

**THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED:
*Forum Theatre as a Tool to
Change Community Attitudes against Stigma & Discrimination***

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Introduction: A person experiencing mental illness 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 treatment or psychosocial assistance. *Nidahas Chinthana Sansadaya – NCS*, (Consumer Action Forum), with the assistance and expertise from Laymen’s Den (Pvt) Ltd. has established a theatre group to promote mental health and reduce stigma at community level. 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 on mental health and stigma, using consumer advocates of NCS to develop short action drama based on their life stories, at a two-week training workshop followed by field rehearsals in November 2009. On completion of the training, NCS theatre group – *Theatre of the Oppressed*, has performed in 25 villages in South, in collaboration with BasicNeeds and its partners covering more than 2000 community members including consumers and carers. In addition, 03 special forum theatre performances have also been organized for health professionals, media, police, development professionals, general public, entrepreneurs and policy implementers covering about 1000 viewers. In addition to 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. between the period December 2009 to December 2010. This study was conducted to understand the effectiveness of Forum Theatre application to educate the lay-community towards reduction of stigma and discrimination against people experiencing mental illnesses and its outcomes.

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

¹ ILO-Entergrowth 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.

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 25 process documents of community performance sessions, and debriefing/ feedback meeting reports, it was evident that Stabilized mentally ill persons 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 stabilized mentally ill people who succeeded in educating the audience of the need for being sensitive to issues and factors that contribute to initiate mental illnesses. 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 consumer members to southern villages where NCS work
 - Central Province Mental Health Promotional Workshop using NCS’s Theatre of the Oppressed Forum Theatre Program
 - 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 sample survey of 50 consumers and 50 community members/ professionals revealed their feelings as below:

COMMENTS	TOTAL	%
1. This theatre should reach other districts too	100	100%
2. Mentally ill persons' abilities and talents exposed	98	98%
3. Very effective medium for education on sensitive issues	95	95%
4. I am proud to be a stabilized consumer	41	82%
5. I felt guilty	36	72%
6. It will encourage more consumers to acquire services	35	70%
7. Ready to educate others using personal experience	14	28%

Majority confirmed that Theatre of the Oppressed is effective in communicating the message of respecting the rights and abilities of persons experiencing mental illnesses.

Conclusions

- Stabilized consumers in mental health could stand for their rights and advocate for mentally ill persons (labeled as crazy and an family burden), 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 become mentally ill.
- “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 mental illnesses 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.