

"Leh Wi Tok for Change Wi Village"¹: Community Dissemination of Research Findings by Gibrill S Jalloh and Lyttelton Braima, Justice for the Poor – Sierra Leone*

Introduction

What is J4P?

Justice for the Poor (J4P) is a global research and development program aimed at informing, designing and supporting pro-poor approaches to justice reform. It is an approach to justice reform which:

- *Sees justice from the perspective of the poor/marginalized*
- *Is grounded in social and cultural contexts*
- *Recognizes the importance of demand in building equitable justice systems*
- *Understands justice as a cross-sectoral issue*

Drama has long been used to promote community dialogue on social and political change.² The recent experience of the World Bank's *Justice for the Poor* (J4P) program in Sierra Leone shows that drama can be a particularly effective medium for engaging poor and illiterate communities. J4P, in partnership with the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), a local NGO, recently teamed with a community drama group, Future Leaders Action Group for Education (FLAGE), to disseminate the findings of J4P's research on local level governance and justice administration in Sierra Leone. The dissemination program provided an opportunity to thank those communities that hosted researchers during the field research, and to encourage community ownership of the research findings. J4P's experience shows that drama can help to

create a space for dialogue between authorities and vulnerable groups. In a context where many community members are illiterate, drama can also raise awareness of ongoing disputes and encourage community members to identify possible solutions.

* The authors are grateful to the Africa Justice for the Poor team members for their assistance editing this note.

¹ "Leh Wi Tok for Change Wi Village" is a Creole phrase meaning "Let us talk to change our village".

² See for instance, Z. Mda, *When People Play People: Development Communication through Theater*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1993; D. Conrad, "Exploring Risky Youth Experiences: Popular Theatre as a Participatory, Performative Research Method," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1) 2004. Retrieved 1 May 2008 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_1/html/conrad.html; R. Gray et al., "The Use of Research-based Theatre in a Project related to Metastatic Breast Cancer," *Health Expectations*, 3, 2000, pp. 137-144.

About the Research

In 2006, *Justice for the Poor* initiated a qualitative research program which aimed to understand how poor and marginalized groups navigate justice and governance institutions in Sierra Leone. Local level justice and governance institutions are intertwined and largely based on traditional or customary law and power structures. The formal state judicial structure and formal governance institutions are largely inaccessible to the majority of Sierra Leoneans. Thus, interventions targeting justice sector reform require an understanding of the interplay between formal and informal justice administration, as well as the dynamics of local governance.

J4P and CGG carried out extensive field

research in a number of rural and peri-urban provinces of Sierra Leone in order to map the roles and responsibilities of traditional (local) authorities, as well as community and individual grievances. The research further highlighted the channels of complaints, from the family circle to the local court and other formal institutions. The majority of findings pointed to the exclusion of the poor, youth and women in community decisions on important issues such as community funds and community development projects. However, researchers also found cases of communities challenging local authorities. For example, some respondents questioned authorities on issues such as the use of resources and the provision of communal labor.

Drama and Dissemination



Actor portraying a corrupt paramount chief

"Communities in Sierra Leone have a long tradition of storytelling. It is a valuable tool for amusement, communication, education, and information."

Why Drama?

In Sierra Leone, poverty and lack of educational opportunities characterize the lives of many local communities. Illiteracy is therefore an important factor to take into account when considering how to disseminate complex or 'sensitive' information at the community level. This was the key challenge facing J4P when it decided to share its research findings with the communities that had participated in the field research. J4P overcame this challenge by building on the tradition of oral communication typically used in rural villages.

Communities in Sierra Leone have a long tradition of storytelling. For the vast majority of them, access to recreational facilities is limited or non-existent. Storytelling is thus a valuable tool for amusement, communication, education, and information. J4P therefore decided to communicate the research findings to communities in the form of a story. Community drama presented a unique methodology for bringing communities together in an informal forum where they could debate sensitive issues and identify solutions to ongoing conflicts.

Planning and Preparation

J4P and CGG sorted through the more than 150 cases documented during field research and selected five cases to present to communities through community drama. The selected cases illustrate common issues such as corruption, fraud, abuses of power, and social injustices. However, some cases also highlight communities constructively challenging leaders responsible for injustices and holding them to account. In Sierra Leone, it is still uncommon to hear of local people challenging their leaders, even when the leaders are clearly in the wrong. The research team believed that sharing the positive experiences of one community would inspire other rural communities to stand up against some of the very ills that have kept them poor for so long.

Working with J4P and CGG, the drama group then developed a series of short skits and role-plays using Creole (the lingua franca in Sierra Leone) and a variety of other local languages, to

reenact the case studies collected during the research. The team also decided which cases to present in which location, taking care to avoid reenacting case studies that might provoke confusion or conflict in communities. For instance, two out of the five dramas were not presented in one particular site because the case studies centered around powerful local figures in the area. It was thought that presenting those two cases in that site might cause problems for the community.

The Day of the Performance

The dissemination took the form of a meeting at the village court "barry"¹, or in some communities, a venue prepared specially for that occasion. In certain sites the villagers were informed about the program by a "village town crier" the night before the meeting. In other sites, community mobilization proved difficult due to misinformation about the purpose of the drama program. In some cases, communities believed that the drama performance was a development workshop, open only to the powerful and elite groups. In such instances, the research team and the drama group collaborated on the day of the event to quickly correct misinformation about the performance. Members of the drama group beat their "talking drums" and sang songs throughout the community to publicize the events and mobilize villagers. The drama performances brought together various groups, including local leaders, teachers, school pupils, and women, as well as farmers and marketers. Some of them arrived in their "best dress", demonstrating that this was indeed a special occasion for the community. They sat beside one another in rows on wooden benches that were arranged in a manner that gave everyone an opportunity to hear and get a full view of the performance.

Prior to each presentation, the drama group performed an ice-breaker, which comically depicted every day occurrences in rural Sierra Leone. This first comic display was intended to capture the audience's attention and set the tone for the presentations to come. The ice-breaker skits were intended to create a fun and lighthearted atmosphere, and to encourage the audience to reflect upon every day life in their own communities.

Following the ice-breaker skit, a facilitator from the research team entered the stage and introduced the first drama. The dramatists then appeared on stage, dressed in comical costumes of worn out clothes, mismatched shoes, faces dotted with chalk, and oversized neck ties dangling over exaggerated stomachs. This type of costume is characteristic of how comedians in Sierra Leone portray the lifestyle of the different social and ethnic groups. Local artists also use this type of comedy to communicate to the public.

The five research cases presented in the dramas illustrated instances of villagers demanding public accountability. The specific stories featured the following anecdotes:

- a community confronting embezzlement of school funds and democratically replacing corrupt community officials
- a community prosecuting a fraudulent development practitioner who stole money on the premise of helping to build houses
- local community leaders mobilizing communal labor to construct a feeder road
- youth confronting chiefs for unfair distribution of rice
- protesting against community leaders dominating the selection of development projects

A narrative of one of these cases has been illustrated in the text box below.

Community Participation

In general, audiences responded to the community drama with excitement. In many instances, community members identified with the characters and events portrayed in the dramas, as evidenced by the frequent murmurs and side comments from the audience. Outbursts from participants indicated a general understanding of the messages communicated in the drama presentations. The cast occasionally involved the audience in the performance through direct engagement in on-stage dialogue, encouraging contributions from audience members. In the embezzlement case, for example, an actor playing the paramount chief faced the audience and asked in Creole,

"mi fambul dem, wetin wi go do wit wi pekin, di CTA chairman?", meaning, "my family members, what should we do with our child, the CTA chairman?" The audience in turn replied, *"yes chief, leh wi pul di man pan da post,"* meaning, "yes chief, let us remove the man from the position." The audience then voted by a show of hands to remove the corrupt CTA chairman.

Each presentation concluded with an open forum discussion between the audience and a facilitator from the dissemination team. The discussions were tailored to the topic and elicited responses on issues raised in the drama presentations, including suggestions on how to mitigate and prevent their recurrence in real life. While the audience responded well to all of the dramas, the dramatization of the case study involving the embezzlement of school funds generated a particularly lively debate among the participants. The majority of responses centered on the accountability of public officers. For instance, one middle-aged man questioned why the paramount chief, who is the head of the chiefdom, did not know about the embezzlement at the school. A female teacher present in the audience was curious to know if she and other staff members have the right to know about the subsidy that her school receives. A head teacher, who was also in attendance, interjected in the discussion and clarified that the school subsidy is a small amount of money intended to augment other fees collected by schools but is not sufficient to cover all expenses and often does not arrive at the school for an entire year. In a bid to clarify the different comments, an old man cautioned that it is important to first investigate whether the subsidies are really coming before launching accusations against schools or officials.

¹ Court "barry", sometimes spelled "bari" or "baray", is used to refer to the facility where the native administrative court sits. By village standards, it is a fairly large building with a space that accommodates large numbers of people. It also hosts the offices of the paramount chief, chiefdom treasury clerk, and the native administrative court chairman. It can also serve as a community center for political and social events.

Case Summary: Confronting Embezzlement of School Funds

A Paramount Chief called a meeting to discuss discontent over the deteriorating condition of the primary school and the head teacher's frequent demands for money from parents. The leader of the village women's group explained that she had attended an NGO meeting in a neighboring village and learned that the government pays subsidies to primary schools - information which the head teacher had kept secret from the village authorities over the years. During the meeting the head teacher, whose official retirement was due, was requested to give an account of how he had utilized the money. His statement of account did not convince the villagers, who accused him of embezzlement and misuse of public funds. The head teacher admitted to the charges and apologized to the community. The village authorities showed magnanimity by asking him to provide materials for the rehabilitation of the school, rather than face prosecution in court. The convicted man accepted the settlement and agreed to provide cement and zinc before his retirement.

In the same case, the Chairman of the Community Teachers Association (CTA) was found guilty of misappropriating money meant for the printing of pupils' report cards. He was removed in a well-organized community meeting and replaced by the women's leader through constructive engagement with the village authorities.



Audience discussion of issues raised during dissemination

"In disseminating politically or socially sensitive messages, care must be taken to avoid fuelling grievances, incriminating local leaders or resurrecting underlying problems. But avoiding all references to "sensitive" issues may dilute messages that communicate the benefits of positive political and social change."

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Lessons Learned

The drama provided a highly effective and engaging medium for disseminating complex and potentially sensitive messages to rural communities. The experience of J4P and its local partners shows that the success of local drama programs depends on a number of factors, including community mobilization, the treatment of sensitive information, and use of comedy to capture the attention of the audience.

Community mobilization

To have a lasting impact, community dialogue on political and social change must involve all members of society. It was therefore important that the J4P dissemination team ensured that the local authorities and ordinary community members felt equally welcome to attend the drama presentations. In the context of rural Sierra Leonean villages, outsiders who enter a community and interact with local residents require the prior approval of local authorities, particularly if they intend to host a public event. Accordingly, J4P sent a team member to each site two or three days ahead of the drama presentation, with letters to introduce the team, publicize the event, and to collaborate with local residents on logistics, including food for participants. J4P's experience shows that letters to officials are not necessarily sufficient for community mobilization. Word of mouth on the day of the event is critical. Also, the food provided for the participants as a 'thank you' for hosting the field research likely contributed to the large turnout.

Communities' previous experiences with development actors impacted the mobilization process for the presentation. In some cases, anticipation of financial remuneration for attendance at a "development workshop," as often happens in Sierra Leone, might have been an incentive for some community members to attend the performances. In other cases, however, it proved difficult to draw an initial crowd to the drama presentation. This was particularly true in communities that have grown skeptical

towards any type of "development program" as a result of unfulfilled promises made by some NGOs and other development actors. In such cases, the ice-breaker skits proved highly effective in drawing a crowd, creating a fun and lively atmosphere, and clarifying that the event was intended to entertain the community.

Sensitivity of information

In disseminating politically or socially sensitive messages to a general audience, care must be taken to avoid fuelling local grievances. Every effort must be made to avoid incriminating local leaders or resurrecting underlying problems in the community. But avoiding all references to "sensitive" issues may dilute messages that communicate the benefits of positive political and social change. J4P's experiences shows that the use of comedy in an informal forum can help to break down barriers, and facilitate dialogue between local leaders and residents on community issues. Further, comedy helps to ensure that audience members remain engaged in the drama presentations and follow-up discussions.

The methodology used to disseminate information to communities should always reflect the socio-economic and cultural background of the intended audience. Using drama to communicate the findings from J4P's field research in Sierra Leone provided an invaluable opportunity for the research team to gain feedback from the communities. The use of local languages ensures that the audience understands and identifies with the content of the skits. As observed from the audience's reactions, the messages on community participation, challenging corrupt practices, and holding their local leaders and public servants to account were well received.

J4P will continue to utilize creative dissemination techniques, in Sierra Leone and elsewhere, to ensure that research findings are accessible to and shared with local communities.