

Amplifying children's voices on climate change: the role of participatory video

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by TAMARA PLUSH

Overview

We would like to appeal to all the leaders who are making decisions about climate change. We want to explain our problems: the children's problems. We hope that the adults will listen to our voices and act on what we have to say.

Vijay Giri, age 17, Bageshwari, Nepal

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time with the greatest impacts being felt by poor and marginalised people living in developing countries, and particularly children. While children have done very little to cause the changing climate, they will inherit its problems. This puts them in the precarious situation of having to cope with both current and future impacts from increasing climate shocks and stresses. Yet when decision makers

create policies and programmes for climate change adaptation, children's concerns are rarely part of the discussion, even though children will benefit most from increased knowledge, resources, and funding.

The motivation to amplify children's voices around their adaptation needs formed the basis for a participatory video action research project that took place in Nepal in 2008 as part of an Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Masters research project.¹ As the lead researcher, I had worked as a video professional for more than 15 years, but had not previously used video as a participatory tool. Participatory video is an empowering process where video itself plays a role in transformational social change. Kindon (2003) describes this as a process where community members 'move forward in iterative cycles of shooting-reviewing' to 'create

¹ The project was a joint research initiative with Change with Children in a Changing Climate (CCC), the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and ActionAid Nepal (AAN). Tamara Plush, the author, proposed the research as part of her Masters at the Institute of Development Studies in Participation, Power, and Social Change and served the role of action researcher, project coordinator, and participatory video facilitator with ActionAid Nepal during the year-long study.

video narratives that communicate what those who participate in the process really want to communicate, in a way they think is appropriate.²

The study took place through an ActionAid Nepal (AAN) programme already working with children to build their resilience to disasters: the Disaster Risk Reduction through Schools (DRRS) project.² The video project focused on five villages in Nepal that had been previously identified by government leaders as highly impacted by disasters due to flood, drought, and landslides. The participatory video research project explored if the process of filmmaking – rather than traditional approaches such as workshops or lectures – could better help children understand climate change impacts, identify coping strategies, prioritise their adaptation needs, and advocate for change.

The methodology

The research partners believed that implementing a participatory video project in isolation would do little to help children understand climate impacts and adaptation needs.³ Therefore, a short-term project would create little ownership of the solution. So they embedded the video research within the three-year DRRS project that started in 2006. DRRS works to reduce people's vulnerabilities to disasters – including those associated with climate change. The DRRS project uses Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA).⁴ This methodology was developed by ActionAid that builds on participatory approaches:

Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA) is different from previous participatory methodologies because it not only collects data, but also mobilises the people to assess the root causes of their vulnerabilities and the effects at individual,

family, and societal levels, and is followed up by them designing appropriate action plans. The main motto of the process is that the communities know their own situations best and so any analysis should be built on their knowledge of local conditions (Gautam, 2007).

The participatory video research project took place in five DRRS villages from three different geo-climatic regions of Nepal:

- Banke district (Terai plains);
- Rawuwa district (the mountainous zone); and
- Kathmandu (the urban core).

Each regional study began with a five-day participatory video workshop aimed at those already working with children through DRRS. Workshop participants included staff from AAN partner organisations and Disaster Management Committee (DMC) members from the DRRS project locations. Each workshop included 12-18 women and men with a mix of education levels.

The participatory video workshops had three learning goals:

- enhance the participant's climate change adaptation knowledge through locally available learning tools (video and print materials in Nepali) so they can pass the knowledge to child groups in their villages;
- build their technical skills in using video equipment so they can function as the video crew; and
- build their skills in using participatory video for child-led awareness-raising and advocacy so they can carry out the research project and use the skills for future projects.

In the workshops and project, one of the challenges we found was that locally available education tools on climate change were often too technical or abstract for teaching children. Many of the materials

² The DRRS project is funded by the Department for International Development (DfID).

³ ActionAid Nepal, the Institute of Development Studies, and Children in a Changing Climate.

⁴ PVA manual: <http://tinyurl.com/PVAmanual>. Full URL:

www.proventionconsortium.org/themes/default/pdfs/CRA/PVA_ActionAid2005_meth.pdf

also focused on an urban mitigation message (such as replacing light bulbs and recycling), rather than on practical adaptation solutions more relevant to agriculture-driven communities with limited access to energy sources. This is an area where more attention is needed both in Nepal and at an international level.

After the workshops, the trained participatory video facilitators used the following methodology in each DRRS community to help the children articulate their climate change adaptation priorities in their own voice:

- The PV facilitators present the project to the children and teachers for approval and input.
- The PV facilitators and local teachers teach the children the science of climate change.
- With PV facilitators, the children create questions related to climate change and interview each other and their elders to generate local knowledge on the topic. The children then watch the video footage and reflect on what they learnt.
- With the PV facilitators, the children work together to create a storyboard and script for their film, and to guide the editing. The storyboard safeguards their vision through the production process.
- The children participate in making their film as actors and supportive crew members.
- Led by the children and PV facilitators, the film is shown to the community and decision makers who can address the children's concerns.
- The PV facilitators work with a local research team to build on the information gathered through the filmmaking process for a printed report.
- The AAN partners, ActionAid, IDS, and CCC distribute the report and child films to local, national, and international audiences.

The project was also designed from the

start with sustainability and local ownership in mind. The equipment was selected carefully for cost-effectiveness and ease-of-use both in shooting and editing on the AAN partner's existing computers. For example, the project used hard drive video cameras that record content as video files rather than onto a tape format. This digital-only approach was easy for people with little technical background to understand, and also avoided the necessity of video cards and fast computers for editing. Each trained AAN partner received a video kit so they could continue to use participatory video as they deem appropriate with the DRRS communities.

The approach: raise awareness for action and advocate from the bottom up

Both the ActionAid PVA approach and participatory video research methodology support the notion that individual and political empowerment starts when people undertake a process of understanding and reflecting on their own situations. This is why, for example, the participatory video methodology was designed with space for reflection after the children interviewed each other and their elders in the community, and before creating their final film.

Children learning about climate change and disasters at school have a strong role to play in raising community awareness. Their involvement in creating visual and oral messages can help as the literacy rate in Nepal is just 48.6% (62.7% for men; 34.9% for women).⁵ This figure drops in the rural areas of the video study, especially among women. The importance of children in awareness-raising is why DRRS operates through schools with the belief that children who are educated on disasters and climate change will then educate other children, their parents, and the community. This is similar to the concept of people-centred advocacy that seeks to educate and influence decision makers

⁵ Nepal literacy rate of people 15 years or older, according to 2001 census.

from the grassroots up in a way that 'enables and empowers the marginalised to speak for themselves' (Samuel, 2002). This dual role of child-led awareness and bottom-up advocacy led to the participatory video methodology. This allowed the children themselves to become action researchers to explore climate change impacts and adaptations at the community level.

Through the report and filmmaking process, we found that children and young people are already experiencing climate impacts particular to them in areas such as their health, education, mental and physical well-being, and food security (Gautam and Oswald, 2008). In their video interviews and the follow up report, they expressed how they are impacted:

It is difficult to go to school at the time of flooding. A lot of children have lost their lives in accidents. Many are now disabled.
Vijay Giri, age 17, Bageshwari, Nepal

The winter is not regular and other seasons have also changed. The winter was very short this year. It has affected our crops. The snowfall helps crops like wheat, barley, and buckwheat grow well. But due to the lack of snowfall last year, not enough food was produced. Families faced food shortages as their crops were not enough.

Pham Maya Tamang, age 21, Sybru Besi, Nepal

We have had problems in finding food and water. The soil and rocks were swept away by the landslides. The animals did not get enough food. And the plants have not been able to grow well.

Sarita Tamang, age 14, Ramche, Nepal

It is important to point out that the stories of climate impacts that we heard during the participatory video research are not isolated in their cause. They are organic and complex, and are often tied to other problems. For example, many of the recent

landslides near Ramche in the Rasuwa District have at their root deforestation by both the local villagers and soldiers from the nearby army barracks. Therefore, as the rains become more frequent and intense, it exacerbates the landslide problem.

The participatory video project in action: a case study from Bageshwari, Nepal

The children's video study in Bageshwari gives a good overview of how the action research project worked in practice.

As a first step, Bageshwari DMC members selected 15 children, aged between 12-17 and active in the DRRS project, to work with the PV facilitators on the video research. This group would explore local climatic hazards and participate in making a film on the issues they discover and prioritise. In Bageshwari, one of the main areas they decided to explore more deeply is flooding since it is one of the most widespread climatic hazards impacting on local children, especially on their education. In a recent study with children, Gautam, Kathayat, and Yadav (2008) reported that:

... in the views of the students, there was no problem to cross the rivers a few years back and they had never experienced the fullness of the flooding in these torrents as of these years. More erratic rains are experienced and the students are of the opinion that such patterns of rain cause the floods.

The next step was for the children to learn about the science behind climate change through Nepali teaching materials, and finalise their video questions to ask each other and their elders. Due to the complexity of explaining climate change, the children and PV facilitators decided to phrase their questions in relation to the weather. Here are a few examples of the questions they developed:

Children asked other children on video (15 interviews):

Box 1: Bageshwari children's video: crossing the Murgiya Nala River during flooding**Scene 1: Group of children with books, on a riverside**

Girl child: 'There isn't much water today. I think we should cross the river and go to school today. We've already missed 3-4 days of school.'

Children in chorus: 'Yes! Yes!! Yes friends!!! We've got to cross and go to school today!'

Children cross the river in water up to their waist. A boy loses his footing and starts to drown; another boy saves him from the river but he is unconscious.

Scene 2: Children sitting in a circle in front of their school

Boy child: 'We should also talk to them about the problems we have with the bridge. Only our books are spoilt today but tomorrow we may drown and die. So we should discuss these problems with our village elders.'

Everyone: 'Yes, we have to discuss these matters.'

The drama ends with the children presenting their problems to government officials (actors) who agree to help them in building a bridge.

- What problems do you face to go to school in the rainy season?
 - What do you need to change this situation?
 - Children asked their elders on video (15 interviews):
 - What was your occupation when I was born?
 - What difference do you find between past and present farming?
 - How has the weather changed since I was in my first year at school?
 - What problems do we face from the changing weather?
 - What should we do to overcome the problems of weather change?
- Through the elder and child interviews in Bageshwari, the severity of climate change and disaster impacts on the children and their families emerged:

Photo: Bageshwari, Nepal, child film still



Children in Bageshwari, Nepal, use video to dramatise the challenges they face in reaching school during the monsoon floods, which are on the rise due to changes in the climate.



Photo: Matehiya, Nepal, child film still

A young boy in Matehiya, Nepal, interviews his grandfather about the weather changes he has seen in the last decade. The interview is part of a child-led research component on a participatory video looking at climate change impacts on children, and child-led solutions.

We used to get regular rainfall. Now, if we get rain, it is heavy. Otherwise, we don't have rain at all. This is what it's like. There is great change. In the past, production was large. Now it is getting low and we don't have any income at all.

Rudra Bahadur Oli, age 50, Bageshwari

During the monsoon we have not been able to attend school regularly. We've missed a lot of exams.

Meena Bohara, age 14, Bageshwari

When I go to school there are floods. There is a river very close. We get wet. Sometimes children are killed.

Krishna Bahadur Oli, age 12, Bageshwari

In reviewing the content of the community interviews, it was evident that the information gathered by video is similar to findings presented at climate change workshops and gleaned through traditional research methods for written reports (see Mitchell, Tanner, and Lussier, 2007). One difference is how the children feel about the knowledge they gathered through their video research and their sense of ownership:

Special workshops on climate change are only one-way communications. Using video is two-way communications. Hidden things in the community become real.

Raj Kumari Rokaya, age 15, Bageshwari

Participatory video allows you to capture what is fact. In other research, someone

⁶ The video was included in the Children in a Changing Climate/ActionAid Nepal report *Child Voices: Children of Nepal Speak Out on Climate Change Adaptation*, which built on the participatory video project in the DRRS communities. The video and report can be found at www.childreninachangingclimate.org/project_5.htm.

asks a question and people may express information that may not be true or the real information may not be given. The video process helps us capture reality.

Vijay Giri, age 17, Bageshwari, Nepal

Through watching the interviews and discussing their problems, the Bageshwari children decided to make a video showing the problems they experience crossing the Murgiya Nala River during flooding. Box 1 presents a short extract from the 20-minute film they made in the hopes of getting a bridge.

The Bageshwari children's film was shown by the AAN partner – Bheri Environmental Excellence (BEE) Group – to the local School Management Committee, teachers, community members, and government officials. Many of them expressed their concern for the children's safety and for their education since they could see powerfully why children are missing classes and exams during the flooding period:

Most of the Village District Committee members were impressed because the video provided a lot of information. They were very sensitive to the child voices and became very serious when they were shown. The Ward members did not know these problems so they were new learnings.

Ram Raj Kathayat, DRRS Coordinator, BEE Group

Additional video showings created community support for building the bridge in Bageshwari; so BEE Group applied for funding:

We applied for UNDP funding with a proposal for a Community Based Disaster Management Project and received a grant for a small construction project in the Banke district. We believe that the children's video was the most important component for UNDP to give us the grant because we mentioned our work experience

on using participatory video for climate change advocacy.

Gopal Yogi, Executive Director, BEE Group

With the grant and DRRS funding, the Bageshwari community agreed to spend the funds to construct a bridge over the river Murgiya Nala. It was completed in mid-2009.

With permission from Bageshwari and the other DRRS villages participating in the study, the video interviews and footage from the children's final films were used to produce a report and video targeted at securing child rights for climate change adaptation programmes and funding.⁶ These materials were distributed at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 14) in Poznań, Poland, in December 2008, and continue to be used for national and international advocacy by ActionAid and Children in a Changing Climate.

The report and film were instrumental in securing a promise to AAN staff by Nepal government officials to include child rights within its National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA). The NAPA lists Least Developed Countries' urgent and immediate needs for international funding consideration and is to be completed by December 2009 in Nepal.

The government has many issues to prioritise. But we went through the video and report at COP 14 and showed them the situation at the local level. We discussed the links to child rights. They agreed that in the case of Nepal in the NAPA process, child rights need to have priority. This is a great achievement.

Nahakul Thapa, National Coordinator, DRRS project, ActionAid Nepal

Participatory video strengths

As the action research has shown, the participatory video initiative led to many positive results – the most important as a



Photo: BEE Group, Banke District

Through the participatory video project, children showed that they have valid and unique concerns in adapting to climate change. By using video to show their difficulty in getting to school during the monsoon floods, UNDP and ActionAid worked with the local government to approve and build the Murgiyana Bridge in Bageshwari, Nepal, so the children could safely reach school.

catalyst for change since it provided a means for children to speak for themselves on the climate change adaptations issues important to them. The outcomes resulted from a strategic process in project design and implementation based on the values of working with children to identify and solve their own problems. As well, the project resulted in a host of lessons learnt for using participatory video in the context of climate change.

Using participatory video specifically with children can be an empowering method to understand, validate, and amplify their climate change concerns

If participatory video is used as a process of research-reflection-action, it can generate local knowledge, raise the consciousness of those involved, and provide a powerful mechanism to convey specific child concerns. Children experience a range of climate impacts and have unique adaptation needs that are not always considered in climate change policy-making. Examples include requests for infrastructure to

secure safe passage to school during flooding or landslides, livelihood support for the family to ensure the children are able to complete their schooling, or better educational materials in the curriculum on disaster preparedness and climate change knowledge.

Integrating participatory video into an existing disaster and climate change risk reduction project can strengthen the use of video as a tool to educate, empower, and advocate

Many development projects fail to take into account the important components of familiarity and trust. By working through organisations with strong community ties and experience in DRR, the participatory video process can add value to ongoing efforts to help children reduce their risk to disasters and climate change impacts. The organisations have established links to local, district, national, and international networks and decision makers. This can also enhance advocacy efforts. It is easier for familiar groups to introduce video into

climate adaptation discussions that may have started prior to the video project, and will continue after the project's end.

Using participatory video as a tool for awareness-raising and people-centred advocacy can strengthen links between scientific climate change data and local knowledge for more meaningful adaptation debates

As climate scientists and decision makers reach to the micro-level to deepen their knowledge on community impacts, participatory video with children has the potential to not only provide data, but offer prioritised solutions in the voice of those most affected. This creates an alternative to expert-driven reports and may have more impact if backed by people-centred advocacy efforts that effectively link children's concerns to development issues.

Using appropriate technology that is easy-to-use, affordable, and fits with the quality needs for video distribution increases its sustainability

From its inception, project sustainability requires an honest assessment of how people will use the equipment, where it will be stored, who will have access, how it will be maintained, who will coordinate and pay for repairs or replacements, and how the organisation will fund future projects. These should be determined up front and supported by necessary staff and resources.

Participatory video limitations

Understanding the limitations of participatory video is important for determining if it is the appropriate development tool to use within a climate change project. Using only participatory video to generate local climate knowledge has the danger of creating fear of the unknown and needs the support of good adaptation learning tools. Too often, science information creates anxiety or confusion that makes the problem too abstract and hard to understand for practical application. People

creating tools to facilitate climate change education need to consider:

- how people learn (perhaps by using more visual communications means such as video, art, and drama);
- what information is relevant to them (such as more emphasis on adaptation over mitigation); and
- what strategies are viable within their context (as long as they are provided as guidance rather than as predetermined activities).

Participatory video also cannot magically change power relations within communities, and may even heighten or reinforce them. Because video is an expensive novelty in many communities, introducing it to a specific group can add to tensions around who gets to use it and for what purpose. The project should be structured to recognise and respond to these issues.

Another limitation is that people share experiences differently on camera than in other types of interactions. Realistic expectations need to be set for the information gathered through video versus other means to ensure it is the appropriate choice to meet the project goals.

Technology can also be a limitation and ongoing training and the capacity for continued project management oversight must be considered for long-term use.

A final limitation is the intensity of time and energy needed to effectively use participatory video as a process for social change rather than a one-off video project involving the community. This requires proper cultivation through the project design, implementation, and impact assessment.

Conclusion: participatory video as a catalyst for change

Taking the strengths and limitations into account, the project showed that participatory video can be an appropriate and viable tool to support children in their efforts to adapt to climate change. It can help demystify climate change as an incomprehensible

scientific subject by linking it to the day-to-day challenges children face. When they can analyse their own situations, they learn and internalise the impacts and solutions. Mobilisation for adaptation support becomes their right and a cornerstone for advocacy, which they can address through filmmaking. The digital nature of video communications makes the concerns of children accessible across distances for stronger participation and influence in local, district, national, and international policy and planning decisions. As children continue to endure the impacts of a problem they did not create, every effort needs to be made to secure their right to climate change adaptation programmes and funding. If used appropriately and with integrity, participatory video can be a powerful tool to support these efforts. This is the essence of climate justice.

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