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We live on prayers: the use of video in community development

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· **Background**

In the early 1990's, Kagiso Trust, a South African development agency, commissioned a research team (of which the author was part) to conduct a needs analysis in a rural district in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. Kagiso Trust had allocated money for a development programme in the Healdtown District and wanted to identify the development priorities of the 14 villages in the district. As part of the needs analysis, the research team held group meetings, interviews with key informants and facilitated self surveys in all the villages.

For the self surveys, villagers developed, administered and analysed their own questionnaires. Working with the research team, the residents associations in each of the villages, discussed the concept and the use of a self survey, and developed the questions for a survey questionnaire. Subsequently the youth organisations in each of the villages administered the questionnaire to each household in the village. The completed questionnaires were then returned to the residents association who analysed the data with assistance of the research team. These data were later included in an overall socio-economic profile of the village.

In one of the villages, Rwantsana, discontent arose concerning the research. At one of the village meetings, the chairperson of the local residents association indicated that the villagers did not see how the research could be of relevance to their development. He went on to say that in the village's history, many people had come to discuss development

matters and had subsequently left, never to return. The villagers argued that the plight of the community could not really be captured in 'the few words spoken during a meeting with village elders' and that for the research team to really grasp the problems of the community, they would have to 'take a look' at how the people in the village lived. After further discussion, a suggestion came from a member of the residents association to produce a video to show the community's problems.

· **Making the video**

At a residents committee meeting, it was decided that members of the residents association would write a scenario for the video and the research team would provide the technical assistance (providing the equipment and doing the filming). The residents association set up a working committee which prepared the scenario - the research team was not involved in this. Subsequently a large community meeting was held at which the 'Rwantsana Video Project' was presented to the whole village for approval. The project met with general enthusiasm and a date was set for the filming.

The filming was regarded as an important event in the village and throughout the filming, a large group of villagers were present. The majority of the filming was done by a professional camera man engaged by the research team. Under his guidance, several villagers participated in the filming. The video film was subsequently taken away by the research team for minor editing, mainly involving the grouping together of similar issues. The editing did not involve the villagers.

The video film

A 45 minute video was produced which took the shape of a series of interviews. The chairperson of the residents association assumed the role of reporter, who then interviewed key people from the various sectors of the community. The villagers chose the interviewees and developed the scenario themselves, without the involvement of the research team. The video followed the structure of a guided tour of the village, which put the interviews into context. The tour included visits to the following:

- the defunct primary health care clinic;
- the communal gardens;
- the village water tap;
- a villager's zinc house;
- the village communal land;
- small business projects (e.g. pigs, chickens, sewing and knitting projects); and,
- the youth choir and the soccer association.

In the interviews, problems related to the above issues were presented. The video concluded with a speech by the chairperson on various aspects of village life in Rwantsana with community members occasionally adding input in order to reinforce or expand on the chairperson's words. The community decided to name the video film *Siphila Ngomtandazo* (we live on prayers) because they feel that their village has so few resources that at times it seems that they survive on prayers alone.

• Viewing the video

Four weeks after the filming, the team returned with the edited version and the necessary equipment to screen the video film (the village did not possess electricity, a television nor a video recorder). A large section of the community gathered in the church hall to view the video film and the first viewing met with emotional response, especially from those people who saw themselves on the screen. There were requests for a second and third viewing, followed by a lively discussion amongst the villagers. They felt that the grave circumstances in which they were living were well reflected in the video and they believed that it would be a great help in negotiating

development aid for the village. Initial plans were made to form working groups around the different issues portrayed in the video.

In the late afternoon, as the time arrived for the team to leave, there was a feeling of great disappointment amongst the community, who indicated a desire to have a several more viewings that day. However, it was agreed that additional viewings of the video could be arranged at a later stage. Two copies of the video film were left in the village and a date was arranged for a follow-up meeting, to discuss how the video could be used and how projects could be developed based on the data in the video.

• Outcomes of the video

The production of the video had various outcomes and effects.

Community building

The video making process had a stimulating effect. It encouraged villagers to work together for the development of their village. First, the residents association committee members worked jointly towards the production of the scenario for the video. Second, in order to provide a representative picture of the community, key people in different spheres of community life were engaged to take part in the video and became part of the task. Third, through calling a large community meeting to discuss the video project and through a large representation of villagers during the filming of the video (the villagers being keen to participate), a large portion of the community became part of the project and had an opportunity to contribute.

Analytical tool

Besides a community building exercise, the video also stimulated a communal process of analysing and prioritising development issues by the villagers, without involving the research team. In writing the scenario, important issues were identified and agreed upon and through the compilation of an interview schedule, these issues were analysed.

The viewing of the video and subsequent discussions by the community assisted further in the joint analysis and prioritising of the community's development issues. This was achieved through developing working groups. During discussions, villagers gradually converged into smaller working groups around particular development interests. These groups were subsequently formalised and their tasks consisted of further discussion of the particular development needs. These groups reported back regularly to the larger community.

Rapport building

As a result of the video, the relationship between the research team and the community improved considerably. By giving them an opportunity to present their development issues 'their' way, the villagers felt that the research team had taken the effort to look at the reality faced by their community. After the video project was completed, the residents association committee indicated that they had more confidence in working with the team. Furthermore, the research team felt that the process had provided them with a much more grounded understanding of the community and village life and had enabled a more open relationship between them and the villagers.

Confidence for action

In deciding on a scenario for the video (including the interview schedule for the chairperson), the residents association agreed implicitly on what were the important issues in their community. The presentation of the video project to the community at large enhanced the collective understanding of the priority issues in the community. The viewing of the video and its accompanying discussion provided the final endorsement of the priority list for development in the village.

As a result of this process, the community had developed confidence for action and subsequently, several activities were initiated. Working committees were formed around issues such as transport, chicken projects and health care. The people who had been involved in these issues in the past, but who had been discouraged because of the lack of facilities, had been given the opportunity to present their issues to the community at large in a medium

of their choice (the video) and felt encouraged to put renewed efforts into their projects. As part of the discussions following the viewing of the video, these people invited others to join them and form working committees to revive their projects or to deal with the problems related to them. Coinciding with the Christmas period, the research team had little involvement in the establishment of these working committees. This process was driven by the villagers themselves. However, once the working groups were functional, the research team facilitated the development of programmes and proposals for funding with a series of meetings and workshops with the committees.

The possession of a copy of the video provided the residents association with the confidence to approach a donor agency for funds for their projects. The community took the initiative to contact the donor agency, invited its representatives to the village and presented them with a copy of the video, accompanied by project proposals for several community projects. Some of the projects were subsequently funded.

Some members of the residents association volunteered to set up an action committee to liaise between the village and the local government with regards to water issues. The video, which showed villagers struggling uphill with wheelbarrows to carry water to their houses had provided the villagers with a powerful picture of their plight. The action committee presented the local government with a demand for taps in the streets close to their homes. The research team was not involved in this activity, but was updated about the progress made by the action committee.

The production of the video led to the resolution of a community dispute. There had been a long standing disagreement on the use of some communal land outside the village between the women and men in the community. The men wanted to use the land to build a school, but the women felt the school would be too far away and not safe for their children. The production of the video encouraged the women to re-open debate and they asked the research team to act as mediators. This was accepted by the

community and a series of meetings was organised. It was resolved to allocate the land for grazing purposes.

• **Benefits and drawbacks of the process**

Making the video enabled the community to communicate with the research team in a way chosen by them rather than imposed on them. They regarded a visual medium to be more appropriate and powerful than an auditive medium (meetings), as a tool to aid the initial identification of problems.

The compilation of the scenario enabled the community to provide a realistic and balanced picture of their community. They presented their needs and problems (e.g. water and roads) as well as their achievements (small projects, sports and music groups). Seeing themselves on the screen expressing their feelings and ideas seemed to provide the villagers with a sense of achievement and empowerment. They felt that being able to present a locally produced document on their village to the outside world (i.e. development and donor agencies) was a great step in breaking out of their isolation.

The video project, however, also created a sense of dependency and disempowerment. After the filming, the product was taken away, to be returned only several weeks later (in a slightly different form due to editing). Furthermore, since the community did not possess the necessary facilities and technical equipment to screen the video, they were dependent on the research team, or any other outside agency, whenever they wanted to view it.

• **Recommendations**

In conclusion, the research team would recommend the use of video production as a means for community mobilisation for development for several reasons. The writing of a scenario for the video film helped the villagers to analyse and reach consensus on their development priorities. The preparation and production of the video, as well as subsequent discussions, helped to build unity in the village and to address long standing

disputes. The video production also provided the impetus for the formation of working groups, which developed projects and budget proposals on various development issues. Even several months after the viewing of the video, discussing its production still seemed to provide an inspiration for the community's development endeavours.

However, the lack of technical know-how and facilities of the community seriously impeded the full potential of the video production. Firstly, if the villagers could have been more integrally involved in filming and editing the video film, they would have had a greater sense of ownership of the end product. Secondly, if they could have viewed the video independently of the research team, they would not have felt disempowered in the process, thus enhancing the video's potential in stimulating communal analysis and development planning. While producing the video was successful, the end product, the video film, was under-utilised. It is important that care is taken to build the capacity of the village with respect to the technical aspects of filming and screening videos.

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