

Papua New Guinea: Seeds Performing Arts Theatre Group

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CONFLICTS AND VIOLENCE occur in the urban settlements of Lae city, a growing industrial hub in Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Economic investment in PNG has been increasing such as investments in mining by the Harmony Gold Mining Company Ltd through its Wafi-Golpu Resource Project as well as the liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the Southern Highlands.

Lae city is regarded as the transit point for people from all the PNG provinces, and is also attracting people from other countries. People come to Lae city to do business, visit relatives and even migrate for a better life.

The city is surrounded by more than sixty urban settlements accommodating different tribal immigrants with different traditional beliefs and practices. Young people get involved in crime, prostitution, drugs and liquor home brewing that contribute to the increase in lawlessness and spread of human immunodeficiency virus/ acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

Gender thinking and attitude among the immigrants differ from one tribe to another. But men generally treat women as inferior and want them to follow their husbands all the time. The women as a result suffer from violence.

Illiteracy and lack of access to appropriate information of the young men contribute to the increasing statistics on gender violence, lawlessness and spread of diseases. The education of these young men as part of the solutions to their problems is a priority that has always been overlooked by the government.

Founding SEEDS

Sam Solomon Sommi, a theater professional and trainer who resides with the youths in the settlements, decided to train them in drama, dance and

music after realizing their talents and potential to live as role models in their communities.

In 1997, he founded the Seeds Performing Arts Theatre Group (Seeds Theatre Group) as a group primarily of unemployed youths in the settlements of Lae city. He is the Director of the group.

Seeds Theatre Group uses theater as a tool to address issues facing the people in urban settlements and thus achieve the following over-all goals:

1. To use theater drama as a powerful communication tool to increase the level of knowledge and understanding of the general public based on correct and accurate information and messages on HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), other health-related issues, and social and development issues.
2. To use theater drama as a media strategy of unemployed youths within their respective communities. This media strategy is a community-based communication technique for communities with low literacy and low access to the popular media.
3. To use the energy of the unemployed local talents in creatively and innovatively using drama, dance and music as ways of helping their own community for education and entertainment, and as a communication tool for social gathering and art.

The bulk of the members of Seeds Theatre Group are from Kalvary Lutheran Church, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea (ELC-PNG), where they participate as gospel outreach ministry group reaching people through drama, dance and music.

Seeds Theatre Group artists have attended in-house and outside theater training workshops. In-house training is attained during rehearsals and briefings before a project is undertaken. Partners are also invited to train the members of the group. In addition to Sam Solomon Sommi, the following artists run the Seeds Theatre Group:

- a. Peter Murawa, the Assistant Director, has twenty years of theater experience and is a former member of Dua Dua and Raun Raun Theatre Group. His role includes dramatizing theater drama skills and techniques as well as dancing and music composing.
- b. Willie Doaemo, the Technical Director, has training and experience in campaign against gender-based violence; project management, monitoring and evaluation; community development; and cam-

- paign on HIV/AIDS. He runs training activities and coordinates the website and the social media page of Seeds Theatre Group.
- c. Esther Sam is a former member of the National Performing Arts Troupe, National Cultural Commission, trainer and specialize in role-plays, dramatizing, and singing.
 - d. Teddy Iwara is a senior artist with ten years of experience in theater work. He plays musical instruments like piano and base guitar.
 - e. Zamoia Noine, music composer, plays leading roles and is also rythym guitarist.
 - f. Merelyne Koe, a senior female artist, plays leading roles in most dramas.
 - g. Pais Koe has vast experience in drama and drama production in performing arts for more than ten years, and plays drums and piano.

Seeds Theatre Group is not a profit-making organization and most of its members have continued to use their talent in the performing arts for self-education, self-employment and self-reliance in community development and mobilization.

For the last fifteen years, Seeds Theatre Group has been actively involved in undertaking awareness-raising and promotion activities on HIV/AIDS and other health issues as well as in running theater training and workshops for other community theater groups, non-governmental organizations NGOs, and the Morobe Health division.

Aims

Seeds Theatre Group aims to raise awareness among women, girls, men and boys in urban communities in order to change their attitude and behavior by acknowledging that women and girls have human rights and dignity

It also aims to contribute to the development of local, national and regional commitments to ending violence against women by

- a. Raising the level of understanding and awareness on the legal consequences of domestic violence to both the victims and offenders at the village/settlement level
- b. Pressing for the enforcement of laws and policies in place and ensuring that the communities in the villages recognize them through

- their assistance to victims of domestic violence in seeking proper advice and support from appropriate authorities such as Health, Women & Children Support Centre and the local system.
- c. Fostering the promotion and preservation of, and education on, cultural practices to enable illiterate communities to benefit fully from their own cultural values
 - d. Effectively enforcing and sustaining messages through theater in raising awareness on domestic violence and HIV/AIDS
 - e. Supporting legal institutions by raising the level of understanding and awareness of both the victims and offenders on the powers of Village and District courts
 - f. Using theater as a powerful communication tool in fighting injustice and poverty, and improving the quality of life in Lae urban settlements.

It uses theater drama play as a major tool for communication in educating the vast illiterate communities in Lae district urban settlements on how

- a. To effectively address domestic violence in their homes
- b. To enforce, and ensure that the communities in the Lae district urban settlements recognize, the laws and policies in place by assisting victims of domestic violence in seeking proper advice from appropriate authorities
- c. To stop harassment by offenders who deter victims from seeking support and also to stop offenders who do not realize the legal consequences of domestic violence.

Activities

Aside from the main activities of staging theater drama, Seeds Theatre Group directors and play writers direct radio plays for radio stations carrying out awareness and promotions on health, environment and other issues that are affecting the illiterate communities in PNG.

Seeds Theatre Group is using online media to disseminate information such as Facebook account (www.facebook.com/pages/Seeds-Theatre-Group/237143369632964/) and blogs (<http://stheatre.blogspot.com/2012/01/religion-gender-equality-and-violence.html?spref=fb> and

<http://genderwordpress.webs.com/>). It is a member of the United Nations online volunteering service (www.onlinevolunteering.org/).

Seeds Theatre Group also collects data on domestic violence against women for script writing.

It tries to strengthen organizational development and capacities at provincial and community levels to enable effective implementation of programs for the elimination of all forms of violence against women. It also trains other theater groups on gender, HIV/AIDS, good governance and on using theater skills and techniques for awareness purposes.

It coordinates activities, and builds partnership among, government entities and civil society organizations (especially women's rights groups and networks). It carries out awareness-raising activities for the Morobe Provincial AIDS Council, the National Department of Health (NDOH) as well as other organizations like the Literacy Volunteers of Morobe. It performs during the celebration of the World AIDS Day, World Health Day and the sixteen-day Women's Rights Day. Seeds Theatre Group is a stakeholder, therefore, in the activities of the Morobe Provincial Aids Council and the NDOH.

In 1997, the PNG Institute of Medical Research (PNF IMR), Lae branch, worked with Seeds Theatre Group on the Transex Project (1996-2000). The PNG IMR Transex project primarily targeted the people in the transport industry, namely, the maritime workers, the dockside workers, and the sex workers. It wanted to facilitate behavioral change and the practice of safe sex in the transport industry. The PNG IMR staff trained Seeds Theatre Group members on the basics of HIV, AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and peer education. Between 1998 and 2000 with the support from PNG IMR, Seeds Theatre Group received funds from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAid) to carry out awareness-raising campaign on HIV/AIDS in the workplace, schools, villages and the urban settlements surrounding Lae city.

In 2000, Seeds Theatre Group was also featured in an ABC documentary film entitled "HIV AIDS in PNG," see content on the website: w.w.w.ausaid.gov.au

The NDOH also engaged Seeds Theatre Group to attend two training workshops: "Traditional and Popular Media Workshop" in 1998 and "Using Theatre for Health Communication" in 2002. After these workshops, Seeds Theatre Group carried out health promotion and awareness-raising activities in Lae city and other urban settlements specifically on malaria, HIV/

AIDS, safe motherhood and family planning. It promoted treated net as anti-malaria measure and also produced a radio drama with the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Kundu FM 105, addressing health issues.

Seeds Theatre Group was actively working with NDOH between 1997 to 2009 in all the Health Expos during the Morobe Agricultural Shows.

With funding support from the United Nations Women's Pacific Fund to End Violence against Women, SEEDS held forty-two performances in public venues, such as markets, bus stops and settlements.

Theater Performances

The theater performances of Seeds Theatre Group promote awareness on violence against women, and human rights. In one of its theater projects, the aims are the following¹

1. To use theater/drama to help educate the people and improve their knowledge of the importance of human rights and to stop the violence against women, girls, men and boys
2. To reinforce and sustain the awareness and education on the violence against women undertaken by other NGOs and government agencies
3. To help victims know where to obtain help and protect their human rights
4. To mobilize women's groups in communities to come out and speak against domestic violence
5. To establish closer link between the communities and the support centers that can provide help.

Seeds Theatre Group has nine gender-based scripts written in PNG setting and mindset, and which were approved by the gender experts in the Pacific office of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). The scripts are the following:

- *School is a place for learning and not bullying.* This play tells the story of secondary school kids of Lae city where bullying, school fights and cargo cult² activities are rife.
- *Wife bashing is a crime.* This play tells the story of the villagers who migrated and resided in a settlement in the urban area, bringing with them their traditional beliefs and thinking.

- *Domestic violence, rape and HIV/AIDS.* This play tells the story of domestic violence that led the husband and wife to contract HIV/AIDS.
- *Money lures young girls.* This play tells the story of the sugar daddy attitude of PNG men in PNG setting
- *Advocating for change.* This play talks about the way to advocate to another person about ending violence against women in PNG setting.

The scripts are mostly written by the project director, Willie Doaemo, based on the actual situations of life in the settlement communities and villages of PNG. The scripts reflect the lives of people in the community that the Seeds Theatre Group members have heard, seen, and experienced by living in communities themselves. The songs were composed based on written stories of real life situations of domestic violence. Most of the songs are composed by one of the artists, Zamoia Noine, of Seeds Theatre Group.



Most of the performers are youth, including one performer with disability, female artists, and young kids. They have been trained in theater performance. Before any major awareness-raising activity, the performers camp out for a week and thoroughly rehearse and test the plays.

The plays are short, of fifteen-minute duration, to make the audience keep track of the story. The performances use backdrops as well as open spaces with the aid of microphones, amplifier and mixer, guitars and keyboards for songs, etc.

People are interviewed before and after the performance. They answer questions from the facilitator who explains in detail the drama (why, what, how, etc.) to the audience.

Under this project, Seeds Theatre Group started a series of performances in Lae city in December 2011. As of mid-2012, Seeds Theatre Group covered ten locations in Lae city with three performances per location, along with two other districts in the province with twenty performances per district. In one location (Waria compound), people from three other locations (Bukawa, Mendi and Wasara compounds) learned of the performance and joined it on their own initiative.

In addition, the project facilitated the following:

- Establishment of informal network between the community councilors and Seeds Theatre Group to facilitate the future awareness-raising sessions in their area at anytime
- Training of artists (including an artist with disability) on gender and gender-related issues and the use of drama techniques and skills to eliminate violence against women (VAW). Training of members of Seeds Theatre Group on how to make referrals to the relevant institutions.
- Writing of nine gender-based scripts
- Awareness of two women members of Seeds Theatre Group about the existence of support institutions and that rather than become silent victims they must go out and seek help when faced with violence. The institutions that can provide services refer to the Women and Children Support Centre (counseling, treating and referring victims), Soroptomist International, the Angau Memorial Hospital, the police, the local court system and NGOs that support and care for the victims of VAW. Referrals to these services are also done in after-play discussions with audiences.

- Translation of one pamphlet into Pidgin and the distribution of copies of the pamphlets in the communities visited
- Offer of support from institutions (Women and Children Support Centre, Morobe Provincial Aids Council) on the implementation of the program of Seeds Theatre Group
- Media coverage of the program (including news coverage by UN Women website).

Seeds Theatre Group launched another series of performances under the sponsorship of a government agency during March to July period of 2012.

Audience Responses

Most audiences are illiterate, with majority of them being older men and youths. Most of them do not know anything about gender and equality. They believe what their tradition and culture tell them: men are superior to women.



They are somewhat surprised to know that violence against women is against the law and can lead to imprisonment. Some feel guilty, while others are concerned about violence against women. Some want to report domestic violence cases and support the victims in seeking help. Because of illiteracy, their access to information about domestic violence is limited. Thus the performances provide the needed information that make them become aware of the issue.

Most women in the audience speak and express the desire to have support centers or some sort of support within their community where they can easily get help whenever they face violence. They see them as an option instead of being silent victims in their community.

Some want the men to take ownership of the issue and fight gender violence. They say that fighting gender violence is a two-way process where both the husband and wife must be educated.

Others worry that PNG laws on gender are very weak, and that progress toward gender equality will not happen unless laws disadvantaged to women are changed.

Examples of response are the following:

“The training and my participation increased my skills and confidence to carry drama to end violence against women and also educated me to gain more knowledge on gender and violence against women issues” (Seeds female artist)

“In court hearings, I usually take bribes to let the perpetrator of domestic violence go free. But now I realize that this is against women’s rights and I will change my way of dealing with local court cases of domestic violence by giving a tougher penalty to the perpetrator.” (Community councilor)

“I did not know that wife bashing was against the law. I realized that I could go to prison for that. Thank you for making us aware.” (Community resident)

“We in the community of Yanga need a community support center where the victims can get help. Currently, we silent-

ly become victims of domestic violence and need more of this support and awareness to educate the men in our community.”
(Community resident)

The Role of the Communities

Seeds Theatre Group encourages communities to take important role in its activities instead of mere hosts of the performances. Communities support the performances by:

- Helping gather data for the pre-survey of the people of the communities prior to the performances;
- Providing volunteer drama artists, musicians and musical instruments for the performances;
- Building stages for performances, designing costumes and providing other supportive work during the performances;
- Training of members of Seeds Theatre Group on traditional dances and songs that go along with the drama plays and scripts developed;
- Participating in project management by answering questionnaires and other questions necessary for project reporting.

Partner institutions in the government and other institutions provide technical advice, information and education materials, training, funding, and also staff in staging the performances in different locations.

Challenges in Using Theater

There is not much problem in using theater in carrying out awareness-raising activities. But unforeseen circumstances ranging from bad weather to ethnic or tribal fights force the rescheduling of performances. Lae city was declared a fighting zone in November 2011 when ten people were killed. Consequently, public gathering was restricted, and people were afraid to leave their homes.

Illiteracy and existence of different languages require the services of translators or facilitators who have to explain the purpose of the awareness-raising activity.

Some Reflections

Being a registered community-based theater group in Lae city, Seeds Theatre Group looks to stable, and longer-term financial support for its program. Its current funding support is still not enough to reach many other disadvantaged people who are illiterate, isolated and have been denied their basic human right to have access to information on the many issues affecting them including violence against women.

It hopes to have good working relationship with a donor agency in carrying out its activities effectively and with desirable outcomes and indicators.

Endnotes

¹ This is the project entitled “Using Performing Arts to E_{VAW} in Lae District, Papua New Guinea,” being supported with a grant from the Pacific Regional E_{VAW} Facility Fund of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

² Cargo cult refers to any “religious movement based on the observation by local residents of the delivery of supplies by ship and aircraft to colonial officials. Cargo cults were observed chiefly in Melanesia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were characterized by the expectation of a new age of blessing and prosperity to be initiated by the arrival of a special “cargo” of goods from supernatural sources. Such beliefs may have expressed traditional millennial ideas, often revived by the teaching of Christian missions.” Source: Merriam-Webster - [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cargo cult](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cargo%20cult).