



INTRODUCTION

The Social Theatre Toolkit consists of five guides describing different approaches to social theatre in West Africa. This toolkit was created as part of the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) awareness raising approach in West Africa.

Due to its educational and transformative approach, social theatre is an important means of stimulating debate around social issues and sensitive topics.

IOM regularly uses it in the framework of community actions to engage audiences about safe migration, local opportunities and risks to irregular migration.

Social theatre is used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations, as it can address certain socio-cultural realities by speaking directly to the target audience.

This toolkit shares knowledge and practical tools. It is intended for artists, facilitators, educators, teachers, and cultural and humanitarian workers who wish to use theatre for social purposes.

Included are tutorial videos, which help practitioners, amateurs and even the non-experts, to learn the basics to lead a theatre workshop or how to put on a show.

In this toolkit, the following five social theatre approaches practiced in West Africa are featured:

Theatrical Storytelling

Popular Theatre

Forum Theatre

Collective Creation

Improvisation Battles

This toolkit presents the basics of each of these approaches. It does not claim to provide a single definition, rather these guides are a proposal that can be used as a basis for experimenting and combining different approaches in order to develop new forms of theatrical expression.



IMPROVISATION BATTLES

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MAIN IMPROVISATION BATTLES
GROUPS AND EVENTS IN WEST AFRICA

A Battle is a confrontation between rappers or dancers, who improvise in front of an audience on a music they do not know. At the end of this competition, a winner will be chosen.

This artistic expression is used by young people in urban and suburban areas. A Battle is also called "Cypher" in the hip-hop jargon.

The Battle was born in the 1970s in the United States, in New York, to enable the Bronx gangs to challenge each other by dancing or singing, instead of using fists and weapons.

The Battle was therefore created in response to urban violence, and also to give young people a space to express themselves in a society where they did not feel heard.

It was in the 1990s, with the rise in hip-hop culture, Battles appeared in West Africa in response to political events, such as bad governance, human rights violations, violence suffered by migrants, marginalization of youth, or drug issues.

A Battle is a confrontation between two people - rappers or dancers - or two groups, called "crew". Each artist takes turns to perform to the music, without physical contact with the opponent. The confrontation is done from an artistic point of view.

A Battle combines creativity, a competitive spirit and empowerment. The competition is theatrical : the rappers can take jabs at each other, but they are playing against each other. It is a game because the values defended in the Battles are peace, love and unity.

At the end, a winner is declared. A bit like in a boxing match, the two opponents hug each other to show that above all, it is the art that is put forward.

Even though the Battles are based on improvisation, they require work beforehand. Dancers can prepare moves, and rappers can come up with good rhymes. Once in the Battle, the improvisation is based on the players' listening and creativity.

The Battle also requires a good stage presence. You have to occupy the stage, and put on a show in order to arouse the interest of the audience.

Besides the rappers and dancers, there are several other actors:

- The disc jockey or DJ: his role is to mix, play the music and create the atmosphere.

- The master of ceremonies or MC: they set the mood, introduce the teams, the process of the Battle and encourages the dancers with the microphone.

- The judges: the jury is normally composed of three to five people. They elect the best rapper or dancer. They vote by a show of hands while respecting certain criteria such as creativity, originality, musicality and technique.

In the first part, during the open mic, everyone is free to take the microphone and perform. This allows the artists to warm up and gain confidence.

In the second part, there are freestyle Battles – with or without a theme. The theme can come from the audience, the jury or even the presenter. These themes are often about societal problems, such as unemployment, migration, and general problems concerning youth.

Sometimes a rhyme is imposed. The duration of each can vary from one to three minutes.

No established precept codifies or dictates the dancer or rapper's movements or words. The freedom of expression is total, in the respect of the values of peace.

At the end, the jury votes. In the event of a tie, the jury may ask the artists to return to the stage and propose another number to break the tie. Sometimes, the winner can also be decided by applause.

A Battle is usually held in places where youth gather: community/neighbourhood youth centres, sports fields, public squares, or in the streets.

The audience is arranged around the playing area to allow interaction with the performers.

✓ Burkina Faso

Improvisation League of Burkina Faso

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