

arena:

Community Theatre & Public Art

cover STORY ●●

WORKING TOGETHER FOR PEACE

Using art, films, and theatre in peace and human rights activism is not new. Many civil society groups around the World use media as a way to enable people to explore human rights, democracy, and peace, even in countries where free voices are restricted. Thanks to the open ended nature of the language used in art it is always subject to interpretation and, in this way, offers a more democratic and flexible manner to set a meaningful conversation in motion. One can hardly doubt the critical necessity of creativity and art in framing the issues that exist in a society. The necessity of this approach is even greater in places where these issues have become taboo and have little chance to become a topic for open public discussion.

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© 2012, Peace Dialogue, Armine Zakaryan, Forum - Theater Workshop in Sairme, Georgia

TOPiC ●●

What is Systematization of Experiences?



Systematization of experience is a method used to understand and improve projects aimed at creating some form of social change that is based on critical reflection and the interpretation of lessons learnt from that project.

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Region ●●

Creative Peacebuilding: Be Curious!



In this article, we present various examples of the community based creative peace work. We hope to make you see the joy of working for peace with a lot of creativity!

Pages 3 and 4 –

Working Together for Peace

"After our workshops when I look back, I see so many things that I have failed to do or missed in my work before. I understand now that this workshop experience is colossal. We discovered a lot of things about ourselves, many things we would never have noticed. Before coming here, I thought we were going to merely discuss the past, however now it is clear that this topic is closely connected with the future also as it will help us avoid mistakes in the future, this is a benefit I really did not expect." - These are the impressions of Roman, one of the Systemization of experience workshop participants representing the Russian Federation.

Early in 2015, the Armenia based NGO Peace Dialogue with its German partner OWEN launched a project called *Arena: Community Theatre and Public Art*. This three-year project is aimed at improving the impact of peace building on both a community and a regional level. In the framework of the project, civil society actors from the Russian Federation, Georgia,

Armenia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan were invited to take part in two workshops on Systematization of Experiences in Tbilisi. (Read more on this methodology below.)

The project strives to empower civil society groups from the above-mentioned post-Soviet/Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries so that they are more able to work together on strat-

egies and methodologies that they can use in their community work. The ARENA-project created a safe space for dialogue, mutual learning and ongoing educational activities for a group of participants who are motivated to work on suitable and sustainable strategies for community-based peace building.

The first phase of the project was aimed at analyzing existing peace-building practices on a community level in order to reveal opportunities and limits, lessons learned and challenges for civil society groups. Peace activists from the Caucasus Region, Russian Federation and Ukraine came together to share their experiences of using art in peace building. In this newspaper we present some of their local experiences of using community theater and public art in peace work. In many of these countries, the situation has be-



Photos: Roman Aleksandrov and Bohdan Dedushkin, participants of the project "Arena: Community Theatre and Public Art".

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implemented in their communities. Participants collected, documented and analyzed their experiences using art techniques, such as filmmaking, community theatre, public art, animation and other means in their peace building activities and in achieving positive change in their societies.

Through the common reflection part of the ARENA project, participants could learn from both their own experience and the lessons of others. They could see what can be changed in order to develop more effective strategies. In the future the organizers and the participants will continue the ARENA project in order to support each other in their efforts to mobilize more people in peace building. They want to attract new creative potential and get the support of the broader community. On the following pages you will find more about some of the ARENA groups. Yes, we hope to inspire you!

come extremely challenging for non-violent forms of conflict transformation and the people who work in peace building across conflict lines. In the countries involved in conflict, autocratic regimes actively use propaganda as a means to suppress any display of critical thinking and deepen the atmosphere of fear and hatred of rival countries. This marginalizes and isolates activists in their peace building initiatives, and results in them being rarely sup-

ported by the authorities or by the broader public. Peace building initiatives are usually presented as dangerous attempts to destroy the countries' stability or security.

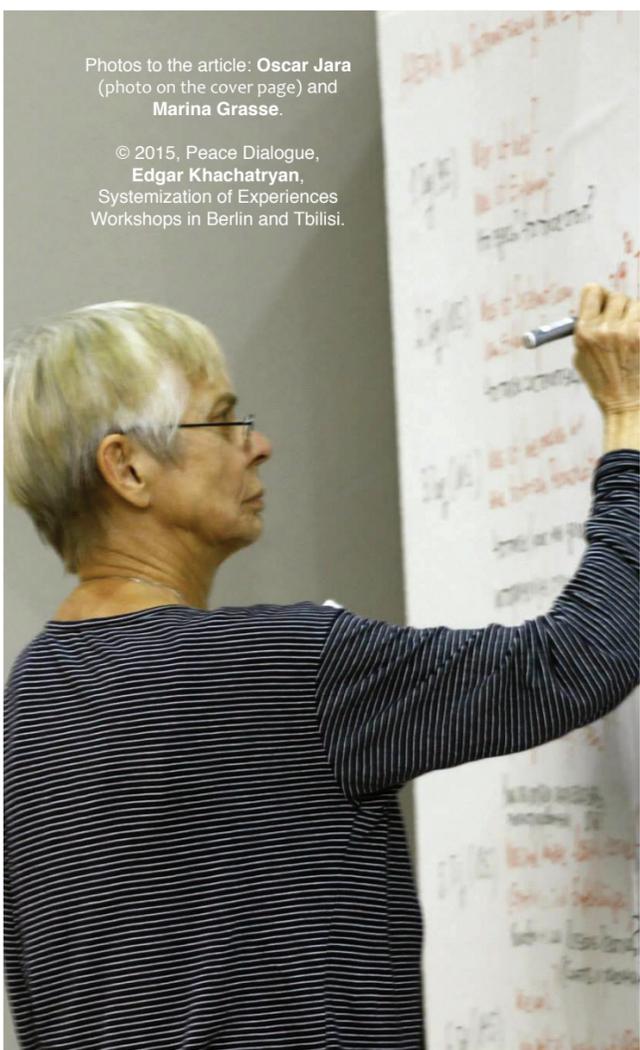
All of these factors served as a basis for Peace Dialogue and OWEN to design the Arena project. The actors involved in the project produced valuable knowledge out of looking at their own experiences. During the workshops they critically analyzed the processes they had

"Sometimes the process of learning can be painful because you see the reality and it is a challenge in a way. However, one should not give up after seeing reality. We always need to see what we are doing and why; it keeps people united. The political situation will get more and more tense in the conflict region; therefore we need to think of preparing ourselves and finding supporters because the people around us do not understand what we are doing and why. They do not understand that what we are doing is connected with them and it is being done for them. If we do not manage to bring this idea to them, they will never support us." - said Bohdan from Ukraine.



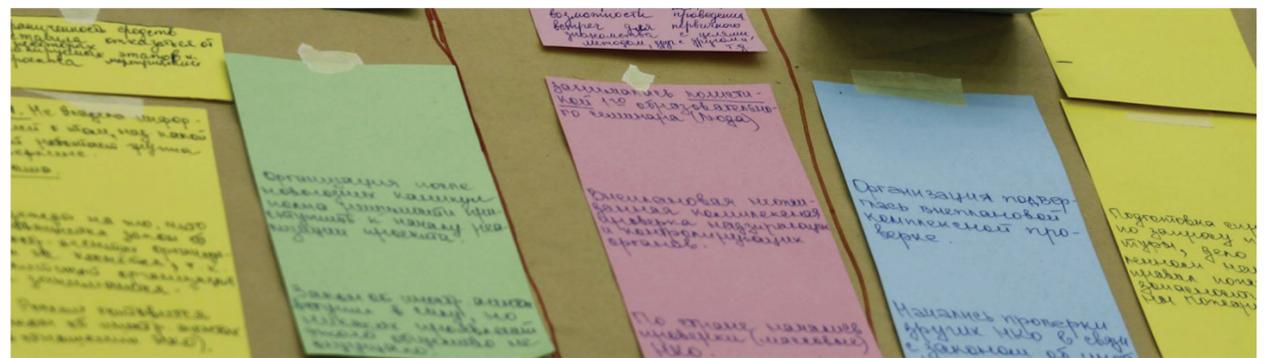
Photos to the article: Oscar Jara (photo on the cover page) and Marina Grasse.

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TOPIC

What is Systematization of Experiences?



The idea of systematization of experiences was born in the 1970s, and is very closely related to popular education, participatory action research and similar trends that developed in those tumultuous years of great social change which saw uprisings, revolutions, and the overthrow of military dictatorships in Latin America. It is thought that the challenge of adjusting to these socio-political changes and the desire to support better or more

effective ways to develop social change motivated people to start searching for new ways to organize and communicate what they had discovered through their actions.

According to Oscar Jara, one of the authors of the methodology, "A new relationship between theory and practice appeared: instead of applying to practice what had previously been formulated in theory, theoretical approaches are built having as a start-

ing point examining the experiences themselves instead of comparing them to a theory."

Over the past 40 years systematization has evolved and obtained recognition as a methodology for social reflection, and is being 'discovered' and used outside of Latin America. The methodology helps to facilitate participatory processes of learning from experiences and analysis on a community level and analysis

of one's own experience and practice. It generates knowledge from community level observation in order to integrate more context-based knowledge into a profound understanding of social processes and social change, including strategy-building and planning processes for sustainable peace building. The approach is based on looking at processes and experiences through storytelling, theatrical and other creative means.

Kiev, Ukraine

Baku, Azerbaijan



Sharing unique stories

Oksana Potapova and Bohdan Dieduskin are members of "Theatre for Dialogue" in Kiev, Ukraine. They use Theater of the Oppressed in their work with IDP communities.



more about the lives of IDPs, we realized that they had different needs: they needed to settle down first, take care of their immediate needs and ensure they had their basic needs covered especially during winter. So, we focused our communication with them on other aspects of their life instead."

In the spring of 2015 the number of IDPs all over Ukraine had doubled and we found a good partner who helped us share information about the project. We managed to gather a group of 9 participants together for a 3-day Forum Theater workshop. At the end of the workshop participants reported the following changes:

They sensed a feeling of relief after having the space to share their feelings and stories - many openly talked about their situation for the first time in a year. They experiencing a shared feeling of unity and support from the group. The theatrical games and exercises, which were unusual for many, helped them increase their creativity, spontaneity, helped them "start seeing reality around them in a new way", and become more aware of their everyday routine and context. Through cooperation and group work participants learned a lot about each others' lives and realized that "IDPs are also not an homogeneous group." There are many different aspects to every person's life which make his or her situation unique. Due to the fact that there were IDPs from Crimea and the East of Ukraine, they also came to realize that there are different experiences of displacement for these groups of IDPs and different attitudes towards

Photos to the article: a scene from Forum -Theater play by „Theatre for Dialogue” NGO.

Oksana Patapova, member of „Theatre for Dialogue” NGO from Kiev, Ukraine.

each different group in society. Through two Crimean participants the group also got exposure to the culture and traditions of Crimean Tatars.

At the end of the workshop all participants felt strongly connected to the work and were ready to work on a Forum-Theater-play. The 15-minute play, premiered in Kiev in May 2015 and depicted key issues faced by IDPs at the time: conflicts with relatives in Donbass over different political views; threats of safety for pro-Ukrainian activists in Donbass, which had motivated them to leave; stereotypes and discrimination towards IDPs from Donbass during the employment process; discrimination in the real estate market; stereotypes and lack of empathy towards IDPs from other people who do not come from that region; overall lack of communication and understanding of the issues faced by IDPs; lack of social support at the new place of living.

Many spectators spoke from their seats telling their own stories of how they adapted to their new place to live, others shared their feelings of relief from seeing that others also experience similar struggles. Some spectators spoke about the need for respect of and dialogue with those who stayed in the Donbass area, without stigmatizing them as "non-patriots" simply because they chose to stay in their homes."

Taking part in the ARENA project, Oksana and Bohdan reflected and analyzed their Forum Theater work with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Their key finding was that personal relationships, trust and connections to volunteers and NGOs had helped them to engage participants, to organize a tour around Ukraine and to ensure that many people attend their events. Relationship building takes time, and it is often not-considered fully in project planning, but it is a crucial component of any initiative and should be taken seriously into account.

Teamwork was very important for Bohdan and Oksana in order to persevere and achieve the desired results. Oksana tells the story of how they created a Forum Theater play:

"When the first groups of IDPs moved to Kiev, Members of the Theater for Dialogue team made efforts to reach out to IDP communities and offer them theater workshops that would help them process what has happened in their life, reflect on it and look for creative solutions to their challenges. However, for a few months we had a hard time finding a group of people who were ready to meet regularly. After reflecting and learning

A different view of war.

Aysel is an artist and filmmaker from Baku, Azerbaijan. With her films and short animated cartoons she talks about the consequences of war.

With her films and cartoons Aysel and her colleagues are transmitting a range of different messages. One of them is a different view of war, to show what it brings, and that neither side wins. Her movies are made for civil society, for people whom she thinks are able to change. She considers it very important to call out to the sympathy and empathy we have for each other. That is how people can realize how important it is to end violent conflicts. Aysel says, through the ARENA project she achieved an amazing new method of reflection

by using Systematization of Experiences.

She found different sides of looking at the work she had done. She learned new methods and gained a clearer vision of the plans needed to work on projects.

She could now better analyze their effectiveness and impacts with greater clarity. Furthermore, she could better define elements of her work. She wants to share her knowledge of Systematization of Experiences, in order to make the work of her group of filmmakers more productive.

"During the process I learned not only what was being done but I was also analyzing myself, for example how I was reacting to certain things. It is not easy. It is not like you sit and do everything in one day and then that's it, you did the systematization. Instead, it is all about sleepless nights, numerous meetings, realization that the group at least subconsciously knows the answers to your questions even if the answers come later. The decision must be made by the whole group, even if it is risky. Before this I was only following the instructions and the description of the work and that's it. After the systematization I became so close with those people that I cannot let go of them."

Zugdidi, Georgia

Communication with the world outside.



Iago Pasandze and Tsitsino Shengelia from Georgian NGO Saunje work with IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) communities.

"Together with our colleagues we want to raise awareness of IDP people, to encourage them to be active members of the new society they are now part of and making a living more accessible to them. Our organization works in two close-border regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Samegrelo and Shida Kartli. Unfortunately, we do not have a dialogue between the different sides of the conflict between Abkhazia, Ossetia and Georgia at this time."



Pasandze.

Iago is an IDP himself from Abkhazia. In the organization Saunje Iago and Tsitsino work on the development of skills for young people and the conflict affected population in the region.

"We started to involve teenagers, who participated in different projects, in project management and event organization. This raised their motivation and increased their active participation in discussions and educational activities. Young people held successful advocacy campaigns and were involved in talks with government representatives." - states Iago



with the Theater of the Oppressed and I want to hold a workshop on this topic."

Tsitsino talks about her experience in the ARENA project: "Taking part in the ARENA project helped me see the world around me from a different angle. This changed everything. I changed my values, my vision, my attitudes and behaviors. The small city Zugdidi, where I live, is very close to the Abkhazian conflict region and has an administrative border with Abkhazia. Here we do not have NGO's or other people who want to make peace.

"After the ARENA project I was motivated to learn more about conflict studies. Now I am looking for the possibility to combine conflict studies

For the generations who did not participate in acts of war, it is easier to participate in peace activities, unlike those directly affected by a conflict as refugees or family members of war victims. This points out the extreme importance of involving conflict affected communities in peace projects.

Iago Pasandze is the Head of NGO Saunje based in Zugdidi, Georgia
<https://ngosaunje.wordpress.com/>
 Tsitsino Shengelia is an employee of Saunje

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St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

To know something new about ourselves and the others

Masha Kolosova and Roman Aleksandrov are from a theater project called "Vmeste" (Together) in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation (teatrvmeste.ru; www.facebook.com/teatr.vmeste/). Masha and Roman work with teenagers using documentary-theater and forum-theater as an educational tool to make young people step out of the world they are used to.



Through the projects activities the youngsters talk to new people, ask questions and improve their listening skills. They developed skills of critical thinking and a heightened sense of empathy. They ask a lot of questions, listen, critically analyze the answers and explore the reality they live in. They also learn to compare the opinions of different people and begin to understand that the world is not divided into black and white.

While playing the real characters whom they interviewed during the

project, they try to understand their protagonists better, even though they may be very different than them. That is how they get involved in the problems of the society they live in. Documentary-Theater helps one to explore social problems, to understand them and provides a backdrop to shape one's own position on many issues.

Masha found it interesting to see how, during the work, educators and teenagers were so enthusiastic about the process, so interested learning something new about themselves and

each other, and to understand the concepts that they confront during forum-theater preparations. In the end they forgot about the main goal which was the final performance. She says, this was great!

"Now I understand that this was a need of the teenagers as well as us. Thanks to the systematization I realized that I can and I need to discuss with the children the process of the work that they are involved in. The ARENA program gave us several constructive options of how to improve our work that we could use in future projects."

Participating in ARENA Masha and Roman looked at the process from another side. They could see the different factors that influenced their work: the place where they met ("a school in our case – not the best option") and the personal context ("my mood and relationships with my colleagues and my motivation").

Now, Masha stops herself from time to time in order to see if she is still on the "right" track. This is what she would like to share with those who work with teenagers and young people!

Grozny, Chechen Republic

Changing public opinion towards women and children's rights

Alina Matyeva is an employee of "Social-Psychological Resource Centre SINTEM in Grozny, Chechen Republic. Alina and her team are changing public opinion towards the rights of women and children in the traditional society they live in.

They are committed to developing more effective mechanisms for the defense of women's rights taking into account both reality and different legal systems such as Sharia, Constitution, Customs, Traditions.



Alina Matyeva, employee of "Social-Psychological Resource Centre SINTEM in Grozny.

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The goal is to give women greater opportunity to receive fair treatment in the legal system. This will give them access to additional information, institutions and organizations who work to help women in difficult situations in their lives. "This work will show our society what kind of possibilities and rights women should have in the contemporary world and how they can share in those possibilities and rights," - said Alina.

"Personally, the most positive thing was the methodology which provided to us with a new very simple cognitive scheme. I can use it in my daily work now and in my future work as well.

Alina mentioned that she heard many stories from the Arena participants about the kind of difficulties and risks they encounter doing their work. "This caused me to think about the important issues of personal security for human rights activists, especially in the Caucasus. Because we are not used to taking into account our own security, sometimes we subject ourselves to undue risk."

She states that one of her first discoveries in the ARENA project was about the people who participated. "They are all very different! Working with them broadened my understanding of the issues we work with at home as well as my vision of our situation. It was interesting for me to learn how my colleagues from other places live and work as well as to understand the context and processes that occur in different countries. It was very significant to hear about these things from the real people and not from the TV news or Internet."

Sharing her thoughts about the negative aspects of the Arena project, Alina said that people did not always answer their questions honestly. "I assume this was because of a particular set of circumstances but this fact did influence our results and the process of systematization."

Vanadzor, Armenia

A safe space for building trust

Anna Zakaryan, Peace Dialogue NGO, Vanadzor, Armenia

Anna is an activist and trainer working with young people from all over Armenia using Theater and Public Art as tools. Her aim is to develop more critical thinking and to show them how to become more active members of their community so they can see how to bring about social and political changes. She is involved in peace building processes at the regional level as well. Together with Armen and their group they create documentaries to raise the issue of ethno-political conflicts and their consequences in the region.

Anna talks about her experience of using Theater in peace work: "I discovered that people usually have a lot of problems which they consid-

er as their own and feel alone with them. But when they come together and start to share with each other they see that they are not the only ones and can consider it not as a problem but just a challenge which they can overcome.

About her findings during the Arena project, Anna said, - "The theater "platform" provides a safe space to come together and share private stories, thoughts, and opinions. Theatrical tools are the best means of building trust between group members. I consider this one of the greatest influences that could come from using Forum Theater as a methodology. One of the difficulties that I encountered was the problem of motivating people to attend our meetings from the beginning."

Novocherkassk, Russian Federation

Openness for reflection

Natalia Katasonova, Liudmila Shepelenko and Valentina Cherevatenko, The Union "Women of the Don Region" (Donwomen) Novocherkassk, Russian Federation. The Donwomen is an umbrella organization that works primarily in the field of peace building in all its aspects, human rights, women's rights, children's rights and overcoming violence in Russian society.

In the project "Future needs memories, memories need future" (2013-2014) the Donwomen brought together young people and people from older generations to learn about conflict transformation using methods of "community-theater".

Regional "community-theater" centers are in Novocherkassk, St. Petersburg, the Chechen Republic, North - Osetia - Alania and Kabardino - Balkaria. Groups from all

of the centers took part in the festival of the "community-theaters" in Novocherkassk. The theater groups work in the local communities, presenting new theater pieces in the regions and involving new participants in solving local problems.

Natalia says that she and her colleagues who are taking part in the ARENA project realized that the openness of all team members and activists which are related to a

particular area of work was necessary for a thorough analysis and reflection using the method of Systematization of Experiences. They invested a deep level of emotional involvement in the process which allowed them to make painful perceptions of the facts and consequences.

They came to the conclusion that in order to succeed there must be deep and sincere motivation to work with complete dedi-

cation and a commitment to good communication among all project staff.

Their main discovery was that the common reflection part of Systematization of Experiences fundamentally changed their approach to solving problems and achieving the goals that they were planning to reach. They see Systematization of Experiences as a constant and continuous process!