

THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AS A PARTICIPATORY TOOL FOR COMMUNITY MOBILISATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Dr. Toryila Akor
tagtoryila@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 0302

Accepted Date: 17/02/2026

Published Date: 29/04/2026

Type: Research

ABSTRACT

Theatre for Development (TfD) has emerged as a vital participatory communication strategy for addressing social challenges within grassroots communities in Benue State. This paper examines the effectiveness of Theatre for Development (TfD) as a tool for community mobilization, dialogue, and social change in rural communities. Anchored on Participatory theatre theory and Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization, the research adopts a qualitative approach, largely utilising observation, interviews, and participatory performance analysis from a TfD intervention workshop conducted at Rice Mill community, Gboko, Benue State. Findings reveal that TfD is a tool that encourages collective problem identification, strengthens community dialogue, participation, and enhances awareness of socio-economic and governance-related issues aimed at positive social change. The study further establishes that when community members are actively involved in the theatrical process from advocacy and story creation to performance, there is a greater sense of ownership and sustained impact. The paper concludes that Theatre for Development remains a relevant and powerful approach to grassroots mobilisation for any action to create a social change for development especially in rural communities in Nigeria and recommends its increased integration into community development policies and programmes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Theatre for Development, Participatory Theatre, Community Mobilisation, Social Change, Benue State.

Introduction

Theatre has long functioned as a powerful medium for communication, education, and social reflection for transformation within human societies. In Nigeria, and particularly in Benue State, traditional performance forms such as music, dance, and folktales have historically been used to transmit knowledge, wisdom, reinforce communal values, address social issues and establish communication. Ikyagh and Biam aver that “African theatre generally are usually affected by the socio-cultural beliefs, philosophical setting and modes of communication” (119). Building on this indigenous performance heritage, an aspect of theatre known as Theatre for Development (TfD) emerged as an applied theatre practice, aimed at using participatory performance to stimulate dialogue, raise consciousness, and promote collective action within communities for positive change. Rachael Diang’a, Charles Kebaya, and Wangari Mwai agreed that:

In order to spur transformation in society, a number of theatre forms have emerged such as Theatre for Development (TfD), Community Theatre, Theatre in Education (TIE), popular theatre, Theatre for social change, Theatre of Necessity, and Participatory theatre. (108)

Theatre for Development (TfD) diverges significantly from conventional proscenium theatre in its objectives and methodology. Rather than focusing on entertainment and information, TfD emphasizes participation, problem identification, and empowerment of community members. Mohammed and Ihidero stressed that, TfD “Theatre for development is capable of integrating indigenous and popular systems of communication that exist already in communities through which engaging the community at any level and time becomes less cumbersome than other community engagements approaches.” (97). It seeks to give voice to marginalized groups by involving them directly in the creation and performance of theatrical content that reflects their lived experiences. Boh agrees that, “the distinguishing feature of Theatre for Development is the active participation of people in creating their own culture...” (48). Through this process, theatre becomes a platform for dialogue and negotiation, enabling communities to critically examine social, economic, and political challenges affecting their development.

In Benue State of Nigeria, persistent issues such as poor community participation in development programmes, weak public and community engagements, apathy for non-inclusion in government projects, health-related programmes, and social inequalities have continued to undermine sustainable development efforts made by some development agencies and international organisations. Many development initiatives have failed largely because they exclude the target beneficiaries from decision-making processes, assertiveness, excessive hegemony and attitude. This smears the interest of the community members to the projects hence the need to use TfD as a tool for mobilisation. However, Sokpo and Yakubu emphasized that “Theatre for Development (TfD) as an appendage of theatre or rather as a brand of theatre practice is a strategy as well as methodology, used to engage members of a selected community and stakeholders in the processes of development” (4). They stressed that, the projects or programmes of development at rural communities will be “most effective” when it involves the stakeholders and communities, combining with the techniques of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). Theatre for Development offers a gateway, it uses people-centred approach that prioritizes grassroots mobilization and participation in the local language and knowledge of the community members in addressing the identified challenges. Laide and Ajayi agree that “Theatre for Development offers a practical and theoretical exploration of the ways in which the arts can be used by communities to create social transformation” (299). The art is flexible such that it speaks all languages peculiar to its origin, and this is the way TfD has projected many successful programmes across the world and indeed, Benue State.

Despite the growing body of literature on applied theatre, there remains a need for more pragmatic efforts that examine how Theatre for Development functions as a participatory tool for community mobilization and social change in specific Nigerian contexts. This paper therefore, examines the effectiveness of Theatre for Development in mobilising communities, encouraging dialogue, and fostering social awareness and behavioural change. By examining participatory theatre intervention at Rice Mill community of Gboko, Benue State which was carried out by some postgraduate students of Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi on 12th day of December, 2025, the paper contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on the relevance of theatre as a catalyst for inclusive development in Benue State and of course, Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives

The aim set out for the study was to examine the efficacy of Theatre for Development (TfD) as a tool for community mobilization, dialogue, and social change in rural communities, with the following objectives:

1. To investigate how Theatre for Development promotes community mobilization and participation in identifying and addressing issues in rural communities;
2. To assess the role of Theatre for Development in mobilizing rural community members towards collective action for development;
3. To evaluate the impact of Theatre for Development on community members attitudes and behaviours in rural communities for a social change.

Area of Study

The study was conducted at Rice Mill community, located in Gboko West, of Mbayion, Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State. The community is saturated with rice milling equipment and has been a hub for large parboiled rice business for over 5 decades. According to James Aker, a mill owner and community member, the community houses about 300 rice mills, some with modern equipment like dehusker, destoner, colour-sorter and modern parboiling system, while many other businesses are also established in within the rice business community. Community houses are built within the area which now wears a semi-urban outfit with a large population.

Theoretical Context

This paper is anchored on Participatory theatre theory and Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization. According to Asante:

“Participatory Theatre is that kind of theatre, which involves the active participation of all community members. It is a community-based media, which employs the people's own indigenous art forms like drumming, songs, myths, and other popular cultural elements to enhance the dramatic presentation process” (17).

The Participatory theatre theory emphasises breaking the traditional barrier, and allowing the audience to be involved in performances to explore social issues interactively. In so doing, audiences are no longer passive spectators but become active participants “spect-actors” as their actions shape the narratives of the performance. (<https://www.carefullcourses.com/researchers/participatory-theatre---unit-1?utm>) Participatory theatre uses techniques like forum theatre in the process of production. Asante further stressed that, “Participation evokes the community members' interest in the decision-making process towards the realization of the development agenda. Through active and democratic participation, a sense of community ownership is created for the development outcome” (15). At every stage of the community engagement beginning from advocacy which the facilitators go to communities for permission and data collection, the second stage is the problems identification and drama building while the last stage is the intervention. Participatory approach must be adopted at all levels, it “gives power and strength to community members to take charge of their developmental needs as far as they can.” (Asante, 16). This is imperative

because the community members understand the topography and needs of their communities more than the strangers.

Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization is a transformative framework for understanding and addressing social issues and oppression. Freire developed this unique model of education which is widely known as "Conscientization". Kishan avers that Freire's "Conscientization" is a process of critical consciousness-raising through dialogue, reflection, and action. Freire believed that education should be a tool for liberation. The theory is a cornerstone of Freire's philosophy of education, which empowers individuals to critically develop understanding of their social, political and economic reality and their ability to transform that reality. It addresses oppression as society is generally characterized by oppression where dominant groups and individuals maintain power by marginalizing and oppressing others. Tfd conscientise, mobilise and empower individuals and group to take action for positive change.

Theatre as a Medium for Dialogue and Critical Reflection

Generally, theatre serves as a profound medium for critical reflection, transcending entertainment to become a powerful tool for social engagement and transformation. Through this unique ability to weave together narrative, performance, and audience interaction, theatre creates a space where diverse voices can be heard, and complex issues can be explored. In this dynamic environment, participants are invited to confront their beliefs, challenge societal norms, and engage in meaningful conversations about pressing social issues. The immediacy of live performance fosters a shared experience that encourages empathy and understanding, allowing audiences to see the world through different perspectives.

Besides, theatre stimulates critical reflection by presenting scenarios that provoke thought and inspire inquiry. It encourages individuals to question their assumptions, and reflect on their roles within their communities and society at large. This process of reflection is essential for personal and collective growth, as it empowers individuals to take informed action and act for positive change. Therefore, theatre is not just a reflection of society; it is a catalyst for dialogue and critical reflection, fostering a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. By harnessing the transformative power of theatre, we can cultivate a culture of open dialogue, promote social awareness and inspire meaningful change that can develop our communities.

Tfd is a type of theatre that harnesses the art to engage communities in dialogue, reflection and action on social issues to create positive change, to this end, community members are required to be part of the intervention processes by breaking the barrier between the performers and the audience, allowing for direct interaction and dialogue. August Boal's concept of Spect-actors breaks the barriers between audience and actors and encouraged the spectators to intervene in the process of the performance and become active performers. There was high level of community participation throughout the Theatre for Development intervention process. Community members were actively involved in problem identification, story development, rehearsals, and performance. Rather than functioning as passive spectators, participants contributed personal experiences that shaped the narrative content of the performances. This participatory approach fostered a sense of ownership and relevance, as the issues dramatized were directly linked to the lived realities of the people. Asante and Yirenkyi agrees and stressed that "Theatre for Development employs the use of indigenous language of the community under engagement. This feat raises the level of inclusiveness among most community members; who most often feel a sense of ownership of the development process" (594).

Participatory Theatre and Community Engagement: The Rice Mill, Gboko experience

Engaging the participants of any theatrical performance to form part of the production has linked the theatre with communities and provided insights in activating their consciousness

to solving their problems. Diang'a, Kebaya, and Mwai posits that “the community becomes the impetus for change” (111). At the Tfd intervention carried out at Rice Mill community, Gboko West on 12th day of December, 2025 and facilitated by Postgraduate students of the Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi (formerly Benue State University), members of the community were mobilised to participate in the production where the issue of youth delinquent behavior was addressed with a synthesis list of effects which include (i) lack of parental care (ii) Social and family dysfunction (iii) Disunity in the family (iv) Negative influence of mothers on the children (v) Abuse of technological knowledge and (vi) Poverty, among other things. This data was presented and analysed on Problem Tree, captured the root causes and solutions as drama skits were acted with community members playing major roles.

The facilitators arrived at the community with a troupe that mobilised the community members with their songs and dances to gather at the arena within Rice Mill Gboko, that was provided by one of the community members Joshua Atume. One hundred and two (102) participants graced the intervention comprising of men of different ages, women and children who actively participated in the performance.

Discussion of Findings from the Tfd Intervention

Theatre for Development (Tfd) is an effective platform for dialogue and critical reflection within the communities. Post-performance discussions provided opportunities for audience members to interrogate the issues presented, to express diverse opinions, and propose possible solutions that could make positive impact. These interactive sessions transformed the performances from mere dramatic presentations into forums for communal dialogue and reflections that provoked emotions. Some key findings from the intervention include:

i) Participants willingness to make a difference:

The Post-Performance Discussions showed that participants were more willing to speak openly about the social issues when they were presented through drama, expressing their first hand experiences. The use of familiar language, (Tiv) with a blend of humour, songs, and local performance styles reduced tension and encouraged free expression. Many confessed and expressed gratitude to the facilitators for making the intervention in their community which has “opened a new chapter” in their lives. This reinforces the view that theatre, when grounded in indigenous aesthetics and its participatory, creates a safe space for dialogue and collective problem-solving, thereby enhancing community cohesion.

Some community members reported changes in attitudes and intentions following the theatre intervention. These included increased willingness to change the way they discipline their children, concentrate on building better homes, participate in community activities, and ensure proper upbringing of their children with good sense of responsibility. Although behavioural change is a gradual process, it is established that Theatre for Development initiated critical thinking and dialogue that could lead to long-term transformation, and it is hoped that, the impact assessment would produce impressive results.

ii) Audience engagement and emotional response:

Findings also revealed strong audience engagement during the performances. Community members demonstrated emotional responses such as laughter, empathy, and critical reactions to characters and situations portrayed on stage. Through critical observation, these emotional responses were significant, as they indicated audience identification with the issues and characters represented. It was observed further that, emotional engagement played a crucial role in sustaining audience interest and stimulating reflection. Participants reported that seeing their daily struggles enacted on stage made the issues more realistic, thought-provoking, palpable and easier to understand. This supports the assertion by applied theatre scholars that emotional involvement is central to theatre's effectiveness as a tool for awareness creation and social learning. Furthermore, this underscore the significance of the participatory theory.

Post-Performance Discussions, observation and interviews with community members indicated that their involvement in the creative performance process enhanced their understanding of the social issues addressed and strengthened their commitment to collective action. This supports the participatory theatre process advocated by Theatre for Development practitioners, which emphasizes community ownership as a prerequisite for meaningful social change. The results also aligns with Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization, where critical awareness was developed through dialogue and collective reflection. Many participants confessed to their inadequacies and laxity that promotes delinquent behaviours of some of their children, however, their resolve to take bold steps to change their attitudes entails that, conscientization has played a pivotal role in their process of change.

A member of the community, Orseer Agber in a personal interview confessed that, if he was not mobilised and or invited to attend the intervention, he would not have known that, allowing children at tender age to move about without caring for them is harmful to the children and the entire family. Also, Mrs. Torkwase Juku popularly known as "Mummy Joy" who does petty rice business at the rice mill stated that, she wakes up very early and leaves her little children in the care of her elderly daughter; her closing time from the mill is usually 6:00pm daily, and this has affected her so much that her first daughter leaned on this opportunity to become wayward. She later got pregnant without having a husband.

Challenges encountered during the Tfd Intervention

Despite the overall success of the Theatre for Development intervention, certain challenges were identified. These included initial resistance from some community members who were unfamiliar with participatory theatre methods, time constraints due to participants' daily economic activities, and limited material resources for staging performances. However, these challenges were gradually mitigated through continuous engagement, trust-building, and flexibility in scheduling activities. It is noted that, while Theatre for Development is effective, its success depends largely on patience, humility, adequate planning, vigorous community sensitization, and sustained support from other facilitators and stakeholders. Looking at the challenges encountered, they did not significantly undermine the effectiveness of the intervention, rather, they highlighted the importance of adaptability, resilience, commitment and continuous engagement in participatory theatre practice.

Conclusion

This paper examined Theatre for Development (Tfd) as a participatory tool for community mobilisation and social change in Nigeria. Drawing from Rice Mill community field-based qualitative data, the study demonstrated that, Theatre for Development promotes active community participation, facilitates dialogue, and enhances awareness of social issues. By involving community members in the creative and performative processes for an action for a positive change, Theatre for Development (Tfd) fosters a sense of ownership that strengthens its impact and sustainability. The work reveals that theatre's emotional and dialogic qualities make it an effective medium for engaging communities and stimulating critical reflection.

In conclusion, Theatre for Development (Tfd) remains a relevant and powerful approach to grassroots mobilisation and social transformation in Nigeria as demonstrated by the Rice Mill intervention. When grounded in participation, cultural relevance, and rural community dialogue, Theatre for Development transcends its conscientization function to become a catalyst for inclusive development and positive social change in all development programmes that are created for social change.

Recommendations for Tfd practice, Communities, Institutions and Development Agencies

The findings of this study offer important suggestions for Tfd practice, community development, and policy formulation in Nigeria. For theatre practitioners, it reinforces the need to adopt participatory approaches that prioritize community involvement at all stages of the

intervention process with absolute patience. Therefore, Theatre for Development interventions should not be treated as a performance or process imposed on communities per se, but as a collaborative process that values indigenous knowledge, experiences, and cultural expressions to arrive at targeted research for a positive change this can only be achieved if mobilisation through TfD is done appropriately.

i) For communities targeted for development and non-governmental organisations, the paper highlights Theatre for Development (TfD) as an effective communication and mobilisation strategy to activate consciousness. Its ability to generate dialogue, foster critical reflection, and stimulate collective action makes it a valuable complement to conventional development interventions.

ii) Development agencies can integrate Theatre for Development into awareness campaigns and community engagement programmes to enhance mobilisation, participation and sustainability. It can be seen that, Theatre for Development can serve as a culturally responsive tool for grassroots engagement.

iii) Government agencies and policymakers involved in community development, education, and social orientation can leverage participatory theatre to bridge the communication gap between them and local communities. Recognizing theatre as a development resource rather than mere entertainment may contribute to more inclusive and people-centred development strategies.

Finally, there is need for sustained community engagement, for follow-up of Theatre interventions by continuous engaging and monitoring communities that were engaged in the workshop to ensure that, dialogue and behavioural change initiated through performances are sustained over time.

Works Cited

- Aliyu, Jamila Mohammed and Victor Osae Ihidero “Theatre for Development as tool for Countering Rural Banditry: The Maganda Workshop Experience” African Journal Online (AJOL) <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ntj/article/view/242800/229615>, pp. 97. Downloaded 17th April, 2026
- Asante, Evans and Samuel M. Yirenyi “Engaging communities for development action: The Theatre for Development (TfD) Approach” International Journal of Development and Sustainability ISSN: 2186-8662 – www.isdsnet.com/ijds Volume 7 Number 2 (2018): Pp 594.
- Boal, Augusto “Theatre of the Oppressed” Boal, Augusto. Theatre of the Oppressed. Translated from Spanish by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer. Pluto Press, London. New edition published 2008.
- Boh, Aondowase. Community Conflict Management and Prevention Strategies: The Theatre for Development Paradigm. Gwatex Publishers, Makurdi, 2018, Pp. 48.
- Diang’a Rachael, Charles Kebaya, and Wangari Mwai. “Community Theatre and Development Practices in the Nyanza Region of Kenya” The Journal of Pan African Studies, Vol.8, No.6, September 2015. Pp. 108, 111.
- Evans Asante. “From Theory to Practice: The Process of Participatory Theatre in Community Development” Journal of Social Science Studies, Vol. 9, No. 1. 2022. <http://jsss.macrothink.org/> Pp 15-16
- Ikyagh, Paul Terseer and Roberts Biam “The functionality of Oral Narrative amongst the Tiv: A Study of Selected Kwagh-hir Songs” Makurdi Journal of Arts and Culture (MAJAC) Vol. 12, Trinity Media, Makurdi, June, 2014.
- Kishan, Ravi <https://www.socialworkin.com/2023/04/what-is-conscientization-model-of-paulo.html#:~:text=Conscientization>. April 14, 2023, Accessed 18th September, 2024.
- Nasir Taofiq Laide and Ajayi Oluwabunmi Christianah. “Theatre for Development as Catalyst for Empowerment at the grassroots through Cybernetic Pedagogy in selected Ekiti State Communities” Journal of Contemporary Research, [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd 21 \(3\), 2024: 298-314](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/21(3)2024/298-314)
- Sokpo, James Luper and Yakubu, Angell Nguemo “Assessing Democratic Governance Awareness in rural Benue: A Theatre for Development study of Select Communities”. Makurdi Journal of Arts and Culture (MAJAC), Vol. 18, No. 1, Chief Shepherd Publishers, Makurdi, 2023, pp. 4.
<https://www.care-full-courses.com/researchers/participatory-theatre---unit-1?utm>) Accessed 27th February, 2026

Note: Dr. Toryila Akor is a Theatre scholar and researcher with special focus in Theatre for Development (TfD).