



Investigating The Impact Of Theatre For Development (TFD) For Public Sensitisation and Community Mobilisation in Selected Communities In Ogun State, Nigeria.

Oluwatoyin Omolayo OGUNKUNBI

*Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria.
Department of Theatre Arts*

Date of Submission: 28-09-2025

Date of Acceptance: 08-10-2025

Abstract

This research evaluates the efficacy of Theatre for Development (TfD) as a transformative, participatory tool for public sensitisation and community mobilisation in selected underserved rural communities in Ogun State, Nigeria. These communities face persistent socio-economic challenges, often compounded by low literacy levels, cultural barriers, and a general distrust of conventional, top-down communication models. This study addresses a gap in the literature regarding tailored TfD research in this specific socio-cultural context. The primary objective is to assess TfD's effectiveness in enhancing community awareness and catalysing collective action. Rooted in the dialogic pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal's concept of "spect-actors", TfD utilises culturally resonant, collaborative performance to convey complex social messages and stimulate critical reflection. Employing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design with a mixed-methods approach, the study will collaboratively develop and stage TfD performances focusing on community-identified issues. Data was collected through pre- and post-performance surveys to quantify changes in awareness, attitudes, and behavioural intentions, supplemented by interviews, focus groups, and participant observation to provide qualitative depth. The findings will empirically demonstrate TfD's potential to foster dialogue, nurture agency, and inspire sustainable, community-driven collective action, offering a model for development communication in similar rural settings across Nigeria.

Keywords: Theatre for Development, Public Sensitisation, Community Mobilisation, Participatory Action Research.

I. Introduction

Theatre for Development (TfD) has emerged as a dynamic and participatory approach to addressing social issues within communities, particularly in rural and underrepresented areas. It leverages the power of performance and storytelling to engage communities in dialogue, raise awareness, and stimulate collective action on pressing social, economic, and political issues. Unlike traditional theatre, which often caters to passive audiences, TfD actively involves community members in both the creation and performance of the theatrical pieces, ensuring that the content is relevant, resonant, and empowering.

In many rural communities in Nigeria, including those in Ogun State, a significant communication gap exists between development initiatives and the local populations they aim to serve. Traditional communication methods have often proven inadequate in addressing challenges such as public health, education, and civic participation, primarily due to cultural barriers, low literacy levels, and general mistrust of external interventions.

TfD presents an innovative solution to these challenges by offering a more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and engaging platform for communication and education. Through its participatory and culturally resonant approach, communities can explore and express their own perspectives on the issues affecting them, identify solutions, and collectively mobilise for change.

This research evaluates the effectiveness of TfD as a tool for public sensitisation and community mobilisation in selected communities in Ogun State, focusing on issues identified by the communities themselves. By involving community members in the development and performance of these theatre pieces, the study seeks to empower individuals, enhance their understanding of the issues, and



inspire collective action to address them. The findings will contribute valuable insights into Tfd's role in rural development and offer practical recommendations for its adaptation and integration into development programs in similar contexts across Nigeria and beyond.

II. Literature Review

Understanding Theatre for Development

Theatre for Development (Tfd) has its intellectual roots in critical pedagogy and radical performance practices that challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge and communication. At its core, Tfd is defined as a participatory approach to development communication, one that uses theatre not merely as entertainment but as a dialogic tool for reflection, conscientisation, and collective problem-solving. Unlike mainstream theatre, which often privileges aesthetics and passive spectatorship, Tfd situates communities as both the subjects and agents of performance, thereby aligning artistic practice with grassroots development (Boal, 1993).

The theoretical foundations of Tfd are inseparable from Paulo Freire's philosophy of conscientisation (*conscientização*), which emphasises critical dialogue as a pathway to empowerment. Freire (2005) rejected what he termed the "banking model" of education, where learners are treated as empty vessels into which knowledge is deposited, in favour of dialogic education, where learners and educators co-create knowledge. Applied to theatre, this pedagogy transforms the performance space into a classroom without walls, one where participants explore their own social realities, identify structures of oppression, and imagine alternative futures (Cornwall, 2016). In Tfd, this educational process unfolds through workshops, improvisations, and performances, where communities are not passive recipients of information but active producers of meaning.

Equally significant is Augusto Boal's contribution through his *Theatre of the Oppressed* methodology. Boal (1993) introduced the concept of the "spect-actor," a hybrid figure that collapses the binary between performer and audience. Spect-actors are empowered to intervene during performances, to stop the action, suggest alternatives, and even step into roles to try out new strategies for overcoming oppression. This transformation from passive observer to active participant aligns perfectly with Tfd's ethos of participation and empowerment. As Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani (2017) observe, these participatory theatre methods allow marginalised participants to

enact citizenship, making invisible power structures visible and experimenting with change in a safe yet critical environment.

Contemporary scholarship has expanded on these foundational theories by highlighting the adaptability of Tfd to contemporary development contexts. Nkweteyim (2022), for instance, argues that Tfd exemplifies participatory communication in action, enabling marginalised groups to articulate their experiences and generate homegrown solutions. Similarly, Chukwu-Okoronkwo and Ajiwe (2023) emphasise that Tfd retains its relevance because it operates at the intersection of pedagogy, culture, and performance, making it especially effective in contexts where literacy is low but oral and performative traditions are strong. This adaptability is why Tfd continues to be deployed in diverse settings, from rural health campaigns to urban civic education programmes, often with significant impact.

Theoretically, then, Tfd represents a convergence of pedagogy, performance, and participatory communication. It is not merely a method for transmitting messages but a process of co-learning and co-creation. By grounding itself in the lived experiences of communities and by privileging dialogue over didacticism, Tfd embodies a radical rethinking of both theatre and development practice. As scholars increasingly note, its strength lies not in the performances alone but in the participatory processes that precede and follow them (Laide & Christianah, 2024). For this reason, Tfd remains an enduring framework for understanding how theatre can transcend its aesthetic boundaries to become a tool for social transformation.

Tfd in African and Nigerian Contexts

Theatre for Development (Tfd) has a long history of application in African societies where oral traditions, storytelling, and communal performance practices provide fertile ground for participatory communication. From its early use in the 1970s to address literacy, health, and civic education, Tfd has evolved into a flexible tool that reflects local cultural forms while tackling global development challenges. The African context has proven particularly significant, given the limitations of conventional top-down communication strategies in rural areas, where low literacy levels, infrastructural deficits, and mistrust of external agents often weaken state-driven development campaigns (Cornwall, 2016).

In South Africa, Zakes Mda's pioneering work demonstrated the potential of Theatre for



Development (TfD) to raise awareness about pressing social issues. Mda (1993) documented projects in which theatre was mobilised to confront HIV/AIDS, showing how participatory performance could translate technical health information into culturally resonant messages. These interventions contributed not only to awareness but also to measurable shifts in community attitudes, highlighting the transformative potential of grassroots theatre in public health discourse. Similar approaches have been documented in other African contexts. In Malawi, for instance, the Liwonde Primary Health Care (PHC) TfD initiative employed community diagnosis and locally devised plays to engage villagers in decision-making about water sources, sanitation, and maintenance, underscoring TfD's role in participatory problem-solving (Kerr, 2015). In Kenya, community-based theatre traditions such as *NgaahikaNdeenda* at Kamiriithu and the work of Magnet Theatre in Coastal Kenya have mobilised citizen awareness around land justice, public health, and research literacy, demonstrating that TfD, when rooted in local culture, can serve as both an advocacy tool and a medium for co-creation of knowledge (Odhiambo, 2005).

The Nigerian context provides a vibrant ground for examining the evolution of Theatre for Development (TfD). Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multilingual landscape, combined with its complex social and political dynamics, presents both challenges and opportunities for participatory theatre. Early experiments in TfD focused on environmental awareness and agricultural development, particularly in rural communities where initiatives such as the Living Earth Nigeria Foundation's Community Theatre projects engaged farmers in discussions on land use, soil conservation, and sustainable livelihoods (Okpadah, 2017). These efforts demonstrated how theatre could operate as a dialogic tool for mobilising local knowledge in addressing developmental concerns. More recently, Nigerian scholars and practitioners have expanded TfD into new domains, including governance, migration, and crisis communication. Chukwu-Okoronkwo and Ajiwe (2023), for instance, illustrate how TfD was employed during the COVID-19 pandemic to localise health protocols, counter misinformation, and embed preventive measures within community practices. Similarly, Akoh and Ugwu (2023) highlight the growing relevance of digital and social media-driven TfD interventions, which expand access to civic engagement and public health education while maintaining the participatory ethos of traditional

community theatre. Collectively, these developments highlight the adaptability of TfD in Nigeria, serving as both a medium for social critique and a platform for collaborative problem-solving across shifting contexts of national development.

The Nigerian context provides a vibrant ground for examining the evolution of Theatre for Development (TfD). Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multilingual landscape, combined with its complex social and political dynamics, presents both challenges and opportunities for participatory theatre. One of the distinctive contributions of Nigerian TfD scholarship lies in its insistence on cultural embeddedness. Oyewo (2006) highlights how Yoruba oral performance traditions, ranging from poetic chants to dance and song, continue to shape contemporary performance practice, giving TfD forms that are at once entertaining, educative, and socially critical. This cultural immediacy ensures that audiences recognise themselves in the stories being told, enhancing the resonance and impact of performances. Beyond cultural continuity, Nigerian applications of TfD have demonstrated adaptability to sensitive and emergent crises. Komolafe and Adeyemi (2020) document how TfD was deployed in Seme, a border community in Badagry, to engage residents in participatory dialogues about human trafficking.

By creating safe communal spaces for performance and discussion, the intervention enabled complex issues to be addressed without fear of reprisal, building trust and stimulating collective responses. Similarly, Samuel & Emmanuel (2022) argue that TfD has become an important tool in addressing broader questions of governance and security in Kogi State, particularly by mobilising citizens to engage with issues that traditional media often neglect. Despite these achievements, challenges remain, particularly the tendency for many TfD projects to be short-lived, lacking institutional mechanisms for continuity and policy linkage. Nevertheless, the Nigerian case illustrates the versatility of TfD in addressing diverse issues, from cultural identity and community health to security and governance, while maintaining its participatory ethos.

Cultural Embeddedness as Strength

One of the defining strengths of Theatre for Development (TfD) lies in its cultural embeddedness. Unlike many conventional communication methods that rely on external languages or media channels, TfD derives its legitimacy from the use of local performance forms, oral traditions, and communal rituals that are



already intelligible to audiences. This cultural grounding makes its messages both relatable and authoritative, allowing performances to resonate deeply with community values and everyday realities. As Kerr (2014) argues, African performance traditions possess a unique communicative authority because they operate within the symbolic frameworks of the communities they serve, making them compelling tools for social mobilisation.

In the Yoruba context, the significance of cultural embeddedness becomes particularly visible. Yoruba performance traditions such as *ewi* (poetic chants), *alárinjò* (travelling theatre), masquerade performances, and ritual festivals function not only as entertainment but also as carriers of moral and social codes (Oyewo, 2006). These traditions provide audiences with culturally grounded frameworks for interpreting new information. For instance, Laide and Christianah (2024) document TfD initiatives in Ekiti State that utilised local oral performance forms to address widow neglect and rural-urban migration, demonstrating that the success of TfD projects depends on their ability to echo the audience's own symbolic resources and shared values.

One of the defining strengths of Theatre for Development (TfD) lies in its deep cultural embeddedness. Unlike externally driven communication models, TfD draws legitimacy from the idioms, rituals, and performance traditions native to the communities it seeks to engage. This grounding in indigenous aesthetics and epistemologies allows messages to resonate organically with the audience's lived experience. As Obafemi (2019) observes, development theatre attains persuasive power only when it "derives meaning from the symbolic and performative resources of the people" (p. 87). The use of familiar oral forms, songs, chants, dance, storytelling, and masquerade, thus transforms theatre from a didactic tool into a dialogic and participatory experience.

Recent scholarship reinforces this perspective by highlighting Yoruba performance traditions as active repositories of social values and communal ethics. Akande (2024), in his study of the Egungun festival in Ago-Iwoye, demonstrates how masquerade performances, chants, and music sustain communal memory while reinforcing moral lessons about respect, unity, and social responsibility. Performance spaces in Yoruba cosmology, such as the market square or family compound, carry symbolic weight that influences how audiences interpret dramatic action. Situating TfD performances in these familiar spaces therefore

enhances legitimacy and participation, embedding development messages within contexts already charged with cultural meaning.

In addition, Yoruba oral poetry and music, particularly *ewi*, *oriki*, and folk songs, function as vessels of moral instruction and communal identity. These art forms embody philosophies of social harmony, accountability, and justice that can effectively frame participatory communication. When TfD practitioners draw upon these traditions, they access an existing moral vocabulary that audiences instinctively trust and understand. This connection deepens the audience's sense of ownership of the message, ensuring that change is perceived not as an external imposition but as a reaffirmation of collective values.

Ultimately, cultural embeddedness is not merely an aesthetic feature of TfD, but its central epistemological condition. By grounding performances in indigenous idioms, spaces, and cosmologies, TfD ensures that social messages are internalised as extensions of the community's voice. In Yoruba and broader Nigerian contexts, this grounding provides authenticity, continuity, and transformative potential, turning theatre into a living dialogue between tradition and progress.

Characteristics and Processes of TfD

Theatre for Development (TfD) distinguishes itself from conventional theatre primarily through its participatory orientation, dialogic practice, and cultural grounding. While mainstream Theatre often emphasises aesthetic quality and tends toward audience passivity, TfD prioritises inclusion, community engagement, and issue-driven performance. Its processes are as significant as its outcomes, since much of its transformative power lies in the collaborative work that precedes the public staging.

At the core of TfD is its participatory ethos, which positions community members not as consumers of art but as co-creators of meaning. As Obasi, Okpara, Okpara, Itiav, and Gever (2021) observe, this participatory process enhances agency, particularly in conflict-affected communities, by providing people with opportunities to share their own stories and explore possible solutions. By collapsing the traditional divide between performer and spectator, TfD embodies Boal's (1993) notion of the "spect-actor," enabling communities to rehearse social change within the theatrical space. This participatory dimension ensures that TfD performances remain contextually relevant and resonate with the lived experiences of local audiences.



Closely linked to participation is the role of dialogue. Rooted in Freire's (2005) pedagogy, dialogue transforms Tfd into a two-way communication model in which communities do not simply absorb messages but interrogate, contest, and reinterpret them. Adelugba and Yerima (2004) have long argued that Nigerian theatre achieves its fullest potential when it functions as a conversational space for shared reflection and critique. More recent scholarship affirms that Tfd performances serve as platforms for debate and collective problem-solving rather than merely instruments of information dissemination (Cornwall, 2016; Komolafe & Adeyemi, 2020). This dialogic structure is particularly effective in rural contexts where trust in top-down communication remains low.

Another defining feature of Tfd is its cultural rootedness. Performances often draw from indigenous aesthetics, songs, dances, rituals, and oral traditions that audiences recognise as their own. Oyewo (2006) underscores the communicative potency of Yoruba oral traditions. By drawing upon these familiar cultural idioms, Tfd enhances credibility and comprehension, ensuring that messages are internalised as authentic reflections of communal experience rather than foreign impositions.

Issue-based orientation also distinguishes Tfd. It is never theatre for its own sake but a purposeful tool aimed at urgent social, economic, and political concerns. In Nigeria, Tfd has addressed themes from public health to governance and agricultural sustainability. Okpadah (2017) documented the transformative potential of this approach in participatory development projects, while Nwabuzor (2020) demonstrated its measurable impact on health awareness among rural women. This responsiveness ensures that Tfd remains relevant, as its themes emerge directly from the priorities of the communities it serves.

Equally significant is Tfd's adaptability. The method has proven effective in both rural and urban contexts, across diverse thematic terrains. Akinwale (2010) observed that Nigerian theatre's ability to evolve with socio-political conditions has enabled Tfd to remain a resilient communication strategy. Internationally, Ebewo and Sirayi (2009) have demonstrated that in Southern Africa, Tfd continues to address issues such as HIV/AIDS and governance, showcasing its versatility across diverse geographies and cultures.

Finally, scholars emphasise the importance of process over product in Tfd. While performances often capture public attention, it is the workshops, improvisations, and dialogues preceding the stage

presentation that generate the most profound transformation. As Okpadah (2017) argues, these pre-performance processes build solidarity, communication skills, and critical awareness long before audiences gather. Participants emerge not just as performers but as empowered community advocates capable of sustaining dialogue and collective action.

These interlinked characteristics explain why Tfd remains an enduring strategy for grassroots engagement. More than a theatrical form, it is a participatory communication model; a living rehearsal for social transformation, through which communities reflect on their realities and mobilise toward sustained development.

Challenges and Sustainability of Tfd

While Theatre for Development (Tfd) has proven to be a powerful participatory tool for sensitisation and mobilisation, its practice is often constrained by challenges that limit both its immediate effectiveness and long-term sustainability. These challenges are structural, institutional, financial, and sometimes ideological, raising important questions about how Tfd can move beyond short-lived interventions toward becoming an integral component of community development.

One persistent obstacle is the dependence on funding and resources. Many Tfd projects in Nigeria and across Africa are initiated through donor agencies, NGOs, or university outreach programmes. While external support facilitates implementation, it often generates dependency and fragility once funding cycles come to an end. Communities are often left without adequate mechanisms for follow-up, which reduces the potential for sustained change. Nwabuzor (2020) observes that many health-based Tfd projects collapse after initial success due to a lack of institutional integration.

A further challenge is the risk of elite capture and top-down imposition. However, Tfd is designed to be participatory; in practice, some projects privilege the voices of facilitators or external experts over those of the community. Okpadah (2017) warns that when facilitators pre-determine themes without adequate community consultation, performances reproduce hierarchical communication structures rather than dismantle them. Such imbalances transform Tfd from "theatre with" to "theatre for" communities, undermining its emancipatory ethos.

Cultural misalignment also hinders impact. While Tfd relies on indigenous aesthetics,



practitioners occasionally misread or neglect key cultural symbols. Ekeke (2024) notes that anti-trafficking performances in border towns faltered when facilitators ignored local ritual practices that could have legitimised their messages. This claim highlights the significance of cultural literacy in participatory theatre, especially in contexts where spiritual and communal symbols lend legitimacy to public discourse.

Another significant limitation is evaluation. Measuring TfD's effectiveness is complex because its outcomes (dialogue, empowerment, and attitude shifts) are often intangible or long-term. Okwuowulu et al. (2023) stress that despite positive audience feedback, few projects conduct systematic follow-up, making it difficult to substantiate behavioural or policy changes. Without robust monitoring frameworks, policymakers may dismiss TfD as anecdotal rather than empirical.

Institutional neglect compounds these challenges. Despite its demonstrated relevance, TfD remains peripheral within national communication and development policies. In Nigeria, state institutions and mainstream media dominate public enlightenment, leaving community-based theatre underfunded and marginalised. This absence of policy support limits TfD's capacity to influence governance or secure long-term institutional partnerships.

Finally, sustainability is weakened by capacity and training gaps. Many TfD initiatives rely on university students or short-term facilitators who disengage once projects end. Chukwu-Okoronkwo and Ajiwe (2023) emphasise that sustainable TfD must transfer facilitation skills to local participants, enabling them to adapt the methods for future use. Capacity building transforms community members from passive participants into active cultural agents.

Nevertheless, the potential of TfD remains profound. Sustainability depends on embedding practice within local governance systems, creating monitoring frameworks, and prioritising capacity transfer. As Cornwall (2016) reminds us, development becomes sustainable only when communities own both process and outcome. For TfD, this means shifting from episodic interventions to institutionalised participatory practices capable of enduring beyond external facilitation.

III. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative strategies to capture both the richness of community experiences and measurable shifts in knowledge and

attitudes. The qualitative component was grounded in participatory action research (PAR), which aligns with the ethos of Theatre for Development (TfD) by emphasising collaboration, dialogue, and iterative cycles of reflection and action (Bradbury, 2021). The quantitative element complemented this by providing empirical evidence through surveys and descriptive statistics, ensuring both depth and validation.

The research was conducted in five Ogun State communities: Oke Ibadan, Itesi, Osiele, OkeOdo, and Jojo, each grappling with distinct concerns: youth disrespect, inadequate healthcare facilities, poor hygiene, environmental neglect, and unemployment. Following the standard TfD cycle, the process began with a community entry and needs assessment, progressed through workshops where performances were co-created with participants using improvisation, songs, chants, and proverbs, and culminated in public stagings followed by dialogues in which audiences debated issues and proposed solutions.

Participants were purposively selected to ensure inclusivity and representation. They included elders, youths, women's groups, schoolchildren, and artisans. Between 10 and 20 individuals per community actively participated in workshops and performances, while larger audiences attended the stagings. Data were collected through participant observation, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and performance documentation, as well as pre- and post-performance surveys designed to measure changes in awareness, attitudes, and intention to act.

Data analysis reflected the study's mixed design. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step process of familiarisation, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and reporting. Deductive themes were derived from the research objectives, while inductive insights emerged from the performance processes and post-performance dialogues. Performance ethnography (Denzin, 2018) was employed in conjunction with thematic analysis to interpret embodied practices, such as humour, chanting, and mourning rituals, which conveyed cultural meanings beyond words. Quantitative survey data were analysed descriptively using frequencies and percentages to demonstrate shifts in perception across the communities. Triangulation of findings strengthened validity, while cross-community comparisons illuminated both common and divergent patterns of response.

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and thick



description. Ethical considerations were prioritised, with informed consent obtained orally due to literacy challenges, confidentiality maintained, and sensitive issues treated respectfully. Reciprocity was also central, as performances not only generated data but also created opportunities for collective reflection and potential action. By integrating qualitative depth with quantitative validation, the methodology provided both cultural authenticity and empirical rigour, positioning Tfd as both a mode of inquiry and a participatory intervention.

IV. Findings and Discussion

This study examined the application of Theatre for Development (Tfd) as a participatory communication tool for community sensitisation and mobilisation in five communities within Odeda Local Government Area, Oke Ibadan, Itesi, Jojo, Abimire Hostel (Osiele), and OkeOdo. Each performance addressed distinct developmental issues, intergenerational conflict, inadequate healthcare, unemployment, hygiene, and environmental cleanliness, while collectively illustrating Tfd's capacity to inspire reflection, dialogue, and social action. The findings reveal that Tfd transcends entertainment, functioning as a dynamic process of conscientisation, community dialogue, and transformation.

Oke Ibadan: Dialogue and Intergenerational Conscientisation

The performance at Oke Ibadan dramatised the growing rift between youths and elders in the community. Using satire, chants, and proverbial expressions (*òwè*), the play created an atmosphere that was both reflective and emotionally charged. What began as a moral accusation, elders blaming youth for disrespect, evolved into a collective reflection on shared responsibility. Through post-performance dialogue, both groups recognised that social disconnection stemmed not only from moral decay but also from economic hardship and generational misunderstanding.

This process embodied Freire's (2005) concept of *conscientisation*, where awareness grows through critical reflection rather than instruction. Youths, empowered to intervene during the *spect-actor* phase, re-enacted scenes that imagined respectful yet reciprocal relationships. Such participatory improvisations aligned with Boal's (1993) notion of theatre as a "rehearsal for reality," allowing the community to experiment with new social relations. The dialogue that followed led to the formation of informal youth-elder forums, evidence that the performance had moved beyond

representation to action. This outcome supports Cornwall's (2016) argument that participatory art forms can transform passive audiences into co-creators of social knowledge.

Itesi: Health Access and Collective Empowerment

In Itesi, the community's concern over the lack of a health centre and poor access to healthcare became the focal issue. The play portrayed the struggles of women during childbirth and the dangers of self-medication, blending humour and tragedy to evoke empathy. Following the performance, community members collectively identified systemic neglect and gendered vulnerability as root causes of poor health outcomes. Women in particular voiced the need for agency, proposing to contribute land and mobilise support for a local clinic.

This participatory shift from complaint to commitment reflects Freire's (2005) belief that genuine dialogue converts awareness into praxis. The improvisational sessions, where villagers staged negotiations with imaginary health officials, allowed them to practise civic engagement in a safe, performative space. Similar findings are reported by Omoera and Eregare (2022), who emphasise that Tfd strengthens local governance when communities rehearse advocacy through performance. In Itesi, theatre thus became both pedagogy and prototype, a creative simulation of civic participation that transformed emotion into structured mobilisation.

Jojo: Unemployment, Economic Imagination, and Social Innovation

In Jojo, unemployment and financial hardship dominated community life. The performance adopted realist storytelling and satire to expose how economic frustration fuelled social discontent. Rather than depicting idleness as a personal flaw, the play illuminated systemic barriers such as limited access to credit and market exclusion. The ensuing discussion became a space for economic imagination, as participants proposed cooperative ventures, local apprenticeship schemes, and shared savings groups.

Here, the process of performance mirrored the dynamics of participatory planning. As participants improvised alternative endings, they not only critiqued their economic condition but rehearsed solutions grounded in collective agency. Boal's (1993) theatre theory finds resonance here, as the Jojo community used performance to prototype social innovation. Okwuowulu et al. (2023)



similarly argue that TfD fosters a "community of action," where dialogue and creativity converge to generate pragmatic solutions. The Jojo case illustrates how TfD can evolve from expressive art into a developmental laboratory, transforming collective frustration into strategic thinking and mutual support.

Abimire Hostel, Osiele: Hygiene, Habits, and Embodied Learning

The Abimire Hostel performance is centred on personal hygiene within a densely populated student environment. Drawing from song, mimicry, and physical demonstration, the play addressed everyday behaviours, handwashing, waste disposal, and menstrual hygiene, through comic yet instructive episodes. The performative energy encouraged identification rather than guilt, enabling participants to confront unhealthy habits playfully.

The *spect-actor* exchanges deepened this identification, as audience members joined in proposing and enacting practical measures such as shared cleaning rosters and accessible hygiene stations. The collaborative experimentation reflected the Freirean synthesis of action and reflection: knowledge emerged not through didactic messaging but through collective practice. According to Okwuowulu et al. (2023), such embodied participation enhances retention of public health messages, as performance translates abstract information into a lived routine. By turning hygiene into a shared aesthetic act, the Abimire community internalised responsibility for their collective environment, demonstrating TfD's strength in converting awareness into daily behaviour.

OkeOdo: Environmental Cleanliness and Civic Responsibility

The OkeOdo intervention tackled environmental neglect, blocked drains, refuse dumping, and erosion of communal cleaning traditions. Using music, dance, and local idioms, the performance transformed sanitation into a metaphor for civic responsibility. The laughter and rhythm of the play softened defensiveness, creating room for honest reflection. Post-performance discussions revealed how the decline of *sanitation days* and ineffective waste collection systems contributed to the community's predicament.

During the participatory phase, residents co-designed a plan for regular communal clean-ups and neighbourhood monitoring. These exchanges exemplified Boal's (1993) principle of theatre as a rehearsal for social order, enabling the community to simulate governance and accountability within

performance. The revival of *òwè* and traditional cleaning songs reconnected the campaign to indigenous values of order and purity. As Omoera and Eregare (2022) observe, TfD achieves sustainability when performance aligns with cultural memory, embedding civic reform within familiar moral frameworks. The OkeOdo case thus underscored how environmental awareness, when expressed through cultural idioms, can mature into participatory stewardship.

Cross-Community Reflections

Across all five sites, several interlocking themes emerged. The first is *dialogue as transformation*. In each community, performance served as an entry point into critical discussion, aligning with Freire's (2005) view that dialogue enables people to reinterpret their realities and act upon them. This shift from instruction to conversation transformed spectators into subjects of change.

The second theme is *participation as co-creation*. Rather than presenting finished scripts, facilitators co-developed performances with residents, blurring the boundary between actor and audience. This process validated Boal's (1993) concept of the *spect-actor* and deepened emotional ownership of outcomes. Communities not only interpreted messages but authored them, ensuring that proposed solutions emerged from within.

A third theme is *cultural embeddedness*. Each performance drew on indigenous aesthetics—songs, chants, and proverbs, that grounded development messages in familiar expressive forms. This resonance elevated the credibility of TfD as a communicative method. As Omoera and Eregare (2022) argue, theatre rooted in cultural idioms carries moral legitimacy that external campaigns often lack.

Finally, *agency and continuity* emerged as central issues. Although TfD catalysed immediate awareness and enthusiasm, sustainability depended on institutional linkage and follow-up. Communities demonstrated readiness to act by forming committees, launching cooperatives, or reinstating communal cleaning days; however, weak governance structures limited continuity. These findings align with those of Okwuowulu et al. (2023), who note that TfD's transformative capacity is constrained when it operates in isolation from policy frameworks.

In essence, TfD across Odeda LGA functioned as both a form of communication and community pedagogy, a process that fuses aesthetic experience with social inquiry. The performances



blurred the distinction between stage and street, imagination and action, thereby redefining development as a participatory dialogue embedded in culture. As Cornwall (2016) observes, true transformation begins when marginalised voices occupy the centre of deliberation; in these communities, Tfd made that possible. The practice thus remains one of the most culturally responsive and participatory communication strategies for grassroots development in Nigeria today.

V. Conclusion

This study affirms that Theatre for Development (Tfd) is a potent participatory tool for community engagement, capable of transforming awareness into sustained collective action. Across the five communities examined, Tfd fostered critical reflection, dialogue, and collaboration, thereby validating Freire's (2005) concept of conscientisation and Boal's (1993) notion of theatre as a rehearsal for change. Through culturally grounded performances, communities analysed their own realities, negotiated shared meanings, and mobilised toward solutions that were contextually relevant and collectively owned.

The research demonstrates that Tfd's effectiveness lies in its integration of communication, culture, and participation. When development discourse is translated into indigenous aesthetics, such as songs, proverbs, and rituals, it gains legitimacy and resonance. However, the sustainability of Tfd interventions remains limited by weak institutional support and inadequate policy integration. For Tfd to achieve its full transformative potential, it must evolve from episodic intervention to institutionalised practice embedded within local governance and education systems. Ultimately, Tfd redefines development not as an external prescription but as a dialogic, performative, and culturally rooted process of community self-empowerment.

VI. Recommendations

The findings of this study point to several key recommendations for strengthening Theatre for Development (Tfd) as a sustainable and participatory communication strategy. To begin with, Tfd should be formally integrated into local and national development frameworks. Relevant government ministries and agencies, particularly those responsible for health, education, and community development, ought to adopt Tfd as a complementary method for grassroots mobilisation and policy implementation. Institutional integration will ensure that Tfd outcomes extend beyond

temporary interventions to influence long-term governance and development planning.

Furthermore, capacity building is crucial to sustaining the transformative potential of Tfd. Communities require trained facilitators who can design, implement, and evaluate Tfd projects independently. Universities, NGOs, and cultural institutions should therefore collaborate to create practical training models that equip community members, youth leaders, and local artists with facilitation and participatory research skills. When communities possess such knowledge, they can adapt the Tfd process to address evolving social challenges.

Another essential step involves strengthening partnerships between higher institutions, non-governmental organisations, and traditional authorities. Co-management of Tfd initiatives with local stakeholders enhances credibility, ownership, and inclusivity. At the same time, long-term evaluation frameworks are needed to monitor changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices resulting from theatre interventions. Participatory evaluation tools such as focus group reflections, follow-up performances, and community storytelling sessions will help document qualitative change more effectively than short-term surveys.

Finally, Tfd practitioners should maintain strong cultural continuity by anchoring performances in indigenous idioms, languages, and performance traditions, while also embracing innovative techniques such as digital media to engage younger audiences. Through such integration, training, partnership, and cultural grounding, Tfd can evolve from sporadic artistic engagement into a continuous, community-owned practice of dialogue and transformation.

References

- [1]. Adeduntan, S. (2016). *Art, community and development in Nigeria: Theatre and the rhetoric of agency*. Ibadan University Press.
- [2]. Adelugba, D., & Yerima, A. (Eds.). (2004). *African Theatre: Nigeria*. London: James Currey.
- [3]. Akande, S. O. (2024). *The functionality and performance practice of indigenous Yoruba music in Ago-Iwoye's Egungun festival*. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, 7(2), 88–103.
- [4]. Akinwale, A. A. (2010). Reconfiguring theatre for development in Nigeria. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 3(6), 23–42.
- [5]. Akoh, A. & Ugwu, A. (2023). *The viability of social media theatre in Nigeria: Expanding*



- the frontiers of theatre for development. Nigerian Theatre Journal*, 23(1), 77–95.
- [6]. Boal, A. (1993). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group.
- [7]. Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.
- [8]. Bradbury, H. (2021). Action research–participative self in transformative action. In *The SAGE handbook of participatory research and inquiry* (pp. 185-196). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- [9]. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597.
- [10]. Chukwu-Okoronkwo, S. O., & Ajiwe, U. C. (2023). Pandemic era and theatre for development interventions: Experiences from two educational theatres in Southeast Nigeria. *Advanced Journal of Theatre and Film Studies*, 1(2), 43-48.
- [11]. Cornwall, A. (2016). Women's empowerment: What works?. *Journal of International Development*, 28(3), 342-359.
- [12]. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2023). Revisiting mixed methods research designs twenty years later. *Handbook of mixed methods research designs*, 1(1), 21-36.
- [13]. Denzin, N. K. (2018). *Performance autoethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture*. Routledge.
- [14]. Ebewo, P., & Sirayi, M. (2009). Theatre for development in South Africa: A theoretical framework. *South African Theatre Journal*, 23(1), 21–36.
- [15]. Ekeke, E. (2024). *Theatre for development as an instrument for border community engagement in Nigeria. GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis*, 4(1), 88–101.
- [16]. Erel, U., Reynolds, T., & Kaptani, E. (2017). Participatory theatre for transformative social research. *Qualitative Research*, 17(3), 302-312.
- [17]. Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th-anniversary ed.; M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).
- [18]. Genova, A., Falola, T., Adeniji, A., Genova, A., O'Hear, A., Adeyanju, C. T., ... & Oduwobi, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Yorubá identity and power politics*. Boydell and Brewer.
- [19]. Kerr, D. (1995). African popular theatre: From pre-colonial times to the present day. (No Title).
- [20]. Komolafe, A. M., & Adeyemi, O. S. (2020). Theatre for development and the dynamics of human trafficking across Nigeria border communities: The example of Seme community in Badagry. *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis*, 3(1), 141-152.
- [21]. Laide, N. T., & Christianah, A. O. (2024). Theatre for development as catalyst for empowerment at the grassroots through cybernetic pedagogy in selected Ekiti state communities. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 21(3), 298-314.
- [22]. Mda, Z. (2020). When people play people. In *The applied theatre reader* (pp. 193-199). Routledge.
- [23]. Nkweteyim, P. N. (2022). Tapping into Africa's Environmental and Cultural Heritage: The Role of Theatre for Development. In *Re-centering Cultural Performance and Orange Economy in Post-colonial Africa: Policy, Soft Power, and Sustainability* (pp. 275-288). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- [24]. Nwabuzor, M. N. (2020). Impact of a theatre for development communication intervention on knowledge of childhood obesity among women in Nigeria. *Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(1), 120–133. eISSN: 2735-9891.
- [25]. Odhiambo, C. (2005). *Theatre for development in Kenya: In search of an effective procedure and methodology* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).
- [26]. Okpadah, O. (2017). Theatre for development as a model for transformative change in Nigeria. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 29(1), 81–98.
- [27]. Okwuowulu, C., Omoera, O. S., Onyemuchara, C., Akoh, A. D., Emokpae, C., Akpa, C., & Chinda, M. (2023). *Theatre-for-development as information panacea for rural dwellers in Nigeria during a pandemic: Lessons from COVID-19. The Journal of Society and Media*, 7(2), 567–592.
- [28]. Osofisan, F. (1999). *Insidious treasons: Drama in a postcolonial state*. Oponifa Readers.
- [29]. Oyewo, S. O. (2006). Primary and secondary orality in Nigerian dance art: Continuity and change. *TRANS: Internet Journal for Cultural Studies*, 16(8), 1–11.



- [30]. Prentki, T., & Preston, S. (Eds.). (2009). *The applied theatre reader* (p. 9). London: Routledge.
- [31]. Samuel, I., & Emmanuel, A. E. (2022). Fostering Nigeria security: theatre for development (tfd) as tool. *Journal of Basic and Applied Research International*, 28(1), 1-6.