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TFD and Community Participation in the Heart of Change: The Otuasega Experience in Focus

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Abstract

Ensuring that development is brought closer to the people in a way that gains their trust and active participation has been a major challenge for developing countries including Nigeria. A number of factors could be responsible for this. However, a key factor here is the fact that community members in most cases are merely beneficiaries and not active participants in the realization of development projects or goals. This has resulted to a feeling of disempowerment and an obvious lack of effective initiatives to figure out issues needed to be addressed in the community. In the light of this, the paper aims at exploring the need to rethink and engage people in communities with communication approaches that make them subjects and not objects in the transformation of their communities. It further seeks to examine approaches that are geared toward facilitating and advancing active community participation and collaboration. To provide a focus examination of participatory approaches, this paper concretely examines Theatre for Development (TFD) as an effective tool that promotes community participation for change. The TFD intervention undertaken in Otuasega community in Bayelsa, Nigeria will be discussed to reveal the viability embedded in the process to produce desirable changes in communities. From the analysis given, the paper recommends that participatory approaches such as TFD should be promoted and the gains and positive outcomes derived in communities should always be consolidated and sustained through an effective approach by both practitioners and other stakeholders involved.

Keywords: *Change, Community, Development, Participation and Theatre for Development (TFD).*

Introduction

The development of every community requires a dynamic process and as such must be addressed through an all-inclusive approach. For significant and sustainable development to evolve in communities' efforts towards domesticating and democratizing the process of development must be worked out. One of the challenges that bedevils development process in Nigeria as well as many other African countries is the fact that most development initiatives and paradigms are always exclusive and stringent to comply with at community levels. The key factors/agents needed to actualize or realize the needed change and transformation of the community are more often than not externally determined (Burkey 93, Melkote and Steve 201 and Omoruyi 21). This extraneousness to development goals and objectives continues to widen the gap of growth and development across many rural communities in Africa and Nigeria. Lamenting this situation, Enyi stated that:

Rural or community development in Nigeria has not received its fair share in the scheme of things. The institutions and agencies charged with the responsibility for rural development and the policies and strategies adopted

to meet these objectives have not lived up to expectation of the rural dwellers in particular and the nation in general. It has been shown that in spite of the numerous natural resources that Nigeria is endowed with, majority of the citizens, particularly in the rural areas live below 'absolute poverty line'. Therefore there exists mass poverty as a result of the lopsided and urban-based development process which the governments in Nigeria have pursued till date. (27)

In the light of this, it becomes imperative to advance programmes and development plans that allows for a holistic and workable process of communication. Abel Idebe sees this as a vital condition that aids the people to respond positively to the real needs of the community, in order to engender social change and transformation in communities (3). Soola gives further credence to this claim thus:

Thus in our thinking, a holistic view of development must conceive of development as people-centered, human capital based, designed and packaged to promote the well being of the beneficiaries of development benefits. It must recognize the need for people participation and self-reliance within the complex, increasingly interdependent world of globalization. Development must not only be quantitative and qualitative in a mutually beneficial and reinforcing manner but must also appreciate the endogenous and exogenous dimensions of development...Development must be of the people. It must permeate the entire spectrum and strata of society touching on the lives of poorest of the poor, lifting them up, as it were, from the abyss of poverty, ignorance, disease, squalor, human right abuses and similar deprivations. (15)

Arising from the above arguments, this paper therefore examines Theatre for Development (TFD) as a communication paradigm that reinforces the need for people's active participation as key determinant to realizing social change. It brings to the fore the vital role communication processes that are truly participatory and down-top in nature leads to creating new pathways to achieving desirables community goals. According to Idebe "TFD is a praxis that involves critical thinking and reflection leading to an action process to initiate change in the community, for the emancipation and development of the community" (5). As a process of critical thinking, TFD is anchored on a participatory approach to development. It serves as the people's media. It is democratic in nature, and it utilizes the people's methods of communication, demanding change in their attitudes and response to addressing problems plaguing communities. Abah thus explains that the reason why TFD is always seeking change is to be found in the nature of the environment in which it exists. It is a situation in which the lives of the everyday people are faced with non-availability of basic needs (98). To this end, Iorapuu and Bamidele assert that:

First TFD has its roots in the philosophy of empowerment. The current view in development struggle respect the need to build on what people know, with the belief that this type of theatre seeks to liberate, demand innovation and effect potential change in the lives of those that use it...TFD uses local resources and enable programme beneficiaries to make use of the tools it offers to change it realities...TFD also provides a means of exploring and addressing dynamic relations between people. It offers a means of reflecting upon why and how changes might be necessary and why and how they come about. It is this dimension that practitioners of TFD are deeply involved with, and attempt to promote by seeking to create Theatre with the People around issues that question the contradictions that have reduced them to objects not subject...TFD is therefore a praxis; a process of reflection and action that uses the medium of drama to deconstruct the myths that makes people become split personalities or social, economic and political lepers. (35)

TFD always emphasizes the need to engage a collective process where the people are not just bench warmers but active players involved in designing and executing plans needed to address the community complexities. As a process, TFD is dynamic in nature. The nature and peculiarities involve in engaging the community in view always determine the process to be pursued. Nevertheless, TFD intervention essentially involves a process of knowing what the issues are, using theatre to communicate the issues before the people, discussing the issues communicated and furthermore ensuring a follow through of the community action plans to address these identified issues. It is often an open-ended process that reaches an amiable height where the people are now firmly in charge of the process. At every given stage of the TFD intervention, it is important to take note of how the different stages impact on the community issues as they unfold. The TFD intervention undertaken in Otuasega is here examined to concretely demonstrate the impact which the intervention had on the Otuasega community in Bayelsa State. The TFD intervention was facilitated by Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) between 2009 and 2010 respectively.

Otuasega Community in Perspective

Otuasega is located in Ogbia Local Government Area (LGA) of Bayelsa State. Based on the documents obtained from NPTA, Otuasega is about thirty minutes' drive from the State Capital, Yenagoa. The people trace their origin to Oloibiri, the first community where oil was first explored in Nigeria. The people belong to the Ijaw ethnic group with a common ancestry traced to Olei who is said to be the father of Ogbia. It was said that one Emeyal migrated from Oloibiri and founded a place called Emeyal. Emeyal's son, Asega, migrated from Emeyal and settled at Otuasega. In spite of all the stories of migration and founding fathers, they do not have traditional rulers who are appointed by lineage. Instead, the rulers are elected in a popular election by the entire community. The community is made of

mainly fishermen, traders and farmers although some of the inhabitants are employed as menial workers with the Transnational companies (TNCs) in their domain that include Shell and Mobil companies. The signature sign of this community as one approaches it, is a Shell flow station with the unyielding gas flare.

Otuasega also houses a good amount of Oil Reserves. However, the community is affected by terrible environmental degradations caused by oil spillage which has affected them. There are obvious and significant parts of the Otuasega community that remain swampy as a result of the environmental degradations in the community. Apart from the environmental problems, there are also serious disgruntlements and agitations from the Youth in the community who are angered over the fact that a number of them have not been considered in terms of good job offers from the TNCs operating in their communities. The Community has also had serious challenges that have led to different scenarios of leadership crisis in the community.

It is important at this point to note that the social challenges bedeviling the Otuasega community involve Youth challenges, unhealthy relationship with TNCs operating in these communities; and community conflicts arising from leadership crises affecting these communities have led NPTA to deploy the use of TFD intervention as a way of providing Otuasega community with more effective approaches of handling social challenges affecting them so that they can create an enabling environment for social change and development.

The Otuasega TFD Experience

The Otuasega TFD experience essentially involved the following stages examined below. These stages are here presented with an elucidation of their implications in concretely demonstrating the participatory impact of the TFD intervention undertaken in the community.

(i) *Preliminaries and Community Research in Otuasega:* The NPTA worked with the youth group members, who were mainly drawn from the Otuasega Youth Association (OYA) to carry out the community research and data gathering. OYA is the umbrella youth organization in the community. They were about 15 of them who were part of the process and the enthusiasm shown by the participants was quite impressive. From the NPTA's documents on the TFD intervention done in the community, Transect Walk, Community Map and Pair Wise Ranking were the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) tools employed to engage the community.

The transect walk was done across major roads in the community and the drawing of the community map, allowed them to see different parts of the community and revealed a number of social challenges plaguing them. These include: abandoned buildings, abandoned farmlands, abandoned overhead water tank, uncompleted public toilets, lack of Women empowerment, abandoned library project, lack of Scholarship, uncompleted school building, oil spillage, Gas flaring, lack of community market, bad roads, and poor drainage. Leadership crises, Youth

unemployment and serious dissatisfaction from the efforts of TNCs operating in their community, in terms of social responsibilities and providing Jobs for Youths in the community were top most in the course of findings. Making use of Pair Wise Ranking they prioritized and ranked amidst debates and disagreements among the participants. They prioritized Youth unemployment, lack of scholarship, Leadership conflicts, and abandoned projects by TNCs and Government. Others included: bad roads, lack of community market, poor drainage, gas flaring, lack of women empowerment, environmental degradation caused by oil spillage and poor water distribution.

The use of PLA tools such as Transect Walk, Pair Wise Ranking, and Community Mapping enabled them to embrace new ways of unlocking and teasing out their social challenges. Furthermore, it opened the room for them to form a team spirit to properly address the issues affecting them.

(ii) *Scenario Building and Drama Performance in Otuasega*: The process of arriving at the final drama involved the community participants. Having made their different contributions to the scenario building, they came out with the drama performance as given below:

** In a family house, husband and wife discuss the hardship they are facing in the community. (Song of Lamentation):*

<i>Awen dirawagisoriema</i>	<i>This life is very hard/unbearable</i>
<i>Ogirikpa wawoema</i>	<i>Suffering is killing us</i>
<i>Awen dirawomo school ema</i>	<i>There is no good school</i>
<i>Scholarship bawawoema</i>	<i>There is no scholarship</i>

** Husband asks whether food is ready. He calls out to the daughter who is playing and he queries why she is playing instead of reading. She complains that the library where she should go to for studying has not been completed.*

** Meanwhile, the other daughter in a nearby secondary school returns to joyfully announce the good news that she has passed her examination to enter the university. Man's mood is further dampened, as he does not have money for sending the daughter to the University. While in this sour mood, his son comes in to lament and express his frustration over his inability to secure a job.*

<i>Awen dirawagisoriema</i>	<i>This life is very hard/unbearable</i>
<i>girikpa wawoema</i>	<i>Suffering is killing us</i>
<i>wen dirawomo school ema</i>	<i>There is no good school</i>
<i>Scholarship bawawoema</i>	<i>There is no scholarship</i>

** Chief is seated. Youth leader comes in to complain about the growing restiveness of the youths over their inability to secure proper means of livelihood. The Chief did not say anything. Husband in the scene comes in to lament about his condition to the chief. In the midst of the confusion, two young ladies storm the chief's place to complain of lack of job. In anger the Chief decides that he has had enough; he decides to write a letter so that the youth leader can take it to Shell to demand employment and scholarship.*

<i>A wen dirawagisoriena</i>	<i>This life is very hard/unbearable</i>
<i>Ogirikpa wawoema</i>	<i>Suffering is killing us</i>
<i>A wen dirawomo school ema</i>	<i>There is no good school</i>
<i>Scholarship bawa woema</i>	<i>There is no scholarship</i>

** At the Shell Office two youth leaders, a lady and a man walk into the office of the Human Resource Manager of Shell to present the letter from the Chief requesting for employment and scholarship on behalf of the needy in the community. The Shell official receives them enthusiastically and assures them that there is no problem. Immediately the youths leave, she (Human Resource Manager) dumps their application in the waste paper bin, saying: "I have not given jobs and scholarships to my qualified brothers, why do these people think I will attend to them just because the company is situated in their area?"*

<i>A wen dirawagisoriena</i>	<i>This life is very hard/unbearable</i>
<i>Ogirikpa wawoema</i>	<i>Suffering is killing us</i>
<i>A wen dirawomo school ema</i>	<i>There is no good school</i>
<i>Scholarship bawa woema</i>	<i>There is no scholarship</i>

** Two ladies are in a boat on the creek paddling with difficulty because of water hyacinth. They come back home exhausted only to discover that there is no water from the tap to wash their itching bodies. The men are also having problems as they cannot cast their nets to catch fish because the water hyacinth has taken over the water (Freeze!)*

The performance of drama in Otuasega, carried with its traditional songs at intervals. The drama was performed at the Otuasega community social centre and it was watched with keen interest. It was immediately followed with an audience critical discussion of the issues affecting the community as mostly captured by the performance.

(iii) *Post Performance Discussions:* Discussions were done around the issues of the inability of community members to get sponsorship of their children's education, poor surveillance of transnational and government projects in the community leading to poor or abandoned projects. The issue of the water hyacinth, the lack of women empowerment, the problem of oil spillage, bursting of pipelines and other social vices as affecting many Youths in the community. The issue of lack of Jobs and Youth empowerment was given some emphatic discussion. Community members expressed huge disappointments especially with endless unfulfilled promises of government and transnational companies' jobs and how these have led to vandalizing of pipelines. One of the women participants who spoke, in the person of Gloria Igbeta said the drama reflected the reality of the social challenges in the community and lamented that the surrounding communities are more developed than Otuasega because they have serious divisions among them. She thus suggested that the way out for the community is for them to ensure that the community leadership should work out ways of ensuring that they properly engage the oil companies and the Government to provide the Youths with means of livelihood. She finally added that it will be important for the community to amend their constitution to ensure that they properly address the issue of leadership conflicts affecting them.

A Youth member of the community said that he is very pleased with the programme been carried out in their community as it has saved their community from fanning the hot flames of community leadership crises and violent conflict with oil companies. He appealed to the audience members to make sure that they take the drama serious and become a more peaceful and prosperous community. He said that the community leaders must also begin to think of what they can do within to empower the youth and women in the community, because they cannot continue to rely on the false promises of oil communities and government. Another community member in the person of Chief Friday Alegbe categorically stated that "... this drama has really saved this community from an impending violent crisis with Shell. The drama and our discussions with the team of facilitators have really helped us avoid a bad war with the oil company". He further stated that on his part, he is ready to do all at his disposal to work for peace, reconciliation and community development. Other persons, who spoke, appealed to different parties that have different court cases to immediately withdraw them. This was further emphasized by the NPTA facilitating team.

Following the robust discussion by community members on the myriad of social challenges affecting them as captured by the drama, and how they can change for the better, they came up with the following resolutions which formed the CAP which they unanimously agreed to pursue:

- Both Elders and Youth leaders will develop a strategy of follow-up actions as against violent reactions. And with specific reference to Shell Transnational Company, the Chief and community members agreed that there was a need to set up a monitoring team that would liaise with Shell once applications have been submitted from the community to address the unemployment menace.
- The participants also agreed to reach to warring parties in the coming weeks to ensure that the different court cases are withdrawn as decided by them.
- Regarding the water hyacinth, the community agreed that clearing the water hyacinth must become a joint action by all men and women; and with regards to the road construction in the community, they shall intensify efforts that will see to completion of the road construction.
- The community members also agreed that both Shell and the Community Development Committee (CDC) need to work together to ensure execution of abandoned projects. This would also demand that the contract process be made more participatory to involve the CDC.
- The chief also decided that a little community market will be constructed as a way of empowering the women and youth in the community. Also they agreed that the community will collaborate with NGOs and transnational companies in developing some Youth enlightenment and empowerment initiatives.
- A constitution amendment committee was also set up for the amendment of the community constitution.

Through their involvement in the drama and post-performance discussions, the community was given a greater sense of optimism. The drama offered the participants opportunity to shift from a theoretical dimension to a more practical understanding of the social issues. In the light of this the community members were triggered to an impactful dialogue on the way forward for the transformation of their community.

(iv) *Follow Through:* Using the qualitative instruments of FGD and Key Informant Interview (KII) to do a follow through on the intervention carried out by NPTA, the researcher sought to find out from the community members how much of the activities they were engaged in and to what extent their participation contributed to the realization of the whole experience. During the FGD with the Leaders and Youth members of the community, some of them remarked as follows:

I must seriously say that the programme with the lecturers from ABU was very

successful; it was done in our community around 2010. The programme mainly involved some lecturers from ABU and they were here with some few people. The last Community Development Committee (CDC) Executives and the Youth Association were part of the project. So they had some activities with us and part of those activities included: training in which some community members were taken to Port-Harcourt for training, and we also had some programmes in the community. Some of us did some trekking around the community and some acted Drama inside this Hall. The Drama always had questions and answers session because it was much more than drama because we were actually discussing mainly about the problems of the community. Even before the drama we also had things like drawing of the community on the map. Although it has taken a long while now but still I must say that it was a very interesting time with the people that came from Zaria and we wish for more of such kind of programme (*Francis Adah during FGD session at Otuasega Community*).

Another focus group discussant in the person of Gloria Igbeta on her part remarks that:

Yes, he has actually summarized everything. The programme involved mainly some lecturers from ABU and they were here with some few people from an NGO. So, they had some important activities with us and part of those activities included; Drama and community meeting (*FGD session at Otuasega Community*).

Equally Chief Friday Alegbe further notes that:

Yes, in addition to what he said because I was part of the training, I can say that it was very successful. Because they taught us many community development things like using drama to affect our community positively and things like community mapping (*FGD session at Otuasega Community*).

While speaking on the participation of community members, Chief Friday Alegbe in a KII session added that it was a programme which was aimed at transforming the community and as such they gave it the needed enthusiasm:

The programme was very effective in the community. It was a big programme for me. You see the Drama was not just about entertainment. We first try to discuss some of the problems affecting the community such as Youth challenges, unemployment and leadership crises. And after discussing the problems, we were able to bring out some very vital stories. The stories were about things that were actually happening to us (*KII session with Chief Friday Alegbe at Otuasega Community*).

The information provided by the community members on the TFD experience in Otuasega communities to a large extent demonstrated a positive participation and acceptance of the intervention.

TFD in Otuasega and Community Participation

Central to the TFD intervention, is the extent to which it is able to engage participation in the entire process. TFD brings together both the participants and facilitators in a converging experience that enables them to articulate and proffer possible solution that is capable of bringing about change in the interest of the community.

Findings from the Otuasega community showed that community members who were part of the process saw it as an effective one. Hence, they cooperated with the members of the NPTA group in undertaking the exercise. The community elders and leaders participated in the programme by rendering their maximum cooperation and joy. On the part of the community members that participated in the FGD session, they believed that the programme lived up to its expectation especially in the areas of creating and facilitating a much-needed awareness for collective transformation. Consequently, one of the interviewees, Gloria Igbeta stated that “our experience with TFD and the facilitators from Zaria has further helped us to be more informed and educated on the need to always come together, not minding the differences that we sometimes express...”. It is in this light that Epskamp, while explaining TFD as a tool of participation in action research, points out that:

Within participatory approaches towards development a bottom-up approach to planning and implementation of development activities is crucial. Participatory action research is used to empower individuals to take practical actions as individuals or as a group, sometimes in cooperation with 'outsiders' often referred to as facilitators, conveners, catalysts, monitors or promoters. As soon as action research becomes participatory in nature, the researcher's positions should become equal to that of the other participants. Instead of the Individual researcher's exercise, it becomes the collective inquiry, analysis and interpretation of social phenomena within the community. Ultimately, it aims at problem solving and the improvement of the quality of life of the primary stakeholders. (48)

In the light of the participatory impact of the TFD experience, community members' involvements in the different activities were done with great enthusiasm. They were able to develop plots that reflected their common challenges and agitations. The storylines communicated messages which challenged them to examine some of the myriads of problems they needed to tackle

Similarly, the Assistant Youth leader, Comrade Teddy Omonibo, in Otuasega also stated that they are contacting different organizations in Port-Harcourt and Yenagoa whom they hope to partner with to organize a carnival programme that will

feature the best of the cultural and creative exhibitions of the community. These actions further demonstrate the participatory effect of TFD experiences with community members. It availed them the opportunity to stimulate and motivate themselves to doing things that projects a positive perception of the community as against the negative perception which is often identified with their community.

However, it is important to state that despite Community members recounting the positive gains of the project in their community, they stressed the need for sustenance of the programme as well as involvement of Government and oil companies' support to organize such a programme. For instance, Francis Adah, one of the two respondents stated accordingly:

Well what I can say in this regard is that the TFD did a lot for the community because these people are not Government but the little, they have done with the community even some of our leaders who say they are our representatives are not doing up to this level. Well I will just say that they did not stay long enough and since they came, they have not come back again (*FGD session at Otuasega Community*).

Sunday Ikpo on his part also notes that:

What I want to say is that we cannot really say that this is what they did not do, or were supposed to do, because they were only helping us to help ourselves. Now the only thing I can say is to add to what my Brother has just said that we supposed to have a relationship with them once at least for some ten years this will help us to understand better what is expected of us. So when you go to Zaria please tell them that the good work they have started should not be left half way (*FGD session at Otuasega Community*).

The challenge of sustainability which the TFD intervention in Otuasega community faced is quite similar with the experiences of many TFD projects across Nigerian communities where TFD have been undertaken. Consolidating and sustaining what has already been ignited becomes a key issue. In this vein TFD practitioners must work more to find ways of ensuring that community members as well as other stakeholders continue and sustain the process for the benefit of the community. It is only in this way that TFD projects can become far reaching and ensure that the benefit it offers communities are well concretized and sustained.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the efficacy of the TFD process as evoking active participation for community development. It critically recounts the TFD intervention made by NPTA in Otuasega community of Bayelsa State. The researcher as a way of concretely assessing the process was able to find out from the community members how the process affected them. Findings from the community members especially

those that were involved in the experience attest to the fact that that TFD as a community intervention process was able to affect them positively. They recounted a number of impacts that includes: withdrawal of court cases among warring factions of the community, better ways of engaging TNCs, collective efforts towards the building of community market, Youth empowerment among others. Nevertheless, the community did note that there was a need for further facilitation by the change agents to ensure that they are able to nurture more of the process for their progress. This paper therefore recommends that TFD practitioners should explore more approaches that can further enhance sustainability and consolidation of TFD experiences by all stakeholders involved within and outside the community.

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INTERVIEWS:

Interview with Chief Friday Oyoyo Alegbe, former Vice Chairman of Otusega Community on the 28th of September, 2016.

Interview with Gloria Igbeta a Community Liaison Officer in Otusega on the 28th of September, 2016.

FGD with Leaders and Youth Members of Otusega Community held in the Community Town Hall on the 28th of September, 2016.

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