Acting Out of Conflict: Using Participatory Theater as a Tool of Peacebuilding in Rwanda

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Rwanda, one of the most densely populated countries, remains a largely agrarian society. As a result, conflict over land is pervasive and only increases with Rwanda’s growing population. Many Rwandans in rural areas are unaware of their land rights and do not fully understand the roles and responsibilities of local authorities in resolving conflicts. This lack of understanding is frequently two-sided, as local authorities often do not possess the skills or motivation to mediate conflicts effectively. Search for Common Ground, an international nongovernmental organization, uses participatory theater to equip Rwandans with the tools for resolving personal conflict and building stronger relationships between local authorities and their communities.

In a largely agrarian society, land ownership can quickly become a point of conflict and contention. Although no stranger to violent conflict, Rwanda has made impressive strides toward peace and stability since the 1994 genocide. Conflict over land, however, is an issue that will continue to stress Rwandan society, as its population grows, and require peaceful and effective community-level mediation and management. Participatory theater is a creative way of informing communities of their rights and changing attitudes and approaches to conflict at a grassroots level. The entertaining format makes it attractive, especially in rural areas, and its reach can easily extend beyond the initial audience as people share their experience with others.

Squeezed for Space

Issues of land scarcity predate the 1994 genocide, but the pressures they impose on Rwandan society are acknowledged to have played a role in the resort to mass violence. The scarcity of arable land has only grown worse as Rwanda’s population continues to grow at an estimated rate of 2.8 percent per year.1 With 11.4 million people...
sharing slightly more than 10,000 square miles, Rwanda is easily the most densely populated nation in Africa. Unlike most densely populated areas, however, Rwanda remains predominately rural, with 90 percent of the population engaged in ‘(mainly) subsistence agriculture’.2

To sustain its rural population, the country is increasingly being divided into ever-smaller plots of land, which Rwanda’s overworked hills cannot support in the long term. This scarcity has also driven up the value of land. Conflicts involving inheritance are likely to become more frequent due to Rwanda’s very young population, 43 percent of whom are under the age of fourteen.3 Land reforms, although well meaning, could cause additional tensions, especially if they are not fully understood by the population. For example, in an effort to institutionalize the process of landownership, the National Land Center and its advising body, the National Land Commission, introduced mandatory land registration in 2009. The implementation of this reform created an unexpected rush of would-be registrants to government offices and raised questions of inheritance and rights of orphans and refugee returnees that the government had not been prepared to address.

Five years after the 1994 war and genocide, Law no. 22/99, ‘to supplement book one of the civil code and to institute part five regarding matrimonial regimes, liberalities and successions’, was passed specifically to assist the large number of widows who did not have the right to inherit land in their families. Article 43 of this law states that ‘all children, without distinction between girls and boys, alive or where deceased before parents their descendants [sic], excluding those banished due to misconduct or ingratitude, have a right to the partition made by their ascendants’.4 The law proved difficult to implement due to resistance from Rwandan culture over female inheritance. Although increased gender equality is to be encouraged, it does further complicate the process of dividing and allocating land. Women’s inheritance adds to the increasing number of people who have inherited or will inherit plots that are too small to support an average family.5 Cultural norms regarding land and farming will have to evolve with changing demographics, but there is presently a need for effective ways of resolving the conflicts that will naturally arise from population pressure.

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND AND PARTICIPATORY THEATER IN RWANDA

Rwandans’ lack of knowledge concerning land rights and inheritance, and their expectations of local authorities, leave many of them feeling as if they have no recourse for their grievances. Such discontent can lead to conflict or escalate existing tensions. Although Rwanda has been cited as the least corrupt country in East Africa—a testament

3. Ibid.
to the emphasis placed on improving governance—the issue does occasionally arise. A more benign cause of ineffectiveness on the part of officials is their lack of understanding of the scope of their roles. Many could benefit from training in mediation and dialogue to build their conflict resolution skills.

Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) working in Rwanda and twenty-eight other countries (fourteen of them in Africa), implements initiatives to counter and transform conflict at local and national levels. Established in 1982, SFCG has developed a time-tested 'toolbox'—a broad array of operational methods of peacebuilding and conflict transformation that include well-known techniques, such as mediation and facilitation, as well as less traditional ones, such as television productions, radio soap operas, community organizing, and participatory theater. Through employing several methods simultaneously, SFCG increases their overall effectiveness and is able to achieve both breadth and depth in their impact.

SFCG began working in Rwanda in 2008 in conjunction with other SFCG Great Lakes country offices to build peace nationally and regionally. Based in Kigali, the office addresses a range of issues that contribute to Rwanda's peace and stability, including good governance, inclusion of majority and minority groups (including women and youths), reconciliation, and collaboration involving land. The organization's work in Rwanda has two main objectives: to promote constructive and collaborative dialogue within Rwanda and in the broader Great Lakes region and to reinforce regional and national media capacity to address conflict issues with accuracy, impartiality, and responsibility.

Through the implementation of grants from the European Commission and United States Agency for International Development, SFCG has used a variety of different initiatives to address issues of conflict over the past two and a half years. These include training local leaders and mediators, producing and broadcasting radio programs on issues of contention, and using participatory theater to reach more rural audiences. Thus far, the theater performances have reached more than 20,000 people. The case study here focuses on the impact of SFCG's participatory theater program in Rwanda in resolving issues of conflict. The thematic focus of the participatory theater was two-pronged. For the first phase of the project, the team focused on resolving issues of land conflict across the country. Within the second phase, the theater focused on elections and good governance issues, corresponding to the country's political context.

Theater has long been used as a tool for dialogue. Audience members can watch their own stories being told from an outsider's perspective, allowing and encouraging them to identify with the characters onstage on all sides. Participatory theater takes such identification a step further by enacting dramatized stories from the audience and by asking audience members to inhabit a character in the performance and play

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7. Here peacebuilding may be defined as a long-term engagement in the promotion of reconciliation, reintegration, leadership, and civil society development to contribute toward sustained social, political, and economic stability in a society and to prevent a relapse into violent conflict. Conflict transformation is not about ending conflict, but about altering, from an adversarial stance to a collaborative one, the way individuals, communities and societies view conflict and approach their differences.
a role that may be counter to their own position. Cynthia Cohen notes that one of the key imperatives in making theater an effective peacebuilding tool is emphasizing relationships and interdependence. It requires ‘individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationships[,] even with their enemies’ and recognize ‘that the well-being of our grandchildren is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy’s grandchildren.’

Participatory theater has been used as an effective tool of behavior change communication, especially in developing countries, on issues such as health and sanitation, sexual violence, and religious tensions. It can be especially effective in rural areas as a relatively low-cost way of reaching populations that often lack access to other forms of media. Its use for conflict transformation and peacebuilding is guided by the theory of social learning, whereby people consciously change their behaviors through observing dramatized scenes and modeling. They receive instant gratification for their choices when the conflicts in the drama are successfully resolved as a direct result of their positive suggestions and solutions. SFCG has used participatory theater in a number of its country programs, including in Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), to support community management of conflict. The organization applied best practices from its implementation in these countries to the Rwandan context.

Two different methods of participatory theater were applied in Rwanda: a classical method based on the approaches of the other SFCG offices and a method specially designed for Rwanda’s unique political conditions. The first step in both methods is to train local actors in the Common Ground approach to theatrical performance, which included interaction with spectators to make the performances participatory. They are also trained in techniques of conflict management. This reinforces the local capacity for peacebuilding and trains local entertainers in a method of acting that can be adapted for future use with or without the support of SFCG.

The classical method employs interviews before the performance. The actors disperse into the community and interview average citizens about their conflicts or the role of conflict in their lives. Special attention is paid to understanding all aspects of a conflict and all points of view. The actors then fashion a show with three to five scenes based on the information about conflicts gathered from the various individuals. The scenes present the conflict in a fictionalized manner, and then audience members are asked to join the actors in resolving the conflict. Those who volunteer come onstage, where they replace an actor, and in that actor’s role, offer advice for solving the problem. This was the basic procedure for performances revolving around land conflicts. Local officials were much more likely to invite the theater group to perform and allow them to interview local residents when the performances involved land issues.

The method was modified slightly for SFCG performances dealing with more politically sensitive issues, such as elections or good governance. In these instances, the team constructed a loosely scripted version of the show, which was then presented to

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district officials in advance to gain their trust and to allow the performances to be held. In lieu of interview-based scenes, the team wrote four scenes to highlight hypothetical issues that might arise between local leaders and their constituents.

**KARONGI CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY**

This case study focuses on the implementation of the participatory theater program in Karongi district, in the Western province. Karongi, like most other places in Rwanda, has concerns about conflict over land rights and use. Also like other locations, Karongi is adjusting to a relatively new system of collaborative democracy, so issues between leaders and constituents can arise from simple misunderstandings about individuals’ role in a functioning democratic process.

Karongi district invited the participatory theater team to perform on several occasions in different sectors (local administrative units) over the course of eighteen months. The theater troupe was more readily welcomed into the community when invited by local district authorities. Even with local support, however, there was often a measure of initial mistrust or reluctance among community members to share their stories of conflict with the visiting performers. The urban-rural divide between actors and villagers, respectively, played into this dynamic as did villagers’ concerns that their perspectives might be misrepresented or interpreted.

The shows centered around encouraging dialogue between citizens and local officials to find solutions for community-specific land conflicts and for general issues, perhaps affecting good governance in the area. Immediately after some of the performances, statements by leaders and members of the audience indicated that they intended to use the dialogue started in the shows to try to solve their real-life problems.

This case study focuses on follow-up in two sectors in Karongi district: Rubengera (the capital) and Gishyita, both of which indicated enthusiasm for conflict transformation shortly after performances there. The study aims to determine whether the communities that participated in the SFCG theater productions remembered the shows as providing useful information, continued to use the channels of communication they had opened, and applied new ideas inspired by the theater in resolving problems within their communities. The objectives of the case study are as follows:

- To identify the role SFCG’s participatory theater played in informing rural communities about their rights and responsibilities in regard to land and government.
- To assess the role SFCG’s participatory theater played in the resolution of problems regarding land in the communities.
- To identify and document the specific aspects of the participatory theater initiative that led to positive changes.
- To record measurable indicators to provide evidence of a decline in conflicts after participation in theater productions.

The Karongi case study was carried out in two parts. First, interviews were conducted with a sample of people who attended a 2010 theater performance in Rubengera sector focusing on land issues. Second, interviews were conducted with a sample of people who attended a 2011 performance concerning good governance issues in Gishyita sector. District officials in both sectors were interviewed to get an overview of any
changes taking place. Analysis was then done to identify overlapping and diverging themes in feedback from the two performances. A total of eighteen interviews took place over three days in Karongi district (see Figure 1).  

Rubengera Land Performance

Using a snowball sampling technique, the researchers first met with local leaders and abunzi (traditional mediators), who were trained by SFCG staff in conflict mediation. The training culminated in a public theater performance in the Rubengera marketplace on 26 August 2010. The sample of abunzi interviewed was selected from a list of those who attended the training. A special effort was made to speak with male and female mediators from different communities.

The abunzi were first asked their opinions on the training and whether they felt they had used the skills learned. They were then asked to provide examples of how the theater performance had helped them to understand the training and whether they perceived or discerned lasting changes in their behavior or approach to mediation. The abunzi were finally asked to identify citizens who had also attended the performance. Because the performance had occurred ten months earlier, they were given photos from the event to assist their recollection. Even with the aid, however, the abunzi were unable to recall or recognize anyone they knew who had attended the performance. They were, however, able to locate an employee of the Local Defense based on his uniform, and he in turn provided researchers with names of several individuals in the photos. This Local Defense employee introduced the researchers to these people, who readily volunteered their stories.

10. All the interviews in Gishyita took place on 30 June and 1 July 2011 and in Rubengera on 29 June 2011.
11. Local Defense Forces were originally set up as a civilian complement to the military to support security in the villages and remain active in their communities. They often help keep order at large events and work with the police to ensure security.
Gishyita Good Governance Performance

A similar method was used to locate interview subjects for the Gishyita good governance portion of the study. Again, the snowball sampling technique was applied, but because the researchers did not have photographs of the event, they relied on word of mouth to identify audience members. The first contact was the executive secretary of the sector, who led the researchers to the local primary school to speak with teachers who had attended the performance on 26 April 2011. The executive secretary and the others were each interviewed about the effect of the theater performance to see whether they had made any changes two months after the performance.

KEY FINDINGS

The interview process revealed that the two participatory theater programs had informed people and also had inspired changes in behaviors and attitudes. Those interviewed shared an increased understanding of the skills that could be gained from attending such performances. Across the board, they recognized the conflicts portrayed as relevant to their own lives, realizing that they themselves played a role in the conflict, seeing their particular rights and gaining and understanding of the appropriate role of local authorities in mitigating and mediating conflict.

Beyond gaining knowledge and skills, the interviewees could cite specific examples of how they applied this new knowledge to their own lives. They reported changes in behavior among leaders toward citizens, reciprocal changes in citizens’ attitudes toward local leaders, and resolution of personal conflicts. In addition, the trained actors were empowered as social communicators and expanded their skills to successfully manage conflict.

Recognizing the Reflection

The Theater was like showing the local leaders a picture of themselves, both the good and the bad sides.

— Respondent in the Gishyita sector

Recognition of the conflicts presented as relevant to their lives is the first step in getting an audience to own the process of conflict transformation and the possible solutions that may arise from the hypothetical interventions presented in the theater performances. Without this recognition and ownership, there is no feeling of personal responsibility or even ability to change the conflict. At each performance, the theater team asks members of the audience to raise their hands if they have encountered a conflict like the one being enacted. This often engenders a sense of shared experience among audience members and between the audience and actors. It is also a monitoring tool to ensure that the activity design is relevant to the targeted communication.

Those interviewed in Rubengera and Gishyita expressed appreciative recognition of the conflicts presented and their relevance to their daily lives. All those interviewed said they were familiar with the scenes of conflict depicted. Even with the passing of time, respondents could still recall readily the themes and specific scenes performed in the pieces. Each also mentioned that the scenes had reflected something they or someone they knew had personally experienced.
A female abunzi interviewed in Rubengera said, ‘One of the scenes presented was about two neighbors; one was a widow and the other neighbor changed the border of the property without permission. The theater was a reflection of how the people in my cell live. Problems like this happen often when widows feel they have no one to stand up with them’ (Rubengera, 29 June 2011). Another woman who attended the same performance recalled the same scene and added, ‘Some of my neighbors are in a conflict very similar to the one with the widow having her border moved’ (Rubengera, 29 June 2011). The executive secretary of Gishyita sector commented, ‘The performance was good and was a reflection of society. Some citizens do not do their part to help, and some leaders are corrupt’ (Gishyita, 30 June 2011). One of this leader’s young constituents said, ‘The theater was like showing the local leaders a picture of themselves, both the good and the bad sides’.

Understanding One’s Role in Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Prior to the theater performances, many locals did not realize that they played a role in a conflict, and thus also did not recognize their potential to resolve it. The theaters presented scenes of familiar conflict and also demonstrated the characters therein working as forces for positive change. Moreover, the theaters depicted the reality that rarely is one side solely responsible for sustaining a conflict, and audience members were able to see ways that they may have been complicit in their disputes.

The head of the land office at the Maison d’Accès à la Justice (House of Justice, MAJ), which handles civil claims in Karongi district, said, ‘The theater that was played helped the citizens understand that if they felt someone was oppressing them, the way to solve it is not through violence. Violence is not the only way and the theater showed some alternatives’ (Rubengera, 29 June 2011).

One woman who attended the Rubengera performance on land issues saw her own family’s conflict dramatized. Seeing the show led to her realization that she could help resolve the disagreement simply by speaking to her family about the division of their inheritance. She was able also to see, by watching how the conflict was solved on stage, that she and her family could solve their conflict without mediation from the courts or the abunzi. Another audience member from the same performance came to a similar conclusion about keeping his familial disputes out of court after watching a conflict that was similar to his own. He said, ‘I chose not to go to the courts to arbitrate between my family and myself over my inheritance of land and instead spoke directly with my mother and her siblings to work out a peaceful resolution of our differences’ (Rubengera, 29 June 2011).

One audience member came to the realization that he could support his neighbors simply by being willing to give information to the abunzi who were trying to mediate the conflict. This understanding of one’s role not only in one’s personal conflict resolution but in the resolution of others’ conflicts helps strengthen community ties and improve citizens’ relationships. This man justified his need to help resolve others’ conflicts because ‘people should not bring conflict into the community. Even if there are conflicts, they are still neighbors who must live together, so there is no need to face the consequences of conflict’ (Rubengera, 29 June 2011).

Without understanding their own role in conflict resolution, it is impossible for individuals to employ agency in finding mutually beneficial solutions. Participatory
theater provides a space for the audience to take on the role of someone who solves conflict. This sort of practice is invaluable when the alternative results of trial and error can exacerbate conflict through unintentional missteps that began as well-intended efforts.

**Understanding the Role of Local Leaders in Conflict Resolution**

Before the performance and training we thought the role of the abunzi was just to know the local history and judge based on that. We didn’t realize we needed to dig deep to find the source of the problem.

— Abunzi from Rubengera sector

The good governance performance depicted scenes of positive and negative behavior by leaders. Local leaders and citizens agreed that the theater accurately represented what the people wanted from their leaders as well as behaviors they did not want. By watching the theater performance, many of the abunzi were able to 'see the steps to solving a problem', as one put it, as well as to view their role more broadly. In clearly defining the role of local authorities, the play incorporated a depiction of corruption and actions that fell outside the boundaries of appropriate behavior. One woman who attended the good governance performance said, 'I did not know what corruption looked like until this production. I thought leaders were allowed to demand money for their services' (Gishyita, 30 June 2011).

**IMPLEMENTING THE LESSONS**

One of the most effective ways the participatory theater initiative has been used is as a tool for inspiration in the communities served. The mediators who attended the performances were able to better understand the nuances of conflict resolution and were inspired to imitate those skills in their work. Those who attended the performance were able to confront issues of tension in their lives because the theater presented conflict as normal and as something that people could resolve on their own without necessarily turning to government structures or local authorities for help.

**Change in Conflict Management Style by Abunzi**

The theater helped the abunzi see the way to talk to people in a non-aggressive tone. This showed them how to mediate peacefully.”

— Leader of MAJ in Karongi district

As noted above, the abunzi were trained in mediation prior to the theater performances. The portrayal of conflict mediation by actors using a 'common ground approach' built upon this training and demonstrated how to apply the approach to conflicts the abunzi adjudicated. Both abunzi and laypeople were invited to play the part of mediator and to see the mediation process through to a successful conclusion. 'It was like a demonstration or a practice round of how to solve the conflict,' said one abunzi of the theater performance (Rubengera, 29 June 2011). Another abunzi from Rubengera sector said the theater was invaluable to her understanding of how to solve
a similar conflict. She commented that she had watched the scene and then 'knew the process' for resolving her conflict (Rubengera, 29 June 2011).

The change in the way abunzi mediated was not only self-reported, but was also remarked upon by members of the community. The local MAJ leader in Rubengera stated that she had seen a clear change in the way abunzi in her community approached conflict:

> The abunzi have worked here for a while, but before the training and the theater, there was not real justice. The mediators did not listen enough to the citizens’ problems, which is the beginning of injustice. The abunzi used to think the person who talked the most should win. Now it is different, after the training and the theater they spend much more time on each case to find the root of the problem... The theater helped the abunzi see how to handle problems in a non-aggressive way. Before the theater, the abunzi would react to problems forcefully. Now they actively listen to all sides of the story. They now mediate more peacefully. (Rubengera, 29 June 2011)

### Personal Conflicts Resolved

Many people interviewed were inspired to speak to those with whom they were in conflict and to come to a peaceful resolution that did not involve formal intervention or mediation. One woman and her family resolved their conflict after they saw a dramatization of it played out by the actors who had initially interviewed them. Their decision to divide their inheritance equally was due to the conclusion that 'this land is our common ground and we cannot let it be the source of our conflict' (Rubengera, 29 June 2011). One man convinced his mother to draft an official will to give him a parcel of land. He learned that it was a legal possibility through the performance. Yet another was inspired to speak with his family peacefully about allowing him to use some land and thus was able to avoid hefty court fees associated with using official mediators.

### Changes in Attitude toward Working with Local Officials

> We no longer feel like we are begging when we ask a leader for help.

— Respondent in Gishyita sector

In the two months after the performance of the good governance–themed production, attitudes toward collaboration with local government leaders subtly changed. After understanding their roles and rights in working with local leaders, the citizens interviewed no longer felt like helpless supplicants. Many thought the performance held up a mirror in front of officials in a way regular citizens could not. One person, Benoit, from Gishyita commented, 'I was very happy to see the local leaders also attend the performance. It was as if they were put on the stage themselves... One scene featured a leader who asked for money in exchange for doing his job. This happened to me before the theater performance, when I tried to get some official papers signed and the leader refused to do so unless I paid. I could easily relate to the scenes in the performance' (Gishyita, 30 June 2011).

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12. This respondent’s name is fictitious.
Respondents’ increased knowledge and recognition of corruption had an empowering effect on many of them. Benoît went on to say that citizens had become more assertive in asking for a change of venue when meeting with authorities. Prior to the theater performance, he said, ‘It was possible to find many people accepting that they should meet with their leaders in a bar. This setting made it easier for the leader to ask for bribes for the work he needed to do. Now we meet in offices when we want to request something’ (Gishyita, 30 June 2011). Another Gishyita resident said, ‘The theater showed us we have the right to have the local leaders work on our issues for us. Many who saw the performance still remember this lesson’ (Gishyita, 30 June 2011). Though the change is understated, the impact is clear, showing that citizens and officials are on their way to collaborating on an equal playing field.

**IMPACT ON THE THEATER TROUPE**

In my community, I saw there were long-standing problems, but when I tried to raise them I was told to leave it alone, it was ‘cultural’. But after learning about conflict resolution, I see that it’s not about culture, and these are conflicts that need to be discussed and resolved.

— Actor in the SFCG participatory theater troupe

Another notable effect of the participatory theater initiative is the impact that it has had on the actors implementing the performances. When reflecting on their involvement with the theater, the actors revealed that they too had been affected by their training in conflict resolution and by the messages they had helped to spread. The training enhanced the capacity of the actors to be effective social communicators. Largely from urban centers, many remarked upon the fact that their experiences with the troupe had brought them to parts of their country they had never seen. A number of the actors had previously worked in radio, and the participatory theater approach allowed them to more directly engage with their audience. It also honed their skills in mobilizing and leading others.

Many of the actors spoke about the idea of conflict being perceived as cultural, as noted above. They believed that their greater knowledge of conflict resolution allowed them to recognize conflict not as ‘tradition’ but as a challenge that could be overcome. Many actors were further empowered to resolve conflicts in their own families and communities. ‘This experience has helped me realize that I can’t just look at myself as an actor’, said one, ‘I also have to look at myself as a leader, and recognize what that role entails’ (Kigali, 13 December 2010). Another actor reported his experience mediating conflicts concerning water: ‘I am able to analyze conflicts and see that there are often hidden issues that are not being discussed. For example, we had a big conflict over the water hole in my community. I talked about it with the different parties and discovered that the conflict was actually about suspicions over an affair and really had nothing to do with the water at all’ (Kigali, 13 December 2010).

In addition to building the actors’ capacity to mitigate conflict, the project also gave them participatory theater as a valuable and new tool with which to do so. The idea of this kind of interactive theater was initially as alien to most of the actors as it was to the audiences. One commented on his initial skepticism:
When we started working with participatory theater, it was completely impossible to me that we would go out without scripts and develop the performances in the field. I was really resistant to the methodology and the idea. But I found that when you include lots of locally gathered information, people relate to it better and they pay more attention to what you’re doing and saying. This process actually simplifies things, and it helps people to speak more easily. This approach helps you become part of the community, and that helps the message you’re trying to share circulate better. (Kigali, 13 December 2010)

The participatory theater proved to be a two-way street, with implementers gaining skills and knowledge along with the audiences. Both groups can continue to use the skills they learned to teach others and to help manage conflict in their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the research here showed participatory theater to be an effective tool for managing conflict and building skills, it was also found to work best in conjunction with other tools that SFCG uses to build peace. It is a positive supplement to the radio programs SFCG broadcasts and the training it conducts and is useful for demonstrating and reinforcing the concepts introduced on-air or in workshops.

In Rubengera sector, however, it was found that none of the abunzi trained by SFCG were from the community where the theater was performed. This meant that the abunzi and their fellow citizens had no common understanding of this specific conflict resolution process nor was it possible for the performance to spark a shared motivation to resolve conflict. In Gishyita sector, it was discovered that few people interviewed had heard SFCG radio programming, which could have built upon the ideas introduced by the performances. It is recommended that special effort be made to coordinate the training, performance, and radio broadcasting teams to make sure SFCG’s programming reaches its highest potential.

Proof of the theater’s positive impact, but also a need for expansion, was that each interview subject requested that the theater be performed more often, in more cells of each sector. More remote areas would especially benefit. Repetition is important in shifting attitudes and provides greater reinforcement of conflict transformation methods. One interview subject said, ‘Rwandans have a saying, “Learning happens every day. It is a process”. So what we learned in the theater was good but sometimes it is easy to forget if you do not return’ (Gishyita, 30 June 2011).

CONCLUSION: SPREADING LIKE A GOOD RUMOR

SFCG’s participatory theater program has been shown to be successful in achieving its aims. Those interviewed recalled the theater performance readily, felt they had been informed of their rights and responsibilities within the context of conflict situations, and stated that the theater program had played an inspirational role in their resolution of personal conflicts.

The impact of the participatory theater program on the two sectors in the Western province of Karongi can be interpreted as social change through art. Those who solved their conflict took the initiative to do so because they were first inspired by the per-
formance. It also reinforced the power of modeling. Some of the people who saw the performance found tools that applied directly to their personal conflict, such as understanding a key aspect of the law or seeing how they could change their role in the conflict to engender peace. Others who saw the performance were inspired to work collaboratively with their local officials because they now perceived themselves as having equal power in the citizen–elected leader relationship.

Audience members are given ownership of the process through their participation. Freed from negative consequences, they are allowed to experiment with trial-and-error solutions in a way that is impossible in real life. Once equipped with new tools, however, they are empowered to resolve conflicts in their own lives. The act of performing and donning another perspective opens new channels of dialogue and understanding. Further, if they share the process with their neighbors, their communities will develop a common language of conflict transformation. The actors present a step-by-step framework for solving conflict that members of that community can return to and apply to multiple areas of their personal lives, not only the particular conflicts dramatized in the production.

The elements of inspiration, instruction, and experimentation during the performances lead to reflection and action by the audiences that spreads into the community beyond those who attended the performance. As one interviewee put it, ‘The theater allowed citizens to gain a level of understanding that enabled many to discuss their own conflicts, which led them to talk about unresolved tensions and issues even with the people who did not attend the theater. I have seen the ripple effect of this change. Neighbors talk to each other about the show and it spreads like a good rumor’ (Rubengerera, 29 June 2011).

The drama of participatory theater transports audiences to a realm where they can see alternative solutions to their own conflicts. Its fictions are grounded in reality, but by virtue of being fictitious, they can be taken more lightly, and sensitive subjects can be broached. The theater is a safe space in which to address issues that are otherwise left as whispered tensions or angry hands. The impact of the participatory theater program has the potential for further growth and reach through word of mouth, hopefully to be utilized in real-world conflicts and contexts.

ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In 2010, SFCG produced several participatory theater shows regarding land reform and good governance in rural districts of Rwanda. These shows were focused on encouraging dialogue between the citizens and the local officials, finding solutions to community specific land conflicts and challenges to good governance. SFCG is now seeking to explore the effect these programs had on creating lasting change and more harmonious communities.

Key Research Questions

1. What sorts of land conflicts were occurring in the area before the theater production? Were these addressed in the show?
2. How, if at all, were these conflicts being resolved before the theater production?
3. How did these conflicts affect the personal relationships between citizens and the public relationships between citizens and their local representatives?
4. What sorts of land conflicts are occurring now? Are the conflicts new or a continuation of unresolved conflicts? How quickly are conflicts resolved?

5. What can the respondents recall from the theater production? How did the respondents hear about the theater production? What words do people use most when talking about the performances?

6. Did the theater production strengthen communication and social dialogue privately between citizens on a more long term basis?

7. What aspects of the theater production were most useful for them? Did the respondents learn new information about land reform from the theater production?

8. Have the abunzi applied their knowledge from the performances and trainings to settle land conflicts due to the theater performance?

9. How do they solve conflicts now in their community? Is it different? Do they see an influence of the theater production?

10. What other mechanisms played / are playing a role in resolving conflicts? Do those mechanisms complement the conflict resolution tools presented by the participatory theater?

11. Do the citizens recognize the performances as coming from SFCG or do they attribute them to other sources, i.e., the government? Is there a rural urban divide between the actors and the audience?

12. How do men and women choose what they will intervene in or comment on? Do men tend to choose the public sphere and women choose the private sphere?

13. Have people felt more comfortable working with local leaders? Have these leaders reached out to their constituents to work on issues that concern them?

**Target Populations**

This case study will involve data collection with the local officials and citizens of two sectors of Karongi district in the Western province:

1. Rubengera Sector where SFCG’s participatory theater performed on August 26, 2010.
2. Gishyita Sector where SFCG’s participatory theater performed on April 26, 2011.

In both sectors, individual interviews with the help of a Kinyarwanda-speaking coresearcher will be conducted with local leaders and abunzi who will act as key informants. From there, follow-up interviews will be conducted with individual citizens whose names will hopefully be provided by the key informants. In Gishyita there will be special attention paid to whether or not citizens believe that government is making a stronger effort to work more collaboratively with them.

**Target Locations**

1. Following the theater performance in Rubengera sector it was noted that the audience expressed an interest to use the conflict resolution tools presented in the show in the future. The research will follow up with district leaders and individual citizens to see if the tools were actually implemented.

2. Feedback from the theater performance in Gishyita Sector showed that citizens expressed a need for a good leader who solves community problems without discrimination. This implies that before the theater performance there was little collaboration between leaders and the population. The research will follow up with district leaders and citizens to see if they were inspired by the theater to work collaboratively.

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Sample Questions for Local Leaders

- What do you remember from the performance?
- Were the issues raised relevant to your sector?
- Do you know anyone who has resolved a land conflict since the participatory theater performance in July of last year?
- What were the conflicts like before the theater program?
- What conflict was resolved?
- What was the conflict and who was involved?
- How was the conflict resolved?
- What influence did the participatory theater have on the conflict resolution in your community?
- What did you think of the solutions the citizens presented?
- Have you been able to incorporate some of their suggestions into your work?
- How were issues brought by citizens addressed before the performance? Is there a difference now?

Sample Questions for Citizens

- What do you remember from the performance?
- Did you feel comfortable with the actors’ portrayal of the local situation?
- What do you think the impact of the performance was?
- What were the steps that were taken to resolve conflicts?
- Do you know anyone else who has resolved conflicts since the participatory theater performance?
- Have you taught others to resolve conflicts in similar ways to those presented in the participatory theater?
- What influence did the participatory theater have on the relationship between you and your local leaders?