

THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ITS DISCONTENTS: IN SEARCH OF A SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

Nenrotmwa Tapshak Sekat, Hussaini Umaru Tsaku, Dr. Elisha Dareng Rwang

Abstract

From its embryonic stage, Theatre for Development (TfD) offers a vision of amplifying people's voices and enabling communities to transform their own conditions. Yet, beneath this emancipatory rhetoric lies an uncomfortable truth: the field faces challenges. Projects generate enthusiasm, provoke dialogue, then end, leaving communities without structures to sustain the initiated change. Drawing on some Nigerian cases, this paper argues that these challenges are not aberrations but structural pathologies embedded in the structure of TfD. It discusses three persistent discontents: the sustainability problem, the institutional gap, and the facilitator deficit. Diagnosing these discontents reveals three interconnected roots: the project temporality, the participation trap, and the logic of institutional self-reproduction. This paper proposes some principles for sustainable practice. The paper argues that the search for sustainability is not merely technical but deeply ethical. The paper recommends a structural accountability. It concludes with a question that every practitioner needs to consider: what remains after we leave?

Keywords: Theatre for Development, sustainability, community governance, facilitator ethics, participatory methodology, institutional transformation

INTRODUCTION

Theatre for Development (TfD) emerged in the 1970s with a vision as bold as it was necessary. In the wake of failed top-down development paradigms, TfD offered something different: a methodology grounded in dialogue, participation, and the conviction that communities themselves are the agents of their own transformation. Drawing on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht, and the emancipatory spect-actor of Augusto Boal, TfD proposes to give a voice to the voiceless, rehearse liberation, and equip marginalised communities to analyse and act upon the conditions of their oppression. Across sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, TfD practitioners have generated extraordinary moments of community enthusiasm, surfaced local knowledge that conventional development approaches systematically ignore, and provoked critical dialogue on issues ranging from health to conflict to governance (Mlama, 2023, p. 57). The archives of the field are rich with stories of communities coming alive through theatre, silenced voices finding expression, and problems named and their solutions rehearsed.

But there is another angle, less often looked at and consulted, that tells a different story. It is the angle of what happens after the performance ends, after the facilitators depart, after the funding expires. And this archive records a pattern so consistent it can only be called structural: projects generate enthusiasm, provoke dialogue, and then inevitably terminate. Communities are left with memories of engagement but without the structures, resources, or ongoing relationships to sustain the change they initiated. The post-performance discussion, intended as a beginning, becomes a ritual of closure. This paper calls these recurrent failures *the discontents of Theatre for Development*. The term, borrowed from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, signals that these are not incidental problems to be solved by better technique or more dedicated practitioners. They are structurally embedded in the very design of how TfD is conceived, funded, institutionalised,

and evaluated. These challenges will not be resolved by tinkering at the margins. This paper is based on a review of some selected cases in Nigeria. The Samaru Project of Zaria and some selected participatory forms on peacebuilding in Plateau State. A reflexive practitioner perspective informs the following analysis.

CASE STUDIES

The Ahmadu Bello University Samaru Project, Nigeria (1970s-1980s)

The Samaru Project represents one of Nigeria's earliest and most significant attempts at university-community engagement through theatre. Abodunrin & Akoh (2019, pp. 58-74). document the long-standing relationship between Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and its host community, Samaru. Beginning in the 1970s, the university's drama programme, pioneered by Michael Etherton, engaged the community through various theatrical interventions aimed at social change. The project was designed to relate the university to its immediate environment, making theatre accessible beyond campus and experimenting with audience reactions across different settings, including performances in brothels. The Samaru Project established a crucial precedent for Nigerian universities taking responsibility for engaging their host communities. It demonstrates that academic theatre programmes could extend beyond campus boundaries and that communities were receptive to theatrical interventions addressing their concerns. The project contributed to the development of community theatre as a distinct practice within Nigerian university curricula.

Despite its longevity and pioneering status, the project "has not been able to achieve a significant level of observable positive change" (Abodunrin & Akoh, 2019, p. 65). The engagement remained largely unidirectional; the university brought theatre to the community without establishing mechanisms for continuous, reciprocal dialogue. There was no formal structure to sustain engagement beyond the efforts of individual practitioners. When key

facilitators moved on or funding fluctuated, the intensity of engagement diminished. The Samaru experience illustrates precisely a gap.

However, Jegede & Gana, (2018, p. 437) give a more recent review of the Samaru Project in 2016. In a paper titled *Development Communication as a Tool for Social Change: the Samaru Project Experience, Kaduna State Nigeria*. They argue that over the years, the Samaru project has employed a unique methodology that has been successful in communicating developmental issues to the Samaru Community. The study aligns with the perspective on development communication that active involvement of communities, in the process of communication accelerates development. The paper argues that forum communication is likely to be more influential in addressing developmental issues? But the key question to this argument remains- to what extent is this success? Is the project's core objective merely to communicate developmental issues? This seems to be a surface evaluation of a TfD project; it is meant to elicit deep-rooted conversations within the community that can lead to an observable positive change and not end at the level of communication. The 2016 experience seems to have recorded some level of success, because it adopted the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach. This approach involved not only the students but also community-based liaison individuals who were part of the process of gathering information from the community. Facilitators are meant to interact with the members of the community to identify most pressing challenges of the community. After this, a detailed analysis of the identified challenges by both students and community-based individuals is conducted. This approach offers a more inclusive approach in data collection. However, there may be the risk of falsifying data collected from the community to suit the interests of a few individuals as opposed to the collective. When the performance takes shape and rehearsals are ongoing, the play is still taken to the Gamji Dramatic club, which is a community-based group for further analysis and

correction. This ensures the performance reflects the exact realities of community members. This approach tries to fill the gap which Mlama (2023) identifies. She argues that this empowerment of grassroots communities is not long-lasting, rarely continuing beyond the animateur-led TfD workshops. Furthermore, the community is not portrayed as a data laboratory for students but as active participants in the process of change and development. The follow-up in this experience is handed over to the next set of students - this also portrays a cyclical approach. While this approach suggests an improvement in the Samaru Project, the question always remains how effective the approach was in raising the consciousness of the community. For instance: Has early marriage been stopped? Do community members work towards environmental sanitation? And what measures will be taken if a member of the community faults?

The two cases above mirror a recurring challenge in the practice of TfD: how to move beyond episodic, donor, or academic-driven interventions towards an embedded, community owned process that lasts even after the departure of the facilitators. The shifts observed in the 2016 project towards community involvement, and cyclical handovers, reflect a deliberate effort to mitigate this gap. However, with the unanswered question of early marriage and environmental sanitation, it indicates that improved methodologies struggle to translate raised consciousness into measurable and lasting social transformation.

Theatre for Development and Peace Building in Plateau State

Pam, (2012) traces the historical timeline of the Jos crisis back to 7th of September 2001, when violence first broke out over political appointments. Then, it resurfaced in 2004 and 2008, with the 2004 violence prompting the declaration of a state of emergency. All these culminated to the post-election violence erupted which in 2010/2011. More recently, attacks in Mangu, Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, Miango, and Wase are mostly attributed to the unresolved farmer-herder clash. It is

the same reason that triggered the most recent violence in April 2026 due to the attack in Angwan Rukuba area of Jos North Local Government Area. This recurrent eruption of violence has experienced interventions aimed at achieving a long-lasting peace in the state. Peace summits have taken place within the state: strengthening capacities for peace building and conflict resolution in Nigeria's middle belt, by GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) a German Federal enterprise that manages International Development Corporation, therapy and trauma-healing programmes run by religious groups like ECWA (Evangelical Church winning all) and many more of such interventions, dialogue have taken place yet Plateau state continues to experience forms of violence and attacks.

One such intervention is the *Peace Building Through Theatre: The Angwan Rogo Community Field Experience* Project. This initiative was organised at Agwan Rogo community in Jos North Local Government Area in 2011 by the Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies, University of Jos, in collaboration with the Netherlands Embassy, and the Department of Theatre and Film Arts of the University of Jos. This project took a prepared theatrical performance titled *Bond of Peace* to, Angwan Rogo as part of peace-building efforts in Plateau State. The project aimed to use theatre to address inter-communal tensions and promote peaceful coexistence. The project demonstrates theatre's capacity to address sensitive issues, such as ethnic and religious conflict, in a volatile region such as Agwan Rogo. After watching the performance, Tsaku & Embu, (2012, p. 50) points that one Hajiya Aishatu Lawal acknowledged that after attending series of workshops on the plateau, that this particular one was different. Agreeably so because even though the participation was limited, it was able to generated immediate dialogue.

Similarly, Ahupa in a paper titled *Applying Theatre for Development in Conflict: The Case of Jol/Ropp Communities in Plateau State Nigeria*, claims the efficacy of TfD in resolving the

protracted farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria. Conducted across the Jol and Ropp communities, this project is a self-funded, three-week project which engaged 106 participants in a two-day workshop. The study's central finding is that the TfD methodology, when applied as a creative intervention, can successfully dismantle barriers, foster mutual empathy, and generate community-owned, action-oriented mechanisms for durable peace, even within a context of active, ethno-religious violence.

At the time of the study, the community of Jol was physically partitioned, with herders living uphill and farmers downhill; crossing the unofficial border risked injury or death, and movement required security escorts (Ahupa, 2025, p. 59). This is the typical scenario in volatile areas within the state. The process of critical reflection was a crucial first step, by performing the roles of their counterparts, participants gained empathic insights into previously dismissed experiences. Post-performance discussions reveal this transformation: one herder described the act of acting out shared realities as a profound relief, while a farmer who had lost family members to the violence stated he felt like a brand-new person (Ahupa, 2025, p. 67). These accounts validate Augusto Boal's notion of the spect-actor.

Ahupa's study claims that the impact of TfD goes extends beyond affective transformation to the production of tangible, action-oriented outcomes. The most significant evidence for this is the Community Action Plan (CAP), which emerged organically from the participatory process. During the CAP phase, volunteers from both farming and herding communities in Jol and Ropp offered to serve as community-level investigation officials in cases of farmland destruction or livestock theft. Furthermore, telephone-based monitoring conducted after the workshop, though limited by funding constraints, revealed measurable behavioural shifts. Participants reported a reduction in retaliatory attacks and improved access to previously inaccessible farmlands. In one

telling instance, a participant who contacted the researcher in 2022, four years after the workshop, sought institutional redress for a grievance through legitimate channels rather than resorting to violence.

From the illustrations on the efficacy of participatory forms in conflict resolution, it is important to note that even as at the time of writing this paper, some of these communities still experience an eruption of violence. Though these projects have used different TfD methods and they have all achieved an immediate objective, however, we cannot get the same outcome for a long-term goal. The Angwan Rogo community which houses the main campus of the University of Jos, is still a volatile area within the state, which puts the lives of students, staff, and members of the community at risk. The Jol/Ropp community experience may have experienced some calm for a short period, but what is the current situation? Additionally, despite its contributions, the study honestly acknowledges several limitations. The absence of in-person follow-up which is attributed to funding constraints. The self-funded nature of the project also restricted the robustness of its monitoring and evaluation framework. TfD workshops are intensive but time-limited; their long-term sustainability depends on structural follow-up and institutional support.

THE NATURE OF THE DISCONTENTS

The sustainability problem is the most documented and least resolved challenge in the history of TfD ((Abah, 2023, p. 43). From the earliest experiments to the most recent interventions, the pattern is remarkably consistent: projects generate genuine enthusiasm, provoke critical dialogue, and then end, leaving communities to pick up the pieces or not. (Mlama, 2023, p. 73 and Abah, 2023, p. 43) Consider the trajectory. *Laedza Batanani* was launched in Botswana in 1974 and is widely acknowledged as the first systematic community theatre initiative in sub-Saharan

Africa. It generated considerable enthusiasm, demonstrated the potential of theatre as a tool for community dialogue, and was replicated across the region. Yet after some time, its transformative intentions had dissipated. This is attributed to the arguments of Kidd and Ross as cited by Mda in the assessment of the project that the intended objectives of the *Laedza Batanani* Project were not attained because of problems of interpretation of concepts such as participation, critical analysis and action (Mda, 1993, p. 14). As much as this challenge was earlier identified, it seems to be recurrent in subsequent projects across the African continent (Mda, 1993, p. 16).

The Samaru Project of Zaria, though embedded within an institutional structure, seems not to have a sustainable framework for community engagement. The essence should not only be about integrating TfD into an institutional framework, rather it should be about how the academia is able to meet specific needs of its immediate community. This is succinctly captured by Abodurin and Akoh who state that the engagement remained largely unidirectional: the university brought theatre to the community without establishing mechanisms for continuous, reciprocal dialogue (Abodunrin & Akoh, 2019, p. 65). This poses a very deep challenge within the curricular activity. Because just as Abah asserts that students use communities as study laboratories, for short-term gain, this results in unfulfilled expectations of the community members when engagement ends. The evidence from the longest-running university-based TfD programme in Nigeria suggests that institutional longevity does not automatically translate into sustainable community-institutional partnership (Abodunrin and Akoh, 2019, p. 64).

The Jol/Ropp and Angwan Rogo Projects replicate the same issue of sustainability, although they operated different participatory methods. Specifically, the Agwan Rogo Project took an already prepared performance on the theme of inter-communal conflict to the community. The researcher participated as a performer and witnessed firsthand the electricity of the performance,

the depth of post-performance discussions, and the genuine sense that something important was happening. Yet no visible mechanism for follow-up or continued engagement was established. The project, funded as a short-term intervention, concluded at the point of great potential (Tsaku & Reuben, 2012, p. 52). A few years later, community memory of the projects seem faded; no durable change in inter-communal relations could be attributed to the intervention. Similar interventions have used participatory forms in peace building around communities in Plateau state. But increasing cases of violence have persisted within the state.

What unites these cases, across decades and contexts, is not a failure of theatrical methodology or community willingness. It is a failure of design structures that would enable engagement to continue beyond the project cycle. The post-performance discussion, a near-universal feature of TfD methodology, functions not as a mechanism of continuity but is often used as a ritual of closure. It generates qualitative data, community members' interpretations, questions, and proposed solutions. However, the data generated is rarely systematically analysed and/or tracked over time. The discussion ends, the facilitators depart, and the community returns to the conditions the intervention was meant to transform.

The institutional gap concerns how institutions position themselves in relation to communities. The university, in principle, is ideally positioned to support sustained community engagement, as seen in the Angwan Rogo and Jol/Ropp projects. Unlike NGOs, which operate on project cycles, or funding agencies, which disburse and depart, universities are designed to persist. Their departments, curricula, and faculty appointments are structures of extraordinary durability. If TfD could be embedded within these structures, it might achieve the permanence that project-based interventions cannot. Yet, the evidence from the longest-running university-based TfD programme in Nigeria suggests that institutional longevity does not automatically translate into a

sustainable community partnership (Abodunrin and Akoh, 2019 p. 64). TfD has generated an extensive archive of performances and trained a generation of practitioners. However, Abodunrin and Akoh's assessment exposes a critical gap: the community is systematically excluded from the critical stages of analysis and play creation, reducing their role to that of a data source and an audience. The project is structured by the academic calendar, leading to successive sets of students repeatedly asking the same questions, generating the same findings, and producing the same performances (Abodunrin & Akoh, 2019, p. 71). This is opposed to the 2016 experience where the Samaru Project experienced a significant or observable positive change.

The consequence, they conclude, is that the project has inadvertently empowered the issues it seeks to remedy (Abodunrin & Akoh, 2019, p. 74). This may be because of the unidirectional flow of communication; the university brought the theatre to the community without establishing mechanisms for continues and reciprocal dialogue. The community is not a partner but a resource mine for data, used for student training, and abandoned when the semester ends. The ivory tower dynamic (Dugga, 2013, p. 62). which identifies the university as site of expertise and the community as site of deficiency - has become paradigmatic of university-based TfD across Nigeria. The problem extends beyond universities because even when TfD is adopted by state agencies like Nigeria's Mass Mobilization for Self-Reliance, Social Justice, and Economic Recovery (MAMSER), it still risks co-optation. Dugga notes that MAMSER demonstrated that theatre could be deployed on a national scale and secured substantial government funding (Dugga, 2024, p. 17). But Umar-Buratai, (2013, p. 98) asks the uncomfortable question: at what cost? Theatre, originally developed as a tool for community empowerment, was repurposed as an instrument of state propaganda. The distinction between popular theatre and populist theatre blurred, and the emancipatory potential of the methodology was compromised.

NGO partnerships, for their part, remain project-based and issue-specific. The most prominent example is UNICEF's longstanding use of TfD for polio eradication, maternal health, and child rights campaigns. Yet practitioners are contracted for discrete interventions; when the campaign concludes, the relationship ends. There is no evidence that NGO partnerships have resulted in the permanent embedding of participatory theatre within community or institutional structures. This is not about the presence of institutions but about their mode of engagement. Truly, institutions such as universities, states, and NGOs are present, but they engage in ways that subordinate community needs to institutional priorities, that extract rather than partner, that use communities as means to institutional ends rather than treating community empowerment as an end in itself.

From the literature reviewed above, there is a tendency, to present moments of affective transformation as evidence of efficacy. For instance, a farmer who lost family members says he feels like a brand-new person. As much as this is a powerful moment, it is important not to mix catharsis with change. Though the study acknowledges funding constraints, the lack of in-person follow-up and self-funded nature of the project, claims of its achievements are striking; dismantled barriers, and community owned mechanism for lasting peace, however, what will be the case if those communities are visited in the present day? If the case is not as the study claim, then the efficacy narrative about transformation is problematic. The real transformation is what happens in the absence of the facilitators.

WHY THE DISCONTENTS PERSIST

If the discontents are structural, what are the structures that create them? This section traces three interconnected roots: the project temporality, the participation trap, and the logic of institutional self-reproduction. The most fundamental constraint on TfD's transformative potential is project temporality. Interventions are designed within fixed cycles typically aligned with donor reporting requirements, academic calendars, or funding cycles that terminate at the point of evaluation. The Samaru Project is guided by the academic calendar, the Angwan Rogo Project was guided by donor agencies, and the Jol/Ropp Project ran for three weeks. Thus, the very concept of a 'project' militates against its sustainability; by definition, projects are temporary. Yet the social problems TfD addresses poverty, such as substance abuse, inequality, and violence, are not temporary. They are entrenched, systemic, and reproduced across generations. They cannot be solved within a six-month project cycle or a single academic semester. They require engagement measured in years and decades, not weeks and months. The temporality of the projects produces a characteristic pathology: interventions generate enthusiasm precisely because they offer communities something rare - attention, resources, and a sense that someone cares. Communities invest hope, time, and energy, only for the project to end at the moment of its greatest potential. The message, however unintentional, is clear: your problems matter only as long as our funding lasts. This is not merely a practical constraint; it is an ethical issue. Asking communities to invest in interventions that will end in a matter of months and then expecting them to be grateful for what was done is a form of what might be called temporal injustice. It exploits communities' aspirations while delivering change that cannot be sustained.

The second root lies in how participation is conceptualised and practised. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation remains the most powerful framework for distinguishing genuine

participation from its counterfeits. The lower rungs manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation are forms of tokenism that "distort participation to serve as a public relations vehicle by those in power" (Afolabi, 2020, p. 216). Genuine participation begins at the partnership rung, where power is redistributed through negotiation between those in power and those at the grassroots. Delegated power and citizen control represent the fullest expression of community agency. The field of Tfd has celebrated participation while largely ignoring Arnstein's lesson. Most interventions operate at the consultation or informing rungs. Communities are involved as they attend performances, participate in discussions, offer their views, but they do not govern. They do not set agendas, allocate resources, determine success criteria, or evaluate outcomes. They are participants in processes designed and controlled by others. Afolabi's distinction between verb-oriented participation (external action imposed on people) and noun-oriented participation (the inherent agency communities possess) illuminates what is at stake. Sustainable practice requires that external, project-driven actions (the verbs) be designed to stem from, activate, and reinforce the community's inherent agency (the noun) (Afolabi, 2017, p. 67). It is pertinent to note that community is not a homogeneous entity. Community governance, therefore, does not mean transferring authority to an undifferentiated mass, but rather establishing transparent and accountable mechanisms that ensure diverse voices including those of women, youth, and marginalised groups have genuine decision-making power. The facilitator's role in such a context is not to withdraw, but to help mediate these internal dynamics in a way that promotes equity without re-imposing external control but this cannot happen when communities are positioned as participants rather than governors. Participation without governance is, as Arnstein recognised, an empty and frustrating process for the powerless (Afolabi, 2020, p. 216).

The third root lies in how institutions, universities, NGOs, and funding agencies operate. Institutions are not neutral vehicles for community development. They have their own interests, priorities, and logics of self-reproduction. They need to secure funding, demonstrate impact, maintain legitimacy, and reproduce themselves across time. This institutional logic shapes TfD in ways that practitioners rarely acknowledge. University-based TfD serves the university's interests as much as, sometimes more than, those of the communities. It provides fieldwork opportunities for students, research data for faculty, and community engagement metrics for accreditation bodies. The Samaru Project's subordination of community needs to curricular requirements is not an aberration; it is what institutional logic predicts. Similarly, NGO partnerships serve NGO interests. They need to demonstrate results to funders, maintain their brand, and secure continued funding. Communities are means to these ends, not ends in themselves. When the funding cycle ends, the partnership ends not because communities no longer need support, but because the institutional logic no longer requires engagement. The problem is not that institutions are evil or practitioners are cynical. The problem is that institutional self-reproduction is a structural imperative, and unless governance mechanisms explicitly counter it, community interests will be subordinated to institutional interests. The three roots of project temporality, the participation trap, and the logic of institutional self-reproduction are not independent; they reinforce each other. The project temporality ensures interventions are short-term, which makes genuine governance impossible, which allows institutions to prioritize their own reproduction over community needs. Breaking this cycle requires addressing all three simultaneously.

IN SEARCH OF A SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

Sustainability in the arts is not just about ecological, social, and economic factors. It also includes cultural vitality. Hawkes, (2001) argued that "cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy

and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability" (p. vii). He explains that culture is not just an extra part of development but is "the social production and transmission of values and meaning" (p. 3). Hawkes clearly distinguishes cultural development, often measured by arts industry statistics, from cultural vitality, the living sum of a community's creative abilities and self-expression (pp. 22–23). This difference is especially important in Theatre for Development. TfD projects often create short-term energy, dialogue, and emotional change, but these effects rarely last after the project ends. As Hawkes said, "a sustainable society depends upon a sustainable culture" (p. 12). The problems with TfD are not about theatre methods, but about cultural sustainability. Project-based efforts struggle to become part of communities' ongoing cultural life.

If the discontents are structural, solutions must be structural. This section proposes some interconnected principles for sustainable practice. They are offered not as a formula to be applied mechanically but as criteria for assessing whether an intervention is designed for sustainability from the outset. Participatory mechanisms must be embedded within enduring organisational structures that can outlast individual projects, funding cycles, and facilitator tenures.

Structural embeddedness means designing interventions so they do not depend on the continued presence of specific individuals or the continued availability of specific funding streams. To achieve sustainability, it must be rooted in local contexts, values, and power structures (Jorrit, 1026). This implies designing projects and institutions that co-evolve with community norms, livelihoods, and ecosystems rather than merely meeting performance metrics. Jorrit's suggestion may not be situated within the TfD domain, but it is very relevant to TfD. Furthermore, for a university-based TfD, the most powerful form of structural embeddedness is curriculum integration. A curriculum, unlike a project, is designed to persist. Its departments, courses, and

fieldwork requirements are structures of extraordinary durability. But curriculum integration is not sufficient in itself. The Samaru Project is integrated into the ABU curriculum, yet it reproduces extractive dynamics. Structural embeddedness must therefore be accompanied by partnership arrangements that ensure community voice in how the curriculum is implemented. The question is not whether the work is in the curriculum, but how the curriculum engages with community. For non-university interventions, structural embeddedness might mean establishing ongoing partnerships with local organisations or building networks of trained community facilitators who can continue the work independently. The form varies but the principle is constant: the work must be built into structures that will outlast the intervention. A critical area for further study may be to explore specific structures that will enable this work to continue.

Communities must have decision-making authority over the interventions that affect them, authority to set agendas, allocate resources, determine success criteria, and evaluate outcomes. Community governance moves beyond participation. Participation means being involved in activities designed by others. Governance means having authority over those activities. It requires what Arnstein (1969) calls partnership, delegated power, and citizen controlling the upper rungs of her ladder.

In practice, community governance means:

- Communities define what problems are addressed and how problems are framed
- Communities have veto power over methods they find inappropriate
- Communities determine what counts as success
- Communities participate in designing and conducting evaluation

- Communities have ongoing mechanisms to hold facilitators and institutions accountable

This is not a romantic claim that communities always know best or that external expertise has no value. It is a claim about where ultimate authority should reside. While external facilitators bring methodological expertise and communities bring lived expertise, both are essential. But when interests conflict, community interests must prevail. Some critical questions to ponder upon here are: Who makes the decisions that actually matter- about resources, methods, timelines, and success criteria? If the answer is not "the community," what would need to change for it to be?

Facilitators must continuously interrogate their own positionality, assumptions, and power. Also, they must be trained and supported in doing so. Critical reflexivity is not an advanced skill for experienced practitioners; it is a constitutive element of ethical practice. It requires facilitators to ask the following questions continuously: How does my institutional affiliation shape what is possible and what is constrained? How do my cultural assumptions about development, participation, and theatre shape how I interpret community responses? Who speaks for the community? Whose voices are amplified or silenced by my methods? What am I not seeing because of who I am and where I stand?

These questions cannot be answered once, at the beginning of a project. They must be asked continuously, in dialogue with communities, and the answers must inform ongoing practice. This has profound implications for facilitator preparation. A single semester of applied theatre training with little or no attention given to the concept of facilitation, with minimal community engagement, is grossly inadequate. Facilitator formation requires extended periods of supervised practice, opportunities for critical reflection, engagement with relevant theory, and mentorship from experienced practitioners. It requires creating spaces where facilitators can interrogate their own assumptions, learn from failure, and develop the ethical stamina that sustained community

engagement demands. Some critical questions to ponder are: ‘What training prepared me for the ethical complexities, power dynamics, and dilemmatic spaces of community engagement?’ If the answer is very little or none, then, ‘what am I doing now to develop that capacity?’

Interventions must be designed with time horizons adequate to the nature and depth of the problems they address. Problems that took years or decades to become entrenched will not yield to interventions measured in weeks or months. This is not pessimism; it is reality. For communities facing entrenched social perils like teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and syndicate robbery, genuine transformation requires sustained engagement across multiple fronts, with theatre being one component of a broader strategy. This means moving from the logic of intervention (drop in, do something, leave) to the logic of accompaniment (walk with communities over the long term). Temporal adequacy has implications for funding, evaluation, and institutional commitment. Funders must support long-term engagement, not just short-term projects. Evaluation must track trajectories over years, not just outcomes at project end. Institutions must commit to communities for the long haul, not just for the duration of a research project or funding cycle. Critical questions to ponder are: If the problems we are addressing took years or decades to become entrenched, why would we expect them to yield to interventions measured in weeks or months? Whose interests are served by maintaining the project temporality?

CONCLUSION

Evidence from *Laedza Batanani* to recent projects, participatory theatre interventions have repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to generate community enthusiasm, surface local knowledge, and provoke critical dialogue but have repeatedly failed to sustain engagement beyond the project cycle. The Samaru Project, after forty years, has not achieved meaningful community empowerment and the Agwan Rogo project may have faded from community memory within a

few years. These are not failures of individual practitioners or projects. They are structural failures embedded in how TfD is conceived, funded, institutionalised, and evaluated. The project temporality ensures interventions are short-term. The participation trap ensures communities are involved but do not necessarily have governance control. Institutional self-reproduction ensures community interests are subordinated to institutional interests.

The principles of structural embeddedness, community governance, temporal adequacy, and evaluative reciprocity, as proposed here, offer a framework for designing interventions that might break this cycle. They are not a formula but must be adapted to context. They provide criteria for assessing whether an intervention is designed for sustainability from the outset. The search for sustainable practice is not merely technical; it is ethical. Communities that invest hope, time, and energy in our interventions deserve more than memories of engagement. They deserve structures that outlast our presence, relationships that continue after our departure, and capacities that enable them to control their own futures. They deserve practice that takes temporality seriously, redistributes authority genuinely, prepares facilitators adequately, and evaluates outcomes reciprocally. The question that must haunt every practitioner, every funder, every institution that claims to serve communities through theatre is this: After we leave, what remains? If the answer is nothing, the work is not yet done.

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