

They are shouting it whenever they can

Beyond invited participation: the power of popular communications

Joanna Howard and Patta Scott-Villiers

*Lo estan gritando
Siempre que pueden
Lo andan pintando
Por las paredes
Que la ignorancia no te niegue
Que no trafique el mercader
Con lo que un pueblo quiere ser*

**They are shouting it
Whenever they can
They are painting it
On the walls
May ignorance not deny you
May the merchant not trade
What a people want to be**

From the song, *Por las Paredes*, by Joan Manuel Serrat

Introduction

Participatory development has long drawn on music, theatre, art and poetry, the tools of popular communications, in work with communities. In many sectors, most notably in health, performance has been used for decades as a way of enlisting people in the projects of outside agencies. Frequently, the use of these and other media has served as a didactic device to impress on people the need to comply with certain kinds of behavioural change – from hygiene to immunisation, contraceptive and condom use. Since the 1970s, popular communications have been used as processes of analysis, to identify problems and seek ways to overcome them through community participation. From the use of picture codes in popular education, to the devising of skits to show everyday dilemmas people are struggling with, these media have proven to be a powerful means of making development more participatory. With the growing accessibility of technology, video, radio and the world wide web are increasingly used in development: both to promote messages and as a way of enabling people to articulate and analyse their situations.

Harnessed to the project of participatory development, indigenous and introduced media have a range of potential uses. Yet outside the frame of planned intervention and beyond the sphere of invited

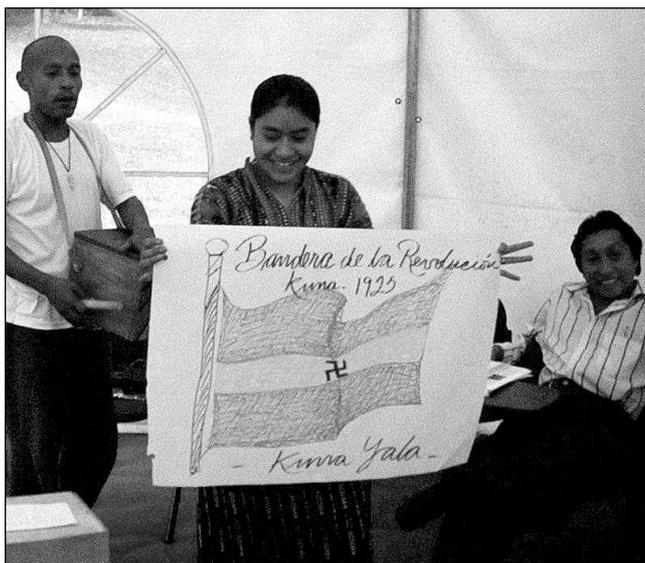
participation, popular communications have long served as a way in which people have voiced discontent and disquiet with the status quo, as well to affirm cultural identity, autonomy and self-expression. Masquerades were used, for example, in colonial Benin to ridicule the identity tags that the French forced their colonial subjects to wear. In Zimbabwe's second Chimurenga war in the 1970s, music played an important part in the *pungwes* that brought people together in the struggle for liberation. The banning, torture and exiling of writers, artists, theatre directors and musicians from countries where repressive governments saw them as a threat, is an indication of the power of popular communications for democratic transformation.

Drawing a distinction between participatory development, which encompasses *invited* forms of participation in processes of planned intervention and participation in development, which captures a much wider process of engagement in making and shaping positive change, is not to undermine the value of invited participation. Over the last decade, spaces for invited participation have widened with the increasing use of participatory methodologies in spheres of development that were once considered beyond the reach of popular engagement, such as policy. The use of indigenous and introduced media in these processes can lever open even more space, providing a way to enable people who are often silenced to gain a voice. Theatre, dance, song and poetry work in an entirely different way to the more cognitive processes that are often used in participatory development: tapping into people's lived realities, their emotions, their capacity for creativity and self-expression. Yet, we suggest here, this is only a small part of a much bigger role that popular communications plays. For, as with other forms of participatory development work, their use for development by well-intentioned facilitators represents something quite different to a more organic process in which people draw upon their own means and media in their own struggles.

In this Special Issue, we bring together a range of stories from people who work in the borderland between participatory development and participation in development. For some, popular communications provides a tool that can be used to stimulate reflection and action

Figure 1 The popular communications workshop at IDS

Photo: Peter Mozajski



within processes of planned intervention, such as development projects. As such, it becomes a means to give voice. For others, it is less about *giving* voice to people than about people using their voices to 'shout it wherever they can'. This collection of stories marks a pause for reflection in a longer process of drawing together stories and insights from a diverse group of people who came together in May 2000 at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Brighton, UK, for a workshop on using popular communications for processes of democratic transformation. Around 60 people in total came from all over the world, bringing with them different and challenging experiences and opinions on using theatre, radio, video, music, plastic arts and other creative media in processes of social and political change. As Manuel Rozental, one of the workshop facilitators, put it:

Popular communication is a statement of people's real existence and of their refusal to be manipulated and silenced. In this sense, it is a means for democratic transformation. Through popular communication, creative expressions of diverse cultural realities find their way to the walls, the performances, the music, the languages, the local community radios and television channels. People are sharing and exchanging stories and feelings about their identities and about the meaning of their lives, as they have been, as they are, and as they could and should be...

The 'well of inspiration'

At the workshop, anecdotes were swapped, email addresses exchanged, but so many of the inspirational stories that each participant had within them were left untold. And so the idea emerged of a *Well of Inspiration*; a collection of stories from experience from the participants, which could be shared amongst them and with other popular communications practitioners and activists.

The *Well of Inspiration* is a testament to individuals who have dedicated their commitment and creativity to democratic transformation. It brings together different realities; expressions of anger and hope. In this edition of PLA Notes, we bring you a taste of these stories, a first draught from the 'Well'. The stories take different forms: radio scripts, testimonies, anecdotes. They speak on different levels and across different dimensions of communication. For this reason, because of their diversity, the stories can be useful to us on many different levels; from practical examples of how to do something (like a radio phone-in) to providing pointers for thinking more deeply about why we do what we do, and what we really want to achieve, beyond getting through a day's work or meeting a project deadline. Some stories can be read as cautionary tales, '*don't embark on something like this without first taking into account...*'; others encourage perseverance, '*if something like this happens to you, don't give up...*'. Because they are stories of lived experiences, they are woven through and through with personal insight, reflection, revelation and emotion. They are stories by and for activists, spoken from the heart with courage, brimming with feeling and with the awareness that comes from reflecting on experience. As such, they offer a window through which to gain a glimpse into that experience – rather than a kit bag of popular communications techniques to borrow from.

Figure 2 Popular communications comes from people's own culture

Photo: Asif Muntir



Sharing stories

The stories in this issue are about using different media for democratic transformation. But they are also about each person's own learning process. Each story is a unique piece of popular communication that tells us about a personal process and inspires us as we identify with their reactions to the obstacles and triumphs along the way. Things don't always work out and to persuade yourself that they do, or that they should, is to miss the point. We

learn from making mistakes: above all, we learn from taking risks, stumbling, getting up again and moving on. Working in the field of popular communications is a political act. It is about amplifying the voice of people whose voices have been ignored, silenced or repressed. It involves taking risks and a level of personal commitment and responsibility that adds up to practicing active solidarity with marginalised groups of people. And this involves other kinds of risks.

Mwajuma Saiddy Masaiganah tells her own story about confronting powerful local elites and the personal risks she took. We asked Mwajuma and other contributors to the 'Well of Inspiration' if they thought there was any risk involved in sharing their stories. She answered:

I am happy to let it [my story] be a learning to others, for I know that with our bureaucratic systems in place, there are many others who meet or encounter same kind of problems but are scared to death to raise their voices to let the world know what is happening, for fear of repercussions that may follow. For me, I have sacrificed enough so for people's voices and struggle to be heard, I whole-heartedly give my consent for the story to be used.

Luis Jamie Tello told us:

I don't think we should think about the risks – it's only by taking risks that we are able to confront the status quo and bring about change. The Well can at least stimulate some reflection and there's always a chance that the results are greater and more fruitful for those who jump in and get wet... because that's what it's about, playing, gambling on the chance that you can do something, that the world can be different from the way the powerful tell us it is. So take up the risk and with it the challenge!

For Luis, this collection is about deeper reflection than the idea of 'stories about what you do' might suggest:

*The Well is about stories that let us reflect on what people and organisations are doing. Sometimes, stories can be more like one-dimensional anecdotes that don't let you see the other dimensions like, how knowledge is constructed, or people's criteria for taking action... The Well should include **stories** that also **reflect**; and later on, also **profiles** or micro-biographies of people who are important in the area of Communications, and also **news** because it's also important to inform people about what we're doing, our achievements, the small struggles that unfold. What we can end up with is something enjoyable, highly interesting and up-to-date (I don't know if I'm being ambitious, but I'm trying to think about what I would like this Well of Inspiration to be!)*

Ideas for the 'Well of Inspiration' are developing and proliferating, as the process is an organic one in which participants from the workshop are invited to be part of a collective editorial board and shape the project as it progresses. Alfonso of *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* in Colombia and Vicky Appleton of ATD Fourth World in the UK suggest that the people who came to the workshop, as well as writing their own stories for the Well, could bring to it stories directly from people that they work with.

Issues and themes

There are a number of key issues that emerge in the stories. Aloys Niyoyita is concerned with information for political change. He writes of his experience with radio as a medium for increasing people's knowledge and therefore understanding of situations and of people with different interests and priorities. Through this greater understanding, negotiation and peaceful resolution becomes possible. Mwajuma Masaiganah's is about opposing vested interests, and the personal risk involved. Naomi Alexander's is about alienation and the power of theatre to change this, while it also speaks clearly of the frustrations of trying to change policy. Some stories have numerous other stories embedded in them, like Ajaya Mohapatra's story from India. His own personal journey takes us via all sorts of colourful anecdotes and diversions and gives a flavour of the rich and chaotic experience of working with multiple media forms in Rajasthani villages.

Identity, autonomy and recognition

Luis Jaime Ariza Tello's story, from Colombia, is about identity, autonomy and the right to self-expression. His experience of literacy training with indigenous and Afro-Caribbean peoples in Colombia leads him to understand the new technology available for popular communications as a means through which existing personal and community strengths can find new expression. By researching and creating their own literacy training materials, the people in Jaime's story were able to reaffirm their cultural identity, and restore the legitimacy of their communities' stories, folklore and traditions. Anna Blackman's story about teaching photography to street children in Vietnam is also about affirmation and identity, and about changing perceptions through communications. When she and the children held an exhibition of their photos in Saigon, '*people couldn't believe that the photos were taken by street children... it really proved what they were capable of... what the exhibition has managed to do is to change local Vietnamese people's view of street children*'.

Bárbara Santos's story about her work with street children, as a teacher of Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil also describes how children challenged Brazilian perceptions of street-dweller 'glue-sniffer kids', but takes her story to a

deeper level. She talks of the difficulties she encountered and of the process of increasing her own awareness of what it means to be marginalised through spending time with the children. And for the young people involved in the theatre production, this medium became a way to challenge society's perception of them, and to demand recognition of their worth.

Personal commitment

The personal commitment and involvement of the individual is another strong theme that permeates these stories. Mwajuma stepped outside her role of NGO worker and accompanied the villagers she'd been working with to go and confront the Prime Minister. She is aware that a facilitator isn't neutral, and that her commitment must be personal and political, not just that of professional duty. In contrast, the radio announcer in the story from Burundi by Aloys maintains an objective distance from the people with whom he interacts in order to allow their voices to come through.

These processes bring self-awareness, but also doubts and pain. Bárbara reflects on a situation when she took the street children she was working with into a bakery in Rio de Janeiro. As she tries to defend their right to be there to the owners, she realises that her own intervention as someone 'socially acceptable' further compounds the marginalisation of the children. Naomi's story from England reflects her personal commitment... and also her frustration. She recognises that the community theatre had an impact on people and achieved something positive, but also raised expectations that couldn't be met because of the constraints posed by the institutions involved. This tension between the storyteller's personal commitment and belief in popular communication and the wider societal constraints in some stories leads to positive change, and in others is marked by frustration, but with an increased understanding and awareness.

Solidarity

These stories are a means of exchanging learning and providing solidarity across continents. Naomi, who works for the Scarman Trust¹ is involved with legislative theatre in Brighton & Hove. Their work, like Bárbara's was inspired by that of Augusto Boal in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He pioneered the use of theatre to change legislation – hence the name. Naomi says:

It's useful being able to refer to what's going on in other countries, because it really adds legitimacy to what we're trying to do. You can say to people 'Look! They've done it in Rio, look, they've done it in Bangladesh, look, they've done it in Nigeria', and then it reawakens people to the fact that they don't just live in

this little tiny speck of a city in this huge planet, called Brighton and Hove, its absolutely tiny: they're part of a planet and there's other people doing similar things, with great effect, all over the world, and it's about saying to these politicians, 'Hey, wake up, what we're trying to do is going on everywhere', and its not that wacky, actually its quite effective.

Political transformation

All these stories are political, either on a personal level or in terms of policy and social change. Maurice Leonhardt's story is about getting the Prime Minister of Cambodia to talk to the people of the largest squatter community in Phnom Penh. Mwajuma and Maurice describe their experiences of lobbying government at the national level, while Ajaya and Naomi reflect on grassroots' interactions with local elites and municipal authorities. All our storytellers use popular communications to transform attitudes and perceptions; the attitudes of the public towards street kids in Rio or Saigon, the attitudes of men towards women in politics in Rajasthan, or the attitudes of local politicians, ministers and prime ministers towards marginalised groups of people in Brighton, Burundi, Tanzania and Cambodia. As Mwajuma puts it; '*without changing attitudes and behaviour in our institutions and without putting our own interests last, participation will be a dream*'.

Democratic transformation through popular communications is also about the years of commitment prior to the success stories. The technicalities involved, and the perseverance required, are often unrecognised and we can end up thinking that influencing policy is just a matter of getting the right information and knocking on the right doors. Maurice explains:

It must be said that the video was merely the tool of presentation and that 5-6 years of hard work in forming the federation and its partnership processes with local government were vital ingredients in convincing the PM to engage with us.

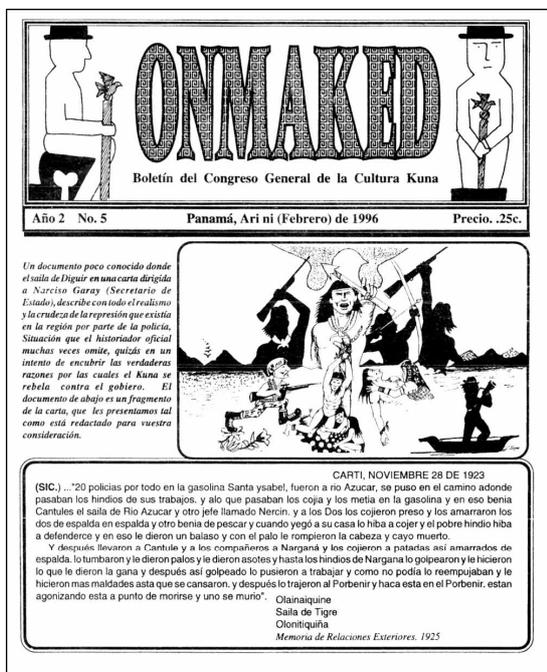
All too often it is precisely this complex, long-term, 'behind-the-scenes' process that is neglected in accounts of other methodologies, perhaps most especially PRA. In telling these stories of processes, then, a lot more of the realities of participatory work can be revealed. This in turn can help move us beyond the 'technical fix' approach to participation in which particular techniques gain a life of their own, beyond those who use them and the situations they use them in, and are attributed with the 'power' to bring about change. As the stories in this issue show, it is the personal engagement and long commitment of those who use these methodologies that is so crucial in making change happen.

¹ The Scarman Trust is a UK based organisation which seeks to promote active citizenship, social inclusion and social health throughout Britain.

Past and future: the 'Montonera'

The IDS workshop has its own Popular Communications story to tell. Two participants, Williams Perez and Anelio Merry, came from the Congress of Kunayala in the south of Panama. At the workshop, they described the Kuna people's traditional form of bringing people together through the *Correo del Chasqui*, which was a form of roving community theatre that would travel to all the villages of the Kunayala people, and convene the meeting through the sound of drums, music, theatre, dance and other artistic media. The meeting that would then take place was called the *Montonera* and brought all the community together to discuss situations and decide on actions to be taken that were vital to the community. The *Montonera* is an open, inclusive space for the full participation in decision-making of the community.

Figure 3 The Kuna people of Panama use popular communications to establish their history and identity



The idea of the *Montonera* has inspired a number of people who were at the workshop to try to organise a *Montonera* next year (2001) on a continental scale. Its objective would be to promote and support processes of the construction of identity in black, indigenous and peasant peoples in the Americas, through communicative social action (*acción social comunicativa*).

The Latin American organisations would like to encourage or hear about similar initiatives in other regions of the world. In Latin America, Marco Esqueche of 'Teatro del Ritmo', a community arts organisation from Peru, is a leading force in this initiative. His theatre group hopes to

attend the IV Latin American and Caribbean Festival of Community Theatre in Cuba, in October 2000, where they will perform their play 'Entre Tablas y Cajones' and pass on the invitation to all the participants there, to the *Montonera 2001* in Panama.

Making connections

The 'Well of Inspiration' is about recognising your own strengths through reading someone else's story. Each story will speak to us in different ways, according to our personalities, our levels of experience and awareness, and the particular needs we have that find resonance in the story. The Well is in itself, a process of practising popular communications and building solidarity. More than a collection of stories, it is about the relationship between us, as we interact with each other through the stories, and as we reflect more deeply about our own experiences. The stories speak to our humanity, challenge our conformity and inspire our respect.

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