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Cooperation in programmes integrated rural water supply and sanitation  
in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh

LEARNING FROM WITHIN

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1. Introduction

When people learn, they remember 20% of what they hear, 40% of what they hear and see and 80% of what they discover by themselves<sup>1</sup>. Communication through theatre is one of the ways to learn from a combination of hearing and seeing, and sometimes from self-discovery. Hence the theme for this presentation: "Learning from within".

At the first workshop on communication through theatre arts in Lucknow in December 1984, the organizer (PSUF) and the participants showed different forms of traditional theatre arts used in modern development programmes to facilitate and stimulate communication. In this second workshop organized by Kerala's SEU from 31 January to 1 February 1996, the sharing process started in the first workshop was continued.

2. The learning process in popular theatre

How has learning through traditional theatre been taking place? In the workshops a wide range of methods was presented.

In some water and sanitation programmes a professional troupe travels to all villages with a standardized play, e.g. a *barakata*. The advantages of such a public performance are that everyone, men, women and children can attend and hear the information. Other means attend communication, such as village assemblies, often do not reach women, because they cannot easily attend and sit far in the back. However, when there is no discussion afterwards, the communication through this type of plays is one-way, with an emphasis on seeing and hearing.

In other cases, the villagers themselves are the performers. Local voluntary groups put up a traditional play or dance, but it is the programme which has prepared the script and which puts in certain messages. These messages are the same for all performances. The villagers can thus not choose their own problems, messages and solutions and the performances take place on the initiative of the programme. However, the capacity to communicate on water, sanitation and local action remains in the village and the groups can perform several times for different and smaller audiences and follow up performances with discussions and action planning.

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<sup>1</sup> Hope, A. and S. Timmel, 1984. Training for Transformation. Gweru. Zimbabwe, Mambo Press

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A number of villages have, with the aid of the programme, formed their own local theatre groups. These groups can play programme-designed plays, but they can also choose their own subjects, prepare their own scripts and make their own shows. The topics may be related to water supply and sanitation, but they may also decide to bring other problems to the attention of the public, such as alcoholism, environmental degradation or female literacy<sup>2</sup>. These performances can be followed by discussions and lead to concerted action by the groups or community concerned. Communication through theatre then goes much farther than just passing on information and may lead to local analysis, action planning and implementation of improvements.

### 3. Who participates in theatre development?

Sometimes the performers have been men, sometimes also include women. In the latter case, the women either act in the background, clapping hands or singing a song, or they participate in the acting itself.

One of the plays from the programme in Karnataka was about the problems of drinking water supply: the hardships of women carrying water, the habits of people defecating near the local pond, other people coming to collect drinking water from this pond. Then the villagers have a political meeting for the election of the pradhan, who requests all -men and women- to vote for him and asks about their needs. The people, especially the women, ask for a water supply and latrines. But when the pradhan has been elected he tells them they don't need these services, because they have the pond. Only when the villagers point out to him that the productivity of their crops suffers, because they are ill too often with diarrhoea does he accept his responsibility and agrees that the village will take part in the design, construction and operation, maintenance and maintenance financing of an improved water supply and local sanitation facilities.

This play was developed by the villagers themselves. It had an all male cast and did not show women in the village meeting and in leadership roles, only as bearers of hardships. However, many other plays were seen to have both actors and actresses and to portray women in meetings and decision making together with men. Several plays also portray men and women in new tasks and show new gender dynamics. For example, men join in cleaning of facilities and women hold roles and get training in maintenance and management.

### 4. What is being learned?

The standardized performances given by a professional troupe or written by project staff for local theatre groups mainly give information and messages which the project selected for the audiences. For example, the performances inform the audience about a coming

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<sup>2</sup> One of the highlights in the Lucknow workshop was the play made and performed by one of the village theatre groups which showed how a young woman was cheated by her father-in-law because she could not read and write and decided to go to a literacy class. The role of the heroin was played by the young woman who had this experience and who acted her won life story.

project and explain what the project experts from the community. Or the performances give information about health and urge people to drop certain bad hygiene practices. In this way the communities get useful information, but it does not create a dialogue about what the communities themselves know, want and are willing to do and instill the kind of local initiative which is one of the elements needed to deal effectively with local operation, maintenance and finance.

Several performances were seen to go beyond giving one-way information on projects and messages on water use, sanitation and hygiene. They had broader development themes like cooperation between people and the responsibilities of the communities for their own development. The central theme is that decisions on village development are made and carried out by the communities to the benefit of all sections in the community and that external projects can help improve local conditions and practices, but cannot manage local change.

There were also performances which did not contain ready solutions, but wanted to make community members and sections think and discuss. These plays stimulate people to use their own wisdom in identifying local problems and to find local solutions. In this way learning takes place not just about the project, hygiene and participatory development, but also in analytical and planning skills. The latter occurs especially when the performances are followed by group discussions and planning sessions and when community organizations exist which can organize implementation.

An important theme highlighted in both workshops is gender. An example of learning on gender are the plays and songs on hygiene. Care for hygiene is traditionally a woman's task, so many plays tend to address only women. But when the division of work between women and men, boys and girls is not taken into account, the hygiene programmes may unwittingly increase the physical workload of women and girls by expanding their work in the preservation of domestic hygiene and the cleanliness around water points to the extent that any savings in time and efforts from a closer and more reliable water supply are nullified.

Men should not be excluded from communication about health, because they are usually the ones who take decisions on investments for labour saving devices such as better latrines and kitchens and on payment for a more regular water supply. And in many cultures it is impossible for women to change sanitation and hygiene behaviours of men. Such a change is necessary, because research has shown that health benefits from improved sanitation only occur at a minimum adoption by 75% of the population<sup>3</sup>.

Themes occurring in several plays are bad hygiene practices also from men and the high demands on workload and privacy from women. Men are then urged to take their responsibilities for supporting physical improvements which reduce these burdens. Other performances show women beside men in roles of control and decision making, e.g. as an effective handpump mechanic or members of the water committee.

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<sup>3</sup> Esrey, S.A. 1994. complementary strategies for decreasing diarrhoea morbidity and mortality: water and sanitation. Paper presented at the Pan American Health Organization, March 2-3.

The performances in the workshops in Lucknow and Trivandrum also learn that in the 'troupes' themselves women and girls can have active roles. In a number of plays, women are scriptmakers, actresses or story-tellers, or they play an instrument in the orchestra, roles they have not held before. They increase their self confidence and skills in expressing themselves and can voice gender concerns and needs to the community and local leaders without personal risks. Such plays show gender to be a dynamic rather than static concept in community development, with the roles of men and women continuing to change over time.

## 5. Conclusions

From the above, several generalizations can be made. These should be checked, wherever possible, by operational research in the field:

- i. Women and men have more equal access to development theatre performances than to formal village meetings. Hence, information in theatre performances reaches more women than information at public meetings.
- ii. Development theatre can introduce new gender concepts and roles of women and men and can have a bearing on changing gender stereotypes.
- iii. Involving women as equal partners in local theatre groups and encouraging them to bring up their own themes and problems in water supply, sanitation, hygiene and village participation promotes the integration of gender aspects in communication.