



COMICS WITH AN ATTITUDE...

A Guide to the Use of Comics in Development Information



by LEIF PACKALÉN and FRANK ODOI

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Introduction

There have always been stories - and people like them! As a storytelling medium comics are quite new, but they certainly have great potential. Comics are inexpensive to produce, extremely flexible and can get a lot of reader attention. Almost any issue, new idea or fact can be turned into a story, which again can be converted into comics. The medium is ideal to be used in information campaigns.

Most of the comics presented in this book have been created by local artists for development organisations. When using local creative talent the stories become more meaningful and interesting to their readers.

These comics are usually hard to come by, as the print runs are small and they are rarely intended for sale. Therefore, I am greatly indebted to all cartoonists, comics artists and development workers, who have shared with me their knowledge and helped me collect the material. Without them there would be no book. All the workshops, seminars and exhibition projects that we have done together, have for me also been an invaluable source of information on how comics are made and understood in different cultures.

Therefore, I dedicate this book to my southern partners in comics: Frank Odoi, Godfrey "Gado" Mwampembwa and Paul "Madd" Kelemba in Nairobi, Katti Ka-Batembo and Michael Sagikwa in Morogoro, James Gayo, Robert Mwampembwa, Paul Ndunguru and Nathan Mpangala in Dar es Salaam, to all Tanzania Popular Media Association members, to S. Martine and the VCDS/SAG comics team in Tamil Nadu, India, to Sergio Tique and the cartoonists' group in Maputo, and finally to all those comics artists, whose work I have admired, but never met personally. They have all given me a lot, actually changed the course of my life.

In return, I hope this book will serve as a guide and an inspiration source for many new and exciting locally produced comics - with an attitude.

Leif Packalén

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CHAPTER I

WHY COMICS?

"The economy of the medium allows you to do things more efficiently than prose..."

Art Spiegelmann, American comics artist



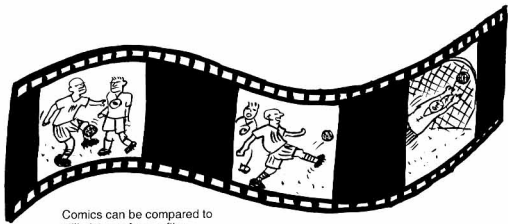
Comics stick out!

WHY COMICS?

The problem of communicating one's messages in an effective way has caused a lot of frustrations to development workers. How can people be taught new skills at a low cost? What would be a good way to deal with sometimes quite sensitive health issues? How can, sometimes very complicated new research, e.g. in agriculture, be simplified so that ordinary people can benefit?

These problems can, of course, be approached in many ways. One alternative is the use of comics. Obviously, in order to give desired results, these comics should be created locally. You will find in this book many examples and instructions on how to go about making comics for information work, campaigns etc.

Comics are often seen as "something for children", and, of course, a big part of the mainstream comics sold today are just that. In this book, we are mainly concerned with the use of comics for getting across information to grown-up readers.



Comics can be compared to still pictures from a film.



People take an interest in comics.

Comics, in a nutshell, are visual storytelling, where texts and effects are added to bring more meaning to the visual story. Comics can be compared with a film that stops at intervals and what we see in the panels (boxes) of the comics is a still image from the story. What is outside the picture and what has happened between two panels, the reader fills in himself, using his imagination.

DRAMA AND HUMOUR IN A LOCAL SETTING



Humour exists in all cultures, and is usually very much appreciated.

With comics you can **dramatise** your message. This is the strongest reason for using comics as an information medium. With a dramatic beginning, every reader wants to know how the story ends. In information campaigns it is important that the drama and humour are in the forefront and the information or educational message will come from the interpretation of the story. Nobody likes to be told this is right - that is wrong, but everybody can make up his mind on an issue which has been presented in a drama!

Comics attract readers! When people see comics, expectation builds up. Within a lot of text a single picture sticks out, but comics stick out even more.



Local artists can best make pictures that are truly local.

Comics are usually easy to read and interesting also for people with limited reading abilities.

If the comics are made by local artists and writers, the visual world is culturally correct and the meanings of the pictures and events in the story make sense to the reader. If comics from other cultures are used, the setting of the story can often confuse the reader, who cannot relate to the various characters and events in it. Therefore, it is important that the comics are thoroughly rooted in the target group's own surroundings and culture. This is best achieved by using **local creative talent**.

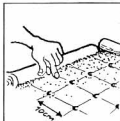
COST-EFFECTIVE AND SIMPLE



Comics do not need electricity or any device to be read.

Comics give you inexpensive possibilities to reach people. They can be distributed easily in photocopies, low-tech black and white printing, posters, small booklets etc. If the comics are attractive, papers and/or magazines can sometimes publish them free of charge.

Compared to educational videos and films, comics are wonderfully non-technical. Once they are printed and distributed they can be read and perused by the reader almost anytime and anywhere. Comics can be read slowly or fast, all according to the reader's own pace, and the reading is not confined to a specific time and place, as the viewing of a film or video. Although the films and videos might be very attractive, there is very little chance of reflection during viewing.



With comics you can be also technically very specific.

If you are making an information campaign with instructions, you can, with comics, be technically very specific as you can use both the picture and have supporting text.

GO FOR THE STORY!



The reader can return to the story anytime and read at his own speed.

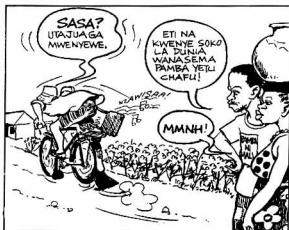
The story is the central element in comics. If you have good-looking drawing but the story is not dramatic or has little meaning for the reader, then the whole thing boils down to just good-looking pictures. Drawing talent, albeit important, is not the most crucial factor. People are keen on good stories in a local setting with interesting characters. The drawing should be adequate, and that is often enough, as you can see from many of the information campaign comics samples in Chapter III.



Comics are not offensive, you can take up sensitive issues in them.

Readers expect drama and humour from comics and this expectation should be met. People like good stories and humour makes life bearable. Ridicule, however, should be avoided and wittiness preferred.

Comics as a medium is non-aggressive. You can deal with very sensitive issues, such as sex, love, death, etc., without being realistically as direct as you might be with photographs or videos. Because comics are drawn by hand, the human factor is very much present and the reader knows it is another human being who is behind the story.



The opening situation in the story sets the tone. Here a neighbour is ridiculing a cotton farmer in Katti Ka-Batembo's story "Safari ni mali", and the farmer sets out to prove him wrong.

MESSAGES, TARGET GROUPS AND PRODUCTION STEPS

You have to define your communication needs and your target groups very well. Is your target group familiar with the medium of comics? What level of literacy are you facing? Can you use local press free or perhaps negotiate a reasonable price for space? Can you reach your target group with a poster campaign? Is your message suited to become part of an interesting story? Can you fit in comics to support your other communication efforts?

To make information campaign comics you could follow these steps: (This is also explained in comics format by Frank Odoi, see Chapter IV)

1. List all the messages you want to convey.
2. Then divide them into important messages and less important messages.
3. Choose one or two important messages for your comics. Too many messages will definitely confuse your readers.
4. Then consider your readers, they are your target group. Try to define them as well as possible, i.e. by age group, sex, living or working place and other common factors.
5. Consider your distribution options, what format to print, with the budget you have, in order to best reach your target audience:
 - print a folder or a flyer
 - print a booklet
 - print a poster
 - publish the comics in existing newspapers or magazines
 - publish comics as a part of other educational material



You can publish comics in many formats, such as flyers, folded sheets, posters, small booklets, and in newspapers and magazines.

Campaign comics are created by combining professional knowledge with artistic creativity.



6. At this stage you can ask the comics artist or cartoonist to join you in the planning. You should give the artist the details of your messages and explain thoroughly what they mean in the context of your target group. You should give him/or her details of the format you are planning to use and you should discuss ideas of storylines and characters at this stage. Payment and copyright issues should also be agreed on now.

7. The comics artist will then consider everything and suggest some definitive storylines and characters for the story.

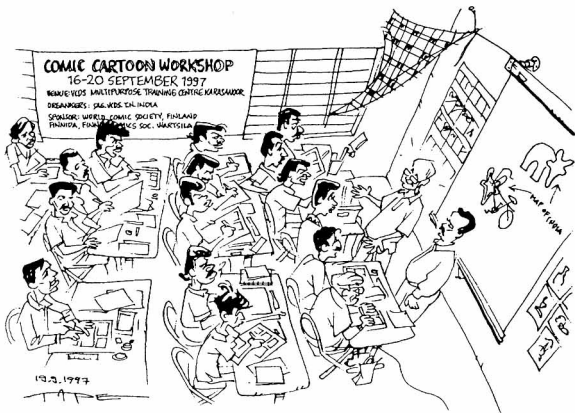
8. You meet with the artist and together you go through his suggestions and make adjustments as necessary. The main thing to remember is that in a story, drama and humour are in the foreground and the educational messages will emerge from the context. Avoid pointing out everything - this often only annoys the reader.

9. The artist makes a pencil draft, before the final artwork is made. If your educational campaign is very large and costly, you could consider testing the pencil version with a few people from your target group - you might get crucial and valuable feedback from them. Another way could be to involve them already in the initial planning.

10. When all details are agreed and set, then the artist can do final inking, i.e. prepare the artwork for the printers.

11. Your campaign comics are printed and distributed.

12. You can then collect feedback from your readers and judge the success of your information campaign.



A workshop scene from Tamil Nadu, where the Finnish Comics Society and the World Comics have a cooperation project with SAG/VCDs, an Indian NGO-coalition. The project aims at producing comics for the coalition's information work. Drawing by Tarmo Koivisto, Finland.

WORKSHOPS AND SEMINARS

Because the use of local campaign comics is not very widespread, it is a good idea to arrange workshops and seminars where organisations meet artists and sort out ways of working together in order to produce campaign comics.

The artists are not necessarily familiar with the organisations' objectives and methods and the organisations, on the other hand, often have little experience of creative work. The workshops and seminars should be aimed at increasing the understanding of the two distinctly different inputs that are needed for information comics, i.e. the professional knowledge about the issue and the artistic creativity which makes the information interesting.



Drama is easily created by having meaningful characters in conflict with each other, often also in an extraordinary situation.

HOW TO CREATE DRAMA IN CAMPAIGN COMICS?

1. Your characters must **mean** something to your readers.
2. Drama is often built on **conflict** between people or their ideas/interests.
3. Drama must start from a **situation**, which is understood by the readers.
4. In drama you **exaggerate**, but not so much that it becomes totally unrealistic.
5. Drama should have **surprising** and unexpected elements.
6. Drama leaves it to the **reader to decide** what is right and what is wrong.

Remember also this:

Tell the story with pictures, not text. Too much text will confuse the reader. Don't have too many different characters in a story.

What is happening between the panels in comics, must be filled in by the reader's imagination. When people use their own imagination the information which is created becomes their own.

CROSS-CULTURAL INFORMATION WITH COMICS

An added advantage with locally produced comics is that they can also be used to present the local culture to a foreign audience. From comics you can follow people's everyday life, their values, and the issues that are of concern to them. Experiences from exhibitions and publications of African and Indian comics in Finland and Sweden have been very encouraging. Especially school children have been enthusiastic about getting information about other cultures in this way.



Two panels from the Tanzanian story "Mama Tabu", by Katti Ka-Batembo. It was translated from Swahili into Swedish and distributed at the African Comics Exhibition in Stockholm, Sweden, 1998. The story gives an insight to how many women live in Tanzania.

In the next chapter you can look at six different campaign comics and in Chapter III you can find samples from about 40 campaign comics from different parts of the world, however, with an emphasis on Africa. In Chapter IV, Frank Odoi guides you through the procedure of making comics with an attitude. Enjoy your journey through the world of comics!

"Comics will be the teaching medium of the future..."

Dr. M. Thomas Inge

American literature expert