

## **Help for the Girl-Child: Making a Difference through Participatory Theatre for Development**

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### **Abstract**

Theatre has been used as a tool for development in education, as communication tool, therapy, behavioural change medium as well as a participatory and exploratory tool in the process of human and societal development. The integration of participatory communication in theatre for development (TfD) targets communities in a bid to foster social change. Participatory communication, according to Freire, has become an established norm in the symbiotic marriage of theatre and development. This article critically analyses the issue of development and how theatre can be used as a powerful tool for effective communication in the process of development and social change. It further examined the role of participatory communication as a viable tool to investigate the safety of the girl-child. To achieve this, it uses direct observation and historical-analytic methods to evaluate the well-being and unequal treatment of the girl-child in Nigeria, using two communities, Obi-Olihe in Ika South-West Local Government Area of Delta State and Oguntula in Akinyele Local Government Area of Oyo State as fulcrum of analysis and discussion. These communities serve as case studies to examine and establish the import of participatory communication in the practice of theatre for development; where salient issues of girl-child mistreatment were raised and attended to for the benefit of improved lifestyle of the girl-child.

**Keywords:** TfD, Participatory communication, Girl-child, Development, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Theatre has always been a communication tool that imitates life before an audience from time immemorial. In contemporary society, it has been used to tackle numerous issues, hence, its changing nomenclatures; from classical theatre to street theatre, intervention theatre, forum theatre, popular theatre and theatre for development, among others. Theatre has never operated in a vacuum because it is the mirror that the society is reflected in; it is seen as the watchdog of society. Theatre's relevance is measured by how accurately it mirrors the realities of the society to initiate change and direct them towards a better and more humane society. Theatre as an art form has been seen and described over the years as a potent social force that plays relevant roles in the social life and development of the individual and the society at large (Kerry, 2000). Theatre as a representation of life; entertains and also enlightens the masses as it often serves as a vehicle for purveying valuable messages to the populace. It is an integral part of the socio-cultural and socio-economic lives of the people, which wields the power of community engagement that comments and points out the way forward.

The use of theatre for educational purposes is not new to Nigerians but it appeared strange to the communities the researchers visited for the project. This may be as a result of a disconnection between their traditional storytelling medium and their socio-cultural living. In any case, theatre has always been used as a force for progressive change and transformation of any society. Theatre for development (TfD) has been fruitfully deployed to identify and solve community problems in many Nigerian communities (Omoera, 2010). This process is done through conscientization, leading the people to self-realization and self-definition. Conscientization is a process whereby people are made to see their problems as a consequence of a particular social order, which is not favourable to them. This process seeks to instill in the minds of the populace a great need for change, a need to redefine who and what they are. One of the issues that impair development in the Nigerian society is the neglect of the girl-child's safety and well-being. Despite the fact that laws and empowerment programmes have been put in place to protect girl children; a majority of them are still faced with the above-mentioned challenges. To do this, the paper reflects on the girl-child problem and highlights the preventive

measures that could be deployed, using the participatory communication (PC) approach in two selected communities in Delta and Oyo States of Nigeria.

### **Theatre for Development**

The origin of the concept of development can be traced to post World War 11 till date. The Western nations' idea of development is traceable to their economic achievement, cultural progress and technological advancement, while the developing nations are expected to adopt this concept without considering their traditional way of survival, an anathema which must be neglected if not done away with. Development goals, at a point in history, were purely associated with economic growth as achieved by developed nations who in turn started assisting the underdeveloped ones. However, in the 1960s, there was a shift from economic development to infrastructural development, which is further believed would provide momentum for economic growth. Soon after, development shifted to basic human needs because the belief that economic growth alone could guarantee development satisfactorily was in doubt. In the 1990s, it became "people-oriented", which means that "people are the wealth of a nation" (Keely, 2002, p. 75). All these are in a bid to forestall the perceived obstacles to the modernist transformation (Melkote & Steeves, 2001, p.19) that all nations strive to achieve. From the foregoing, development means a process of good structural societal change that is not purely an economic phenomenon; rather it is a multi-dimensional process involving the re-organization and reorientation of the entire economic and social system of a people or a nation. It is expected to generate self-reliance, empowerment and a general improvement in community and social relationships that will lead to progress for a decent standard of living (Thomas, 2004; Coetzee, 2001; Chambers, 2004). As a multi-dimensional phenomenon, developmental objectives changed in various societies based on concrete realities of the populace especially in Africa who are chiefly peasants. Hence the notion of Nwamuo's rural development, where he posits that: rural development is a process designed to create condition of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and fullest possible reliance upon the community's initiative. It is stimulation of communities to change their own affairs constructively (1990, p. 75).

Development in Africa is not just about economic, political, social and environmental but about human development, which helps build a formidable society. Thus, the success of every society is reflected in the development of the socioeconomic wellbeing of the people, which implies that as a nation develops, the people move with it especially the youth who must be properly groomed to take over. However, within development, there is an increasing recognition of the need to hear the opinion of the people who are mostly affected by the non-development as a result of lack of intellectual participation, the non-raising of consciousness and the discouragements of dialogue. Development is accomplished by, with, and for the community with the help of theatre through dialogue once the awareness is created and the community in question is involved, their fate lies in their hands.

The use of theatre as a tool for development has become prevalent in Africa and in Nigeria particularly. As the aim is to provide community awareness, motivate the people to diagnose their own specific problems and stimulate them to find solutions to the problems on a self-help basis. The strategy, therefore, is to shift emphasis from scripted plays to the medium of loosely structured plays and sketches in which local community problems are examined and potential local solutions explored. Theatre as a tool for development (Theatre for Development) uses a technique of performance and drama-building through local entertainment, which heightens the consciousness of the people and motivates them to help themselves. This form of theatre rests on an interaction between people who are in the flight path of development projects and those agencies who initiate them. It has created a niche for itself as a problem solving, performance-oriented, people-oriented and revolutionary form of art because it is used in educating and conscientizing the people; while arousing their understanding of societal structures. It also tries to articulate and unify the community on socio-economic, political, environmental and religious problems with the hope to change it for their own advancement (Omoera, Onyemuchara & Okwuowulu, 2020).

Theatre for Development also known as “participatory theatre for development” is one of the viable means of engaging communities in setting development actions. It is a community engagement tool in which many rural development workers both local and international have described as *a democratic way of building*

*societies* (World Bank, 1994). In other words, Theatre for Development is a democratic platform where all community members can meet, interact and share ideas irrespective of one's educational background or status in society who are on the same path of development projects for the benefit of the society. This theatre is that of consciousness and emotions where the populace is awakened and compelled to reason deeply about issues and how to resolve them. Participation, on the other hand, is a method to increase the effectiveness of an externally introduced program through the involvement of local people (Cleave, 1999). In other words, it empowers communities, groups or individuals, equipping them with capabilities and providing opportunities to take control of their own direction, objectives and options for change to improve their livelihood (Huesca, 2003). Participation is based on a level playing ground where different people benefit from each other and it involves a more equitable sharing of both political/economic power and structural changes in order to redistribute power by decreasing the advantage of certain groups (Servaes, 1996).

This participatory approach gained impetus in the 1980s and 1990s and has over time evolved into a rich field standing in absolute opposition to models and theories of the first development decade. The evolution brought about the elimination of the dichotomy between subject and object, master and slave, teacher and students. It rather introduced dialogue between teacher and student with an action-reflection, orientation towards inquiry, which resulted in moral awareness/conscientization. Therefore, participatory approach to development involved a participatory approach to communication (Barker, 2001, p. 4). In other words, participation in development programs and projects cannot occur without communication (Gumucio-Dagron, 2006, p. 460). Participatory development communication is a dialogic approach to communication that encourages critical reflection on one's own experiences and those of others before identifying expectations for how best to define and confront development challenges. According to Bessette (2004, p.8), participatory development communication is: a planned activity based on the one hand participatory processes, on the other hand on media and interpersonal communication which facilitates a dialogue among different stakeholders around a common development problem or goal with the objectives of developing and implementing a set of activities to contribute to its

solution or its realization, and which supports and accompanies these initiatives.

This approach grew out of the realization that individuals at the grassroots have to be involved in defining and planning development program and that local knowledge as well as cultural and national identity is integrated (Melkote & Kandatte, 2001; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Servaes et al, 1996). Participatory development communication is aimed at giving people a voice, encouraging them and allowing them to meaningfully contribute in the social change process through communication strategies between themselves and the stakeholders in a two-way horizontal process (Boeren, 1992, p. 268; Dodge & Bennett, 2011, p. 34; Bessette, 2004, p. 118-119). By so doing, all participants “feel comfortable enough to express their views, concerns and provide their inputs” (Tufte & MefaloPulos, 2009, p. 25).

### **Participation Communication Approach**

The approach used in this research is based on the ideas Paulo Freire on liberation and revolution. His objectives are to engage the populace in constructive dialogues/debates where communication is seen as equal information exchange or dialogue between the stakeholders and community. This approach is through both the horizontal and vertical communication structures that make the people more aware and conscious of their own realities. They become participants in the reenactment of their stories so that they can promote collective action in their communities to change their local realities. In Freire’s word, “being dialogic is not invading, not manipulating, and not imposing orders; it is pledging oneself to the constant transformation of reality” (1973, p.46). Hence, he suggested that “it is urgent that the disowned unite and that we all fight in favor of liberation, transforming this offensive world into a more people-oriented one, from both a political and ethnical standpoint” (1997, p. 46). Freire’s ideas have assumed the status of external and universal truths which can be applied to challenges faced by any society, especially developing ones, warranting its recommendation for use in two select communities in Delta and Oyo States.

These ideas are structured into the following aspects; communication, liberation through education, problem-solving through a cycle of reflection and action, conscientization/

sensitization and empowerment. Freire says that for participatory development communication to be actualized, it is important we rethink the role of communication, as not information dissemination but as a two-way process and that everyone individually and collectively be given the privilege to speak. The delegated right to speak should not be for some people because “no one can say a true word alone, nor can he say it for another in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words” (1983, p. 76). It therefore means that everybody be given an opportunity to be a part of the dialogue as active participants from the community with the agents of change in the social change programmes. Education transmits knowledge, skills and values necessary for the survival of future generations, so the function of education becomes both social and individual, an instrument of increasing equality, justice and opportunity in the society. According to Freire in *The Pedagogy of Freedom*, “whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, whoever learns teaches in the act of learning” (1998), means that education turns on the mind. Sharing experiences is educational, because learning occurs when concerns are shared. It is through self-experience in the world that people become who they are. Thus, the liberation of both the individual and the community comes through a self-sustained effort through growth in individual awareness and communal consciousness evolving through a process of learning (Thomas, 1994).

Individuals have the capacity for reflection, for conceptualizing, for critical thinking, for making decisions, for planning and social change. So, it is not about knowledge being deposited from one to another or awareness of their situation but is formulated through dialogue between both parties (teacher/student, community/stakeholders). People should not just come together to dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social realities, they should learn by thinking about events, activities and experiences. This is because this confluence of experiences (action) and thought (reflection) combines to create new knowledge. This is what Freire called “praxis” – a set of practices informed by reflections (1973). These dialectical and emancipatory processes of action and critical consciousness (reflection) in which learners become actors, not observers, and authors of their own discussions constitute the process of conscientization. A conscious awareness is created when both the stakeholders and the community members uncover their

experiences, their own social circumstances, and their awareness of the need of development to solve their problems. It therefore means that conscientization occurs through educational (formal or informal) experiences, a direct influence of an educationist on an illiterate. Freire says that conscientization implies a commitment to “critical insertion into history” in order to create history. He likens conscientization to a painful birth (German Adult Education, 1979, p.6). The realization of the social circumstances by the educated sensitizes him to fight back so as to transform his situation.

In getting to know reality, there is an engagement in conscious action and a commitment to change the society to become more progressive. All these actions lead to the empowerment of the individual, group or community, a process whereby one has the ability to have control over making decisions about issues and situation that affect ones’ lives (Chitnis, 2005). Empowerment is a communicative process centered on human interactions and collective actions (Papa, Singhal, Law, Pant, Sood, Rogers,& Shefner-Rogers, 2000, p. 91), where people develop a “sense of identity and self-worth”. This gives them the ability to regulate events of other lives (Pardasani, 2005, p.122) and working together to improve the quality of their society or to change the social order (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 582). For Freire (1970/1998), empowerment is to free people from oppression, so that they have the ability to question, challenge, and probe everything to find deep rooted cause and imaginative solution. Empowerment, to him, brings about collectivism in order to be totally free, emancipated from oppression, inequality and subjugation.

### **Obi-Olihe and Oguntula Communities in Perspective**

Using Obi-Olihe and Oguntula communities in Delta and Oyo States respectively as points of reference in the challenges the girl-child faces in the society, this paper highlights these issues as they affect them and proffer ways of preventing these recurring decimals in the society. Obi-Olihe is a quarter in Ime-Obi (Agbor), Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State. These people are surrounded by Alisor, Alihehan and Ozanogogo people who speak the Edo language known as Oza or Ozara (Onyechie, 2002). This Ika people are part of the four groups that make up the western Igbo group called Anioma (Aniocha, Ika, Oshimili and Ukwuani). The Obi-Olihe



community is a closeknitted familial community with few strangers living among them; hence they have this strong belief in oneness. Apart from their traditional religious worship system, they practice Christianity. These people have traditionally relied on farming for their food and commerce. Food crops like yam, cassava, banana, plantain, and vegetable are predominant in the community. However, in recent times, due to urbanization, modernization and nonchalant attitude of youths towards agriculture, its full potential is not harnessed.

The people of Oguntala, on the other hand, are settlers in Ibadan land near Ojoo in Akinyele Local Government Area, Moniya, Oyo state. Their population is a little below average, comprising also residents who are non-indigenes because of their friendly, accommodative and co-operative nature, strangers are able to live among them. Surrounded by other communities like Okpa, Otun, Shogun, Igbo Oloyin, Eja, Ologidi and Abogun, with a village head called the Baale and assisted by a chief referred to as Otun. Because of colonialization, their traditional religious practice is almost neglected for the colonizers' religions – Christianity and Islam. The major occupation of the Oguntula people is farming, and products like cassava, cocoa and kola nuts eventually generate little cash after sales. Some are gainfully employed as civil servants in government parastatals, others are self-employed and majority of men are bus drivers. From the research carried out, both communities share the same characteristics in terms of their occupation and as such it negatively affects the outlook towards their children, especially the girl-child.

### **Process of Theatre For Development (TfD) in Communities**

This research occurred over a period of two-years with different students and colleagues as participants who looked at Freire's concept of development that uses theatre as a stimulus. So, the Theatre for Development approach adopted for this study is built on the Participatory Communication model as the tool used to engage the communities in the human development project. Since the dimension for Theatre for Development is participatory and people-oriented, the researchers involved the community members in all aspects of the project for their development. They were allowed to

identify their problems, discover the various dimensions of the problems, identify possible solutions and take decisions which must be implemented for advancement. The Theatre for Development approach does not align with the monologic channel that allows for only the top-down approach of communication but relies more on the participatory bottom-up approach that is dialogic. At this instance, the communities were fully integrated and participated in all the stages from inception to implementation through a theatrical process, which entail seeking the problems, analysis of research findings, ordering of problems, planning of a theatrical piece and its performance as well as collating the post-performance experiences and follow-up. The processes involved in the adopted method by the researchers are highlighted below:

1. Participant observation: This stage involves active observation of participants and communities by the researchers during the field. It also gave room for note staking and a conscious attempt to understand the cultures of the people under study.
2. Community immersion: This is the researchers' conscious movement around the communities, taking photographs and video coverage of all positive and negative aspects of the environment. These images are discussed, while identifying issues facing the community and highlighting strengths that the community possesses to resolve these issues.
3. Semi-structured interviews: These are social encounters with members of the communities where speakers collaborate by giving accounts of the lives, actions, experiences, feelings and thought patterns. However, most of this information might not be a literal reflection of the peoples' reality. At times, it may not also be the truth.

### **A Fusion of Development and Participatory Communication**

The world in its wisdom has ensured the elimination of gender disparity, ensuring that all boys and girls get educated, especially at the primary level and reducing maternal mortality ratio. These targets negatively affect the girl-child, because one leads to the other and the impact becomes disastrous. To achieve the goals using the two communities of Obi-Olihe and Oguntula, went through five

stages. These stages are enquiry, prevention, awareness, action and result (EPAAR).

**Stage one: Enquiry**

Researchers identified the issues that affect the girl- child ranging from preference the boy over the girl, parental neglect, over-independence from childhood, and greed/covetousness. It becomes pertinent to prescribe ways of preventing the continuous occurrence of the girl-child issue. Since its consequences on their well-being and safety are terribly affected and produces negative impacts like trafficking, prostitution, child labor, sexual abuse, and pedophilic marriage, among others, both on themselves, their immediate environment and the society at large.

**Stage two: Prevention**

Having identified the problems, the researchers resorted to looking at ways in which these issues can be prevented. Hence, the first step is that “the people must be convinced that they can change things for the better, their refusal to be permanent victims of any situation and emergence of self-confidence” (Bessette, 2004, p. 17) which will be appropriate to handle the state of their helplessness. Knowing that children are gifts from God, it is important therefore that they be treated, handled and protected from any negative circumstances. But in these communities, through observations, encounters and conversations, one sees that the children are gifts left to wander and fend for themselves with little or no supervision or protection. Hence, they become victims or perpetrators of physical, verbal and emotional attacks which elicit little attention from adults. Children’s needs for attention, affection and stimulation are not considered, rather are generally ignored. There is pervasive neglect, yet they are allowed/cajoled to contribute to the upkeep of the family from an early age even when they are not doing anything meaning. Children are seen as investment to parents in these communities, a retirement plan so they must seek for a faster way of becoming economically stable. As a result, education to any parent is not encouraged but seen as a waste of time because the girl child would belong to another family once married (Tetteh, 2011, p.228).

### **Stage three: Awareness**

In order to make changes in the lives of these girls in these communities, they have to realize that there are problems which need urgent attention to be solved. Once identified, the stakeholder creates a communication avenue among the girls who are forced by circumstances to become what they never intended to be, a process of creating and stimulating understanding and social relationship among the group/community as the bases for development not just information transmission (Agunga,1997). It therefore means that dialogue “requires the capacity to listen, to be silent, to suspend judgment to critically investigate one’s own assumptions, to ask reflexive question and to be open to change” (Hamelink, 2002, p. 8). They are not passive participant, but active participant who are ready to participate in joint analysis leading well informed decisions collectively taking control over their decisions and take action to achieve their goals independent of external institutions to the change they desire (Pretting, 1995).

### **Stage four: Action**

The researchers attempt to eliminate the dichotomy between them (as teachers) and the group (as student) combined with an action-reflection orientation toward inquiry resulted in a heightened moral awareness or conscientization. Through dialogue, (the group is consciously brought into awareness of their situation) the consciousness of the group jostled into awareness, hence they are unconsciously propelled into “thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation rather than as a static entity –thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). In this process of action-reflection, girls are made to understand that they can free themselves from societal/parental domination, stagnation and subjugation and can fight, not physically, but from being subjected to carry out obvious acts like sexual abuse, prostitution, pedophilic marriage, gender inequality, educational disparity, fending for the family and child labor (Lawrence, 2010; Unicef, 2013; Lansford, 2012; Oberg, 2012) among others, to liberate themselves through the struggle for freedom. They are encouraged and allowed to meaningfully contribute to the issues affecting them, making their voices count

(Besette, 2007) and making them feel comfortable enough to express their views, concerns and provide their input (Tuft & MefaloPulos, 2009). In the same light, they are made to construct the primary “meanings and values of development” (Rahim, 1994, p.18).

### **Stage five: Result**

The communication process with the girls in both communities ignited in them the attitude and courage to stop being used” as a means of enriching families, hence they decided to start from the scratch, attending primary schools and be focused. Their mothers were drawn into this game plan since they agreed on sponsoring their children; some even volunteered to monitor girls especially during school hours. The head teachers in the various schools, within and around the communities were asked to be a part of this plan and their support were appreciated. It becomes clear that “being dialogic is not invading, not manipulating, and not imposing orders. But being dialogic is pledging oneself to the constant transformation of reality”(Freire, 1973b, p.46).

### **Suggestions**

This study brought about a lot of discoveries which are summed up as suggestions for good development in communities through a two-way communication channel. There is the need to constantly adopt TfD for more development-oriented projects targeted at the girl-child especially the less privileged ones. These should be with full community participation in order to avoid complete alienation of the people involved. So, the researcher/facilitator must help facilitate and create the conditions for the participants to make decisions on what to do, how to do it and what best suits them. Parents and guardians need a re-orientation and sensitization using participatory communication approach on the benefits of training the girl-child. Theatre for Development as the name implies, must contribute to change that has instrumental value to the people. Researchers/facilitators must be well equipped with knowledge of people, especially their peculiarities in order to properly strategize on the best approach in TfD to accomplish desired goal (s). Participants must also be encouraged to be actively involved in development as they have vast knowledge, experience, and resources

that must be respected. The researcher/facilitator should create a conversational and informal environment that encourages free flow of information, rather than giving lectures to participants who should be allowed to talk.

### **Conclusion**

Participatory communication as a people-centered approach encourages and places premium on the involvement of people, in making decisions about implementation processes of programs and projects that affect them for development. This approach involves the use of the theatre, a form of performance which responds to a collective crisis in “the service of social change” (Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 12). It is about people celebrating their struggle to change their social environment and in the process changing people themselves (Ngugi in Byam, 1999, p. xv). Participatory communication approach also creates room for listening to peoples’ voices so as to engage them in the process of participatory development. This enables trust, cultural identity, commitment, ownership as well as enhances awareness and confidence, to ultimately empower their actions. This approach views participation as an unconditional right of the people in all the stages of social change, thereby making collective action and a two-way dialogue process key in the participation of the community members.

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