regard of wanting to hold conversations with government that other means of communication are added to TFD and PLA. In our work with CBOs in different urban and rural communities we are always told, 'The government does not talk to poor people like us'. In contrast, they see us as 'people who can talk to government'. We know the truth that not even we are able to talk to government as easily as community members imagine. But we do know the media that government wants to see itself reflected in. These are television and radio. They are also happy to be packaged in videos. So, with 'Encountering Citizens' (an ongoing research by the Theatre for Development Centre

(TFDC) into citizenship in Nigeria) we have used these forms of media to disseminate research results to people in power and to other development activists. Information about what others are doing in an environment where face-to-face sharing is difficult, the voices that are heard are not necessarily that of TFDC. It is the voices of the ordinary people who ordinarily do not enter the spaces where development and policy matters are discussed. In serving as media through which the government is prepared to hear voices of such people, those same people have managed to enter reserved spaces; it is also an act of transgressing the spaces that are usually closed. For example, when on December 4, 2003 the TFDC showed its video, 'Nigeria: In Search of Citizens?' at the Commonwealth People's Forum event as part of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the people sitting in the main auditorium of the Yar'Adua Centre in Abuja, Nigeria were a combination of law makers drawn from the Nigerian National Assembly, representatives from international development agencies engaged in giving different kinds of development assistance to Nigeria. Also present were civil society activists from all parts of Nigeria and the Commonwealth countries. The video they were watching was a documentation of realities of development problems from Bayelsa, Benue and Kaduna States. The voices they heard in the video were those of the peoples of these different regions talking about ethnicity, religion, gender, their needs and their frustrations. I am not sure that Kande Patrick from Kurmin Jatau in Jaba Local Government Area from Kaduna State would otherwise go beyond the gate of the Yar'Adua Centre without being harassed, insulted and sent away! But the world listened to her that day! When the oil spillage and the flames of burning gas in the Niger Delta filled the screen, the realities of the calamity were beyond denial. The images and the drama that the audience watched that day were of young and old people from Bayelsa in the Niger Delta. The TFDC offered incisive captioning and problematised the three related issues of citizenship, rights and development. In addition, the discussions that followed proved that video can be a useful tool for communicating development. They also showed that such media could bring home issues and generate a lot of discussion. This media dissemination also went beyond the Yar'Adua Centre to the national arena. The Nigerian Television Authority in its annual review of major events showed interviews with key players in the citizenship research from Nigeria, UK, Brazil and India, three different times. Watched by over 40 million people across the nation the issues had engaged national consciousness.

In a related manner, when the ginger drama and the Commonwealth civil society visit to Sab-Zuro in Jaba Local Government Area of Kaduna was shown on the Kaduna State Television station in its prime time news slot, 'Panorama', on the 18 December 2003, the politics of ginger was being heard all over the State and brought the debate to public view.

But beyond mass audiences on television or at major events as happened at the Yar'Adua Centre, such videos may be watched by people in power in the privacy of their offices or homes. They may also be put to use in workshops and conferences to frame discussions and debates on related issues.

Stage four: community action plans: building capacity and planning development

One last step in our making development together with the people is to discuss the catalogue of issues that have emerged, prioritise them and engage in the discussion of actions. There are several rationales around community action plans (CAP): that development does not have to be something that someone or some authorities out there give to communities. Communities can develop their own societies. We however acknowledge that such development may need the support of others outside their immediate environment. So, when the community action plan starts from identifying priority issues, it explores who the stakeholders are in the project. It is then that we begin to talk about responsibilities and who would take charge of what activity. Then we analyse capacities and capabilities. By the time we have explored budgetary implications and time frames and what outcomes the community is looking for there is a whole picture, as well as the challenges, laid out in front of everyone. In outlining a range of activities, in identifying actors/stakeholders and in allocating roles and responsibilities to members of their organisations, the CBOs are accepting that they are change agents. The journey to this point is a long exercise of challenging attitudes, perceptions and preconceived notions. This journey is a capacity trip.

Conclusion

The communication that takes place in Theatre for Development happens in different arenas, corresponding to the various stakeholders in the agenda defined by any one set of objectives and goals. In general however, there is always a development issue at the centre of all TFD work in Nigeria. We have also found that sometimes the issues are

Communities plan their own development intervention making and interrogating the map of Birnin Kebbi
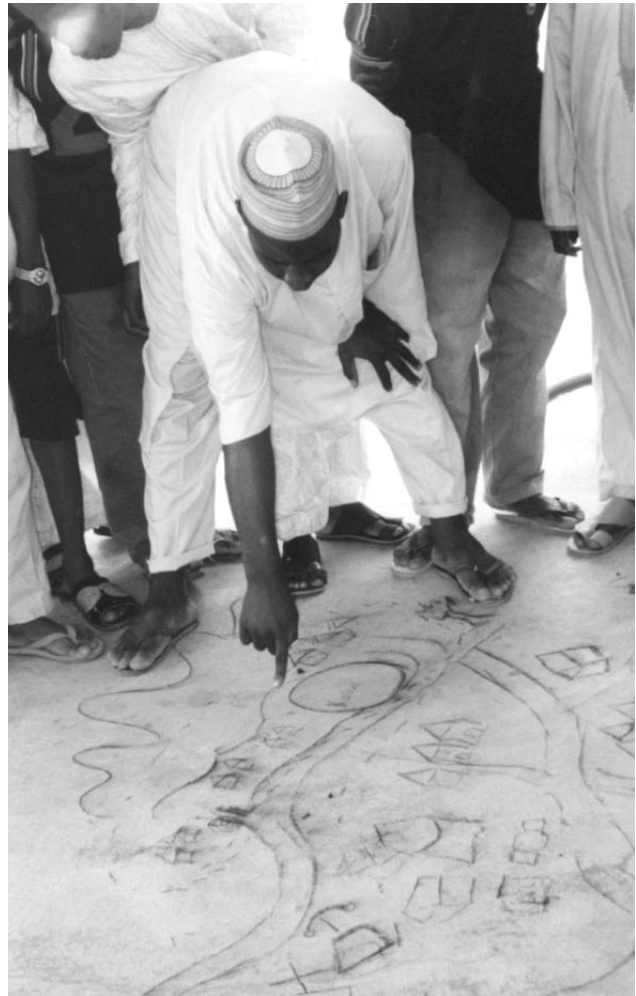

Photo: Oga S. Abah

not necessarily physical infrastructure. It may be located in what Boal has called the 'cop in the head', i.e. internalisation of belief or philosophies that may act against critical thinking and change. Development communication in this instance would be about reaching the cranial recess where such internalisations have taken refuge in order to develop a new consciousness that challenges the 'cop'. It is also about developing collective understanding and meanings of the phenomena that underpin our lives. Following these therefore, the group can put out 'messages' to places where they believe there would be positive effect. The media that have made the voices and voices loud have, in our experience, ranged from the indigenous performance arts of storytelling, songs and dance. Others are drama, PLA, radio through to television and video.

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