

Engaging with Human Rights through Theater: A Case Study of the Vanuatu Rainbow Disability Theatre Group

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WAN SMOLBAG (WSB) plays a critical role in the wellbeing of Vanuatu and Pacific Island communities, whether it is engaging youth in theater, providing reproductive health care, creating dialogue around good governance or protecting fragile Pacific ecosystems. To give a sense of WSB's approach to human rights education and what makes it a unique organization, the following are responses from people who work at WSB to the question, "What makes Wan Smolbag so remarkable?"

[At Wan Smolbag], we talk a lot about life as a human being – that's why they're interested in talking to us. What we talk about are things in daily life. We talk about the issues that are affecting people. If you go out and talk about the Rights of the Child, for example, they will listen, but it may not really change how they behave. But [we] deal with things in life, and this is what's really interesting for communities. When we go out they all have lots of questions for us.

I think the most unique thing about Wan Smolbag is that we create a platform for dialogue, and I think that's where the drama makes us so unique. That medium is just a very powerful way of engaging communities.

The way we treat people in the organization - Recognizing people as being people and not like part of a big machine. And also the way we work with communities – we are not coming with an approach of "we know what is best for you and you need to do this." We are actually finding out about their lives and using that information to create a workshop or drama production that helps them to discuss the issues, and find ways of addressing them or improving their lives.

The following paper provides an example of WSB's approach to human rights education, which was not premeditated as human rights education,

but grew out of a natural progression from the wsb community theater group. This paper begins with a history of the growth of wsb and its programs, followed by case studies of the current play by the Rainbow Disability Theatre Group's play, *Ae Blong Hem I Blaen Nomo*. The next section discusses the strengths of and barriers to wsb's approach. This involves factors including writing a play which is both engaging and informative, and defining the group as a recreational activity or a job. The paper concludes with a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the wsb approach and key elements of the wsb model which may be of use in adapting it to other organizations and contexts.

Almost twenty-five years ago, wsb¹ began as a small theater company of fifteen voluntary actors, and then five paid actors, focusing on theater and initiating dialogue around reproductive health and population. Reproductive health was a clear starting point as these issues were not openly discussed, and there was a lack access to reproductive health services and information. wsb's name is from a Bislama² phrase meaning "one small bag"; over the last twenty-five years, the theater groups have traveled to communities across Vanuatu, to create exciting and engaging performances and workshops, with only "one small bag." Based on identified challenges and gaps, wsb organically expanded its focus on theater and reproductive health, to include several issues including governance, education and the environment.



WSB built partnerships with the Blacksands community, on the peri-urban outskirts of Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila, through a large community theater project in 1997 (see photo on opposite page). WSB circulated leaflets, seeking volunteers to work on a community play, which surprisingly resulted in six months of workshops with eighty people ranging in age from ten to sixty. The group created a two-hour play dealing with poverty and domestic violence, amidst song and laughter. Both the community and wsb wanted to continue this partnership. When asked how wsb could give back, the community identified a reproductive health clinic as a needed contribution.



Actors performing *Tijim hem*, February 2013. (Davis Ragonmal, 2013)

The community play group and wsb established the *Kam Pusum Hed* Clinic in 1998, providing confidential services and counseling for family planning, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS). The clinic began to test for HIV in 2002, and in 2005, wsb established an additional health clinic in Vanuatu's northern city of Luganville, Santo. Peer Educators play a key role in the wsb health program, as they travel to and visit diverse communities, to provide counseling, referrals, contraception, and support to community members. Over the last few years, the Peer Educators have facilitated series of workshops for both men who have sex with men (MSM)

and Commercial Sex Workers (CSW). While WSB was initially led to work in reproductive health through an interest in the topic, ongoing community requests and enormous demand for reproductive healthcare and education has maintained health as a central program.

Numerous theater productions and plays echo this focus on health topics, such as WSB's first play on AIDS in 1989, fourteen years before the first local case was confirmed in Vanuatu. Other WSB plays portray social issues to open dialogue. For instance, the 2013 production of *Tijim hem* is built around true stories about violence; whether it is between a married couple, a teacher and a student, a police officer and a young person, or between neighbors. The stories and words of this play are from direct quotations from interviews conducted by the actors, in peri-urban communities of Port Vila, making the play all the more powerful and challenging to watch. Other productions deal with issues of sexuality, homophobia, pornography, drug abuse, and more. While the plays address sensitive and emotional subject matter, they always include humor, song, and fantastic acting which makes them very watchable and engaging.

Invariably tied to human health is environmental health. This is particularly obvious in Vanuatu, as 76 percent of the population lives in rural areas, mainly supporting themselves through subsistence farming and fishing.³ In 1995, the Year of the Turtle in the Pacific, WSB collected stories and information on the current perception of turtles from a number of villages on the island of Efate and close off-shore islands. The resulting play was taken back to these villages. To continue this conversation on turtles between the communities and WSB, communities decided to identify turtle monitors. In 2001, the WSB turtle monitors across Vanuatu became the Vanua-Tai Monitors Association, meaning land and sea monitors. The network, which continues to focus primarily on turtles, has grown to include five hundred monitors, who feed data into a Pacific-wide database. The environmental program is fully embedded in WSB world with theater productions, school programs, teaching resources, films and songs, waste management programs, an international volunteer program and recycling projects.

When working in health, the environment and other areas, WSB partners with government, including the Department of Women's Affairs and the Ministries of Health, Education, and Fisheries. In Vanuatu, there are corrupt politicians, government departments lacking in skills and funding, and a lack of information on the political system. In response, WSB began to

develop plays and videos focusing on governance, such as *Vot Long Pati Ia* (1998), which explains the process and importance of voting. This film has been popular across both Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. The governance program includes workshops for chiefs and their successors, identified community leaders, and community members. The program is echoed by the good governance of WSB which conducts decisionmaking through open and collective dialogues, including all interested staff members.

Vanuatu has a very young population. Over one third of the population is between twelve and thirty years old.⁴ Noting both this trend and demand for improved education, WSB began creating projects that contributed to the education system in Vanuatu and programs specifically for youth. WSB found there to be a lack of resources for teachers, and began to develop a huge number of resources, many which accompany films, radio; or *Love Patrol*, the WSB TV show. The response to these materials has been extremely positive, with teacher training and material dissemination spreading to neighboring Solomon Islands and Fiji. In conjunction with supporting the education system, WSB has established wildly popular youth centers in both Port Vila and Luganville. The programs available include: sports, nutrition, agriculture, photography, pottery, sewing, literacy, music, theater and dance. The youth programs provide activities and opportunities for youth whose families cannot afford school fees.

In 2013, WSB is producing its seventh season of its hugely popular soap-opera-style TV show, *Love Patrol*, which ties all of the diverse subject matters into one project. *Love Patrol* centers on the lives of people living in Port Vila, and covers issues including domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, corruption, pornography, and crime. *Love Patrol* is produced in English, so that it is more accessible to a Pacific-wide audience. It is produced alongside teaching resources which cover the same topics.⁵

In short, WSB did not begin with a direct focus or intention to engage in human rights advocacy or education, but began to engage indirectly with these issues in response to a need. The approach that WSB takes is not a one-way approach of explaining human rights perspectives or ideals, but rather an open, two-way discussion which draws on a variety of formats including theater, music, dance, and participatory workshops. The following case study reflects the design model and approach of WSB projects.

Case Study: Rainbow Theatre Group

The Rainbow Theatre group is a group of nineteen ni-Vanuatu actors who have created plays, workshops, radio dramas, and a film with wsb and the Vanuatu Society for Disabled People (vsdp). The formation of the group was first discussed by some of the group's core actors, Francis, Willie and Arthur, with wsb's scriptwriter in the 1990s. During this time, wsb produced the play and film, *Things We Don't Talk About*. This production tells stories about people with disabilities, and the attempts to "cure" them through traditional medicines and faith healing. Eventually both the people and their disabilities are accepted.

In September 2010, the Adelaide-based *No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability* visited wsb to run a week of workshops with wsb youth and community members with disabilities, culminating in their own performance. It consisted of a series of scenes depicting the barriers of people with disabilities, such as one man's inability to get a passport because he could not access the passport office. This process resulted in the creation of the Rainbow Theatre Group. In April 2011, wsb's first joint production with the Vanuatu Society for Disabled People (vsdp) was performed in primary schools in Port Vila where teachers say it changed their students' perception of disability. The play, *Folem Rod Ia*, is a custom story about accepting oneself and disabilities. In September 2011, Rainbow Theatre Group worked on three radio dramas, which were based on custom stories that the actors had collected. The titles are *Team Angel*, *The Snake and the Boy*, and *The Woman and the Moon*.

Most recently, the group's third play, *Ae Blong Hem I Blaen Nomo*, has been the first play by the group that has an accompanying workshop and film (in progress), and is examined in this case study. The current project is running on one time funding from the New Zealand Basket blong Sapotem Kommuniti KAMAP (NZ BSK). The key parts of the project include the play itself, the post-performance workshops, and a film on the play.

The play was written in Bislama by wsb's scriptwriter, Jo Dorras, who canvassed people with disabilities for their experiences to create the plot. She has used examples of experiences of people with disabilities to write all of the Rainbow Theatre Group productions. The play tells the story of a blind man's life, from childhood to adulthood. He is continuously ostracized by his classmates and community. Eventually, he attempts to commit sui-

cide, but realizes in the end that he can live a full life. The core issues that the play deals with are the experience of being disabled and going to school, the intense prejudice that people experience, and whether or not people with disabilities can or should be allowed to be in relationships.

The play has been performed between fifty and sixty times around the island of Efate in schools and communities. This project is directed towards the general public. Through this project, people of all ages, genders, and both people with a disability and without, have engaged in discussions about the role of people with disabilities in communities. Performances have been held in villages and schools. In the future, the group is very interested in advocating for politicians to focus on disability issues and rights.

Following the play, the theater group holds workshops with the audience. The group provides a statement such as “people with disabilities should be allowed to go to school” or “people with disabilities have a right to have children and get married.” The participants are then asked to demonstrate that they “agree,” “disagree,” or “don’t know” by standing in a corresponding area. Each group discusses and presents reasons for their position, and everyone is given the option to change their position at any time.

In an additional activity, the audience learns an important achievement from the lives of each of the actors. The facilitator holds up a sign and



Wan Smolbag Rainbow theater group performing their 2013 play, *Ae Blong Hem I Blaen Nomo*
(Davis Ragonmal, 2013)

reads out a particular achievement written on it. The audience then guesses whose achievement it is, choosing from the actors seated in front of them. This process is repeated until all of the actors have been matched with their achievement. The achievements include: “won a bronze medal at the Beijing Paralympics”, “holds a degree in tourism”, “has married and has a son”, “has traveled to 17 countries” and more. Then each actor is introduced and asked to tell the story of how they became disabled and how they had come to realize their achievement. The audience is very engaged in this activity, shouting out who they think has each achievement, and enthusiastically applauding when they find out whose it is, and after hearing the personal stories.

The play has been filmed, and a film is in production. The film acts as an additional tool in initiating dialogue around the rights of people with disabilities. The film includes the full performance, and interviews with community members and students who have seen the performance and been involved in the workshop. It will be distributed to Vanuatu schools and villages.⁶

Challenges

While this project has had significant impacts, it was challenging to design and produce. The Director and Scriptwriter described multiple challenges for this project including time management, defining the project, defining roles, and sensitivity to culture and disability. From an educational perspective, the design of the project strives to have a positive impact on the audience and create a safe environment for performers, while being both educational and entertaining.

Time is an important factor in creating a play. It requires consistent attendance and attention of everyone in the group. One approach that the group took was to meet, and have about an hour of spending time together before starting to work on the play. This gives an opportunity for the group to catch up and get to know each other better, strengthens friendships, and results in less chatting during the rehearsals.

Another challenge is how the group views the project – as a job or only an activity; this becomes important when dealing with issues of commitment, payment, and accepting new group members. If the group views the project as a recreational activity, their commitment to it may be lower, and when they are faced with interpersonal conflict, they feel that they can ignore the problem, or just walk away. This response is not conducive to creat-

ing a play. When people with disabilities approached the group to join, the group discussed the possibilities, noting that if more people join, they would each earn less money from the play. It was decided to not include additional actors, as the project was well underway and the actors wanted to maintain the group size and their individual incomes.

Having clear roles and responsibilities was essential. The director was firm that he would be the only one to make criticisms during rehearsals, because otherwise, the actors would give frequent direction to the other actors. It is important to involve caregivers, who come along with the actors, in the play so that they felt they had a place in the projects, and could actively contribute. The group has fourteen members with disabilities, and they come to the project with five caregivers, who provide support for those who need it. They took the approach of including the caregivers as actors in the play.

Sensitivity to both culture and disabilities were important for the director to keep in mind. In some scenes, the characters are bullying another character because of their disability. Comfort levels vary on what people are willing to act in terms of this scenario which they have all likely experienced firsthand. The group discussed how to go about this scene, and found ways of being honest and representative of their own experiences without making themselves uncomfortable.

In terms of human rights education, *WSB* references human rights in the post-play discussions, and portrays human rights in the productions themselves. In most theater projects, *WSB* presents stories of personal experiences, and discusses the scenarios in the personal level. This approach is used because it is more relatable than abstract understandings of rights which vary from person to person. For instance, one community member may understand rights as constitutional rights, while another may see it as something that is conditional, such as you have a right to go to school if your parents can pay for school fees.

Content is important to consider in writing the play. For instance, *WSB* has homosexual characters in its TV show, *Love Patrol*, because it creates a safe environment for the actors. In the context of Vanuatu, homosexuality is rarely accepted. To have a play on homosexuality and tour to villages may put actors in a dangerous position. Also with content, the project requires a continuous source of scripts to keep the actors engaged. These plays all deal

with the challenges that are faced by people with disabilities, and ideally will expand to other topics.

Impact and Critical analysis of experiences

WSB does not expect drama to have an immediate and significant impact on behavior. That said, it is extremely valuable to initiate dialogue on the role of people with disabilities in communities where children with disabilities are teased, excluded, left at home, and not given the opportunity for learning, socializing, and challenging themselves. The actors have seen significant changes in community's responses to people with disabilities since they began performing. For instance, more people attend the plays, most community members say that they support the rights of people with disabilities in the workshops, and individuals express that they have changed their beliefs about and treatment towards people with disabilities. The following quotations from three actors describe the impact of the project on communities.

Most villages, if they have a disabled person, they just keep them at home. They watch the play, and after say "We have learned not to keep all the people with disabilities at the house. We will take them to school and church"... They tell us that "we would insult and be disrespectful to people with disabilities but we don't anymore."

The villagers tell me that before the performance, able bodied people see disable people as "second-class person." They say, "You have a good play. We now get that people with and without disabilities are equal." They understand that we are all one... Before the play, they don't know, but after the workshop and play, people say that they agree that people with disabilities have rights.

The group talked about children with disabilities who they know, who have directly benefited from this project, because after the group visits the school, other children respect those with disabilities.

If the performance group goes to school, the students learn not to look down, swear, laugh at or hurt people with disabilities... If one child who has a disability comes to the school after the play, the kids understand that they are all the same. I know

kids who have disabilities in grades 3, 7, and 8 who have had this experience.

One WSB staff member who worked closely with the Rainbow Theatre Group significantly changed his perspectives through working with the group and seeing its play. He said that,

For me personally, they have definitely changed my way of thinking. Before, I used to think they were useless and an extra burden. I can honestly say that I am really ashamed. They are really friendly. For a moment I didn't see their disability and just take them for who they are. Hopefully with the film, others will see the way I do. I'm stunned. I've seen a blind guy act and he finds his way around the stage. He has so much courage and confidence... I am really amazed by their ability to act despite the limitation of disabilities... They have a voice inside them telling them to give up, but they fight every day. I not only see them as equal, but it gives me a new perspective. Maybe I'm not challenging myself enough because a blind man can act. They are very inspiring.

Responses from communities and schools included shifts in thinking around people with disabilities. For instance some students said that they never knew that people with disabilities have rights, and that they were amazed and inspired to see the talent of the acting group. In the communities, people responded by saying that the performance was really powerful. One elderly woman compared the play to seeing one's own child going through this experience, and she said that she found it very moving.

The use of drama is important in connecting with community members. One WSB actor said that "people see you as an actor but they don't know that you're not only an actor, you are also a community educator."

Personal Impact

The impacts of this project on the lives of the actors are significant. People with disabilities in Vanuatu are generally neglected, and not given the opportunity to have an education or connect with other people. As one WSB employee put it, "People tend to neglect disabled people and treat them as invisible." One of the actors with a disability said that "People in town and

people in villages, they think we are worthless and should only stay in the home. You can't have a friend like other people. You can't learn anything." There are little to no other activities or work available for people with disabilities in Vanuatu.

This project provides an opportunity for people with disabilities to meaningfully contribute to their community, make friends, try something new and learn new skills. An actor said that "it feels like we are doing something with our lives." The chance to leave the home and be around other people is valued; "I like leaving my house and am happy that I could go study in Fiji." Challenging oneself and trying new things is important for everyone in building confidence, and it is especially important for people with disabilities as they are constantly told what they cannot do. Another actor said, "Before I was mostly alone, and I didn't realize that I'd become an actor, but now I have acted in the sixth season of *Love Patrol!*" An actor described the development of confidence of a friend, and the group as a whole:

Before we were shy, but now we are loud – talking and calling to each other. For example, Mike didn't talk much at all and now he talks all the time. Being involved in this project brings out his shyness and now everyone is outspoken, loud, and makes a lot of noise. (Pseudonym used).

The actors have built strong friendships within and outside of the group; one actor said, "I have made lots of friends by being involved in the play. They all call out my name wherever I am – at WSB or at school or around town." Although their project is moving to rehearsals once per week, the group plans to participate in WSB pottery programs every week as a group. In sum, through the project, the actors are involved in meaningful work, develop a strong social network, and build confidence.

Benefits of this Format

This approach of using theater to begin talking about human rights issues is engaging and welcoming. Because there is no right or wrong answer to workshop questions, the audience feels comfortable to express their perspectives. The physicality of moving around is engaging and non-verbal. It transcends language barriers, and keeps everyone actively engaged. The actors have found that working with communities through theater and work-

shops is more effective than only workshops or training sessions for starting conversations:

We talk and advocate for our rights, but words are not enough. When we come with wsb and perform plays, our message stands out clearly in the play... Actions speak louder than words. When we just talk, it's not enough, but when we perform with wsb, it opens the eyes and minds of the communities.

Before, when we only talked with communities, everyone didn't get the message, but when we role play, everyone understands.

Ae Blong Hem I Blaen Nomo acts as a vehicle for discussing the challenges for and role of people with disabilities in communities.

Key Elements of the WSB Approach

The following are some of the key elements of the wsb approach which may be helpful in adapting this model to other contexts.

- Use performances as a starting point for discussions around human rights.
- Design discussion and workshops so that there is no “right” answer.
- Respect everyone’s perspective and allow all perspectives to be voiced.
- Do not rely heavily on the use of human rights and associated terminology which is difficult to relate to. Instead, use examples of real-life situations and talk about how everyone would deal with them and why.
- Be responsive to political events. For instance, wsb conducted workshops on the Family Protection Bill.
- Be responsive to community needs. wsb identified reproductive health as an area which many people lacked knowledge of, and designed projects around this.
- Support community members in fulfilling roles in all dimensions of theater, film production, workshops, etc.
- Keep workshops engaging by involving physical aspects and various forms of expression – writing, talking, debate, visual arts, tableaux, plays, etc.

- Provide accessible and relevant resources and training to communities and schools so they can run workshops independently.
- Adopt a multi-media and multi-prong approach. For example, wsb's radio drama, *Spare the Rod*, is accompanied by a combined teaching manual and comic book with interactive activities. Similarly, the wsb environment program includes school workshops, teaching resources, songs, films, plays, the Vanua-Tai Network, waste management projects, and a volunteer program.
- Build partnerships with communities, NGOs, and government.
- Work towards equality in gender, disability, and community representation in project staffing, payment, and responsibility.

Conclusion

In summary, the wsb Rainbow Theatre project is an example of how theater can be used to effectively initiate discussion around human rights issues. This format brings the focus back to the real-life experiences of people, in a way that is accessible to varying education levels and ages.

Endnotes

¹ To learn more about wsb and to access resources, visit <http://wansmolbag.org/DynamicPages.asp>.

² Bislama, one of the three national languages of Vanuatu, uses Melanesian grammar on mostly English vocabulary.

³ Prime Minister's Office, *Vanuatu Millenium Development Goals 2010 Report*, September 2010.

⁴ Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009 *Youth Monograph: Young People in Vanuatu*, 2012.

⁵ Wan Smolbag, *Love Patrol Resource Guide*, Series One to three, 2008. Available at www.wansmolbag.org/DynamicPages.asp?cid=26&navID=34.

⁶ The film of the play (*Ae Blo Hem I Blaen Nomo*) is available at YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?=GCQdkpQRvfw. A short documentary on the play is also available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHL-QeHxo0M.