

# **Drama: an Appropriate Tool in Development Support Communication**

**By Felix Fandyroy Moyo**

## **Abstract**

Development has been synonymous with directed, purposeful progress equated with economic growth. As such, communication for development has been largely understood as persuading people to adopt cut and dried messages which direct progress, hence the concept of mass communication. Unfortunately, this gives communication an apparatus for manipulation and propaganda dissemination. The widespread failure of development projects may be attributed to this understanding and practice of communication in development as communication becomes a way of forcing receivers to adjust and adapt to ideologically mediated messages. This paper proposes drama as an efficacious tool for development support communication. Drama incorporates aspects of lived realities, supports progress in peoples' lives and effectively grips the audience's attention and commitment. Drama conscientises people on aspects of life such as environmental conservation, assists people in spreading and using technological advancement, assists in health, educational and other social efforts and programmes. In this way, drama provides a viable tool in development support communication and, as the paper shows, drama is natural communication which can ensure high impact yet low cost effects.

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# **Dramatique: Outil Appropriate Pour Soutenir la Communication de Developpement**

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## **Resume**

Pour certains, le developpement est synonyme des progres realises au bout des activites sociales, planifiees et realsees, dans le but d'améliorer le niveau de la vie economique. De ce fait, on a tendance a voir la communication de developpement comme un moyen de convaincre les gens pourqu'ils puissent adopter des messages conçus dans le but d'accelerer de tels progres; d'ou l'idee de la communication de masse. Malheureusement les tenants de cette conception presentent le developpement comme un outil de manipulation de propagande. Cela explique nombre d'echecs des projets de developpement, dans la mesure ou les communautes interessees auraient pu preferer s'opposer à cette ingerence.

Moyo propose le dramatique comme un moyen efficace de soutenir la communication de developpement. Selon son expose, le dramatique incorpore des aspects des realites deja vecues et connues aux communautes interessees. Ce qui ne manquerait pas de gagner leur attention et engagement. Il s'agit d'un moyen de communication qui s'est deja verifie dans la sensibilisation des population à la preservation de l'environnement, de l'adoption des techniques technologiques avancees, aux avantages de l'education de la sante ainsi qu'a d'autres programmes sociaux. Selon Moyo, le dramatique constitue un moyen naturel, efficace et peu coûteux de soutenir la communication de developpement.

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## Introduction

The word 'development' has become synonymous with directed, purposive progress that results in economic growth. Developmentalists seem happy when material outputs increase—what more could anybody expect of them?

The word 'communication' has the hidden prefix "mass" always attached to it whenever it is perceived. This gives it the stigma of an apparatus of persuasion and manipulation and therefore something to view with suspicion, something to avoid and something unfriendly. Unfortunately, government, institutions and even humanitarian organisations use mass communication to beam propaganda, persuasion and coercion or at least some cut and dried messages which force perceivers of the messages to adjust to the messages.

Drama identifies with concepts like entertainment, education, social comment (e.g. political, religious, cultural, *inter alia*). Drama has been and continues to be ignored as trivial by some, believed as reality by others, feared as too critical, admired as courageous, hated as too threatening, trusted as effective in effecting change and revered as balanced, neutral, fair and ideal. Drama is a make-believe controlled experiment which, because its events and outcomes are deliberately created by the playwright, can be used to depict any and every human aspect for specific objectives. Drama is communication par-excellence because of its ability to grip its perceivers as it unfolds and rolls at a predetermined pace in a predetermined direction. Drama supports, all that is progress in our lives—it is development. This then makes drama a most appropriate tool in development support communication.



## **Why Drama ?**

Drama is not the only medium of effecting change for development, but I consider it a most appropriate tool because:

(a) Drama removes the stigma of "mass" from the concept of communication because real humans carry messages in their own flesh and blood and communicate almost at interpersonal level with perceivers. Where the perceivers do not directly participate, they at least seem to observe immediate neighbours as the neighbours thrash the issues and messages loaded onto the script—on stage, on the screen or on air (radio). Communication then ceases to appear as "organised" manipulation but rather takes the form of spontaneous, natural interaction.

(b) Drama broadens the meaning of the word 'development' to include concepts like education, conscientisation of the people, empowerment of the indigenous communities, insistence on good governance, moral purification of society, condemnation of crime and corruption and above all, drama ushers in participation by the communities—a very crucial element.

(c) According to Thomas in Servaes et al (1996:21) drama challenges the "taken for granted assumptions and pries open the gaps between ideological promise and institutional performance".

Promise with no performance is no development. Those who give the promises always have the means to broadcast the promise and yet usually, there is no platform to question the unfulfilment of the promises. However, in a manner subtle or bold, drama exposes the gap between promise and performance. Drama directs the spotlight onto those responsible or is it irresponsible! Drama demands accountability and suggests remedies. Drama evaluates the totality of performance by all organs within a community be they political, social, economic,

ideological, moral, philosophical etc. This evaluation is not a question and answer session the gate keeping method. It is a no holds barred, unstoppable exposition. This way, those charged with developmental assignments dare not rest on their laurels. Hence the banning and condemnation by some authorities, of certain plays (e.g. by Churches, pressure groups and governments). Hence the persecution and even execution of playwrights by some governments.

All this happens because drama, as a true tool in development support communication, will be at work not only to communicate development but to insist on development. The icing on this case is that no matter how serious the message contained, drama will always be loaded with entertainment (e.g. humour, comical blunders and misplaced trusts).

(d) Drama exploits the politics of possibility. Over the centuries, drama has been used to criticise, suggest ideals and propose solutions to problems. It uses humans to suggest how all its proposals could be implemented. The playwright creates ideal communication situations with actors who interact to fulfil the playwright's purpose. Implementation of suggested proposals develops society and yet through drama, nobody feels "exposed" as the ring leader in criticising lack of development—sometimes not even the playwright! The development support messages seem to come from this huge powerful but anonymous bulldozer called drama. The message becomes a collective effort of the playwright, the depicted, the actors, the criticised, the critics—in fact, the whole community not only feels part of the issues raised by the drama but feels it OWNS the issues and is therefore OWED restitutions.

(e) Drama is dialogue and according to Paulo Freire (1972:136) "dialogue does not impose, does not manipulate, does not domesticate, does not sloganize". (Development messages are



imposed when brought by carriers or researchers who are outsiders not only in terms of community membership but culturally and politically as well. However, a play tailored to suit a specific situation, carrying that specific development message and acted by members of the target community will belong to the people in its entirety, will be owned by the people and so will the development message it carries. This is dialogue. This is drama. Paulo Freire's notion of cultural action for liberation stresses the importance of evolving culture-based development strategies and the use of popular theatre as a medium for social transformation.

(f) Drama provides as opportunity for the target community to participate. I know that the mass media have cheapened the word participation to refer to the rhetoric of apologetic mass messages from politicians and even developmentalists. Participation is a democratic process. Drama is real participation. In drama, the word participation has not yet lost its critical edge. In drama, participation is context-based, is tradition based and is therefore wholly cultural. The people are involved in the construction and interpretation of the message.

**At exposition,** they see Mr Khumalo—a member of their community— taking a wrong course of action and Mr Dube—another member of their community—taking the correct course.

**At conflict,** Mr Khumalo seems to have it all easy, rosy and comfortable (e.g. wining, dining and highly promiscuous). Mr Dube seems miserable in his self-imposed life of sanction and denial.

**At Resolution,** Mr Khumalo's irreversible misery sets in and he exits in agony—even in death—while Mr Dube has the last laugh as he enjoys good health and prosperity. (Consequences and rewards)

**NB:** Use of culturally foreign humour misleads the people to concentrate on the wrong details (e.g. clothing, symbols) and explain away the results on these strange symbols.

This way, the target community needs little motivation to implement the lessons derived from the drama. It becomes their project. The use of drama as a tool in development support communication then becomes true generosity which empowers the target communities to be independent to desire development, to propel themselves to develop.

According to Freire (1972:21-22), "Real generosity lies in striving so that those hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, by working, transform the world". Desired transformation is development.

(g) Drama is easy to assimilate. Perceivers participate or they sit, watch and listen. Reading is heavy and too demanding. Instructions are not always the best method of communicating. However, drama constructs the story/ message and real human beings bring it to the perceivers.

(g) Drama has access to any medium, leaving it to the playwright and the owners of a development message to select the most appropriate medium between the State, Television/ Film and the Radio. Two or more of these media can be used simultaneously or one after the other to carry the same development message. This makes drama a very convenient tool in development support communication.

## **Why Drama in Our Communities ?**

### **Playing Church**

(a) The Southern African child is brought up in drama. As



soon as a child can play with other children away from its mother, the child is ushered into the world by other children through drama. With no script, no director, no stage manager, no casting director and without a producer, the children play what in Sindebele language we call *Amandhlwane*.

Here, the children organise themselves into a family unit, cast one another to occupy the roles of father, mother, children, etc. They then allocate themselves "family" duties according to the roles played. It is interesting to note that within these families, the children are more respectful and more obedient to their "parents" than they sometimes are to their real parents in life. The explanation to this interesting observation is the word participation. At *Amandlwane* all the children participate in the drama. They help construct it, they feel part of it, they own the drama and will therefore co-operate to the full. PARTICIPATION! DIALOGUE! In a real family situation, their parents limit this dialogue but rather instruct the children, force them to comply and punish them if they do not comply. Taboos and myths are given to the children and enforced without explanation. This way the parents remain strangers to the child's world and therefore outsiders. The child then learns to respect authority (parents) but appreciates and values participation and consultation (peers). Later in life, the child fits in, with greater congruency, with those messages that come through participation, consultation and dialogue. Drama is dialogue!

(b) Our people are very polite to strangers and outsiders. They will not show any hostility or opposition to messages that strangers bring. They will sit and listen and maybe marvel at the stranger's amazing oral skills. This conspiracy of silence misleads the stranger into believing that this lack of hostility, lack of opposition, is acceptance and a pledge to implement the message (development projects, health programmes etc.). The stranger is then shocked—come evaluation time six months or a year



later, to find that nothing, absolutely nothing has been done and the people find nothing amiss. They were not involved and they therefore feel no obligation. Drama, by its participatory nature, adequately removes this conspiracy of silence.

(c) Our people strictly observe cultural relationships, e.g. joking relationships and those where distances are permanently kept. In real life, certain topics or issues can never be raised when those of strict respect between themselves are both present (e.g. Mother-in-law and Son-in-law). However, in drama, everybody attains a degree of diplomatic immunity. Barriers temporarily disappear, tongues loosen and some strict cultural constraints also temporarily "act" dead. Utterances that would not normally be heard are pronounced as the people come out of themselves and speak for themselves about themselves but as if from outside themselves. This is progressive because development frequently requires a frank exchange of ideas not inhibited by any barrier. One preacher once asked "What would a son-in-law do if his mother-in-law was drowning and there was nobody else to save her except the son-in-law?" Should she die?

(d) Our literature has, over the centuries, been passed orally from generation to generation. Our teaching/learning culture is therefore of the spoken word—human to human as opposed to the written word and the distant mass communicator whose message is tailor-made for a type of recipient and not for a specific person. The recipient is catered for only as a unit within a stereotype. He/she is not accorded any respect, is without dignity as an individual and no consideration is given to his/her unique conditions and ways of life. Without his/her pre-world and pre-understanding taken into consideration, the fusion of horizons is either limited or simply non-existent.

Drama resembles oral literature. People hold dialogue as the story unfolds. The target community builds a stage for the story

as it watches the story on the stage/screen or listens to it on radio. Just as they fully participate in oral literature, they also participate in drama. Folklore situations demand that people sit and listen—so does drama. Oral literature gives them an opportunity to discuss and ask questions—so does stage drama where they interact with the actors and sometimes the playwright to ask questions and even argue certain aspects.

### **How can drama be used ?**

The most rewarding approach is likely to be the participatory approach for many reasons:

(a) For greater legitimacy, the topics dramatised should originate from the community. The community stands as an institution and the community members should therefore play the roles themselves so that the roles symbolically represent the community, or that order. That way, the community participates fully. Thomas in Servaes *et al* (1996:218) writes about a drama that mirrored a local problem in South Arcot district, Tamilnadu, India. "There were frequent interruptions and members from the audience corrected misinterpretations or misrepresentations of their social reality". This is born of total participation and a belief that the performance represents reality and cannot go uncorrected. (They phone the T.V. Station, write to the press, contact the actors or the playwright, etc.)

(b) A drama that carries development messages totally strange or new to the people's culture should be fused with the people's culture through prior-research to enhance acceptance by the people. People tend to reject the message when their expectations are not met or when they are unable to connect to the language and conversations used.



However, when a drama depicts the life of the community in its totality in terms of language, culture, symbols and conversions, the people concentrate on the development message carried by the drama. Foreign or unfamiliar symbols and conversions constitute noise which interferes with message assimilation.

### **Areas of application**

Drama, as a tool in development support communication, can be used to:

(a) Criticise political mismanagement. This type of literature is plentiful. It is easy to come up with examples of such drama which have landed many playwrights either in jail or at the gallows. Thomas in Servaes *et al* (1996:213) says that drama can be used to "advance and validate a people based counter-culture; people's versions of social reality versus political hegemony of the ruling class"

(b) Comment on social problems like street kids and tribalism.

(c) Question some cultural aspects. Appavoo (1986) records a specific instance when a ritual drama of protest by the Tamils in South India was used to justify the non payment of divine tax" (Servaes *et al* (1996:214).

(d) Debate religious matters. Thomas (1996) contends that religious and cultural myths have been maintained through dramatisation and re-dramatisation. Let us therefore, use drama now within the present communities to import, propagate and maintain development messages.

The youth in my Church community were written off as totally decayed. The adults became very concerned and a lot of questions were asked to find out what had gone wrong and how

best they could be reclaimed. Suggestions came from the choir, various prayer orders and different sections of the Church community. These suggestions were all tried with little success. The parish priest then suggested that the youth could dramatise one scripture passage once a month; that is, every third Sunday of the month. I accepted the challenge to script these passages monthly. This has worked miracles as the youth:

- now attend Sunday services better than before.
- feel responsible as they preach once a month. They are now totally reformed.
- now compete for roles within these dramas.
- now participate in other parish matters with enthusiasm including the choir and other areas which they had abandoned.

This is moral development.

(e) Examine economic society by providing an objective and informative look at all the related problems like economic white collar crime, economic empowerment of indigenous people (affirmative action), mismanagement and its cost to the organisations, etc.

(f) Assist educational programmes. The education-for-development messages should reflect the needs of the victims of development especially where these are very unique like sections belonging to the rural poor, the politically or tribally discriminated against. Success in such issues like ethnicity, gender relationship and inter-religious harmony can only come about as a result of sustained long-term efforts at education. If drama is used, it should be used as a teaching and/or learning aid and not as a complete education-for-development message in itself. This calls for clear, specific and measurable objectives for the drama



so that it serves its purpose well.

(g) Assist health efforts. Many dramas have been made in Southern Africa and elsewhere to assist awareness programmes on diseases (especially TB, AIDS, etc.), population control and hygiene, *inter alia*.

(h) Conscientise people on conservation including animal conservation, vegetation conservation and environmental pollution.

(i) Assist spreading the latest in technological advancement and discoveries. A modern drama will show how new technology is used to improve the welfare of people. For credentials, the start role models will use the gadgets and make it clear that they derive the maximum possible satisfaction from using the gadget thereby popularising the use of the gadget. If its use truly develops society, drama then plays a crucial role as an appropriate tool in development support communication. After all, the advertisements that are now an economically powerful industry in themselves are short dramas.

Those are just examples of areas of application for drama. A drama can deal with one of these areas at a time or it can deal with two or more of these areas at a time. Where more than one area is dealt with, care must be taken to carefully interrelate the areas in the true systems approach where the components must each play a role towards the sustenance of the whole (in this case the plot). Once a component has outlived its usefulness, it must be got rid of (e.g. a burnt-out sub-plot). Carefully interwoven sub-plots have a wider appeal and therefore tend to have a bigger following. The playwright as communicator reaps greater satisfaction as he/she fuses horizons with a wider audience. But, the bigger beneficiaries are the communities as they assimilate development messages at a broader base.

## **Conclusion**

Drama is natural communication that can be a very effective tool in development support communication. It entertains, counsels, informs, stimulates debate and educates. About conferences and symposia, people complain that after all is said and done, there is more said than done. Not so with drama. In drama there is more done than said. In the process, human happiness is maximised through the resultant development, in the true principles of the utility theory. A belief in drama as a vital tool in development support communication is not a mistaken belief, is not a misplaced trust, but a guarantee that those communities will adopt development projects as their own and therefore an investment in the future.

## **7. References**

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