

Getting to the Bottom of the Story with Theatre for Development

The village chief is trying to look calm, but it's obvious that he's nervous.

'What has happened to the money?' the two men, still standing, ask.

'It's in a bank,' he offers feebly as an explanation, which gets the audience snickering.

The members of the audience find the theatrical performance darkly humorous because they recognise the deception. In the oil-producing region of the Niger River Delta, even the once revered traditional leaders have been corrupted, leaving the communities adrift.

Researchers from the Theatre for Development Centre (TFDC) at Ahmadu Bello University used participatory theatre as a methodology for encouraging discussion among communities of the Niger Delta on the breakdown in accountability of local and state leaders to citizens. Most research on accountability in Nigeria has looked at the high-ranking actors – the governors and oil company executives. This research, by contrast, looked at problems through the eyes of the community members, by transforming them into scriptwriters and actors.

The process of winning community cooperation in the theatrical performances began the same way in each community, by following an old tradition. Researchers would visit a community elder with a bottle of schnapps, kola nuts and some money, perhaps 200 naira, under the nuts to 'wedge' them in place. After the elders listened, they would often begin with a similar lament. The youth in the community simply do not listen any more. They used to listen to stories after dinner about society and morality, but now all that interests them is easy money.

Or perhaps they just need new stories. The drama above, performed in Sanubi, Delta State, was entitled 'Unfulfilled Promises' and addressed issues from the denial of rights through to collusion, corruption and violence.

In the drama, oil is found on the farm of one of the community members. The chief tries to deny the landowner his compensation money on the grounds that his forefathers were slaves, evoking a controversial stipulation in the Nigerian Constitution distinguishing between the rights of 'indigenes' and 'settlers'. The situation is inflamed when contractors hired by the oil company Royal Dutch Shell rip up several farms in the community to lay pipes. The performance ends with local thugs beating back protesters who are chanting 'Shell o! Emo! Emo!' (Shell o! It is war! It is war!).

The dramas in every community were distinct, but each demonstrated how the corruption resulting from oil production is interwoven with inter-community and even inter-family divisions. When cooperation and solidarity arise, powerful actors can easily exploit different cleavages – gender, religion, ethnicity. Increasingly though, and with the aid of such tools as community theatre, community members are beginning to recognise their shared plight.

The burden and blessing of oil

Large-scale oil production in Nigeria began in 1958. Now among the world's top ten oil-exporting countries, Nigeria relies on oil for more than 80 per cent of its government revenue. Most of that production is through joint ventures with foreign companies, the largest of which (with Royal Dutch Shell and ELF Petroleum Nigeria) accounts for about half of the country's total crude output. Oil revenues in 2008 earned the country an average of US\$2.2 billion every month.

This abundance of resources is commonly considered more of a burden than a blessing for Nigeria. The 'resource curse' is attributed to the undermining of accountability at every level in the country, earning Nigeria the dubious distinction as one of the top twenty most corrupt countries in the world, according to the 2008 World Bank Governance Indicators.

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In addition, oil production has been associated in Nigeria with allegations of human rights abuses and environmental devastation in the Niger Delta, which refers to both the immediate area where the River Niger splinters into tributaries and empties into the Atlantic Ocean and to some of the contiguous states where oil is found. The Scotland-sized area, criss-crossed by marsh and creeks, is home to 31 million people from more than a dozen distinct ethnic groups and is also the site of the country's most important oil fields.

In spite of its oil wealth, the region has inadequate infrastructure and high unemployment rates, in part because pollution from the oil industry has diminished forest activities and fishing. Residents of the delta states have to drink, cook with and wash in polluted water, and eat fish contaminated with oil and other toxins.

Global scrutiny of the region intensified following the execution, ordered by a military tribunal in 1995, of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who had led a non-violent campaign against environmental degradation caused by Royal Dutch Shell and other multinational oil companies in his native Ogoniland.

Since then, many other groups have emerged from the region to demand a more equitable share of the bounty; women's and youth organisations have become highly mobilised. These groups protest, negotiate with government on behalf of the communities and monitor the award of contracts and the employment of workers in the oil sector, functioning as watchdogs and pressure groups. Yet the struggle for accountability is also rife with its own accountability challenges; groups that set out to broadly defend the rights of the communities have ended up pursuing shorter-term gains, and some members of these groups, especially young men, have increasingly turned to violence.

Since 2006, rebel groups led by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, or MEND, have resorted to kidnapping oil workers and sabotaging oil facilities. These groups claim they want to win a greater allocation of the oil wealth for their impoverished people, but some of their members have become armed bandits, using political grievances as a guise for personal enrichment, or have formed gangs committed only to the interests of their village.

The result is that the people of the Niger Delta are frustrated and angry, feeling excluded from the benefits of the natural resources in their region, and yet at the same time unable to rely on many of the actors that would ordinarily be trusted with defending their rights. It is in this context that the TFDC has been employing its unique use of drama.

The democratic nature of drama

Performance art is an especially effective tool for carrying out research that aims to raise consciousness, foster local knowledge and spark social action because it opens a space for dialogue that practically anyone, regardless of background, can enter. Drama does not discriminate against the illiterate, and allows people to express their

views in their own unique language and manner. In the circumstances of fear and distrust that predominate in the Niger Delta, drama brings other benefits. Its ability to dismiss itself as fiction, and to deliver fun to the gathered crowd, also makes it a safer way to discuss the accountability failures facing their community.

In the Niger Delta, The Theatre for Development Centre – with years of experience in this methodology – sent facilitators into eight communities (four in Bayelsa State and four in Delta State) in the Niger Delta region. The facilitators worked with liaisons in each community who were well known and respected among their neighbours. The facilitators in turn selected key participants – teachers, community group leaders and other influential figures – who were trained over three days on how to create a 30-minute theatrical performance. Over the course of the three-day training, the participants explored the issues of accountability through the creation of the performance. Finally, the entire community was invited to watch, followed by a discussion that produced a community plan for action.

Something taken, something left behind

The use of theatre as a research methodology was successful in garnering new insights into the nature of accountability in the Nigeria Delta, including on:

- how a lack of accountability in formal governance structures can fracture the trust and solidarity that protects communities from outside manipulation, even corrupting the very institutions that claim to seek solutions; and
- how these fractures sow conflict and violence in a vicious cycle that further impoverishes the community.

While revealing these insights to researchers and practitioners, theatre is also a powerful tool for raising local consciousness and spurring positive action. The research process is democratised by theatre in three ways.

- It creates a space in which people can speak and bring issues forward for discussion.
- It allows them to make suggestions about what is to be done.
- It challenges power relations within the community, creating a space in which to question roles and hierarchies within the community.

In contexts of violence or human rights abuses, researchers may feel an extraordinary obligation to leave something useful behind. Theatre for development is one such methodology for understanding complex problems, while at once providing a tool for overcoming them. The links between the performance and the action afterwards are multiple: the performance has identified gaps and established a basis for further dialogue, eventually leading to a congruence of concern between community members and possibly a common agenda. The will to act, however, can only be fostered in the long term through the social organising that invariably must occur before and after the final curtain call.