

AIDS on stage

For the last two decades theatre has been used as a tool for development communication in various parts of the world, disseminating information and promoting community dialogue. Currently the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its impact is becoming a prominent topic of theatre performances – for example in Malawi, where a research team of the Berlin-based "Seminar für Ländliche Entwicklung" (SLE – Centre for Advanced Training on Rural Development) spent three months to explore the role of theatre in HIV/AIDS prevention and to conduct an evaluation of other awareness activities of the agricultural extension service.

A young woman and a young man meet. "People who are not married should always use a condom", she insists. "I *am* married, so I don't have to use one", he replies. Roaring laughter in the audience, which is seated on the ground around the actors on the village square. This little dialogue in the local language Chichewa is the beginning of a 30-minute play on HIV/AIDS, performed in August 2001 by members of the 'Chitedze HIV/AIDS Awareness Group' in a rural community west of the Malawian capital Lilongwe. After the performance a vivid discussion evolves: on the situation depicted in the play, on promiscuity and condoms, on modes of transmission and ways of prevention. Questions from the audience are answered by a representative of the local health centre.

"Chitedze HIV/AIDS Awareness Group" is one of the various community drama groups the SLE team had the opportunity to meet. These drama groups are either based in villages, at health centres or in schools. Meeting in their spare time, the group members collectively create scenes and plays on HIV/AIDS issues in order to perform them in the communities. Using the language and the daily-life aesthetics of the people, they attract large village audiences and stimulate discussions on the pandemic and its impact on the rural communities.

In the publication "HIV/AIDS prevention in the agricultural sector in Malawi" the SLE team presents the results of its research on theatre and HIV/AIDS and develops ideas about ways of integrating theatre into the activities of the Department of Agriculture Extension Services.

Theatre performances are very popular in Malawian rural areas. In interviews spectators and drama group members alike state that they think theatre is a good means to discuss HIV/AIDS and that the performances can lead to behavioural change in the audiences. But apart from these possible *external* effects, there is also evidence of fundamental changes *within* the groups. Many group members report they have gained considerable knowledge on HIV/AIDS through their theatre activities and some say this has led them to change their own sexual behaviour. They

feel responsible, they say, because as actors they are perceived as role models by their environments. Several of the drama groups encountered are motivated to perform in places outside their immediate environments, but they lack the financial means for transport. Another major constraint is the difficult access to information on HIV/AIDS. Many groups do not feel prepared to answer questions of the audiences. One group member told the SLE team that "sometimes we feel like one blind man leading an other".

So what about the agricultural extension service? *Some* extension workers might decide to play theatre themselves and to form extension workers' drama groups to disseminate messages on HIV/AIDS in the communities (this is already happening in some places). But *all* extension workers can play a key role in promoting theatre as a means of communicating HIV/AIDS and in motivating community members to form drama groups.

In order to achieve an integration of theatre into the activities of the Agriculture Extension Service, the SLE team elaborated a number of recommendations, such as the integration of theatre skills modules into the HIV/AIDS awareness training of extension workers in order to sensitise them for the work of mobilising community members to play theatre. For representatives of community drama groups an integrated HIV/AIDS and theatre training (focused on the application of participatory theatre skills) would be a promising approach. This would not only enable them to create and perform plays on HIV/AIDS with a better knowledge background, but also to meet other community groups. For more contact and communication between the different groups the SLE team also recommends the organisation of regular "dialogues" of different drama groups – from joint public performances of two or three drama groups to small festivals. Another recommendation refers to financial support for groups who want to perform in places outside of their immediate environments.

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