



Using theatre in participatory environmental policy making

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Introduction

This article documents the use of theatre as a tool for promoting community participation in policy development in community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) initiatives of southern Africa.¹ The experience of the last decade has demonstrated that culturally appropriate forms of communication, such as theatre, story telling, song and dance, can be effective tools. They can enhance community participation in the policy development process at national and international levels. By amplifying the individual and collective voices of diverse rural dwellers, theatre has brought community perspectives on natural resource management – including those of traditionally marginalised community members – to policy makers.

This article describes the ongoing process of developing of theatre as a communications tool in three related initiatives. The critical factor for success has been the development of partnerships between appropriate institutions. This has

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enabled collaboration between CBNRM and theatre professionals as mediators of the communications process.

In 1996, the production *Guardians of Eden* sparked an interest in the use of theatre for articulating key CBNRM concepts. Since then, theatre has become a significant component of the CBNRM toolbox, notably through the efforts of the Report-back Africa Community Outreach Programme (COP). COP developed theatrical performance as a tool to research and package community perspectives to disseminate to policy makers and enhance participation and further community empowerment in local CBNRM initiatives.

¹ ‘Theatre for Development’ has been in use since the late 1970s as a medium for communicating with rural communities in developing countries where existing media systems had failed to serve the needs of development. It is viewed as a more democratic medium, capable of integrating indigenous and popular systems of communication and relying on human resources and interpersonal channels (Mda 1993). The theatre initiatives described here take this approach a step further.

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The COP experience then led to the establishment of local theatre related initiatives. These include the creation of several dedicated NGOs in those countries involved in the COP. One of these is SEKA (Sensitisation and Education through Kunda Arts) in Zambia. SEKA’s experiences are related here. They illustrate how theatre is used as a tool at village level for catalysing community participation.

Each of these three initiatives has refined and improved the ‘theatrical tool box’. And evidence shows that theatre is capable of representing multiple points of view, envisioning solutions, and suggesting methods of resolving conflict, whilst communicating this complex information to a broad range of critical audiences in a sympathetic and appealing manner.

Background

At the IUCN World Conservation Congress (WCC) in Montreal in 1996, *Guardians of Eden* helped to articulate Southern Africa’s sustainable use position. It was commissioned by the Southern African Sustainable Use Group (SASUSG) and brought to life by the vibrant physical and musical theatre style of Theatre for Africa (TFA). Despite being a ‘side-event’ it became one of the most popular events of the Congress. It achieved what technical document-based communications could not do: it provided the human face of community conservation. It captured both the practical struggle of people living in close proximity to protected areas, as well as the intellectual premises behind CBNRM. It achieved a powerful impact contributing to WCC adopting several progressive resolutions on the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

The production created an awareness amongst implementing agencies, donors and policy makers of the value of

theatre in providing a mechanism to communicate community perspectives. Such appreciation – coinciding with increased international awareness about the need for, and difficulties associated with, ensuring that community perspectives were considered in the policy making process – proved to be the catalyst for developing theatre as a tool for participation. The COP built upon this early success and developed theatrical skills, expertise and networks both throughout the region and internationally.

Methodology

The COP was implemented in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region in Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.² These countries had adopted policies and programmes to promote CBNRM strategies and were signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The regional nature of the COP promoted an ecosystem approach. Countries could collaborate across boundaries and exchange information and best practices with relative ease. It also allowed cost-effective implementation, while ensuring that the messages developed were representative of the southern African region rather than just one country. An additional significant advantage was that regional ‘peer pressure’ was generated. This was ensured significant domestic political support for COP activities in particular and CBNRM activities in general.

From the earliest stages, the COP adopted an approach based on partnership and consultation. During the project conceptualisation phase, the design team visited each country.³ They found appropriate local implementation partners and ensured that each took the lead role in designing and implementing activities in their respective countries. Before the project proposal was developed, partner institutions had been identified in each country. All were involved in developing the details of activities in their respective countries. These included a local NGO as lead partner, the relevant government Ministry and a local theatre group. These local implementing partners proved to be a critical ingredient. They contributed to success at every stage of the programme and have continued to support and promote activities since the COP ended in 2001.

Next, two individuals from each country were selected to become members of the core team of ‘actor-facilitators’ for

² The principal donor was the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) through the World Bank, whilst the Ford Foundation provided significant co-financing.

³ The design team consisted of the primary implementing agency, Africa Resources Trust (ART) and the main technical advisory agency, Theatre of Africa (TFA).

the COP. These 14 individuals formed the building blocks upon which the programme was implemented. The team underwent an intensive four-month training period with TFA and ART. This upgraded their acting and directing skills and introduced them to the basic principles and concepts of CBNRM. They also received intensive training in facilitation and community extension skills from an experienced team of CBNRM trainers in Namibia. These 'actor-facilitators' represent the unique contribution that the COP has made to CBNRM. They are professionally trained actors, who are also experienced and knowledgeable in CBNRM issues – and expert facilitators. They have gained local respect and trust, collected information and identified key local CBNRM issues for dramatisation. They effectively facilitate community discussions exploring the issues that arise after plays have been performed and help plan action that should be taken. The capacity and commitment of these individuals, coupled with that of the local partner agencies, has meant that in most cases activities were sustained and expanded after the COP was withdrawn.

After training, team members returned to their respective countries. Employed by the lead national agency, they were integrated into the ongoing community extension activities of the national CBNRM programmes. They undertook a range of activities, which included:

- Creating plays to raise awareness in villages on CBNRM rights and responsibilities.
- Working with community members to create theatrical productions that related stories and perspectives of rural villagers. A number of these toured nationally and regionally.
- Development and training of local community theatre groups.

After two years of in-country fieldwork, the team was brought back together to share their findings, gathered from the communities they had worked in. They were to create a theatrical production that would tour throughout the regional and internationally. The stories, perspectives and knowledge of rural communities from the seven countries were collated and then presented in the form of the production *A Light in the Night of President Khaya Afrikha*.

The creation and rehearsal process took eight weeks. The actor/facilitators, theatre directors and CBNRM technical experts generated a storyline that would appeal to an audience of policy makers. But it would also remain responsible to the community at grassroots level. A variety of media including song, dance, image theatre and storytelling were used. The challenge was to communicate rural stories to an

In the theatre production *A Light in the Night of President Khaya Afrikha*, the sympathetic President Khaya listens to the needs and voices of marginalised rural communities and ultimately devolves power to the people. Findings from across the region were presented in a compelling story, with appealing songs and dances, to reinforce key messages



Photo: Undine Keyser

audience of firstly policy makers – but also project implementers, donors, the urban public, media and other artists. The production then went on tour in each of the seven countries. There were performances in national and provincial capitals as well as the specific project site in each country. They then went on to tour throughout Europe.

Ms Graca Machel was patron of the production. With her support, the performance was able to secure the 'hosting' of the Minister of Environment or equivalent in each country. Getting an invitation for the performance from the Minister went a long way to ensuring that the key target audience of politicians, bureaucrats, donors, implementing agencies and the media were in the seats. So the perspectives and voices of many of the most marginalised in society were presented directly to those whose decisions impact upon their livelihoods. We cannot claim that this had a direct and immediate impact upon policy development. But evaluations of the road show have made it clear that this approach contributed to a greater appreciation of the complexities and implications of environmental management. This contributed to the creation of 'democratic space' in the policy-making process.

Applying the methodology at village level is best illustrated by the activities of SEKA. SEKA was established by the COP Zambia team members in 2001. It has used theatre to communicate and problem solve on issues of land use planning and management, human wildlife conflict and anti-poaching in the Luangwa Valley, Eastern Zambia. SEKA has trained groups from Zambia, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon on how to use theatre to introduce the Elephant Chilli Pepper farming method.⁴ Their

⁴ Using chilli pepper extract on farm fencing. It is an irritant that deters elephants from raiding crops.

A crop raiding elephant, performed by the SEKA drama group, South Luangwa, 2006



Photo: Miranda Guhrs

distinctive use of action research combines with a theatrical use of humour, visual imagery, puppets, and local song and dance forms to create channels for community concerns. They also create radio dramas to ensure that issues reach a wider audience. Box 1 provides a taste of one of their theatrical productions; the following describes the production process.

Nsendemila (Upside Down) was commissioned by the IUCN with UNDP and Parks Canada for the World Parks Congress (WPC), to give a local perspective on governance issues. The play was created using the Action Research methodology that SEKA has incorporated into their approach. A team of actor-facilitators (later to be the cast) spent two weeks living in the villages of the target area Malambo. They first informed the headman and traditional leader that they would be speaking to people in order to create a play. They then spoke to a cross section of the community, joining people in their daily activities so as not to interrupt work. Children on their way home from school, children who were not at school, women gathering firewood, young entrepreneurs at the local market, the elderly, and well

Box 1 Fwalu's journey

Fwalu is a weaver who lives on the edge of a protected area. Complaining that new laws about paying for materials will put him out of business, he comes into conflict with government authorities. In the series of meetings that he attends, he is sent from one group claiming authority to another. His frustration levels mount as he struggles to find the right person to speak to. He has a plan, he says, one that can work for everybody, but who will listen to him? Fwalu is a fictional character, played by Msatero Tembo of SEKA. As he goes on his journey, he encounters government officials who drown him in paperwork, traditional leaders who argue heatedly that they – not the local council – hold the power, and development workers who baffle him with jargon. All of these are played by a group of animated puppets, created and skilfully operated by the SEKA actor-facilitators.

respected figures in the community were interviewed in depth. The team gathered stories, opinions, issues and possible solutions to problems people experienced relating to governance structures. A recurring theme was that people often felt they had solutions to the problems that faced them, but did not know who were the correct authorities to speak to. At the end of each day, the actor facilitators reported back amongst themselves, comparing notes and gaining a detailed picture of attitudes and life situations in the community.

Normally, the action research process would then require them to develop two drama scripts. One script is usually not enough to cover all the issues that arise. During the data analysis process, the actors sort the data into themes. One script might deal with, for example, human wildlife conflict, while forestry issues would be dealt with in a separate script. This prevents a storyline from becoming too 'crowded' with issues.

Each script would:

- present the problem (to be verified by the audience);
- show the effects (negative impact on the individual);
- show the negative impact on the society as a whole;
- quest for a solution;
- brainstorm alternative solutions (action plans with audience); and
- present the ideal situation.

The performance would then be presented at a big village event. Various groups and other villages would attend, along with all stakeholders – government officials, chiefs, headmen, teachers, children, parents, the Area Member of Parliament and any other stakeholder specific to the area. The performance itself is participatory: the audience must verify the findings, as well as take ownership and come up with solutions to their own problems.

The *Nsendemila* performance was a little different. It was

**Simple but effective
imagery from
Thailand enhances
the global relevance
of environmental
messages**



Photo: Liz Rinoy

not targeted at the local community but created for the urban WPC. However, the issues presented were collected using a participatory methodology. The WPC audiences laughed with recognition at the characters presented. But they also reflected on the complexities that confronted the main character, and the need to create systems that would allow his voice to be heard.

Results

Theatre can be a powerful and culturally sensitive tool to convey complex environmental and developmental

messages. It can also represent a variety of different perspectives in cross-cultural settings. Local level feedback indicates that the use of plays conveyed information more equitably than traditional communication mechanisms do. At meetings presided over by traditional or political leaders, the participation of marginalised groups is often minimal. Plays serve to bridge communication gaps. They make dialogue possible between technical agencies and communities, and leaders and their constituents. They stimulate dialogue and conflict resolution between those who hold opposing perspectives.

In rural areas, entertainment events are well attended by a large cross section of the population. Plays performed in the vernacular and using familiar modes such as stories, proverbs, song and dance, easily stimulate open dialogue and participation. Facilitated discussions after performances take place in an informal, unstructured manner and incorporate women, youth and the poor, who are often marginalised by decision makers in a village. The regional network developed both between implementing agencies and rural communities has laid down a foundation for cross-border co-operation which many other initiatives have been able to build upon.

A lasting legacy of capacity now exists. Ongoing initiatives, such as SEKA, contribute to environmental policy-making at a variety of regional and international events, including the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg 2002, and the WPC in Durban in 2003. A significant indicator of how well theatre has been embraced as an effective communications tool within the policy development process is its 'coming of age' at the WCC. At the 1996 WCC it was a 'side-event'. By 2004, the COP theatrical performance was a highlight of the WCC official opening ceremony. And nine other performances were also used in mainstream workshops, social events and special media performances. This is perhaps the strongest testimony of the ability of theatre to overcome cultural, technical and language barriers as a means to inform and raise awareness of complex issues.

Lessons learnt and ways forward

Perhaps the most valuable lessons have been the recognition that issues of resource management and sustainable use are cultural and political as well as economic and ecological. The use of theatre is highly appropriate for unpacking the complexity of these issues. It unearths the range and breadth of different perspectives, particularly of those who have long struggled to have their voices heard by policy makers. At village level across southern Africa, rich debate is taking place and effective solutions are being generated. Yet too often people lack appropriate communication channels and are ignored by decision makers. A repository of skilled actor-facilitators is now available. So is a comprehensive and dedicated network of institutions and individuals who are aware of how good theatre is at addressing this gap.

Entertaining, representative performances are not enough to ensure that community voices are heard. Equally important is having the capacity and strategies in place to ensure that decision makers are exposed to these voices. The

COP was successful in developing the skills for creating theatrical productions. But it has left behind a vacuum. There are currently no systematic means of effectively utilising the expertise and network. This has resulted in an ad-hoc and inconsistent approach. This situation is far from optimal. It fails to capitalise upon existing capacities and demand. The benefits inherent in the regional nature of the programme need to be reaped. The high international and national demand for services needs to be met. So some form of regional coordinating mechanism is necessary, as well as ongoing capacity building for the actor-facilitators.

Would be practitioners should also be aware of the potential pitfalls of this approach. Theatre, for all its power and vibrancy, can also be used irresponsibly. There is a risk that the community's 'voice' and message is distorted or misrepresented. Production directors may choose to sacrifice certain key messages by simplifying complex issues for the sake of clarity. Or they may stereotype certain stakeholders as 'villains' for the sake of dramatic effect. The opposite can also happen. A lack of imaginative portrayal of issues, or representing points of view 'to the letter' can squeeze out the drama and colour from a situation, creating stultifying 'talk' plays with no real grip on the audience.

A further clear lesson from the COP is that 'participation' and 'empowerment' are not just concepts to be applied at the village level. In the implementation process, a broad range of different implementing agencies must ensure effective participation and empowerment. This has proved to be a critical ingredient in ensuring the sustainability at all levels. Only by developing partnerships and ensuring genuine 'ownership' and pride in national level activities can the regional approach be assured of success.

Conclusions

Who creates the theatre production? Who is it speaking to? These factors determine how participatory a particular process might be – and what power dynamics are in play. There are multiple 'actors' in the process described here:

- community members who 'speak up' about issues affecting their lives and livelihoods;
- mediators or facilitators of the messages that are being communicated; and
- consumers, including policy makers.

The extent to which communities take ownership of the messages may vary. Theatre is often used as a top-down communications medium. Information is packaged in such a way that the end user or community is simply a passive recipient. At the other end of the scale, theatre can be fully

participatory. Communities interact with stories to identify problems, develop solutions, or use the medium to vocalise their concerns.

In the COP process, the research aspect of theatre was critical. Actor-facilitators validated the general principles of CBNRM through living and working in communities. The work of SEKA also emphasises community participation and ownership of issues. It applies tools and processes used in participatory performance practices and tools commonly used in Theatre for Development. However, what is unique about the use of theatre in these programmes is that they have gone beyond Theatre for Development. They use theatre professionals as an intermediary to repackage the issues for specific audiences. In all cases, these 'theatre makers' have been well

versed in the technical aspects of CBNRM and environment/development issues in general. This has been a unique advantage. Village-level performances do not need to exist in isolation. They can be repackaged for a variety of different end-users, from policy makers to cash paying tourist audiences. The role of the actor-facilitator provides a great flexibility in how the community's voice can be channelled, and to whom. Theatre is both versatile and powerful in this regard. However the 'tool' is only as effective as the craftsman. Actor-facilitators need to be well skilled and responsible to the community they represent if they are to avoid distorting the messages they carry. Theatre can contextualise such messages with an energy and immediacy that paper or oral based communications fail to achieve.

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