



Theatre

Theatre is one of the most powerful forms of communication and there are many ways in which it can be used within the Reflect process.

WHY?

Theatre can be an effective means both for bringing people into the Reflect process and sharing key learning within the wider community, with other communities and even with decision makers. Reflect processes start from people's own knowledge, culture and identity – theatre can build on that basis and strengthen it as an act of resistance or assertion.

Theatre is a dynamic mix of fiction and reality, offering people the opportunity to express or challenge ideas and issues using a fictional voice, and symbolic situations. Reflect circles offer a space to address a wide range of issues, enabling people to find new ways to express themselves, and theatre can be used in this environment as a positive force for transformation.

WHEN?

Theatre work can be introduced at any stage – as an initial means of mobilisation for the Reflect process, to extend analysis within circles or for participants to raise issues with, or communicate conclusions to, a wider audience.

HOW?

There is a long history of popular theatre work around the world. In the 1970s in southern Africa, for example, theatre practitioners would research community problems and run local workshops to create a play presenting those issues in context, followed by structured discussion. Forum theatre, developed by Augusto Boal drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, challenges the power structure inherent in traditional Western theatre, where a few powerful people have control of the process while others passively watch. Forum Theatre transforms the audience into actors and creators of the drama, actively engaged in the process, encouraged to critically reflect on, challenge and change the course of the play and try out different solutions.

Theatre for Development

This was developed largely to enable target communities to analyse and criticise the work of development agencies were doing in their name. It is based on a democratic process, building on indigenous modes of entertainment and therefore looking very different in different cultural contexts.

USES OF THEATRE

There are many ways to use theatre which, in the context of Reflect, might include:

- **Mobile theatre groups to encourage people to join circles where a new Reflect process is starting;**
- **Short pieces developed by group members in order to communicate specific issues to a wider audience;**
- **Theatre groups formed by interested participants from different Reflect circles to devise plays based on common issues to mobilise support or perform directly to decision makers;**
- **External groups playing to provoke deeper analysis of specific issues;**
- **Reviving traditional forms of theatre as a means of culture regeneration.**



PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

An example of using theatre for initial mobilisation around Reflect comes from Yakshi in **India**. A local organisation, Girijan Deepika devised a drama highlighting local issues and encouraging people to reinstate the "Gotti", traditional community forums which had become largely defunct. In the process, the Gotti was also reconceived as a democratic space for analysis of local issues and collective learning. Theatre has continued to be used by the Gotti to place local issues in a national and international context that might otherwise not be known. For example, a play was developed that dramatised the role of the World Bank and World Trade Organisation in changes to local patterns of crop production.

Participants in a Reflect circle in Arua, **Uganda**, developed a powerful piece of theatre on the theme of family neglect that eventually led them to perform in front of government and NGO officials. The play captured, through the stories of members of a family, a range of interconnected issues from prostitution and alcoholism to domestic violence, school drop out, early marriage and petty crime. At the end of the performance, the audience discussed the issues raised and the role of their institutions to address the root causes of the problems.

The Pastoral Social in **Guatemala** has used puppet shows to raise very sensitive issues in a non-threatening way. The fact that, with puppets, there is no eye contact makes it easier to raise issues such as child trafficking or the impact of war. The effect has been to give people a licence to speak out and act on issues which have previously been taboo.

At the Latin American Reflect conference in 2001 Colapso Urbano, a popular theatre group from **El Salvador**, presented work based on the popular story of "The Emperor's New Clothes", but with high-technology designer clothes from the US bought by the Emperor with money raised through extortionate taxes. This stimulated rich debate on the manipulation of power, the US role in domestic affairs and the irrelevance of much imported technology, as well as leading to intense discussion around our own role as NGOs.

References:

On theatre for development, contact ActionAid-UK (e-mail: esummers@actionaid.org.uk) for a copy of Katie Wiseman's report "Hearing Voices for Social Change". Boal's books include "Theatre of the Oppressed", "Rainbow of Desire" and "Legislative Theatre". "Lines in the Dust", a video produced by CIRAC and available from ActionAid-UK, highlights some of the theatre work of Yakshi.



A play performed in the local community, by the local community with musical accompaniment in Orissa, India.

