

PARTICIPATORY THEATRE IN ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION: THE WOARABEBA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Environmental health, protection and its sustainability are important issues of concern to every nation. With the ever-growing population of many communities, associated with increased structures for habitation, issues of sanitation have become rampant. Governments, key stakeholders and community members continually seek for ways of promoting good and sustainable environmental practices at the community level. Recognizing that community members are key factors of change, participatory theatre was employed to provide the platform for education and promotion of sustainable environmental health in Woarabebeba, a fishing community in Winneba, Ghana. Johnston and Taylor's Social Engagement Theory formed the theoretical base for this community project. The paper highlights key engagements activities and how they positively affected the community physically. The outcome of the projects reveals that, a well collaborated participatory and engagement theatre plays a pertinent role in the mobilization, activation, information dissemination and behavioral change.

I. INTRODUCTION

Poor sanitation has been a bane on all aspects of human development; being it education, health, economic or social wise. The main objective of a good sanitation system is to protect and promote human health by providing a clean environment and breaking the cycle of disease. Lack of improved sanitation access has a dangerous health impact on human kind. Ensuring good sanitation is the collective responsibility of all citizens, communities, private sector enterprises, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and public institutions like the District Assemblies and sub-district institutions. Solid waste disposal has been a major issue confronting many communities especially rural areas. Ghana, a developing country is saddled with this menace especially at the coastal areas.

It has been noted that poor sanitation leads to water contamination and the high incidence of various water borne and water washed diseases (UNICEF et al. 2004). In this respect, Babatunde (2005) postulates that "better sanitation is a good investment and prevention of diseases could offer greater benefit than the building of hospitals to treat those diseases." In view of this assertion, the issue of proper solid waste management in our communities is worth discussing. Proper management of waste and promotion of healthy environment is directly linked to human behavior; it is an attitudinal, which is very important in the promotion of good sanitation practices. A healthy environment is very important because, the health status of a community largely affects its total productivity and development. Living in a clean environment is the priority of every person or levelheaded being because it brings comfort and happiness. The sight of the filth alone makes one feels uncomfortable.

Ghana is highly confronted with environmental problems of which Woarabebeba a coastal community in the Central Region of Ghana is no exception. Some common environmental problems in this community just as in other coastal areas are poor management of solid waste and open defecation. The sites for disposal of household waste in the Woarabebeba fishing community are not managed properly. There are no refuse containers for the community members to dump their refuse. Therefore, they resort to burying the refuse at the sea side which have resulted in creation of 'hills of garbage' in many part of the community. Quansah (2011) contends that poor and improper management of solid waste encourages children scavenging on the garbage. In his view, these children can contract disease from this practice, which can affect their health throughout life and deprive Ghana of health leaders in future.

Preparation and sale of food by vendors in this community are also done under unhygienic conditions. These among other things bring about a lot of diseases like cholera, dysentery, typhoid fever and malaria which are predominant in Woarabeba community.

There is a clarion call over the country to keep the environment clean. This cannot be achieved if household waste is not properly managed or disposed. One way of responding to the call to keep the environment clean and safe for human habitation is to educate the masses on proper sanitation practices and its associated benefits.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The state of sanitation and its health-related issue in Woarabeba is an issue of great concern to the development of the community and for that matter Ghana at large. Community leaders and other stakeholders over the years have contributed their quota in providing a healthy and safe environment; however, the situation seems to continue unabated. It is clear that, the main antagonistic factor to this environmental health delivery is attitudinal. As stated in the introduction, most of the causes are human creation which can be easily dealt with. Such acts, impede community growth; and it needs urgent attention. Woarabeba Community faces attitudinal and behavioural change challenges in the area of proper sanitation management.

In light of the above, Participatory Theatre (PT) was employed as an appropriate medium to create awareness on the need for promoting positive attitudes towards good sanitation practices.

This participatory tool was used to engage the community members on good sanitation practices. Participatory Theatre provided the platform for mobilization, participation, community dialoguing and consultations through Drama workshops.

III. LAB SITE PROFILE

Woarabeba is a small fishing community in Winneba in the Central region of Ghana with a population of about a thousand inhabitants. The community is situated along the sea and has two different lagoons. As it is found in most coastal areas of Ghana, the people here are mainly fisher folks. It is about a twenty minutes' drive from Winneba. It is a beautiful village with mostly bricks/ thatch houses and few block houses. As at the time of this project, the community did not have any school and so the children attended school in Winneba and other surrounding communities. The community was the scope and its inhabitants therefore became the population for the study.

IV. THEORY OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Communities are now showing increased interest in taking a more critical role in important issues. This has led to heightened levels of exchange of experiences and viewpoints among community residents, which have brought them closer together and strengthened their sense of mutual respect and direction. Community engagement is a vital part of many projects and the benefits are numerous, such as better outcomes for all stakeholders, community ownership and lower project costs.

Engagement according to Johnston and Taylor (2018) is a contemporary and socially responsive approach to organizing a community on a shared responsible basis. It is seen as a dynamic social process involving influences and outcomes for both stakeholders and community members. Social engagement at the community level simply means involving or engaging community members in the decision making of things that have direct link to their lives. Participatory Theatre approach provides the platform for community dialogue and active participation, hence the adoption of the social engagement theory for this community based project.

Social Engagement theory operates on five main stages or phases. The facilitators of the project engaged the Woarabeba community on all levels during the period of the project.

The first stage of the social engagement theory is *Orientation*. This is the period where the facilitators familiarize themselves with their new environment. Socially, they get closer to the community members and their cultural lifestyle.

The second stage is "*Experience*" where interaction and connections are established. At this stage, the facilitators actively chart a cause for the project. This is where community members are introduced to new ideas and finding suitable ways of engaging them.

The third stage, which is *Participation*, is where the facilitators actively involve community members to jointly develop meanings as well as initiating the dialoguing process. The story creation and rehearsal stage of the project directly falls under this phase of the engagement process.

Collective Action is the fourth stage of the social engagement theory. During this stage, there is a shared consensus on issues that have been raised and discussed in the previous stages. This stage provides clear roadmaps on the possible solutions for the identified problem in the community. Lastly, there is the *Intension* stage, which is the readiness to put into action the various solutions preferred throughout the engagement process.

V. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The Theatre for Development (TfD) methodology was employed as the main tool for data collection. Conventionally, TfD methodology is a process of collating and using data about community development project for live performances. Strategically, the theatre involved is used as a tool for data collection as well as mobilization, creating awareness and most importantly entertaining. Aside the TfD methodology, the facilitators employed traditional data collection methods like *direct participants Observation* to gather data. Participant observation was necessary because the facilitators wanted to have a vivid experience with the community and its folks which really helped them understand the community psychology within their contextual boundaries. *Open Interviews* were also used to collect data from the opinion leaders, participants and any witness in the community. *Focus Group Discussion* with all the stake holders were organized to solicit data from different participant of different background who had divergent views on sanitation issues.

VI. THE COMMUNITY BASED PROJECT

Engaging the community

After the data collection phase, the facilitators had a fair idea of the community as far as the issues of sanitation and healthy environment were concerned. A data mapping was developed to guide facilitators in the transect walk of the community. The community was mapped into three zones. In each of the zones, community forums were held on various topics on proper sanitation, environmental health and their importance in community development. In the organization of the community forums, key considerations were given to

- i. The level of knowledge and understanding of the community folks.
- ii. Their level of acceptability of such community education programs.
- iii. How to actively involve them in the discussion
- iv. Lastly, how compelling the messages will be for their easily assumption and acceptance.

The community was also fully involved the creation of the skit which was later used for the lager public education. A discussion group of concerned community members were also instituted as part of the community engagement process.



Figure 1 Community interaction with community folks

The community was also engaged by the facilitators to conduct some clean up exercises in the community. This plan was to instill in the community members a sense of community ownership of the project.



Figure 2 Facilitators and community leaders at a clean-up exercise



Figure 3 A massive clean-up exercise in the community

Drama Workshop

A workshop play was couched from the data collected. The creation of the story was done together with selected community participants. The involvement of the community folks in the story creation served as means of triangulating some of data collected. The issues in the story created were basically on environmental health and general cleanliness of the people and their community.

The themes of the drama and the various scenarios reflected their daily lives and so simple improvisations were adopted in the rehearsals and performance.

Performance

There was pre-activity test for members of the community who served as the primary audience.

As stated earlier improvised drama was based on the data and outcome of the various community activities which the audience were able to identify with. This turned many of them into spec-actors because they performed unconsciously. Dances from the Woarabeba community were also used as integral part of the performance to attract the attention and involvement of all community members in the performance.



Figure 4. A Dance scene from the performance



Figure 5. A scene from the performance



Figure 6. An aerial view of the performance grounds

Post-Performance Discussion

A typical participatory theatre offers the audience the opportunity to share their views and ideas on the issues in the workshop plays. This is termed as the Post –Performance discussion in the community theatre parlance. Immediately after the drama, the post-performance discussions were initiated by asking the audience to contribute to the subject matter of the play. Mostly, the discussion begins from where the play ends and it was not different in this instance. From the discussions, it could be deduced that the performance was well comprehended by the community people as some of the concerns raised were all contextually correct to the themes in the drama.

The post- performance discussion is also the phase where invited resource persons are given the chance to educate the community members on the issues on the table.

The Director of Shape Attitude Ghana, a community-based Non-Governmental Organisation in Winneba, who was the resource person for the project took his turn to elaborate on the need to live in a healthy environment and the benefits it can have on the life of the individual and community at large. In his address, he discussed the role children can play in keeping the environment clean and healthy. He proposed the ‘*catch them young approach*’ which is the ability to instill in children proper waste management practices at the community level.

VII. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Findings

The community had only one dysfunctional public toilet facility prior to the project. This resulted in the rampant open defecation mostly at the seashore of the lagoon. Through the engagement project, the community mobilized resources—both human and capital to renovate the toilet facility into a functional one. Also through engagement and dialogue with other stake holders, it was discovered that the community had some funds they could access from the Effutu Municipal Assembly for some physical development. The community has since began accessing these funds.



Figure 7. Community members working on the toilet facility



Figure 8. The refurbished toilet facility in Woarabeba community

The participatory theatre approach created a platform for all members of the Woarabeba community to share ideas on the need to keep their environment healthy. Old and young, male and female, royals and subjects all gathered to find a possible solution to their greatest and common enemy-filthy and unsafe environment. *Nana AmaAkyere I*, the queen mother of the Woarabeba community in her remarks recounted emphatically that, this was by far the best program the community had ever witness in that, it has given them (community members) the opportunity to dialogue a situation which was very rare. She further admonished the community members to adopt positive attitudes towards good sanitation practices so that whatever they have learnt through the participatory engagement could be of benefit to them.

There is relative flexibility in the participatory theatre approach. The drama skit is developed and performed by the community members. The facilitators become mere coaches in this instance. The community members are active members of the whole process. The language, song text, dances and even costumes are all contextually bound. It must be noted that, participation as mere performance is no guarantee of progressive change; the community members must control the process so they may feel a sense of ownership but not to be seen as mere mouthpieces of ideas produced by others.

As a community based theatre projects, few challenges were realized including;

- i. The ability to sustain the improvised performances
- ii. Keeping performers together at all times-there were mostly ad hoc performers.

- iii. Identifying accepted cultural norms of the people
- iv. Sifting information gathered to come out with relevant ones.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Participatory theatre has proven to be an effective medium of communication for many less developed communities. The element of participation, where the facilitator and the community people work together during the project lifespan is the key factor in community development process. The participatory theatre approach directly deals with community members in identification and finding solutions to their problems without any form of imposition. Most often they look within for possible internal solutions before soliciting for external help where necessary.

The element of entertainment which theatre provides cannot be under estimated. However certain skills are required in order to achieve the projects objectives and not to turn the whole thing into an entertainment show. Participatory theatre is different from traditional plays in that it involves actively the audiences by combining engagement and entertainment. Effective

Participatory performance does not succeed without active engagement and involvement of the community members.

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