

Dimensions of Participation in Theatre for Development: Lessons from Mubi and Kano, Nigeria

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Abstract

Participation has become the cornerstone of any Theatre for Development (TfD) exercise. In whatever form, the involvement of communities in the process of engaging theatre for their development has come to be seen as the surest guarantee of the success and sustainability of any project. Participation is crucial because people need to own the process and determine its outcome for any TfD project to be considered meaningful. This fundamental criterion has shaped the perception of participation into a bifurcated view; participation in development and participatory development. While the latter is seen as the ultimate approach, in the sense that communities take control of the process of their development, the former is considered a cosmetic involvement of a community in order to drive them to preconceived goals. This would suggest that participation in development is merely a mechanical device for initiating pretentious participation. This paper, however, highlights the advantages of such an approach, drawing from two case studies in Adamawa and Kano States, Nigeria, while considering its characteristic strategies for genuine participation. It uses the qualitative method of participant observation and interview to underscore the effectiveness of participation in development in community mobilisation and action. The study finds that although participation is crucial in TfD, development is not necessarily an intrinsic outcome; participation does not guarantee development. There are solutions that can only come from outside of the limits of a people's knowledge and knowledge systems and leading people towards such information does not make them any less in control of their lives. The following is the framework of the relationship between participation and development: while participation may not automatically guarantee development, development can hardly be achieved without it. The paper argues that, irrespective of where development originates, people's participation is important for its acceptability and sustainability. It recommends that communities participate in development processes, whether from within or without, as they stand to be the beneficiaries of such interventions.

Keywords: Participation, Participation in Development, Participatory Development, Theatre for Development, Sustainability

Introduction

It is the changing perceptions of participation that have shaped what Theatre for Development (TfD) has become. The deep desire, and attempts, to truly establish a process of popular theatre in which, as Willet (1964) reported, Brecht had declared, “the people take over” has been reflected in the various manifestations of what has now culminated in TfD, today. Initially, the goal was to consider the people as the theatre's recipients by bringing it to them, irrespective of its content. Then, it was to include the people in the process of determining the form and content of theatrical representation, drawing from their existential realities and cultural modes of production in the orchestration of the theatrical. The fundamental shift between these two is that the people are no longer mere recipients of an external production, but that they become critical to determining the form and content of the theatre.

The third is the attempt to get the people to provide the spur and tempo for the theatre that emanates from the totality of their ways of life. In this instance, the ideal is that people, without external prompting, employ their cultural systems, which carry everyone along, to initiate and harness a forum of belonging and change. In a manner of speaking, it is a return to the pristine nature of the theatre, popular by its own character, which Boal (1979) had described as “free people singing in the open.” Abah (2013, p. 31) suggested that, “This stage is perhaps the desired destination/goal in the practice. It is the stage at which the people themselves begin to make theatre, about their own selves and their problems. Theatre at this point becomes an integral medium in the development process.” Theatre thereby becomes an instrumental medium for participatory communication which Singhal (2001) described “as a dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups, and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realise their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare.”

At the base of these transitions is the contention that participation is empowerment for self-expression and self-determination, and that this leads to sustainable development. According to Mela and Bello (2023, p. 48), “Development in any community is determined by the level of involvement of the immediate citizenry who come together with the common goal of improving their social, economic, political, educational and cultural wellbeing for a better livelihood. Thus, people’s participation is an indispensable element for effective community development.” Aldegheiy, Alosaimi and Alotaibi (2024, p.377) have also submitted that “Community participation is the backbone of any developmental effort aimed at improving the quality of life for citizens at social, financial and cultural levels”. Participation is crucial to community development.

Literature review: exploring participation and participatory development

Although various researchers have identified different methods of participation in community development (Norad, 2013; Abah, 2013), two basic approaches to the involvement of the people have evolved from this argument; participatory development and participation in development.

Connell (1997) and Rahnema (2020) have defined participatory development as a process in which individuals and communities are actively involved in the planning, implementation, and assessment of development efforts that affect them. It is a process that ensures local ownership of development projects. Habib (2022, p. 88) noted that:

Participatory development can take many forms, such as community meetings, focus groups, workshops and other forms of consultation. These methods can be used to gather information, assess needs, identify problems and develop solutions.... This means that community members should have control over the development projects that affect them and that the solutions developed should be sustainable in the long term. Involving stakeholders in the development process can also lead to greater accountability, as stakeholders are more likely to support and maintain a project if they have been involved in its planning and implementation.... Participatory development is a process where individuals and communities actively participate in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development projects that affect them.

Participatory development means that the people are at the core of all the stages of the development project; from conception to evaluation and monitoring. The temper and tempo of the development exercise are within and under their control. They determine the cultural/theatrical form of expression as communication and the content to be communicated towards a common goal of purgation (development).

The other approach is participation in development. This term is often used to refer to the cosmetic inclusion of community members in the development process. It is considered a simulated, passive and usually manipulative approach adopted by some external agents of development to create an impression of involvement in order to ‘sell’ their agenda in a community. Counterintuitively, this approach is accused of initiating/conceiving development themes and action plans outside the community and engaging community members only as recipients of interventions that uplift their lives and wellbeing. According to Norad (2013), “External agents define problems and information gathering processes and so control analysis.... External agencies encourage participation to meet predetermined objectives.”

Participatory development and participation in development have, however, problematised the seemingly innocent concepts of participation and intervention as almost antithetical notions. While TfD is often a coalescing of animateurs from outside of the community with actors from within the said community, participation is internally motivated but interventions come from outside. Therefore, Prentki (2015, pp.27-28) is right to worry about “the appropriate point of balance, the fulcrum” between the two, especially as TfD is “trying to free itself from message delivery by discovering strategies for genuine participation” (p. 23). In a sense, genuine participation hints at the methods found in participatory development while participation in

development gestures towards intervention. But, can an intervention inspire genuine participation? What, in the first place, is genuine participation?

Perhaps, Afolabi's (2016; 2017; 2026) iteration of participation as both a noun and a verb becomes imperative in mitigating the fissures of what may constitute genuine participation. Participation as verb, according to him, describes 'the process of *doing*' without empowering the participants in a process of action learning and capacity building to effect change. This resonates with the (mis)conception of participation in development as a ritual of activity without action, after all, it is perceived as "an external force that needs to be exerted on the people" (Afolabi 2017, p. 68). Participation as noun, on the other hand:

...is concerned with the *becoming* – the final outcome of the process. Participation and involvement engage the people beyond the surface value of mere doing to making effective and effectual decisions that will ultimately be implemented. This is imperative because the model engenders a bottom-top approach and seeks to push the here and now of participation to the public spheres where decisions are made. I believe that the ultimate form of participation is turning the people into shareholders, and partners with authority for a communal benefit. It is engaging people's participation to the point of exerting political power to initiate transformation where need.... (Afolabi 2016, p. 206).

While participation as noun would readily present itself as typical of participatory development, it goes beyond such sentimental tagging. Framing participation as 'name' shifts the preconceived notions of participation in development and participatory development as opposites, and presents a current lens of reality which calls participation the actual doing and not the perception of it as it occurs in the present. In another way of saying, how participation is executed in participation in development goes a long way in making it crucial and authentic to the development process, and its approaches.

In her ladder of participation, Sherry R. Arnstein (1969) had highlighted citizen control as the highest rung of participation. By this, she referred to people's ownership as genuine

participation. Afolabi (2026) corroborates this and further problematizes its implications when he submits that:

An efficient participatory process would uphold human dignity and give power and control to the people involved. Self-consciously, such understanding of participation will query: who sets the tone for participation? Who decides what to participate in, and who determines and selects whom to participate? Who is included and excluded? When do we participate, and how? These questions and more can help recenter participation not as a tool but as an essential ingredient to democratic and collective creation (pp.34-35)

These questions directly query the tactics and approaches of participation in development. But participation in development is not necessarily a dehumanising approach that only pretends to be participatory. In fact, and this is the core argument of this article, the notion that development cannot come from outside of a community, or that community members cannot be presented with alternative knowledge systems, attitudes and behaviours for the betterment of their total existence, is false and quite implausible. Introducing new perceptions and technologies of navigating life from the outside to a people clearly aware, but rather helpless, in their situation, is a noble form of participation and development, so long no one is forced to act under duress.

Development, in the context of this paper, is the improvement of lives in a manner that humanises people. Harry Truman's significant inaugural speech in 1949, which advocated for the transfer of the advancement and technology of developed nations to the underdeveloped ones, has continued to shape discourses around development. The later identification of the centrality of recipients of such advancements, in all their dignity and capabilities to initiate, take over, own and express systems and attitudes, defines the parameters of, and for, development. Development, therefore, is not in the material *per se* but in the becoming, the transformation that gives such material a place of relevance among a people.

In a manner of speaking, development is participation. And theatre, which is characteristically a participatory gesture, is a significant pivot in the development process. Theatre is for development. In fact, Prentki (2015) had submitted that TfD manifests “as an art form that is concerned primarily with the art of living: supporting participants and audiences in the quest to realise what it means to be human and exploring through theatre ways of making the best of it” (p. 4). Participation in development offers its own unique dimensions in advocating for change from an outside-conceived agenda to inside-appropriated processes and eventual ownership of interventions. It is this very view that inspires the choice of the two experiments that are presented here; the Theatre for Development exercise in Mubi, Adamawa State and the street theatre project in Kano State, both of which drew their spur from initiatives outside of the communities.

Participating in Shit Drama for Development: The Mubi Case

At the behest of the Adamawa State Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Agency (AD-RUWASSA), the Nigeria Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) found its way to Mubi with the aim of implementing a local government area-wide engagement, sensitisation and awareness campaign on open defecation. This stemmed from the pervasive practice of open defecation, which the agency wanted to stop through participatory communication, attitudinal change and the adoption of safe practices to ensure sustainability. As a member of the team, I rely on participant observation and interviews as methods to analyse the process and assess participation in development as a viable approach for communication and development.

AD-RUWASSA had conducted a baseline study which revealed, in alarming proportions, the rampant practice of open defecation in Mubi and its environs. To curtail the consequences of such practices, the NPTA team was invited with a preconceived agenda to dissuade the communities from open defecation and through participatory methods, leading them towards alternative and

healthy behaviours. One of the arguments against participation in development is that the agenda is often set from outside of the community and its people. In this case, the government set the agenda, recognising that its people were in danger and required immediate intervention, but not without their involvement. Hence, the NPTA, as part of its mandate on this project, worked closely with Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) committees at the community level. Away from the general members of the community, but still within the community, NPTA and WASH committees came together for a three-day workshop. The aim of the workshop was to collectively develop strategies and approaches that would best communicate with the larger community in a participatory manner. The team adopted Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS).

According to Kidd (2013);

CLTS is a new approach to “trigger” large-scale community action to improve sanitation.... CLTS uses a series of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) activities, including role playing, to challenge communities to stop open defecation. It uses a community forum to get the whole community discussing what they want to do as a community about open defecation and agreeing on an action plan to get everyone to stop defecating in the open and build some toilets.... CLTS emphasises the collective benefit from stopping open defecation. It gets the whole community to make a change, rather than focusing on individual behaviour change. Everyone has to stop shitting in the bush if everyone is to benefit. CLTS uses a self-reliance approach – so there are no latrine subsidies and CLTS does not prescribe specific latrine models. Households collect their own materials (e.g. poles, thatching grass and mud) and each household decides itself the kind of latrine it wants to build (p.197).

This shows that CLTS is driven towards helping people recognise their problems and leading them towards ‘self-reliance’ in the manner they collectively decide to adopt. This is characteristic of participation in development. It does not prescribe or provide tokens to communities; it opens their eyes, through participatory approaches, to evident problems which they were previously not directly conscious of. The intervention of the team from outside becomes merely a catalytic trigger, for the people to take over the processes of their own development.

To foreground the dangers of open defecation and graphically capture the process of transmission of faeces to sickness, the F-diagram was presented during the workshop. This F-diagram shows the pathways of faeces to the mouth, from one host to another. It highlights the six (6) Fs, which include faeces, fingers, flies, fields, fluids, and food. It also shows how preventive hygienic practices could break the F-flow through use of toilets, safe water, hygiene and handwashing. The team, after a comprehensive engagement with the F-Diagram, decided to represent this in dramatic form to be shown to the larger community. This decision was reached because the participants recognised the capacity of drama to simplify complex issues, sustain attention through its entertainment value, provide easy access to information and serve as a forum for interaction.

The WASH committee improvised a drama which tells the story of a man who, on his way home, meets his friend coming out of a roadside bush after defecating there. His friend tells him that he was feeling uneasy and he had to relieve himself. They shake hands in salutation, and he requests for kola nuts from his friend who has just returned from defecating. The friend reaches into his pocket, cuts the kolanut and hands a part of it to him. He collects it and throws it into his mouth, thanking his friend as he walks home. At home, he suddenly becomes sick and keeps running to the back of his house to stool. His wife prepares herbs for him, but with no respite in sight., they decide to go to the hospital where he is admitted and treated. The nurses in the hospital then step forward and engage the audience by asking them to identify the behaviours they had observed in the skit that could have led to his sickness and what they needed to do to prevent such occurrences. Some of the members of the audience realised that they have been eating one another's faeces and this has to stop through proper hygienic practices. Another member of the audience highlighted the

significance of each member of the community having toilets in their homes, because as long as one person openly defecates, no one is safe.

From their comments and observations during the post-performance dialogue, it is evident that the community recognised the drama as necessary and topical. The people's voices were amplified through the trigger of the drama in a way that demonstrated its efficacy while revealing their deep concern to openly share their views and opinions on the issue of open defecation. Although the whole process was not their initiative, the realisation that the drama reflected their behaviours, revealing actions and consequences, inspired them to admit their mistakes and pledge to do better by adopting safer hygienic practices. After the drama, the community collectively resolved to embark on individual tasks of building toilets in their homes and adopting safe water and other hygienic behaviours moving forward.

Long after this intervention was conducted, AD-RUWASSA confirmed that Mubi South, the location of the exercise, had achieved Zero Open Defecation status. Although the NPTA team was not directly involved in the monitoring and evaluation phase of the project, the confirmation goes a long way in showing that people do not necessarily have to be the initiators or drivers of a development process but can assume an equal status by becoming initiates of projects that improve their lives and guarantee its sustainability having been active enough to claim ownership of its benefits through changed behaviour.

Performing Women's Rights: The Kano Experience

The Yar'adua Foundation contracted Arojah Royal Theatre for a community theatre advocacy project on women's inclusion in governance and Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Kano. The goal was to work with Community Based Organisations (CBO's), especially theatre practitioners

resident in the two communities within the project's scope: Fagge and Wudil Local Government Areas (LGAs). The project sought to communicate, through dramatic form, the importance of women's inclusion in governance, as well as the impact and manifestations of GBV on the development of society. The Arojah team, under which I served as a member, developed a script to capture the thematic focus of the project, which was approved by the Foundation. The script, of course, captured the flora and fauna of Kano, including names of characters, culture and cultural materials, language, religion and setting. The script was developed outside the contribution of local participants, however, they were at liberty, especially during the rehearsals, to edit wherever they found appropriate.

This is important to note because local participants and residents did not initiate the process nor did they determine the area of focus for the project. They were invited into a preconceived goal but were given the freedom to amend the script and the process, characteristic of participation in development. This flexibility gives them a sense of control and ownership. For instance, the twins in the script were initially named Hassan and Hassana. The local participants, knowing the culture of naming in Hausa society, quickly noted that twins are not named with the same variants but could instead be Hassana and Hussein or Hassan and Hussein. This local knowledge, among others, was respected and accepted by the Arojah team. This approach addressed the usual worry and fear about interventions that come from outside the community. Prentki (2015) had noted that such "projects took no account of the expressed needs of the so-called beneficiaries whose voice went either unsought or ignored.... Due to factors such as lack of participation... much of the well-intentioned work of development agencies was viewed with cynicism" (p.10). The power to alter and refocus the script to fit into cultural, even religious considerations, while performing in it, took care of the concern for lack of participation and consequent cynicism.

The play tells the story of Hassana, a primary school teacher, who has decided to run in the upcoming elections for the position of the local government chairman. She encounters great opposition and ridicule from the community due to the common belief in the community that women of virtue should not participate in politics. Infuriated by the community's stigma and the accusation that her husband does not have control over his household because of her participation in politics, Hassana's husband vehemently rejects her candidacy. However, with the support of her twin brother, Hussein, and, even more crucially, her mother-in-law, who had raised her son as a single mother after the demise of his father. The husband was eventually persuaded on the merits and legitimacy of his wife's qualification and good deeds to support her. While campaigning from household to household, Hassana discovers that many women are living under conditions of GBV and galvanizes the women to support her candidacy as part of ways to mitigate, and ultimately end the menace.

The audience was quick to develop an intense empathy for Hassana in the drama. They also found her husband ridiculous at the beginning. They pointed out the importance of having women active participation in politics. In fact, one of the members of audience, during the post-production interaction, stated that:

It is important that we give women a chance. We have been trying men for so long and where has this led us? Corruption, rigging and no development. If we give women a chance, we will get better accountability because women take care of our homes and the children. Our hospitals will be better equipped because women visit hospitals, as caregivers, more than men. They know what we need. In this LGA (Wudil), it is a woman who is serving as local administrator. We all can testify to

the good things she has been able to bring to our community within a short time.

Women deserve a chance in governance, we have tested and we trust them.

The importance of this is that when women become the subject of community theatre, a gendered dimension to development is triggered. The representation of women's issues, especially their inalienable rights, in drama spills into a discourse on the desired manifestation of such rights in real life. If it enters the talk, it can be walked, in a manner of speaking. The performance of women's rights led another male member of the audience, to openly admit that:

The husband in this play and the community represent the beliefs we have held for so long which have denied us the development we need as a people. The traditions that do not serve us have held us back for too long. So many women have contributed immensely to the development of their societies. Why must our own be different? Just because people will talk, the man is ashamed to allow his wife bring so many benefits to us. May Allah bless his mother who insisted that he must never discourage his wife from pursuing her dreams. We must encourage our daughters to go to school. Women who have excelled in their fields should also be encouraged to grow round our schools to motivate our girl children. The world is changing and we must support our women to join politics.

The level of acceptance this drama received, given its thematic focus, is most commendable. The notion that development must be triggered from within the community is not necessarily a precondition for the acceptance or ownership of a development project. In fact, for the Kano project, follow up revealed that a political party fielded a woman to run in the local government chairmanship election, the first of such instance in the political history of Kano state. While this may not be a direct consequence of the drama, it does reveal changing perceptions around the

inclusion of women in governance. Moreover, denying women the opportunity to participate and exercise their rights to vote and be voted for constitutes gender-based violence.

The Question of Sustainability: Reflections and Projections

Afolabi's bifurcated perception of participation is essentially to ensure sustainability. Rather than being a one-off occurrence, participation must remain continuous if development is to be achieved.

This is where the verb and the noun combine. According to him:

Participation should be an active means/tool (verb) to enhance a human agency that is in a constant state of becoming (noun) for the emancipation of the people. If these two perspectives are explored symbiotically and relationally, participation should pose as an effective and affective tool to engender a sustainable social movement that will bring about systemic change *for* and *by* the people (Afolabi 2017, p. 69).

Development projects, whether they adopt participatory development approaches or participation in development methods, ultimately seek sustainability as the primary goal. The success, or otherwise, of such projects is assessed, not necessarily by the depth of participation at every stage, but most essentially by how much the goal of the project is achieved and sustained. In fact, the whole idea of participation in TfD and other community engagement strategies is to ensure sustainability. Monitoring and evaluation therefore become critical criterion for any serious development project that is people-inclusive and/or people-centred to measure sustainability. According to Obasi (2025, p. 107), "Without Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), it is difficult to ascertain the worth or merit of a project and also its impact and sustainability." But what exactly is sustainability?

Bassey and Etika (2019) stated that development is sustainable when it meets the current needs of a people without compromising the ability of future generations from achieving theirs. For

them, sustainability makes room for the future while ensuring that present objectives are achieved. Yusuf, Adekunmi and Ayanda (2020, p. 140) submit that, “Project sustainability relate both the behaviours of end users towards sustaining the operations of the project and the continuation of the project services after its completion.” This suggests that sustainability occurs when a community owns the development process and stays true and committed to the ideals and objectives of the project. But how exactly does sustainability manifest itself?

For the Mubi project, sustainability reveals itself in the people: their realisation and resolve to be deliberate about their behaviours around defecation led to the reported attainment of Zero Open Defecation status. This was a consequence of sustained behavioural change. The people, having realised that they had been eating and drinking their shit, made a conscious effort to change this unhealthy behaviour. If such behavioural change is sustained, then the intervention can be regarded as having achieved a measure of sustainability. In the case of Kano, women have started coming out to contest for elections. A political party fielded a woman to contest on the card of the party. The local government administrator is a woman. Sustainability, in this instance, does not automatically translate to women winning party tickets to contest but rather the continued willingness of women to unrelentingly make efforts to put themselves out there for participation in governance and politics. While winning the ticket to contest is a proof of success, consistent insistence on being a part of the political process is a greater success. Ultimately, development is participation, and participation goes beyond being involved in projects to embodying ideas that shape behaviours which do not compromise the personal and collective, present and future, wellbeing of a people.

Conclusion

The key to sustainability is participation. Development projects and communication strategies, like TfD, thrive by constantly evolving ways that would engender greater involvement from the people who are the end-users of development. While it is ideal for communities to initiate the process and goals of development and also determine each stage of its evolution, most development projects originate outside the community. In this case, it is the responsibility of the visiting team to ensure that members of the community are involved enough to takeover, thereby providing a good chance for the sustainability of such exercise.

This article reveals that participation in development can serve as a viable means of leading a community towards recognizing problems they may hitherto have been unaware of. The two experiences from Mubi, in Adamawa state and Kano, Kano state, demonstrate that development can be triggered from outside and the community, by accepting the intervention, can galvanize themselves into sustainable development. Whether it stems from within or without, the participation of a community in the development process leads to ownership and sustenance of such a development.

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