

# From Knowledge Sharing to Community Understanding: the use of Theatre for Development to Share Scientific Knowledge in Rural Communities

*Jonga phambili Sinethemba (JPS)*  
*(Looking forward we have hope)*

Nick Hamer

## Introduction and background

### **The JPS project**

This Theatre for Development TfD process took place towards the end of a four year research project investigating 'Vulnerability, Coping and Adaptation in the context of HIV/AIDS and Climate Change' in two rural Eastern Cape sites.

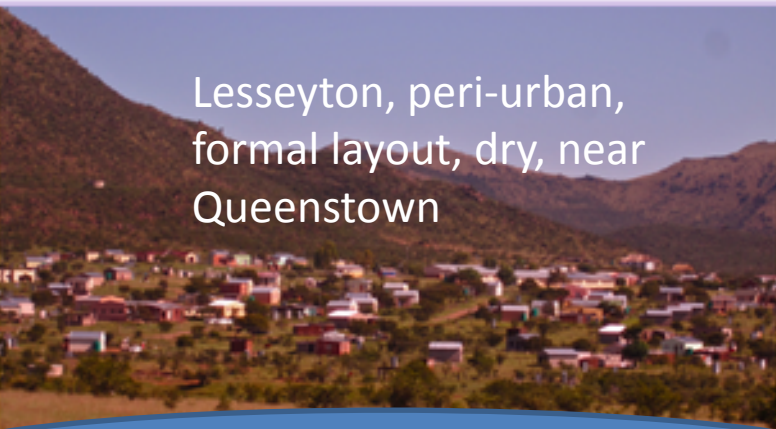
The JPS project has developed a large body of scientific knowledge, including Hons., Masters and PhD theses.

# Project Sites

Willowvale – remote, rural,  
NR dependent, wetter.  
poorer



Lesseyton, peri-urban,  
formal layout, dry, near  
Queenstown



Two sites – peri-urban/ rural



# The problem

- Academic research programs often find it extremely challenging to share scientific findings in a way that is meaningful and relevant to rural communities. Research can make the error of disseminating a one-way flow of information from scientists to communities.
- The JPS projects has been especially careful to avoid the one-way knowledge flow from Scientists to Communities.
- So much so that we could perhaps make a serious error of a one-way flow of information from communities to scientists

# The problem

- We appreciate that it is essential to find innovative ways to communicate findings from scientific research, in a way that knowledge is shared, with dialogue and mutual learning taking place
- JPS has responded to this challenge in numerous ways, such as community exchange visits, the SLG colloquium, amongst others.



# Methodology

## What is Theatre for Development?

*“TfD has come to be widely accepted in Africa and other parts of the developing world as a theatre of the ordinary people used to address their own problems, in their own terms, from their own perspectives and from within their own art forms.....The people are the protagonists, generating the themes and infusing the drama with conflicts from their daily lives.”*

Ogah S. Abah

- Well suited to the need for dialogue and mutual learning
- When handled well drama can also raise extremely serious and sensitive issues in a way that audience members can feel confident to express opinions that might otherwise be muted.
- Characters portrayed are fictitious, but speak of real life dilemmas, situations and as such the process can deepen our understanding of the issue at hand.

# Process overview

Use of Rhodes University Drama expertise and a Grahamstown based director and facilitator, drawing on his own performance skills.

Auditions were held in the Lesseyton and Gatyana communities and 2 local performers were selected from each site.

Two professional actors were also employed from Grahamstown, in order to mentor the local performers and to elevate the performance level.

## Challenges of the process

A particular challenge for the Director was that a number of objectives needed to be achieved simultaneously:

- Mentor and develop raw talent and integrate this into a professionally performed piece of theatre.
- Translate the scientific findings of the JPS process into a theatre piece, that is entertaining, educational and an opportunity to look at local realities from a different perspective.
- Test the JPS project messages and build on them during the work shopping process.

## Knowledge translation

Three separate meetings were held (between drama and JPS) to discuss what JPS's key findings were and how we would best present them.

## Agreed messages of the play

The overall theme to be about CHANGE, and how we adapt to it, in a context of Climate Change and HIV/AIDS

The piece structured around:

### Past

- Far more Farming
- Less reliance on government
- More livestock
- More harvesting of wild foods
- More predictable weather patterns



# Agreed messages of the play

## Present

- A far greater reliance on government and social grants
- Abandoned fields and crops so far less farming practices
- Far more dependence on shop bought foods
- Far more violence, HIV AIDS
- Far less predictable weather and extremes in weather

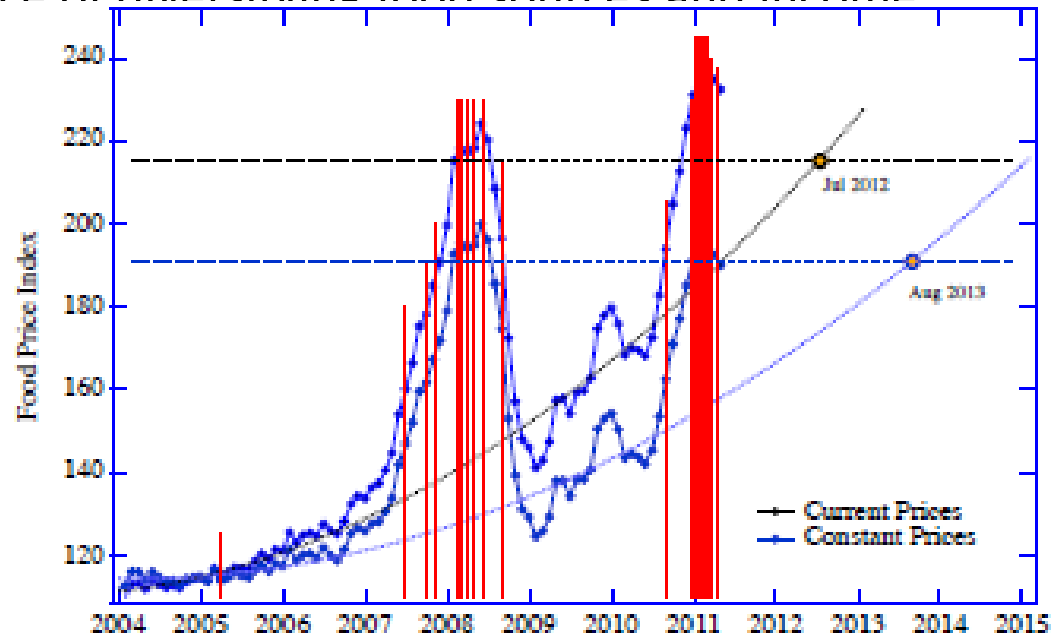


# Agreed messages of the play

## The future

- We know that the weather is going to become more unpredictable and more extreme.
- This means that bought food prices are going to fluctuate unpredictably
- Part of the challenge to the audience, is how they act NOW, to cope with this future?
- The importance of diversifying food sources and income

New England Complex  
Systems Institute (2011):



## The work shopping process

- The drama was then work-shopped further.
- Intensive and deliberative process, drawing on the personal experiences of the performers. This was part of the critical aspect of dialogue taking place, to ensure an 'authentic' voice was being portrayed and not regurgitating the understandings of the academic team.
- Need for right balance between entertainment and education, to ensure the audience were engaged by the show and receptive to the messages and challenges within it.
- Theatre of 'exploration', not 'explanation.'

## The show

- The drama piece was performed at two Community Imbizos, in front of an audiences of approx. 100 local community members.

Scenes were depicted that looked at the various aspects relating to past, present and future scenarios

- **Scene 1 Introductions**
- **Scene 2 Village life**
- **Scene 3 Mangwanyana's feast**
- **Scene 4 Imbizo**
- **Scene 5 Interview**



# The show

**Scene 6: Sick Wasemba**

**Scene 7: Sandile steals chickens**

**Scene 8: Farming group**

**Scene 9: Mandlenkosi Drunk**



**Scene 10: Mangwanyana monologue and character statements.**

**Scene 11: Shopping scene.**

**Scene 12: Mangwanyana's questions:**



## Audience reactions

Observation of audience reactions, post show discussions, as well as follow up interviews with performers and audience members indicated that the show was well received and appeared to be an effective tool for sharing research findings and in engaging community representatives in a discussion about serious challenges.

### **Performers and Drama team**

- They also felt that the audience were receptive to the piece and saw that it resonated with them and stimulated discussion and debate.
- Push felt that the audience members found a voice in relation to the material in the play, perhaps in contrast to when people with 'scientific' authority speak.

## Audience members

- “ They looked as if they had taken the information from a book but it is actually our lives..... The problems in the drama are relevant to us and we try to address the issues but I believe we get overwhelmed”.
- “What I learned here is that we need to come together, as men of this place, and give each other some advice to get through the problems. I believe what I got from this occasion is positive things towards the future”.





“ The main thing I got from the whole Imbizo is that we need to know how to take care of ourselves and not depend on other people and government”.

“ People have learned that the weather is starting to change and that our hard work is being wasted. So by learning about the Climate Change we are then placed at an advantage because we will know what to expect”.

# Challenges

A classic Theatre for Development process would be much more rooted within local communities, with the process being of much more significance than the performance aspect.

Ours was a hybrid model incorporating local community participation, whilst developing a clear outcome of a theatre piece.

No direct audience participation in the drama, though dialogue responded to audience reactions.

We made very good use of limited time and budget,

# Was it a success?

In many ways it is easy to argue that the drama was a great success at a number of different levels:

- Creating a learning opportunity for local performers
  - Extending JPS dialogue with the community, via the process and performance
  - Presenting the message in a relevant and innovative way
  - Assisting the JPS team to contemplate the research results for a non academic context
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- Success was due to the hard work and professionalism of the drama team, as well as the context of the whole JPS process. A drama is not a 'quick fix' to the challenges of sharing knowledge with local communities. Less well considered drama can simply be another mechanism for disseminating knowledge in a one way direction (Propaganda!).

## Further questions to consider:

Does the drama lead to further discussions and learning taking place in the broader community?

Within our Climate Change Adaptation work should we be interested in true TfD as a research/developmental tool? Or perhaps do we want 'Edutainment' where the explicit aim is convey messages in an entertaining and engaging way?

How does the drama play out in the context of being a part of a 4 year process? How did the drama resonate with different audience members at the Imbizo? How do different groups of people learn and what do they learn?

We'll attempt to follow up on some of these questions as we monitor the impact of the JPS project in the broader community early next year.

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