

"THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED"

Forum Theatre as a Tool to

Change Community Attitudes towards Inclusion of Persons with Psychosocial Disabilities

Experience of

Nidahas Chinthana Sansadaya – Consumer Action Forum (NCS-CAF)



Introduction: A person experiencing mental distress is considered a burden to the family. On the other hand, unawareness and stigma makes many families hide their member consumers, preventing them from taking support or psychosocial assistance. In 2009, Nidahas Chinthana Sansadaya – NCS, (Consumer Action Forum), with the technical and financial assistance and expertise from Laymen's Den (Pvt) Ltd. has established a theatre group called Theater of the Oppressed. Its purpose is to sensitize the communities, government officials and civil society organisations.

Forum Theatre is an application evolved from Latin American countries to educate the laypersons on the impact of malpractices of the corrupt governments on the poorer strata of the country. It has been adapted later as an effective medium to educate lay-communities on different subjects¹. NCS and Laymen's Den (Pvt) Ltd. has developed this application for community education for promoting inclusion of persons with psychosocial disabilities.

¹ ILO-Entergrrowth Project in collaboration with British Council Sri Lanka has adapted Forum Theatre Applications to promote small enterprises among village communities in Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Kurunegala districts.

To start with, Activists with psychosocial disabilities who were the members of NCS-CAF were trained to develop short action dramas, based on their life stories, at a two-week training workshop (2009) followed by field rehearsals. Since the completion of the training, they have performed covering more than 10000 people including persons with psychosocial disabilities, their family members, health professionals, policy makers, policy implementers, media, police, development professionals, public, entrepreneurs and policy implementers. Besides, the community level programs at schools, community halls, temples, they have performed at trade fairs, special educational workshops organized by Ministry of Health, Police Department, Hospitals, Business Development Service Providers, etc.

End of each performance, a random spectator survey was conducted during process documentation to understand the effectiveness of Forum Theatre as a tool to reduce societal stigma and discrimination, towards promoting inclusion.

Objective: To share the experiences and learning of NCS on using Forum Theatre approach in mental health promotion facilitating reduction of stigma and discrimination.

Methodology:

An analysis of process documentation developed through 28 performance sessions, has been done to extract evidences on attitudinal changes of the audiences. Learning of the theatre group and the collaborative CBOs/Institutions has been extracted from debriefing meeting reports. Structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 100 viewers at five performances, covering 50 consumers and 50 other community members/professionals.



Findings:

- Analyzing the 30 process documents of community performance sessions, and debriefing/ feedback meeting reports, it was evident that persons with psychosocial disabilities based on whose life-stories the dramas were developed, were able to take the main role effectively.
- About 95% of the performers in the drama were persons with psychosocial disabilities who succeeded in educating the audience of the need for being sensitive to issues and factors that contribute to initiate mental distress. This was indicated by 10 – 15 members (10%) from the audience, volunteering at the repeat performance session to change the wrong actions by family and the community depicted in the drama.
- Immediately after the program, more than 50% viewers from the audience approached the performers individually for more information and further clarifications. Majority of them were consumers and carers/relatives of consumers.
- “Theatre of the Oppressed” Forum Theatre conducted in other regions as special programs has created demand for NCS assistance in building capacity of consumer groups on consumer advocacy, life story development, and organizational aspects. The follow-up collaborative programs evolved were as follows:
 - Educational tours organized by VSO for their partners and persons with psychosocial disabilities to southern villages where NCS-CAF works.
 - Workshops/events of Ministry of Health, WHO, District Secretariats, Sarvodaya, etc., invited NCS-CAF to stage Theatre of the Oppressed - Forum Theatre Programme.
 - NCS participation as resource institutions in experience sharing programs/workshops organized by VSO and its partners, in Central Province.
 - NCS assistance with Hitha Mithuru Sangamaya to lead community mental health programme in Kandy district in collaboration with Psychiatry Unit of Kandy General Hospital (Teaching).
- The findings of the random survey of 200 spectators revealed their feelings as below:



COMMENTS	TOTAL	%
1. This theatre should reach other districts too	200	100%
2. Persons with psychosocial disabilities abilities and talents displayed	196	98%
3. Very effective medium for education on sensitive issues	190	95%
4. I am proud to be a supported consumer	164	82%
5. I felt guilty	144	72%
6. It will encourage more consumers to acquire services	170	70%
7. Ready to educate others using personal experience	56	28%

Majority confirmed that Theatre of the Oppressed is effective in communicating the message of respecting the rights and abilities of persons with psychosocial disabilities.

Conclusions

- Persons with psychosocial disabilities can stand for their rights and advocate for their peers (labeled as crazy and with unsound minds), as effective leaders, wounded healers, and consumer advocates in the sector of mental health promotion and education. They as performers/actors, in a dramatized discussion forum (Forum Theatre) could effectively advocate for their rights, as it depicts the strong influence of the family and social environment around any person to experience psychosocial disability.
- “Theatre of the Oppressed” which adapted forum theater techniques, is proven to be effective in changing attitudes of communities in mental health promotional aspects. As evident in the survey the viewers felt responsible (guilty) for the societal exclusion of persons with psychosocial disabilities at the end of the Forum Theatre, compared to the other methods (lectures, life story telling, publications, electronic media) used for mental health promotion and education towards reduction of stigma and discrimination.

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THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

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