

# Theatre for Development Paradigm as Trend in Socio-Aesthetic Dynamism: The Zimbabwean 'TfD' Workshop Example

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## Abstract

With the paradigmatic shift from the dominant theatre tradition and the more process-oriented nature which theatre has come to assume by re-engaging itself to issues of deeper social concern, its instrumentality in expanding human development frontiers in this new milieu cannot be overemphasized. Theatre for Development paradigm, otherwise called Alternative Theatre, offers an alternative approach to the conventional theatre practice. The ultimate goal of every TfD effort is to address the people's needs and aspirations through arousing their consciousness for active participation in the development process; and of course using those familiar media at their disposal. By refocusing the Zimbabwean TfD workshop experience, this study examines the intricacies of socio-aesthetic dynamics that had transformed *Pungwe* – an indigenous performance tradition of the people, from theatre-for-liberation to theatre-of-national-reconstruction, and highlights TfD's implications for development in Africa.

## Keywords

Conscientization, Development, Participation, Socio-Aesthetic Dynamics, TfD

Received: March 10, 2015 / Accepted: March 23, 2015 / Published online: March 26, 2015

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## 1. Introduction

Augusto Boal, the Brazilian political activist and major exponent of "Theatre of the Oppressed" whose theatre as Nwankwo [1 p.10] notes, "is akin to the libertarian education method of Paulo Freire", has apparently used his theatre to create *revolutionary consciousness*, particularly within the class struggle [2]. Freire, the Brazilian lawyer-turned-educationist, has also used his works to advance the liberation of the "student" through *self-consciousness*. What these men have done, Nwankwo emphasises, "is to present both theatrical and educational dialogics that enable an interface between the people and outsiders who are interested in developing them". By "dialogics" therefore, emphasis is given to the practise of engaging people in critical reasoning which entails sharing and learning between them, that is, the educator and the person or persons to be educated. Boal [3

p.122], in setting the thrust for the discussion in this study emphatically declares that:

Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic characters so that the later may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case, a "catharsis" occurs; in the second, an awakening of critical consciousness.

From time immemorial, theatre has been used as an instrument for the manipulation of people's consciousness, especially when it was the domain of the nobility in whose hands it became powerfully instrumental for domesticating the minds of the people. Aristotle aptly typifies this

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perception with his concept of tragedy where the tragic hero comes from the noble class. Kafewo [4] opines that Aristotle has envisaged a situation where a dramatic work *and tragedy in particular* is so constructed that at the end the audience watching the piece of theatre will shudder at the tragedy that has befallen the hero and be purged of their emotions.

Brecht's *reaction* regarding Aristotle's 'poetics' above, therefore, is incontrovertibly an outright rejection of a situation where the audience, after watching a performance, will be purged of negative emotions or rather socially cleansed as though it was incapable of knowing right from wrong. For him, therefore, the audience is made up of intelligent thinking people who are quite capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, and thus ought not to be thought for. Hence, the audience in the Marxist poetics which he postulated in recognition of the power of theatre are necessarily participants who are required to make decisions based on drama that showcases their social reality; that not only contributes in mastering their individual realities, but also the corporate realities of their environment. Therefore, this apparent aversion to Aristotle's *poetics* may have rightly influenced Boal's "poetics of the oppressed", a rather 'deconstructive' theatre form which essentially:

Focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries solutions, discusses plans for change – in short, trains himself for real action. (p.122)

Boal [3 p.122] has, therefore, summed up his stance above by the categorical assertion that: "theatre is (indeed) a weapon and it is the people who should wield it". This is also against the background of his ardent philosophy that all truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilize it. Little wonder he has used his theatre to create revolutionary consciousness particularly within the class struggle as Eyoh [2] has noted.

Informed perhaps by the foregoing, attempts have therefore been made at various fora to tap the abundant potentials of theatre to raise the level of consciousness of the people to understand and be able to change the structures that have subjugated them; and TfD approach over the decades consequently has come to define itself as a viable development tool in this direction. This is in the clear understanding that the people can now be encouraged through popular education and participation to initiate their own development [5].

## 2. TfD: Expanding Human Development Frontiers

The TfD paradigm in its socio-aesthetic inclination seeks to "intervene in a widening range of communities and constituencies, to make a popular appeal to an ever-expanding audience" [6 p.7]. Popular appeal in the context of our present preoccupation is interpreted to mean 'a re-awakening' to critical consciousness by which the people's 'active' involvement in the process of development, comprehensible for them both as individuals and as a collective, is effectively stimulated. The implication of 'popular' as associated with this theatre here also becomes more significant when considered from the perspective of a theatre: That is truly creative and authentic, rather than a tool for the divisive social system in which we live; a theatre which projects the necessary values for the creation of the era of justice that the human race should build [7]: that which places high premium on the advancement of both the quality of life of the people as well as their environment as *sine qua non* to their deeper preservation and sustainability.

Brecht, as quoted by Obadiogwu [8], has also offered us a further dimension on the concept of popular with reference to the people as those, "who are not only involved in the process of development, but are actually taking it over, forcing it, deciding it"; emphasising that "popular means intelligible to the broad masses taking over their own form of expression and enriching them – adapting and consolidating their stand point". It is this 'populist impulse', - this deeper 're-awakening' consciousness, therefore, that predicates this theatre's exceptional development aesthetics. We shall further be considering the two dimensional approaches by which the people are actively engaged in a creative awakening process of development in TfD.

## 3. The Sociological Dimension

The influence which theatre wields on the society from time immemorial cannot be overemphasized, especially when we consider sociology's definition as the study of a particular social institution and the part it plays in the society. Bamidele [9 p.1] has noted that "the broad discipline of sociology of art begets a question of the place of sociology of the various forms of art", which theatre is part of. Thus, art, and indeed, theatre's functionality in the human society through the ages is irrefutable as has been elucidated by many scholars: Soyinka [10], Hagher [11], and Chukwu-Okoronkwo [12] to mention but few. It is not in doubt, therefore, that theatre has always been a powerful means of communication and education in the society, such as was also inherited from the Europeans which though as Osofisan [13

p.2] emphasizes “pandered largely to the tastes and prejudices of aristocratic and bourgeois” or otherwise elitist “groups”; and which has become the conventional practice. Besides, the essence of this theatre relies so much on its appreciation from the perspective of entertainment; “functional”, to borrow from Uka [14 p.193], “in educating our sensibilities and functional in the manner it offers us complex entertainment”. Uka, therefore, may have had this dominant theatre tradition in mind when he explicitly remarked that “the primary motive for any group to go to the theatre is for entertainment” (p.193).

This entertainment, however, “truly understood”, Uka further clarifies, is not a simple desire to relax from the cares, tensions, and worries of a challenging world; rather, it is a desire to be renewed through the exciting insights and provocative perceptions of significant topics, advocacies for action in political, social and moral issues, and a heightening of our awareness of our surroundings [14 p.193].

However, the pertinent questions remain: How truly developmental has this medium of theatre been? What is the broad-base of this development? In proffering answers to the above questions, it would be necessary to ponder awhile on the very concept of development in our present context. In doing this, we have to start by discountenancing the prevailing tendency to see development only in terms of economic growth, physical infrastructure or industrialisation, to consider it as something that has to do with, first, people; since development, as Schumacher [15 p.140] unequivocally declares, “does not start with [material] goods”. Rather, “it starts with people and their education, organisation and discipline” without which “all (other) resources remain latent, untapped potential”.

Development, therefore, construed from the above people oriented perspective:

Relates to the widening of the intellectual horizon, the raising of consciousness and the encouragement of dialogue and participation in issues relating to the peoples economic, political, religious and social realities within their environment. [16 p.28]

It is therefore,

A comprehensive approach of a process of change that is primarily concerned with people’s freedom, their social, economic, environmental and political relationships *and determined by their ‘culture’ or familiar media; the actualisation of which also relies on the level of freedom of control to which the people are allowed over the process (my emphasis)*. [5 p.4]

Soubbotina’s [17 pp.7 – 8] consequent assertion that “the notion of human development incorporates all aspects of

individuals’ well-being, from their health status to their economic and political freedom”, obviously lends credence to Iorapuu’s statement above. Rogers, quoted in Batta [18 p.47], therefore, aptly summarizes our concept of development in the present context as:

A widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom, and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment.

In the light of the foregoing, there is no doubt that the aforementioned medium of theatre lacks that proactive development configuration that is truly inclusive of the majority of people for whom development initiatives are always targeted [19]; and therefore, has not lived up to the above bidding. Uwandu [20 p.207] has also reinforced this opinion by the affirmation that it “has failed to arouse sufficient”, or rather effective “awareness to launch the ... society into rapid development”, having “failed to reflect the needs and concerns of the people for their personal and collective development”, – a failure which he stresses stems from its inability to employ the idiom and symbols which are intelligible to the people. It is this failure, therefore, that has predicated the necessity to reappraise the approach of this hitherto dominant theatre tradition as it touches on development plans/programmes in order to make them more relevant to the people’s needs and aspirations.

This is because, when the people are proactively enabled “to see and analyze their way of being in the world of their immediate daily life ... and when they can perceive the rationale for the factors on which their daily life is based, they are enabled (also) to go far beyond the narrow horizons of their” immediate local community “to gain global perspective of reality”. [Cited in 8 p.85].

## 4. The Aesthetics Dimension

The traditional or conventional meaning of aesthetics has always been that read from the philosophical perspective of the study and appreciation of beauty or that which is beautiful; but this study does not dwell on the traditional or conventional understanding of aesthetics from the philosophical point of view as it relates to beauty and its appreciation. This is because as Johnson [21 p.51] rightly notes, “the word aesthetics has also been used severally ... to represent basically canons and principles and not necessarily beauty”. He further emphasises that:

The subject of aesthetics, it does appear, would lend itself to several subject areas, depending on the ... scholar

applying it ... and of the scholar's subject ... when this application is thus made, what may constitute the aesthetic elements (for that realm or subject) would have to be decided by the scholar, usually through his convictions and arguments. (21 p.41)

Therefore, the approach to the concept of aesthetics adopted in this study is strictly from artistic or creative point of view. The implication of this approach is that emphasis is given to the functionality aspect of the creative experience than mere appreciative exercise given only to sensuous pleasure; such that focus is directed on such drift that has revolutionized the conventional theatre practice, thereby turning it into a more viable instrument of development.

The aesthetic trend, therefore, emphasizes the style or method of theatrical performance process that veers from the *status quo* – the conventional “literary dramatic” style and stage performance nature of theatre buildings – such, according to Etherton [22 p.3] that sought for “a new social purpose for drama in performance, *and* one which allows for interaction with *and participation of* potential audiences” (*My emphasis*). Perhaps, it is in corroboration with Etherton's point of view above that Nwadiuwe [23 p.74] may have argued also that if ‘theatre’ must really, therefore, meet the sociological exigencies of contemporary societies, the imperative for it to “diversify its approach both in content and context”, and move beyond the bounds of “its traditional site and space in search of ‘audience’ with the people” [23 p.66], needs not be negotiated.

He stresses that “the concept of space goes beyond physically delineated boundaries to inculcate cultural beliefs and connotations prevailing in the *given* environment” (p. 74). This is also in recognition of the invaluable role of culture in spurring people's participation in their own development as it constitutes the basis of their indigenous knowledge of events around them. He maintains that theatre will obviously make its optimal impact when it goes to the target audience on site and adapts its production devices to suit the context and circumstances prevalent in the place (p.75). He further enlightens us, with regards to the project that has given impetus to the work under reference, on the efforts that were made to incorporate the cultural nuances of the people in terms of performance setting/s and communication media:

The community education project *which was* for migrant fishermen adapted the riverside spaces including the makeshift quay and anchored canoes as part of the set ... Some of the performers actually rowed their boats or swam onto the stage and flowed into the dramatic action. (23 p.71)

Besides, the performance which was aimed at giving an

identity to the project which the fishermen could easily recognise and identify with made use of,

Local performance idioms such as songs, music, dance and a boat carnival procession (mobile happenstance), augmented with relevant costumes, props, and local language with appropriate dialect. (23 p.72)

Mda has also cited Kerr as having formulated the under-listed determinants on the material mode of this alternative theatre approach, which, perhaps, further expatiates the nature of its aesthetic dimension as opposed to the conventional theatre:

| (Conventional Approach)        | (Alternative Approach)                          |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Individual author              | Collective creation                             |
| Script                         | Improvisation                                   |
| Structured stage               | Arena troupe                                    |
| Charged admission              | Free performance                                |
| Actor's 'magic'                | Actor's self-criticism                          |
| Audience applause              | Audience participation                          |
| Post-performance contemplation | Post-performance analysis (and possible action) |

(24 pp.46 – 47).

## 5. The Zimbabwean Theatre for Development Workshop Experience

The background of this workshop is traceable to the agelong struggle of 90 years of colonial cum settler rule that continued to trail the people even after independence. Chinyowa provides us with a philosophical base on which this workshop is to be understood, by citing Wa Thiong'o who asserts that:

It is when people are involved in the active work of destroying an inhibitive social structure and building a new one that they begin to see themselves. They are ‘born again’ during the process of releasing their creative spirit and imagination. [25 p. 99]

This workshop which took place in 1983 is traceable to the determined struggle of the people since independence in 1980 to change the agelong structures of 90 years of colonial and settler rule that had continued to trail them. Anchored on mobilization and conscientization as bedrock of the struggle, this effort which found impetus in the people's community theatre process – the *Pungwe*, handy as it were in activating, politicizing and boosting the morale of the fighting peasants during the liberation struggle, became vital also in this post-

independence effort, in maintaining the close two-way communication with the peasants.

It is significant to note that the Zimbabweans were quite aware of the vital role theatre had played in the ideological training of the freedom fighters both in Mozambique and Tanzania where it helped in clarifying the aims and issues concerning the struggle and re-enacting the history of the liberation struggle, thereby building up morale in the freedom camps. The methodology for the Zimbabwean workshop therefore drew from two major influences:

1. Earlier experience in theatre for development activities recorded in some independent African countries, and
2. Zimbabwe's own experience of people's theatre for conscientisation and mobilisation during the liberation war

Suffice to add that the Zimbabweans had a thriving tradition of popular performances prior to independence, explored through *Pungwe*, the all-night theatrical performances which peasants, workers and guerrillas engage in during the Zimbabwean national liberation struggle. The *Pungwe*, which rose out of the need of the liberation struggle, as Obadiegwu [8 p.95] clarifies, is a community gathering in an open, highly participatory format allowing spontaneous contributions of songs, dance, sketches and so on, by anyone or group, encouraging everyone to join in the activities.

Participation and dialogue, therefore, were the essence of this powerful theatrical form which also represented the peasants' capacity for organization; for they do not only perform in the *Pungwe*, but organized it too. It lent itself to popular control and was never foisted on the people. Rather, it was:

An ideal form for blending development communication, conscientization, and community decision-making ... (and created) a natural forum for community issue-raising and discussion. [26 p.12]

It was indeed, a form of cultural expression and self-reliant entertainment for the people, their political education, conscientization, as well as both their community and morale booster. The post-independence reconstruction of Zimbabwe and its people from the hegemonic claws of colonial-cum-settler rule through theatre (*Pungwe*) is, therefore, very instructive here. The Robert Mugabe led government that came to power during independence recognized the necessity to maintain close communication with the people, by exchanging information and development ideas between the rulers and the ruled, and therefore decided to use their indigenous artistic form in conscientizing and mobilizing the people, thereby transforming *Pungwe* from theatre-for-liberation to theatre-of-national-reconstruction. The

foregoing, therefore, goes to highlight the power of theatre in the hands of the people, which as Boal [3 p.122] notes, "is a weapon and it is the people who should wield it", to mobilize themselves as we have seen here, both for the purpose of raising their awareness of their prevalent circumstance, as well as become instruments in charting the course of their collective destiny.

From an aesthetic cum functionality perspective, it is interesting to note how the Zimbabwean TfD workshop experience has turned *Pungwe* into a powerfully instrumental tool in conscientizing and mobilizing the people towards national reconstruction and development.

Highlighting more on the artistic/creative dimension in TfD, Ode [27 p.7] notes that:

In this theatre, the emphasis is on artistic creativity by rigorously analysing problems that are peculiar to the target audience. It encourages every member of such an audience to become highly perceptive and consequently begin to fashion out enduring ways of integrating more meaningfully into a systematically ordered society. Opposed to being passive in the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, it encourages proactive approval to acquiring development in the life of the people.

At this artistic level, Gbileka [28 p.173] informs us too that "various elements of traditional arts *of the people* are usually tapped to enhance optimum theatrical communication and participation" (*My emphasis*). The Zimbabwean *Pungwe* example also aptly buttresses the foregoing in appropriating the indigenous cultural performances of the people like "*bira* (ancestral thanksgiving), *ngondo* (warrior dance), *ngano* (storytelling), *nheketero* (oral poetry) and *dzimbo* (song)" [25 pp.101 – 102], in the transformative process as explored in this participatory and dialogic TfD workshop.

## 6. Implications for Development

The implication of the paradigmatic shift from the dominant theatre tradition signposts the fact that the application of the dominant ideology of Western theatre tradition towards development initiatives, especially for the underprivileged has come under severe interrogation as most of its initiated/associated development projects have failed because those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of such projects have always been alienated and grossly denied the right of participating in deciding on issues that affect them. This is what Abah [29] has rightly identified as one of the major problems of development. Since, naturally, as Dandaura [30 p.2] emphasises:

Such estranged ‘development projects’ are visited with two possible negative reactions from the people they were supposed to benefit. That is either; (1) the people would remain insensitive and apathetic towards such projects, or (2) they would engage in outright sabotage of such projects.

The point, therefore, is that for real development to be realized in the light of applying theatre towards development purposes/projects, the people must of necessity be incorporated from the onset. Little wonder the statement that emanated from The African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation, which held in Arusha in February 1990, maintains its strong unacceptable stance that “development and transformation in Africa can proceed without the full participation of its people” [Quoted in 31 p.691] especially, where the people are “excluded from the decision-making process”. Thus, “popular participation” which the advocated incorporation entails now becomes the absolute “centrepiece” on which the people’s yearning to achieve that enduring and sustainable economic and social justice for all relies.

The implication of the foregoing is that participation in this context now translates into a process in which the people become more aware of their situation: “of the socio-economic reality around them, of their real problems, the causes” of these problems, as well as “what measures they themselves can take to begin changing their situation” [32 p.7]. This process of awakening or raising of consciousness, Burkey maintains, constitutes a process of self transformation through which the people grow and mature as human beings; and as such, the process needs the enabling environment to thrive, to bring to fruition its laudable objective/s.

It is heart-warming therefore to note that the TFD approach is apparently development oriented, than mere entertainment, and directed towards the disadvantaged. Let us refocus Nwadike’s “‘Meet us at the other side of the river’: performance venue and community education among migrant fishermen in Nigeria” (Drama for Environmental Education Project) experiment as a further case in point, here. The project which took place at Osamala, a Niger Delta community in Ogbaru Local Council of Anambra State where most of the inhabitants engage in fishing for subsistence and commercial purposes with a majority of them nomadic is invariably an effort in addressing the environmental problems associated with this migrant community and to facilitate development in the region.

The skit and subsequent clarification of the polluting activities of some fishermen like Agu, Ndu and Okoye (characters in the sketch) broadened their understanding of

the problem and helped to transform the impact of the performance. [23 p. 72]

Among the key issues raised at end of the project include:

- the possible health risks (which the polluting activities of some fishermen pose) to man as opposed to fish in using chemicals;
- the issue of abject poverty which tempts some fishermen to use harmful fishing chemicals;
- the unfair competition posed by rich fishing conglomerates using trawlers;
- the brazen attitude and impunity enjoyed by oil prospecting companies resulting in oil spills and water pollution;
- the lack of power by community leaders to actually sanction offending fishermen; and
- the provision of potable water and other amenities for coastal communities.

[23 p. 73].

All of the above, Nwadike informs us, were quite noted and later incorporated into the development programme mapped out for the people by the government.

Relating the process oriented approach to development therefore implies that development as Tor Iorapuu [5 p.4] emphasises, must be “understood broadly as a comprehensive approach of a process of change that is primarily concerned with people’s freedom, their environmental and political relationship”, which he concludes:

Implies that ‘development’ is a planned activity aimed at directing the process of change primarily from the perspective of people ... and the people who are involved are those whose lives will be changed and those who will be enabled by changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes to improve the quality of their situation. [5 pp.4 – 5]

Iorapuu therefore, as Chukwu-Okoronkwo [33] emphasises, is no doubt locating the fundamental connection between the concept of development and the context of this study at the level of the *process* which is aimed at empowering the people. This further implies that the people for whom development is meant must be able to exercise what he calls “freedom of control” over the process. What the foregoing means is that the process must never be foisted on the people; for they must willingly participate in the process rather than be compelled into such participation. This development as Gbilekaa [16 p.28] infers, “relates to the widening of the intellectual horizon, the raising of consciousness and the encouragement of dialogue and

participation in issues relating to the peoples economic, political religious and social realities within their environment". It is a development which in Akanji Nasiri's [34 p.48] definition "implies a comprehensive and qualitative growth and improvement of society ... with regard to the individual and collective life of its citizenry"; thus engendering such approach that employs all paradigms at its disposal in the process of realising its objectives. Little wonder why the duo of Daniel and Bappa [35 p.18] conclude in affirmation that "it is therefore, an approach which is committed to using theatre as a relevant medium and language in mobilizing people, particularly those in rural communities, towards self-reliance and development", in both participatory and interactive manner for that enduring dividend.

From the foregoing, one cannot gainsay the fact that there is great merit in the revolutionizing process of TfD as reflected in the emergence of new approach to theatrical productions and performances wherein the people are now at the centre-point; and as made manifest in the engendered mutual atmosphere of productive participatory research, problem analysis, playmaking and discussion, all in the bid to chart the course of the people's collective destiny. In this milieu, the people's participation becomes but a *sine qua non* and nonnegotiable, where their 'democracy' or 'freedom' is adequately protected from every "imposition of idea" as Obadiogwu [8 p.61], would say. When he also observed that: "The aesthetics of theatre for development lies in the early traditional culture destroyed through colonial education" p.58; he is no doubt alluding to the early traditional culture of the people which is imbued in their communal participation and the vast cultural media it has employed from time immemorial in addressing their peculiar/particular needs, to reinforce Gbilekaa's [28] earlier statement, and which the prevailing TfD approach is consistently re-steering back to. This is also in the clear understanding that culture is quite significant for spurring the participation of the people in their development precisely because it constitutes the basis of their indigenous knowledge of events around them [36], as it reflects in their artistic expressions/traditional entertainment forms, language, proverbs, songs and dances, and local norms; such that they identify and respond to them readily and spontaneously. Perhaps, this process of 'cultural' awakening, by which the people are proactively mobilised in the course of charting development, is also a way through which they creatively take control of their own destinies.

## 7. Conclusion

The study has carefully examined the intricacies of socio-aesthetic dynamics that have given impetus to the

paradigmatic shift in the practice of theatre in the service of development from the hitherto dominant theatre tradition; highlighting how the emergent trend translates in the effective galvanization of the consciousness of target communities towards active participation in addressing their development needs and aspirations. It is pertinent, therefore, to assert that the TfD approach has certainly inspired and shall continue to inspire development initiative in Africa. What, therefore, becomes instructive from this study is the fact that if the medium of theatre must continue to remain relevant in addressing the sociological exigencies of contemporary societies, the imperative for it to sustain and accelerate this auspicious trend in getting the people for whom development is really meant actively integrated in the whole process needs not be negotiated. This is because, it is only in this milieu that the people would be afforded that horizontal platform wherein their 'freedom' and 'control' in the process would be most effectively guaranteed. Again, by refocusing the Zimbabwean TfD workshop example, the study has equally reinforced the efficacious tool of TfD – in its participatory and democratic orientation – as the people's media, as well as its powerful weapon in the hands of the people for their *national* reconstruction and development therefore.

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