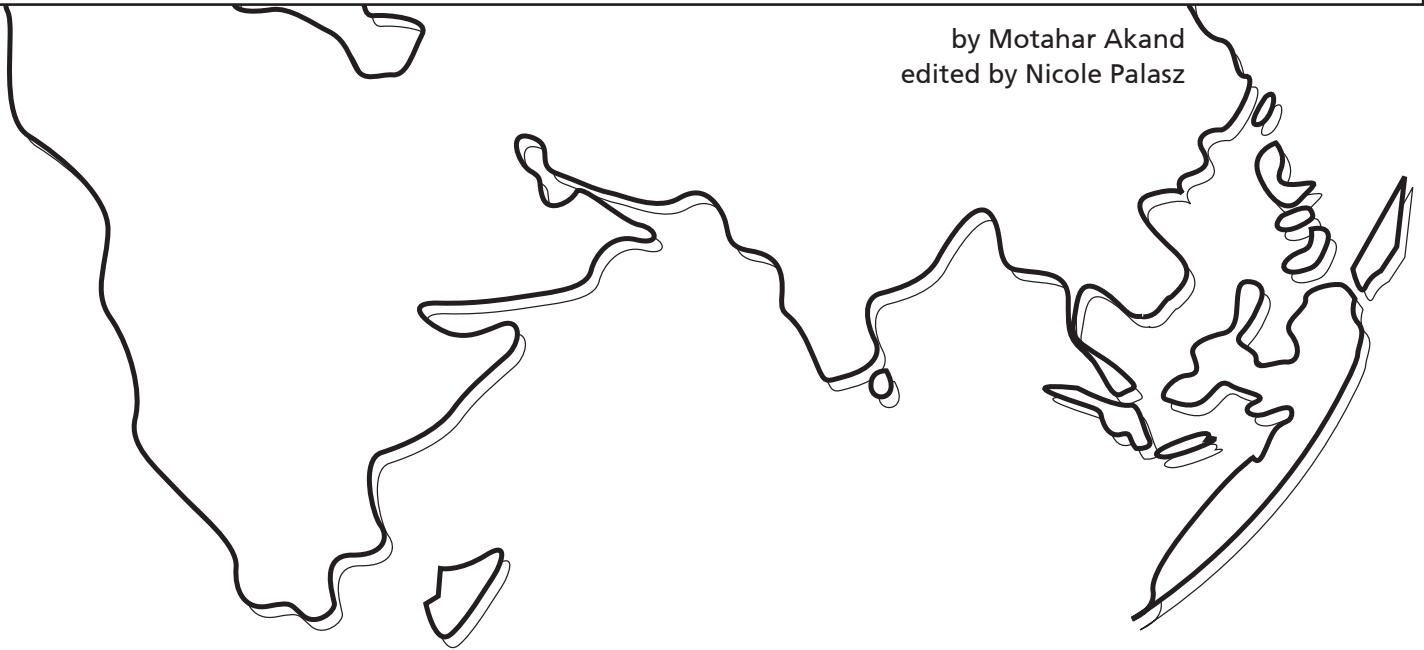


**Action Theatre:**  
Initiating Changes

by Motahar Akand  
edited by Nicole Palasz



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### About the author

Motahar Akand is the Deputy Director of Human Rights Awareness through Human Rights Awareness Program at Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a leading human rights organization in Bangladesh. He was actively involved in the street theatre movement against fundamentalism and the military leadership in Bangladesh from 1983 to 1992. He worked closely with grassroots theatre workers during this time, and performed in *Jatra* during his childhood. *Jatra* is a traditional form of theatre that his father was involved with.

Since 1993, he has been working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a theatre and human rights trainer. He has participated in a large number of national, regional and international trainings on human rights, gender issues, advocacy and theatre. He initiated the tactic of Action Theatre in numerous districts in Bangladesh.

He has a Masters degree in Management from Dhaka University, Bangladesh.

### About the Organization

Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) is a legal and human rights resource center created in 1986. ASK is one of the leading human rights organizations of Bangladesh, seeking to promote principles of gender equity, social justice, human rights and the rule of law. ASK provides legal aid and psychosocial support to disenfranchised groups and victims of violence, and engages in advocacy and training in human rights issues. In addition, ASK conducts and documents fact-finding investigations of human rights violations. ASK has consultative status with UNECO-SOC and participates in several national, regional and international networks.

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I would like to express my deep gratitude to the late Br. Salma Sobhan, founding executive director of ASK, former director Adv. Saidur Rahman and Adv. Sultana Kamal, the current executive director. They offered me the space and support to implement Action Theatre in Bangladesh.

I also humbly acknowledge the valuable contributions of my core team members in ASK and the members of local Action Theatre teams. They are shaping the future of Action Theatre and developing it as a theatre form.

I also thank the New Tactics project staff who offered me the opportunity to share the Action Theatre experience with others around the world. A special thanks to the coaches who made this notebook readable in English.



April 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to the New Tactics in Human Rights Tactical Notebook Series! In each notebook a human rights practitioner describes an innovative tactic that was used successfully in advancing human rights. The authors are part of the broad and diverse human rights movement including non-government and government perspectives, educators, law enforcement personnel, truth and reconciliation processes, women's rights, mental health advocates, and so many more. They have both adapted and pioneered tactics that have contributed to human rights in their home countries. In addition, they have utilized tactics that when adapted can be applied in other countries and other situations to address a variety of issues.

Each notebook contains detailed information on *how* the author and his or her organization achieved what they did. We want to inspire other human rights practitioners to think *tactically* – and to broaden the realm of tactics considered in order to strengthen their strategies to effectively advance human rights.

This notebook will discuss how Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), in Bangladesh, has formed Action Theatre groups, or *Manobadhikar Natya Parishad (MNP)* in villages in twelve areas throughout Bangladesh. Action Theatre is an applied form of theatre that includes a dramatization of a social problem, followed by the participation of the community in identifying potential solutions and then the community moving forward to actually carry out the proposed solutions. Local theatre groups are now gaining ground as a mobilizing force in Bangladesh.

The entire series of Tactical Notebooks is available online at [www.newtactics.org](http://www.newtactics.org). Additional notebooks are already available and others will continue to be added over time. On our web site you will also find other tools, including a searchable database of tactics, a discussion forum for human rights practitioners and information about our workshops and symposium. To subscribe to the New Tactics newsletter, please send an e-mail to: [newtactics@cvt.org](mailto:newtactics@cvt.org)

The New Tactics in Human Rights Project is an international initiative led by a diverse group of organizations and practitioners from around the world. The project is coordinated by the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) and grew out of our experiences as a creator of new tactics and as a treatment center that also advocates for the protection of human rights from a unique position—one of healing and reclaiming civic leadership.

We hope that you will find these notebooks informational and thought provoking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'N. L. Pearson'.

Nancy L. Pearson  
New Tactics Project Manager



## Introduction

Hatosh Haripur is an island village of 5,000 people surrounded by the Padma and Garai rivers in Southwest Bangladesh. In 1998, my organization, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), went to the village to follow up on reports that in recent years there had been five rapes, 15 underage marriages, three cases of polygamy and high levels of domestic violence. We had also received reports of unlawful dowries, verbal divorces, drug abuse and terrorism. The schools were also reportedly suffering.

In partnership with a local non-governmental organization (NGO), ASK went to the village and visited households and farms as well as public spaces such as the village market. After several days in the village, the ASK representatives had developed strong relationships with five enthusiastic local young people. Through this small group, an additional fifteen people, including the local chairman, were recruited to form a primary Action Theatre group, or *Manobadhikar Natya Parishad (MNP)*.

Action Theatre is an applied form of theatre that includes a dramatization of a social problem, followed by the participation of the community in identifying and carrying out solutions.

The Hatosh Haripur theatre group identified three major issues they hoped to tackle in their community: rape, under-aged marriages, and negligence in the schools. During the next few years, the group received training in theatre, family law, human rights, gender relations analysis, laws concerning violence against women, and issue-based drama production. They used this information to organize many Action Theatre performances on these issues in the community, leading to significant changes:

**A reduction in the number of underage marriages:** The performances led community members to protest this practice. With the leadership of the theatre group, the community prevented at least five underage marriages through dialogue with the guardians and elected representatives. These successes increased support and praise for the theatre group, and led to the active involvement of the Union Council<sup>1</sup>. Community tolerance for underage marriages decreased rapidly, leading to a decline in the practice.

**Improved educational achievement:** One high school in Hatosh Haripur had very low Secondary School Certificate Examination results due to conflicts within the school committee and a lack of quality teachers. The theatre group performed a drama on the right to education for students, parents and guardians, teachers and opinion leaders in the community. Afterwards, teachers and school committee members received a warning that the students' guardians would organize against them if they failed to make

needed changes. Within three months, the committee settled their conflicts. The next year, more than 40% of students passed the Secondary School Certificate Examination, compared to less than 10% prior to the intervention.

**Changing the response to rape cases:** Rape cases in Hatosh Haripur were traditionally addressed through a practice called *shalish*, or mediation. According to Bangladeshi law, *shalish* for rape cases is illegal. However, the practice continued. In 2002, a local 13 year-old girl was raped by a 28 year-old man in the village. Despite protests by the theatre group, the chairman of the union council decided to mediate the case through a public *shalish*. While the typical *shalish* draws the participation of 20 to 100 people, this *shalish* was attended by thousands of local residents. In the end, the chairman proposed that the rapist pay 20,000 taka (approximately \$300) to the victim's family and be publicly caned. The family and theatre group members demanded that a case be filed at the police station. The theatre group enacted a drama demonstrating the illegality of rape case mediation and the community grew sharply divided.

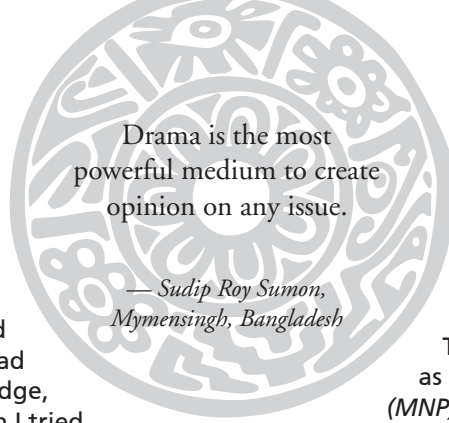
Despite threats made against theatre group members, they informed journalists of the situation. The police became involved, and filed a case against the local chairman and shalish mediators for violating the law. The victim's family filed a case against the rapist with the help of the theatre group. This led to reprisals against theatre group members, but ultimately the rapist and chairman were arrested.

After his release, the chairman convened a public gathering with theatre group leaders, journalists and the police present. He declared rape a major crime that would no longer be mediated. He sent future victims to the police to file a case.

Before starting the action theatre program, we had hoped that drama would allow people to analyze their communities' problems and actively seek to resolve them peacefully. Hatosh Haripur and other community successes inspired us to continue to develop and expand action theatre as a tactic that can lead to meaningful change.

In this tactical notebook, I will outline the Action Theatre framework we have developed and replicated in twelve working areas across Bangladesh. I will share the key elements and steps necessary for the successful application of this tactic, as well as some of the challenges and unexpected outcomes we have seen. Local theatre groups are now gaining ground as a mobilizing force in Bangladesh. I hope this tactical notebook provides you with the information you need to determine whether Action Theatre is appropriate for your country and human rights issue.

<sup>1</sup>The Union Council is the most local level of government, with approximately 7-15 villages comprising a Union.



Drama is the most powerful medium to create opinion on any issue.

— *Sudip Roy Sumon, Mymensingh, Bangladesh*

## Development of the Tactic

I have been involved with theatre since I was a child. I always thought theatre could be a powerful tool for change. As a student, I experimented with using theatre in this way, but had little success due to lack of knowledge, support and skills. I failed again when I tried to incorporate theatre into my work during the beginning of my career in the NGO field.

However, I had a spark of hope when ASK implemented a pilot project on gender and social justice in four districts of Bangladesh in 1996-1997. We conducted more than forty workshops with local elites, elected representatives, professionals and women leaders. We learned of widespread violence against women, including rape, dowry, domestic violence, and *hilla*<sup>2</sup>. During the workshops, participants identified numerous causes of these abuses, such as ignorance of legal protections, lack of information and awareness, and passive attitudes towards the problem.

Three potential approaches were highlighted to address these problems: legal aid, human rights and legal training, and awareness-building through theatre. We began forming local groups and staging dramas, but soon realized that information dissemination is not sufficient to eradicate deeply-rooted social problems. People left the performances without knowing what they could do, in practical terms, to take action.

We reviewed our program with the participation of local theatre groups and other interested people. They suggested an alternative form of theatre, in which the performances would be used to activate people to be a force for change. Though we knew it would be challenging, we embarked on an experiment to create a new tactic, which very soon became known as Action Theatre.

The goal of Action Theatre was to develop the capacities of young people and cultural activists at the grassroots level to be a force for change, helping to create a society based on human rights, gender equity and social justice. The tactical outcome would be the creation of local theatre groups who would initiate discussion, debate, analysis and actions on critical human rights issues in their community. Participants in the tactic would also enhance their leadership skills and human rights awareness.

## WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF ACTION THEATRE?

Action Theatre consists of six elements, as described below:

**INITIATOR:** The initiator is an individual, institution or group of people who forms an Action Theatre group. The initiator is responsible for mobilizing local people to participate and carry out the activities of the theatre

group. In Action Theatre, the initiator is absolutely essential.

### **ACTION THEATRE GROUP:**

The theatre group, also known as *Manobadhikar Natya Parishad (MNP)*, is the body that implements the drama and leads the community to act.

**PURPOSE:** Action Theatre has a specific objective. The initiator and the performers share the same objectives. The objectives are based on research, and each Action Theatre production is aimed at achieving that specific objective.

**ISSUE-BASED DRAMA:** Issue-based drama is a vital component of action theatre. After research is completed and the purpose defined, the theatre group portrays a case scenario on the issue and leaves it open-ended so the audience can determine the next steps. Every issue-based drama is facilitated by the theatre group to reach a solution through discussion with the audience, debate or other means.

**AUDIENCE:** The drama is for an audience. In Action Theatre, the audience is critical, as they are needed to achieve the stated objective. The drama inspires them to think analytically about a problem in their community, and decide on appropriate solutions.

**ACTION:** Action is the primary goal of Action Theatre. The theatre group and audience engage in an action after the performance. This action can be short-term or long-term.

Each of these six elements work in conjunction with one another to provide a complete Action Theatre experience.

### **KEY ACTION THEATRE ROLES IN BANGLADESH**

- *Initiator:* Creates an action theatre group.
- *Core team:* ASK staff members who initiate Action Theatre in other communities.
- *Primary team:* Community members who form the human rights theatre group, or Manobadhikar Natya Parishad (MNP), and implement action theatre
- *Upazilla level Manobadhikar Natya Parishad (UzMNP):* Federation of local MNP groups.
- *Partner NGO or PNGO:* The local group with which ASK works to coordinate the program.
- *Community Organizer (CO):* Local community member working under the supervision of the PNGO to build the primary team and provide support to them.
- *Audience:* Participants in performance who are tasked with defining the action to be taken.

<sup>2</sup>*Hilla* is a practice whereby a Muslim man who divorces his wife will only re-marry her if she marries another man and divorces again. This typically occurs without the consent of the wife, and is an illegal customary practice.

I have a real platform  
now to protest against  
any inconsistencies  
of the society.

— Nasreen Naher, Joint Secretary  
of the MNP in Pabna,  
Bangladesh

## Tactical Steps

Through our experience, we have defined eight critical steps in carrying out an action theatre program in a particular community. This process, incorporating trust-building, human rights research, training, performance and action, has worked very well in the communities where we have worked. (See "Steps of Action Theatre" diagram on page 13)

### STEP 1 – RAPPORT BUILDING AND PRIMARY TEAM FORMATION

This is the first job of the initiator. The initiator or his or her representative goes to meet people in the selected area to develop a good relationship with them through regular visits, meetings and discussions. We start this work with the help of local partner NGOs. They already have programs in the community and have gained the trust of local people. This generally creates an atmosphere of trust and support for our activities.

The initiator makes a list of those individuals who are interested in working for the betterment of society through theatre. The people are invited to a formal discussion on current social problems, their consequences and probable remedies. The initiator and the group exchange views sincerely on the topics mentioned. After one to three formal sessions and a common agreement on objectives, roles and strategies are reached, a primary group is formed. This step generally takes 15 to 90 days.

We recruit one Community Organizer (CO), a local person, who works under the supervision of partner NGOs. The CO together with one Theatre Activist (ASK core team member) meet with local people in their workplaces or homes. Gradually they develop a trusting relationship with them.



Rapport-building in the final meeting in Gaibandha District before forming the primary team.

### STEP 2 – RESEARCH AND DETERMINATION OF ISSUE

This is the first working step of the group. To perform an issue-based drama and inspire the audience to take action on a particular issue is the main task of the group. Research is important so the team members firmly grasp the issue. Research is a continuous process for every issue and every play. The initiator provides technical assistance to the group for research in the primary stage. The group determines the issue for the play and analyzes it through research. Research helps the group to select the right issue at the right time and in the right place to portray a case scenario with full confidence and neutrality. The research can be done formally or informally. Through workshop sessions, focus group discussions, question-answer processes, and newspaper clipping analysis, team members develop a deeper understanding of the problem they are addressing. The time frame for the research depends on the issue.

The research techniques also depend on the human rights focus area and the capacity of the group. There are some issues like dowry, underage marriage, and wife beating which are very common. These do not require formal research because there is a lot of existing documentation and analysis of the issue. However, Action Theatre has also been used to highlight some other issues about



Research analysis on corruption, terrorism and violence against women.

which local team members and the community know little. These might include the dumping of seeds that affect local agriculture, the impact of World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements, globalization, or police torture.

Research is also essential when there is a particular incident that is motivating the action theatre production. If there is such an incident, the Action Theatre group members visit the site of the incident and interview the victim, his or her relatives and neighbors, and occasionally the perpetrator. They also collect information from the police station and other sources. This information is cross-checked through a group discussion process. For the newer issues like globalization, they use workshops to analyze and discuss news clippings, government gazettes, or United Nations treaties.

### STEP 3 – DEVELOPMENT OF THE STORY:

Next, the theatre group develops a story based on the issue. This participatory story development step is divided into two parts:

1. Story-telling
2. Story analysis

In the first part, the group practices to tell an engaging story. Different innovative and participatory processes are used to develop the story. We use ABCD technique, Moving Circles technique, Relay technique, and other approaches.

For example, in ABCD technique, the group is divided into groups of four. Each member is given the name A, B, C, or D. First, A tells a story on the issue while the other three participants listen attentively. After A has completed the story, B tells a new story on the same issue. Then it is C's turn. C is responsible for compiling those two stories and telling it to the group as one story. Finally, D tells C's story again, but adds one or more character or incidents that create a paradox or add a different dimension to the story. In the next step, the group of four is given five to ten minutes for feedback and corrections. After this process, each group presents their stories in front of the other groups for feedback and discussion.

In the second part, the story analysis phase, the group analyzes the story through different lenses such as irony, paradox, conflict, power relations among the characters, socio-political context, and so on. Necessary editing of the story is done in this step. In the analysis part, the facilitator or the group members ask questions like:

- Is the issue presented clearly in the story?
- Was the story boring or interesting? Why?
- Do we have a picture in our minds after listening to the story?
- Are the characters behaving logically according to their position in society, place and time mentioned in the story?
- Where and between whom is the main conflict?
- Why does this conflict exist?
- Is the conflict articulated logically?
- Is it possible to dramatize the story?

Through this process, we create a final story about the issues that is both engaging and nuanced. At this point, team members are ready to translate the story into theatre.

### STEP 4 – DRAMATIZATION OF THE STORY

This process also takes place through workshops. First, small groups create different scenes according to the story. Then, dialogues are developed on the basis of the story line and in light of the issue. Some theatrical elements such as music, dance, and choreography are



Team members work on dramatizing their case scenario.

inserted into the scenes. All of the scenes are prepared one by one and developed through incorporating the feedback of the other group.

Improvisation, still image, power games, mirror games and other techniques are also used for dramatization.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, all the scenes are composed together and performed in front of a selected small audience from the community. This allows the team to gather feedback on the issue, theatrical approach, acting, sensitivity and other technical aspects. The play is sometimes re-worked to incorporate the feedback and suggestions of the small audience.

<sup>3</sup>For more information on these and other techniques, see *Improvisation for the Theatre: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, By Viola Spolin, Northwestern University Press, 1735 Benson Avenue, Evanston, Illinois 60201 or visit the website for Theatre of the Oppressed, [www.theatreoftheoppressed.org](http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org).

<b>SAMPLE EVENT MANAGEMENT PLAN</b>	
Name of the play	
Location of the play	
Date and time	
Name of the facilitator	
List of questions	<p>Sample questions:</p> <p>What do we think about the problem that we saw in the drama?</p> <p>Why does this problem continue in our community?</p> <p>What are the future consequences of the problem?</p> <p>What do we think about the solution of the problem?</p> <p>What initiatives can we take for this purpose?</p>
Point clue of intervention of facilitator:	
Name of the logistics manager:	
List of musical instruments, props, microphone, etc. :	
List of performers:	

### STEP 5 – PRACTICE

For a strong performance and clear communication, practice is necessary. The group practices the play as much as they can. They use a fast forward rehearsal technique. This involves performing a 30-minute drama within 10 minutes, which is like the fast forward picture on the VCR. One performance event facilitator also practices the post performance question answer/debate/discussion session in this step. A list of questions and clues for discussions are finalized through a participatory way and a performance event management plan is also developed.

### STEP 6 – PERFORMANCE AND FEEDBACK:

After sufficient practice, the group performs the play in a selected place according to the event management plan. Since Bangladesh is a densely populated country most of the time the theatre group starts the play in a public place such as a boatyard, schoolyard or village market and people come after hearing the drum or other music. The main consideration in selecting a location is identifying a place where performers can reach the community to whom the performance is directed. For example, if they would like to reach an audience of women, they would probably choose somebody's yard or a location in the village away from the highway and religious institutions. At a certain point during the performance, the designated facilitator stops the performance to raise questions as per preparation. The facilitator also asks supplementary questions to better understand the issue and maintain the discipline of the audience. The audience participates in various ways. Sometimes people from the audience come up to the

stage and give their opinion through performance. On other occasions, audience members request that the group perform again, incorporating their suggestions. Some audience participants disagree with the views of the performers regarding the issue. For an effective analysis of the issue by the audience in the same day the group may need to perform again and again

There are many different techniques which are used for these discussion sessions, including direct question-answer or discussion with a few selected people from the audience. Under some circumstances, two or more facilitators hold talks with separate small groups of



Action theatre performance

people. Discussion may take place in the tea stalls after the performance, or two or three days later through meetings with the spectators in their homes or other places.

### STEP 7 – ACTION

Action is the ultimate result of the discussion that was initiated during the issue-based drama performance. Two types of actions can take place:

1. Instant action
2. Short-term action

The instant actions include the immediate behaviors of the audience like pointing out the perpetrator, declaring a decision about the issue, sincere confession by the repentant perpetrator or calls for a particular next step on the issue.

The short-term actions are mainly initiatives or steps taken by the audience or jointly by the theatre group and the audience. These could include protest rallies, public meetings against human rights violations, assistance for the victim seeking justice, or the creation of peace committees.

The theatre continues to perform the drama until the community has decided to take action on the issue raised in the drama. The number of performances depends on the audience and the issue. In general, the group performs until a short-term action has taken place. However, there are times when the performance is stopped after the instant actions. The group decides this on the basis of their competency, relationship with the community, sensitivity of the issue, and time they can devote to the issue. The theatre group inspires the audience to take action, but the final decision on which action is taken falls to the proactive spectators.



Demonstration following action theatre performance

### STEP 8 – INSTITUTIONALIZATION

This is the final stage of Action Theatre. The theatre group becomes well-accepted in the community as an essential resource team. It becomes sustainable like a school or library. The groups begin to develop new theatre groups in other places and regularly enroll new members. During this phase, the local groups organize different events like yearly festivals and day observation events. They continue to perform issue-based dramas and seek to influence public opinion on human rights issues.

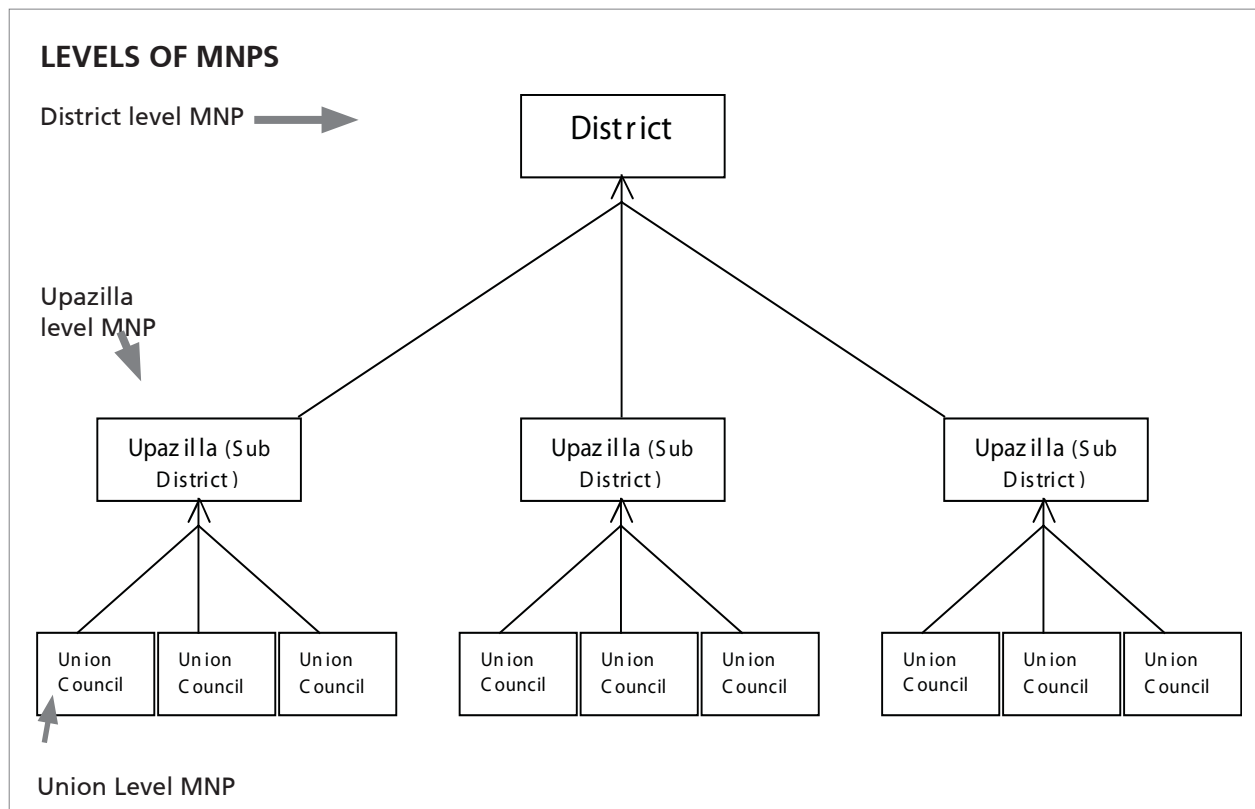
At this stage, ASK continues to maintain regular contact. We provide capacity-building training, help to create a network among like-minded groups and occasionally provide limited funds for festivals organized by the groups.

During the past years the theatre groups have been performing more dramas and the involvement of the theatre activists in various cases of human rights violations has also increased. This created the need for the local theatre groups to organize into Upazilla (sub district) level and then District level federations. Organizing an Upazilla level MNP (UzMNP) was needed in order to enhance the visibility, influence and network of the union level theatre groups. (See “Levels of MNPS” on page 12)

UzMNP organizes events on a larger scale, and publishes brochures and a yearly calendar. The UzMNP also supervises the union level MNPs and participates in lobbying for human rights cases with local police officers, lawyers and journalists.

With this support, the local MNPs are gaining ground as a mobilizing force. Villagers have utilized the structural support provided by ASK’s core team to take a further step to initiate relevant activities such as:

- Study circles dedicated to discussing legal provisions that can enable citizens to gain justice. Leaflets and bulletins produced by ASK’s Training and Communication unit are usually used in these study circles.
- Participation in local *shalishes* or mediations. Even though ASK’s Popular theatre unit (the core team) limits its work to training theatre activists and performing issue based dramas, often the theatre activists are called in for *shalishes*. This practice cropped up because the theatre activists are considered to be trained in law and human rights. Participation allows MNP members to protest unlawful decisions in *shalish* mediation processes.



### Case Study in Action Theatre

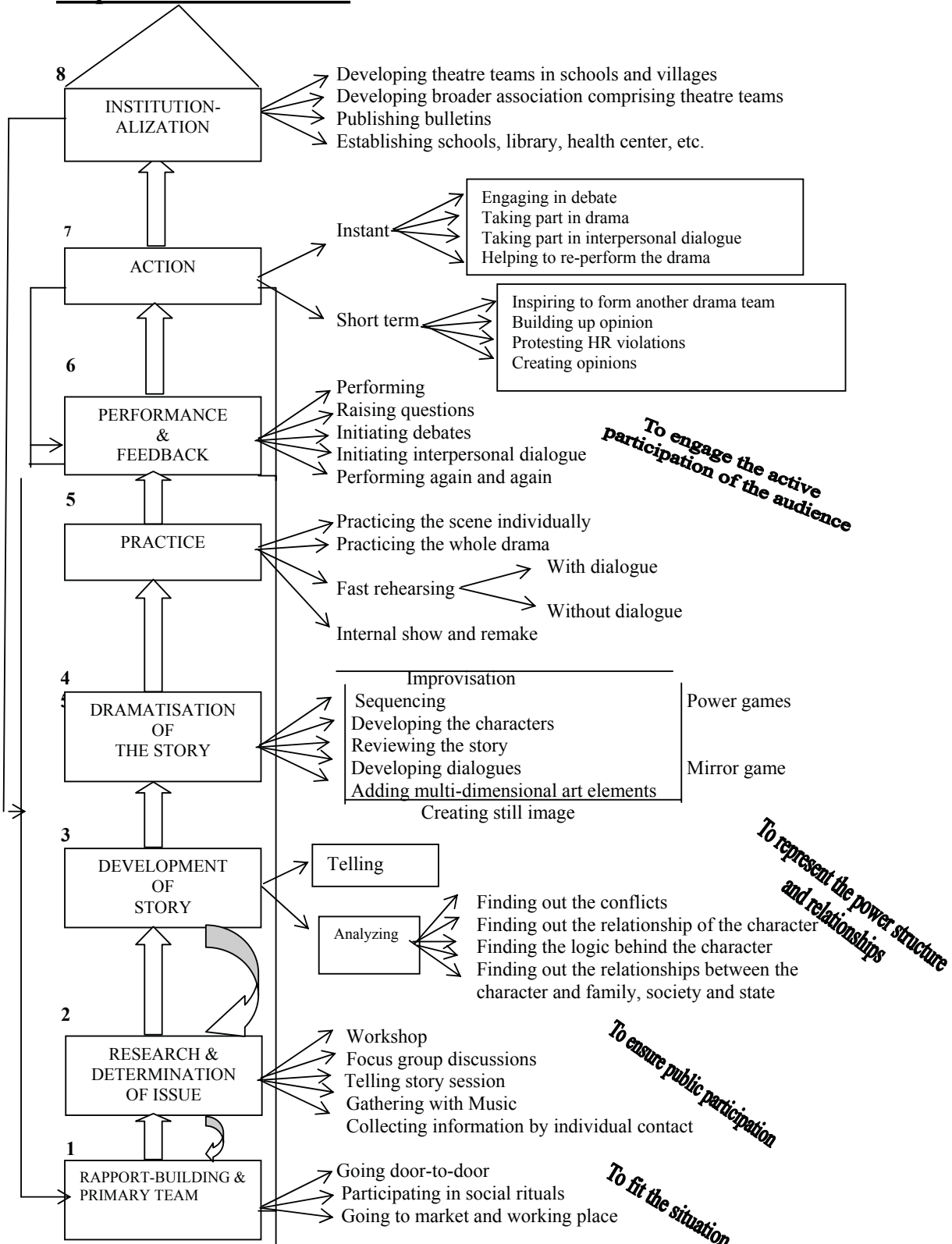
There is a Madrassa (religious school) in Nouda para, in the Pabna district of Bangladesh. This school is financed in part by the government and is governed by a local committee. In 2004, the school was in need of two new teachers, and organized a recruitment effort. Fifteen individuals applied for the position, some of whom were more qualified than the two teachers ultimately selected for the position. These teachers, along with one other applicant, had bribed the superintendent and one of the other committee members. The local people were unhappy with this outcome, but they remained silent.

The Maligacha Union MNP learned of this situation through some of their members who lived in the community, and decided to perform a drama on the issue. The superintendent and his associate attempted to negotiate the matter to avoid the embarrassment of the drama, but the MNP refused. MNP members from Nouda para were threatened by the superintendent's supporters, but they nevertheless performed the drama on the yard of the Madrassa during a Holy day. A huge crowd, including parents and guardians, students, shopkeepers, women and children, gathered to watch. Many took part in the discussion after the performance and had interpreted the story as fact even though the story had been somewhat altered.

Within three days, after two performances, some students, prominent parents and guardians and other local youth, started to protest. They also prepared to file a corruption case against the superintendent and the Madrassa governing committee.

After meeting with local political leaders, the superintendent convened a public meeting where he confessed and publicly apologized for his behavior. At the meeting, it was decided that the superintendent would return the money to the Madrassa to buy two computers. MNP members then followed up when they discovered that after 15 days, only one computer had been purchased!

## Steps of Action Theatre



## **APPLYING THE EIGHT STEPS OF ACTION THEATRE: A CASE STUDY**

**AREA:** Shialcole Village, Sirajgonj District, Bangladesh

### **STEP 1:** Rapport Building and Primary Team

An action theatre group had been formed in the village one year earlier and was actively involved in influencing public opinion on local cases of injustice

### **STEP 2:** Research and Determination of Issue

The group members carried out informal research in the village and discovered that at least three families were suffering because women who divorced their husbands were unaware of their legal rights. Many families believe that if a woman divorces her husband, she loses the right to the dower. They rarely know about possible legal remedies to the situation, and either refrain from divorcing or forego the dower.

### **STEP 3:** Development of Story

The group organized a workshop on the issue and developed the following story:

The story of the drama:

A woman called Rehana divorced her husband after three years of marriage. Her husband had tortured her almost everyday. She had one daughter.

The neighbors tried to intervene numerous times to solve the problem, but failed each time. Rehana demanded he divorce her, but the husband refused because he thought that if he divorced her, he must repay the dower money. The law states that the husband should pay the full amount of the dower that was fixed on the wedding day as a condition of a Muslim marriage. If the marriage lasts, this money should be paid during married life. In the case of divorce, the husband must pay the full amount to the wife, if it was not given to her earlier.

Rehana's husband's abuse grew more intense, as he mistakenly believed that if Rehana was the one to seek a divorce, he would be able to keep the money. There is a false belief among villagers that if the wife divorces the husband, she will not get any dower. As Rehana's life had become unbearable, she chose nevertheless to divorce him. After three months, Rehana and her brothers went to the man to demand the dower money, but the in-laws and their neighbors refused to repay it to them. Rehana threatened to go to court if they did not pay. The family laughed and kicked them out of the house.

Finally Rehana went to the court, where the court found in her favor.

### **STEP 4:** Dramatization of Story

The group dramatized Rehana's story by inserting theatrical elements through a workshop process.

### **STEP 5:** Practice

Through continual practice, the drama became more attractive and better communicated the themes the group hoped to convey. The objectives of the presentation included:

- The families in the community affected by the lack of information about legal remedies regarding divorce and dower would seek legal recourse
- Their neighbors would help and support them in this process
- Victims would have their dower money returned to them

A staging plan was prepared and the group nominated a facilitator to guide the discussion during the drama.

### **STEP 6:** Performance and Feedback

On the day of the event, the facilitator introduced the theatre group and began to develop a rapport with the audience. He announced that a discussion would be held on the issue that was performed in the drama.

At this point, the drama was staged in a public place in the village where over two hundred villagers were present. Among those attending were the mediators, Union Council members, teachers, and one or two women leaders who had received ASK training on law, human rights and gender. The facilitator stopped the performance just at the moment when Rehana and her brothers were insulted and kicked out of the husband's house.

He asked the audience, "Will Rehana get the dower money if she goes to court?" Most of the audience answered "no." Some were silent, and one woman said "yes." The facilitator asked someone from the "no" side to explain why Rehana would not get the dower money. Two people came up to the stage, and explained the reasons and their views. Audience members also added their perspectives. Their main argument was "Rehana will not receive the dower because she initiated the divorce, not her husband, so she has no right to the dower money." This, they concluded, was the way it worked.

The facilitator then asked the audience if they could listen to the woman who said that Rehana would get the money. The audience agreed, and the woman went up to the stage and said "Rehana was supposed to be paid the dower during the marriage, as it is a condition for a Muslim marriage. She will receive it even if she initiated the divorce." The audience disagreed with her entirely.

The facilitator then asked “Is there anybody who supports the woman?” Another woman, who had received some legal training, stood up and said that according to the law, Rehana will get the dower if she goes to court. She also asked the Union Council member in the audience to confirm that this was correct. After a brief introduction, the Union Council member agreed with the woman. The audience continued to disagree.

The facilitator intervened again and asked the audience, “Do we want to see the last part of the drama where Rehana goes to court, so we learn the court’s decision?” The audience clapped and invited the group to act out the last part of the drama.

The last sequence took place in court, where lawyers were arguing the case with one another. In the end, the judge declared a decision in favor of Rehana. People in the audience clapped.

The facilitator returned to the front of the crowd and asked the audience, “Do we have any comments on the court’s decision?” There was complete silence for a few moments. Then one person from the “no” side stood up and said, “It is not practical for poor women to go to the court for justice. What’s more, there are many hassles and costs in doing so.”

One elderly person raised his voice and said, “If the information that was delivered in the drama is true, then we should go to court for situations like Rehana’s. But how can we access the court, since we do not have money or knowledge about court procedure?”

The facilitator then asked the audience to answer the elderly man’s question, as there were indications of how to do so in the drama. The woman who had been trained in legal matters (who was fortunately present) and the Union Council member addressed the crowd, and explained that there are government and NGO facilities in the area where people can go for help in seeking legal remedies.

### STEP 7: ACTION

After a long discussion, the audience remained divided along the following lines:

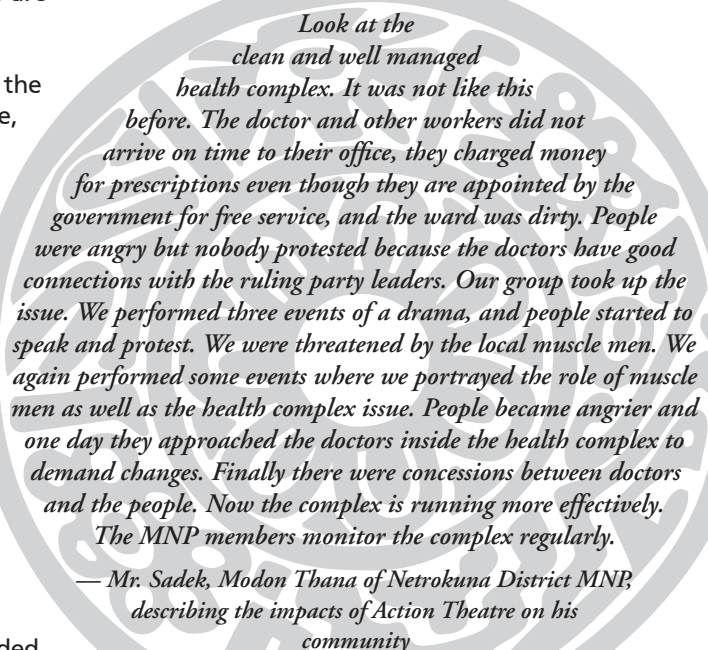
- Rehana must receive the dower money even though she initiated the divorce
- It is impractical for Rehana to get the dower from her husband when she is responsible for the divorce

There was a heated debate in the audience, and some enthusiastic participants from both sides gathered around the theatre group and proposed a consultation with a lawyer. They sought assistance from the theatre

group since they are familiar faces to the audience. In the end, a decision was made to send five people from each side to meet a lawyer who worked with one of ASK’s local NGO partners. This meeting took place one day after the drama. Participants learned the woman who divorced her husband has full rights to the dower money.

### STEP 8: INSTITUTIONALIZATION

With the help of the local NGO, one out of the three local women who had divorced their husbands went to court. After the first court hearing, the husband’s family entered negotiations and paid the dower money to the wife. That case was withdrawn. After this success, the other two divorced women, with the help of their family and neighbors, also attempted to bring cases against their husbands. Both received the dower money through negotiation, though less than the amount fixed at the time of their marriage. Now, everybody in Sialcole Village knows that the wife should be paid the dower money even if she chooses to divorce her husband. If the people of Sialcole village practice their legal rights regarding dower or they continue to use action theatre as a problem solving tool, we will call it institutionalization!



*Look at the clean and well managed health complex. It was not like this before. The doctor and other workers did not arrive on time to their office, they charged money for prescriptions even though they are appointed by the government for free service, and the ward was dirty. People were angry but nobody protested because the doctors have good connections with the ruling party leaders. Our group took up the issue. We performed three events of a drama, and people started to speak and protest. We were threatened by the local muscle men. We again performed some events where we portrayed the role of muscle men as well as the health complex issue. People became angrier and one day they approached the doctors inside the health complex to demand changes. Finally there were concessions between doctors and the people. Now the complex is running more effectively. The MNP members monitor the complex regularly.*

— Mr. Sadek, Modon Thana of Netrokuna District MNP, describing the impacts of Action Theatre on his community

### Tactical Impact

It is very difficult to assess the impact of a tactic within the brief time frame of three to four years. We initiated Action Theatre in twelve different working areas with the help of twelve partner NGOs. Each area addressed different issues that were prioritized within their own communities. Some of the NGOs have successfully dealt with specific cases of human rights violations, but in my

view, we need to see whether this creates sustainable change in the customary practices that allowed the abuse to occur.

I would like to share two types of impacts we have seen through the expansion of Action Theatre in Bangladesh. First, we have documented declines in certain human rights violations in the communities where we work. At the grassroots level, the Action Theatre groups are federated in sub-district levels, tirelessly challenging human rights violations in their communities. They have seen some remarkable achievements. Some of these are outlined below:

**Hilla marriages have stopped in all twelve working areas:** All Action Theatre groups staged regular performances on this issue. Community members began to rise up to challenge local decision-makers, precipitating dialogue and the end to this practice in all twelve areas.

**Six villages in three working areas are now “dowry-free”:** They now have anti-dowry committees that formed as a direct result of continuous dramatization against dowry by Action Theatre groups.

**Village mediation of rape cases has ended:** No village mediation for rape case is occurring at this time in most of the working areas for Action Theatre. Rape cases have decreased, and those that do take place are now going to court. This is another success for the theatre groups, who staged dramas on this issue throughout most of the area.

**Underage marriages have declined:** The rates of under-aged marriages have seen a marked decline in all twelve areas since this issue has been addressed by the theatre groups.

In addition to these reductions in human rights violations, we have observed another exciting development as a result of this tactic. We have watched the theatre groups develop their leadership skills and reputation in their communities, expanding their areas of work and their tactics to improve their effectiveness as human rights defenders.

**Human rights education through theatre has been adopted in eighteen high schools:** As a direct impact of



A rally to mark International Women's Day organized by local people with the assistance of MNP

Action Theatre group campaigns, eighteen high schools in six working areas now have human rights education through theatre as a co-curricular activity.

**Human rights celebrations have increased:** With the encouragement of the Popular theatre unit of ASK local theatre groups (MNP) have been commemorating nationally and internationally significant or historical days. All Action Theatre groups have been involved in this. Twelve UzMNPs organize yearly theatre festivals for their districts. The goal of these events is to create tolerance for cultural and political diversity and to enhance a commitment to common human rights and democratic values. Through rallies, songs, discussions, poem recitations and drama presentations, these festivals are increasing awareness about human rights abuses.

We had several advantages in carrying out this work that are important to share, as they were critical in our successes. First, ASK is a leading and credible human rights organization. The organization was willing to use the tactic and leverage their reputation to help raise funds to implement it. We were able to seek out training workshops in Bangladesh and elsewhere to improve our theatre knowledge and skills. These workshops created an opportunity for us to assess our tactic's effectiveness in relation to other approaches.

In addition to the opportunities afforded by our organizational backing, we had an extremely dedicated team of sincere, energetic and creative staff members who worked to make this process happen. We also connected with inspirational people in the communities where we worked. Our successes would have been impossible without the involvement of the MNP and the audiences. The majority of MNP members were young (students, artists, small-scale entrepreneurs, folk singers, etc.), and performed without remuneration. They were highly committed to social change and were able to commit a lot of time to the effort since they did not yet have family responsibilities. Along with other community members, they welcomed us and offered

**I did Jatra**

(a traditional Bangla form of theatre) and I lost my money and my energy, now I do Action Theatre which already brought a change in my village. One villager donated a piece of land for our theatre group where we established our office and a music school. The members of our theatre group become social leaders; people are coming to us for many social purposes. We do the jatra but now people accept it in a different way than before.

— Mohammad Ali Mussa, ex-President of Netro kuna MNP

their cooperation. MNP and community members helped us to form the theatre teams, provided space to practice and also props, lighting and other supplies for the performances.

Finally, our success depended on the constant support from local journalists, who helped us to share information about human rights violations and the efforts to create social change in Bangladesh.

## Challenges

Action Theatre is a very simple and widely transferable tactic. However, this does not mean that there aren't many challenges that you might encounter in adapting this tactic.

**Overcoming divisions:** Theatre groups and NGOs often have conflicting notions about what it means to create theatre. I already mentioned that it was difficult for NGOs to imagine how theatre could be used for social change. It is sometimes seen by NGOs as peripheral to their real work. Similarly, some established theatre groups do not believe NGOs should be involved in drama performances, believing it could reduce the integrity of their work.

**Overcoming Distrust:** In some communities, local people are suspicious of non-governmental organizations. They may have had a bad experience in the past, or they believe that foreign governments are funding them and have an ulterior motive. Still others were cheated by so called NGOs in Bangladesh. This created a few misunderstandings during our efforts to expand Action Theatre. However, through regular visits and open dialogue, we were able to reduce confusion and develop trusting relationships.

**Threats and reprisals:** As noted in the case stories, Action Theatre groups have been victims of reprisal attacks because of their work. On different occasions, local terrorist groups, partisan muscle men, religious fundamentalists and elected representatives have attacked theatre group members. Some members have also been tortured by the police after performing a drama on police torture and corruption. We have relied on journalists and local community members to support and defend us.

**Women's participation:** Women's participation in the theatre groups as well as in the audience was initially very low. In our society, where there is a lack of gender equality, we had much to overcome to ensure women's participation. We had to adapt our approach to have an impact on this problem. We began changing the location of our dramas, including on occasion performing in someone's yard. We also began forming theatre teams in girls' schools and colleges so they could participate in theatre teams as well.

**Misapplication of the tactic:** There were several examples of failures in carrying out the tactic. We learned that in most cases, the theatre activists had made adjustments to the tactical steps. When they were asked about the failure, they just claimed that the steps and process are not effective. However, we have found that all eight Action Theatre steps are critical, and when some of them are skipped, the chances of success are significantly reduced.

## Transplanting the Tactic

The use of theatre for social change can be found around the world. Creative people are using drama to build awareness about human rights issues, create discussions about social taboos, and inspire new activists. As you have seen, we have been able to use this tactic for many different human rights issues, from domestic violence to the impacts of trade agreements on local livelihoods.

Despite the adaptability of this approach, there are some important considerations in applying this tactic:

**1. SKILL AND ATTITUDE OF THE CORE TEAM:** It is impossible to implement Action Theatre without a skilled and highly motivated core team. This requires an investment of time and energy to train and provide support as the group begins its work.

**2. CAREFUL SELECTION OF THE THEATRE TEAM:** We have found that younger participants are more devoted to the tactic, as they have fewer family responsibilities.

**3. TRAINING FACILITIES:** Training is a critical piece of this process, so availability of training facilities for core team members and theatre team members is important.

**4. FUNDING:** Action Theatre is a relatively low-cost tactic. However, you should expect some expenses related to training, travel, space rental, core team member salaries and other miscellaneous expenses.

**5. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND ATTITUDES ABOUT THEATRE:** Action theatre demands the active participation of community members. In some areas, theatre may not represent an acceptable medium for creating social change. It is important to carefully select the communities where this tactic is implemented.

**6. SUSTAINABILITY:** In order to enhance the sustainability of the program it is important to train members of the Action Theatre group who have been involved with the group for at least one year and have displayed creativity and some leadership qualities. In our working area, we annually support the training of at least 25 people in a residential training program. As a result, a group of local facilitators is formed

to independently train more theatre activists in the working area.

#### **SIMPLE GUIDELINES FOR GETTING STARTED:**

- Determine your objectives: is this tactic appropriate for your goals, objectives and strategies?
- Develop a skilled, sincere and devoted team. Select at least one member with a theatre background for the core team.
- Train the core team to develop their skill and understanding of Action Theatre.
- Select a simple but essential issue for the first event so more people can be involved and community members leave without feeling threatened by the existence of the theatre group.
- Select and train a theatre team from the community.
- Provide training on drama but also on relevant human rights subjects so they can dramatize a case scenario that has a strong analytical basis.
- Inspire the theatre team to develop a strong organization with collaborative ties to journalists and other organizations.

and shared our goals and ideas with them, and proposed a process for bringing action theatre to their communities. Some of them agreed, and we worked together to develop this tactic. The name Action Theatre was coined by people working in the field, as it represented their experience and emotional connection with the tactic.

In Action Theatre, the theatre group members have responsibilities that go well beyond the stage. They have to commit to seeking social change. They are researchers of human rights abuses, analysts of social problems, performers, and resources for information in their communities. Without this level of strong social commitment, Action Theatre is not possible. After a five-year experiment with this tactic, we are convinced of its effectiveness, and hope to continue to work with community members to develop its potential for the promotion of human rights.

## **Conclusion**

I am very proud to have been able to find a way to connect my passion for theatre with a commitment to human rights issues. There are many human rights violations whose solutions can be found right in the communities where they take place. Issues of corruption, violence against women, and discrimination are found in many parts of the world. Theatre can bring these problems to life, and provide people with an opportunity to overcome apathy and take action against abuse.

Action theatre is a tactic with many advantages. It is a tactic that is owned by the communities where it is implemented, and adaptable to a wide range of human rights issues. It builds capacity and leadership at the local level. It is also an effective educational tool for sharing information about human rights laws and principles. Perhaps most importantly, action theatre empowers local communities and motivates passionate, creative people to actively address human rights problems occurring in their villages.

We initiated this tactic with a belief in the power of theatre to create change. We went to the people