

# Using Dance, Drama and ICTs to Inform Rural Communities: The ARRIN Project

## Drama and dance make people change

by Edith Tulp and Arjan de Jager

Drama and dance are an excellent way of informing people and making them aware of what they can do to prevent HIV infections or to plan their family. That is why the Ndere Troupe theatre and dance group from Kampala in Uganda trains farmer groups all over the country to perform for their community. The farmer groups are coordinated by the Agricultural Research and Rural Information Network (ARRIN) which has set up information centres, called InfoPops, throughout Uganda with the support of IICD. The ARRIN project started in 2003 and uses ICTs in an innovative way to drive home important messages to rural communities. The goal of the project is to translate important information (for example, how to fight the banana wilt bacteria) to and from farmers into drama and then convey this message to a much wider audience with the help of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

To accomplish this, Ndere Troupe has set up a rural information network of five information centres – or InfoPops – hosted by farmer groups with a direct link to its headquarters in Kampala. These InfoPops hand in a request to Ndere troupe to develop a play on an important issue such as the banana wilt bacteria. Ndere Troupe then develops the play and distributes the transcripts (generally, text and video) electronically to the InfoPops (on CD ROM via normal postal services). The InfoPops then channel the information via this theatrical performance to rural communities in local languages. The ICT facilities in the rural InfoPops are also used by the community for other purposes, for example to access market information, to give farmers information on new crops, etc.



Adhola United Cultural Performers

A total drunkard comes onto the stage. He shouts at his wife who is complaining that she does not have enough to feed all their children. Moreover, she is pregnant again and she wants to get advice from the clinic about family planning. "You're not going there", shouts her drunken husband, "That's where they kill children. And I want more children. I want you to fill up the whole house with my children." "I'm not a factory", his wife shouts back. The audience laughs.

The performers of the Adhola United Cultural Performers (AUCP) are doing a good job. Their play about family planning not only makes people laugh, it also makes them think as well. Towards the end of the play the drunkard visits the clinic, where he learns that no children are killed there and that he would be a richer man if he had fewer mouths to feed.

"Did you know", the acting nurse adds to this information, "that giving birth to so many children will make your wife grow old prematurely."

"So, are you telling me that the beautiful women I see in the streets are all planning their families?" the man reacts.

"Yes, family planning has a lot of advantages."

## Farmers stand up for themselves

The Adhola United Cultural Performers (AUCP) is one of the 32 farmer groups around Tororo that has been trained by the Ndere dance and theatre group. They perform for the community once a week and are very popular. "People love listening to stories, it's a traditional thing", says Justine Ayo, coordinator of ARRIN Tororo. "So they like watching a dramatic performance; you really can blow them away with it." But aside from being entertaining, the plays aim to sensitize the public about important issues that affect the local community, such as hygiene and sanitation, livestock diseases and how to cure and prevent them, how to commercialize your farming activities, how to operate and maintain boreholes, domestic violence, family planning and HIV/AIDS. The plays are based on the information ARRIN gathers from farmers in order to sensitise and counsel them about important areas of their work and life. The ICT equipment provided by the project, which is supported by IICD, is also used to store the data and share it with other 'InfoPops' in the country. Justine Ayo and three volunteers work together with the leaders of about 100 farmer groups with a total around 3,000 to 5,000 farmers. Ayo is passionate about her work: "We stimulate farmers to work together and organize themselves", she says. "It is only by working together they can stand up for themselves. This is necessary because individual farmers work through middlemen and are more often than not cheated by them. If farmers can share the transport costs and sell their products as a group directly to buyers, they can then get good prices and everybody will prosper. Up until now, we established farmers' groups for groundnuts, cassava and oranges. It's still small-scale, but we would like to go up a notch and take it to the commercial level." To reach that goal Ayo is looking for ox-ploughs. "With ox-ploughs the farmers will be able to dig and plant together at the right time", she says, "it will increase production and the produce will be able to be transported in bulk simultaneously. Then the middlemen can be removed."

## Sweet oranges

On a plot next to an orchard full of lush green, low-lying orange trees, a group of about twenty farmers gather. They are members of the Mudodo Orange Farmer Group, which started planting its first orange trees five years ago.

Their dedication to the project is evident from the large, yellow oranges dangling like Christmas balls from their trees.

There are 36 orange trees in the orchard. Each tree delivers about 30 to 50 kilos of oranges. The weight of two oranges is about 1 kilo, which they sell for 500 shillings. The taste of the oranges is surprisingly sweet and reflects the meaning of the harvest to these women: they could double their income and improve their lives. Thanks to the oranges they can buy clothes, soap, salt, sleeping mats, school materials and uniforms for their children. "It is good to share ideas and skills with each other", one of them says. "It eradicates our poverty and promotes cooperation and understanding amongst us." Another woman stated: "Cooperation helps us to endure times of hardship when we have



social difficulties and problems. By working together, we find support from each other." Cooperation is not always easy, but the women found their own solution for non-cooperative behaviour within the group. When somebody does not turn up for work, she will have to pay a fine of 100 shillings. Those who arrive too late to work will have to pay 50 shillings. Apart from the oranges, the women also grow groundnuts, maize, cassava, millet, sorghum, sweet potatoes and beans, albeit on a very small scale. Some women even decided to start growing and selling tomatoes and cabbage together.

When asked to give their opinion of the performances they have seen, the members are usually very enthusiastic. Chairperson Paul Ochari of the Mudodo Orange Farmer Group speaks for the whole group when he talks about the plays. "I saw a play on diseases and animals and how diseases affect them", he says. "I learnt that an animal must sleep in a clean place and that you feed it in a place free of ticks. You must either grow enough grass yourself or bring them to a place where grass grows. And if there is any sign of disease you must act early on this. My animals are doing very well now. These are the things we learn from the plays"

### **Local government**

The Ugandan government recently gave farmers another incentive to organise themselves into cooperative groups when it decided that, henceforth, extensive services for farmers such as assistance and support from veterinary doctors, will no longer be free. Their services are demand-driven and based on a contract, and farmers have to pay them individually. "But how can you pay for assistance when you are a small groundnut farmer?" Ayo asks. "It is only through corporation that you are able to request extensive services and share the costs." Where possible, ARRIN works closely with the local government offices. "Eighty per cent of Uganda's income comes from agriculture," explains Simon Peter Opio, district speaker for Tororo local government. "So agriculture is the government's first priority. We have set up programs like the Program for the Modernisation of Agriculture and the National Agricultural Advisory Service. At the district level, we look at the grass roots level, collect their concerns, and make plans for the next three years. But unfortunately, we only cover two or three sub-counties out of a total of eighteen and even then not all the groups are involved. So, we are very happy with ARRIN and we are trying to work together to expand the services to the people we are targeting."

### **No choice, no voice**

ARRIN focuses strongly on the position of women. Women in Uganda, as in the rest of Africa, tend to do all the agricultural work. Research shows that 75 percent of the workload goes to women, only 25 percent to men. Most of the plays performed by the farmer groups therefore explore the situation of women, particularly those living in 'negative cultures', and look at issues such as domestic violence and family planning. "By 'negative culture' we mean a culture in which women are not allowed to speak in their own home or attend a meeting and where they are forced to have up to 15 or 20 children", Loyce Ogolla explains. Ogolla initiated the Mudodo Women Tree Planting Group and is now its chairperson. The group consists of 26 members who plant trees as a source of income. They sell firewood and grow fruit trees such as citrus, mangos and pineapples. Ogolla sees music, dance and drama as very important instrument that can be used to change the negative culture. "Men sometimes react harshly to the plays. But that doesn't keep them from coming and watching. Their attitude changes slowly. I remember a song about a man who went to the prostitutes and came back drunk, day after day. After the performance, a man approached me. He was angry and said: is this song about me? No, I said, it's not about you and I explained to him what we were doing. Eventually, the man changed his behaviour. Some men still resist, but nowadays most allow their wives to go to the meetings."



Samali Osuna in the Arrin office in Tororo

“There is a law in Uganda which says that women, after men have paid a dowry, are the property of their husband,” says Samali Osuna, chairperson of Women Tororo, who also works with ARRIN.

“Women feel that men have robbed them from everything. They have no voice, they have no choice. Men give 25 percent, but benefit for 80 percent. We tell the men: you can regard your wife as your property, but why not try to see her as a gift? There is a proverb which says: when you invest in women, you invest in everything. That’s why women need to be empowered, to

choose their own direction in economy. If you give them an ox-plough and training, look what you’ll have after five years. They will be able to send their children to secondary school. Educated children will add to a better economy.”

### **Immense satisfaction**

Under a ground-swell of applause from the public, the actors of the AUCP finish their play. They did an outstanding job. The monthly training sessions they have been following in acting, singing and dancing seem to have paid off. But more than that, their commitment and motivation for rehearsing for four hours, twice a week, is what has helped to turn them into skilled performers. They love what they do, but what they prefer most is acting. “Because”, as Deo Okech, chairman of the AUCP put it, “it helps a lot to sensitize the people. People do change their behaviour because they recognize situations and it makes them think. Like men who go to prostitutes and then refuse to use condoms when they are asked. Sometimes they get offended. But we know men who have really turned their lives around and we have helped them. That gives us an immense satisfaction.”