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The Most Significant Change: using participatory video for monitoring and evaluation

by CHRIS LUNCH

Insight is a UK/France-based organisation pioneering the use of participatory video (PV) as a tool for empowering individuals and communities. Insight has experimented with using PV for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in its own PV projects. Here I describe some of these experiments and what we have learnt from them, with a particular focus on our most recent experience of combining Rick Davies' Most Significant Change (MSC) ideas with PV.

What is participatory video?

Participatory video is an iterative process, whereby communities use video to document innovations and ideas or focus on issues affecting their environment and community (see Box 1). Local viewing of the material as the project progresses lies at the heart of the PV process and achieves a number of outcomes at the same time:

- opening communication channels locally;
- promoting dialogue and discussion; and
- setting in motion a dynamic exchange of ideas and solutions.

It also encourages others to get involved and it can help gauge trends and move towards building consensus in the community. It is the fire that keeps the cauldron bubbling!

Box 1: Participatory video in a nutshell

- Participants rapidly learn how to use video equipment through games and exercises.
- Facilitators help groups identify and analyse important issues in their community by adapting a range of PRA-type tools with participatory video techniques.
- Short videos and messages are directed and filmed by participants.
- Footage is shared with the wider community at daily screenings.
- A dynamic process of community-led learning, sharing and exchange is set in motion.
- Communities are involved to varying degrees in editing their films, but they always have full editorial control.
- Completed films can be used for horizontal and vertical communication.

Using PV for M&E

It could be argued that the PV methodology itself, which moves progressively from action to analysis, means M&E is ongoing and integral to the process, so it is not surprising that PV lends itself so well to participatory M&E.

Insight's experience of using PV for monitoring and evaluating our own participatory video projects can be divided into three categories:

Farmers documenting local innovation in Ghana during PV capacity building with network partners, Compas and Prolinnova



Photo: Insight

Monitoring and evaluating the participatory video process itself

Participatory video can be used to document any changes experienced by individuals and groups as they use the tools. If the participants are using the video camera every day, it is not difficult sometimes to shift the focus onto the participatory video process itself. In this way we can record feedback that can help us develop and improve the methodology, or which can be shared with future participants, trainees, donors or decision makers.

Monitoring and evaluating a project as it progresses

When used as the work progresses, participatory video can help strengthen local control over the direction and evolution of the project. Participatory video has been used to develop a feedback loop – community members are asked to react to short films made by other villagers, also on video. These reactions are then also screened, eliciting fresh discussions and new perspectives. In one case this process was vital to ensure that the women were fully involved in the development of an Insight renewable energy programme (see Box 2).

Monitoring and evaluating on completion of a participatory video project

Before any video is distributed the edited version needs to be viewed and approved by the community who made it. Any changes they suggest are made immediately using a laptop. This is usually a special event for the village and most of the population will turn up, since it is an opportunity for them to

Box 2: Solar power = community power programme

In this Insight project in Turkmenistan, community members are using video to document meetings. In this way, women, who traditionally do not attend such meetings, can watch the discussions in their own homes. The women then provide feedback and suggestions, also via video, and the films are played to the community at evening screenings, ensuring that their ideas and opinions are heard.



Turkmenistan participants conduct an interview

Photo: Insight

discuss in detail how they think the film should be used, who should see it and why, and so on. It is also a chance for us to ask what they think they have achieved, and to gauge their perceptions of the project in general.

As an obvious extension of our work in the community, these same participants are asked to lead the evaluation process. After working out three or four core questions, these individuals go out with a video camera and microphone, and interview groups and individuals around the village to record their responses to the final film and to the project in general. When community members are asked questions by other villagers, neighbours or relatives, with no project staff in sight, in the comfort of their own homes or backyards, their responses are always very frank and relaxed.

The feedback loop

Communication is an important aspect of evaluation. We have found that the videos produced during such M&E exercises can be used in various ways:

- to influence national and regional policy;
- as a means of communicating with donors and generating project funding;

Box 3: Completing the feedback loop: natural resource management in the mountain regions of Asia (NORMA)

In this EU-funded project, Insight worked with four high-altitude nomad and farming communities in the Karakoram-Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. Using PV techniques, the villagers were able to express their views on what they saw as the key areas for research to support natural resource management, and to communicate them directly to scientists, policy makers and donors at a workshop held to identify how to achieve these needs. A video of this workshop, with messages from scientists, was made and translated into local languages to be shown in the communities.

- as a way of helping to spread programmes to new areas and villages; and
- for sharing information with global networks of NGOs and researchers.

Videos containing the views, evaluations and descriptions of projects by the participants themselves are always the best and most transparent way of communicating project work.

The portability and accessibility of video as a medium mean that it is possible to show the material outside the community, and obtain useful video feedback from people in neighbouring villages, roadside cafes and markets, or policy makers in their city-based offices. Used in this way, the edited video made by the first community becomes a powerful tool for drawing out more experiences, reactions and evaluations. Ideally, community representatives should present their film to these different groups, in which case they can also help facilitate the video feedback. When played back to the community that made the original film, this feedback can be extremely useful. Seeing that their work has had an impact on other individuals and groups can be a deeply empowering and satisfying experience for these communities, many of which have a strong sense of their own marginalisation. They are given a glimpse into other worlds, and into how others perceive their ideas and achievements (see Box 3).

Improving participatory video as a tool for M&E

Our initial experiences with participatory video led us to consider how we could formalise its obvious potential as an M&E tool and develop a more systematic approach. Rick Davies' Most Significant Change (MSC) technique for M&E provided a way forward (Box 4).

We immediately saw the potential for participatory video within this innovative M&E technique. Participatory video, with its ability to convey 'a rich picture', could help the technique go even further and make the stories more accessible

Box 4: Most Significant Change technique

The MSC technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. The approach is akin to traditional forms of communication and storytelling, and is used to provide data on project impacts and outcomes so programmes can be assessed and managed in a more participatory way. It involves the collection and systematic, participatory interpretation of stories of significant change. Unlike conventional approaches to monitoring, MSC does not employ quantitative indicators, but is a qualitative approach.

For more information, see Davies, R. & J. Dart (2005) *The Most Significant Change Technique: a guide to its use*. Available online: www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm

to all kinds of audiences, and to all parts of the communities themselves, including children, the elderly and the non-literate. Video has great potential to enhance indigenous means of communication – which, like video, are primarily visual and verbal. Ultimately it can help to link the MSC stories more closely to the localities and to the communities they come from, as well as strengthen the communities' sense of ownership and control over the documentation and diffusion of the MSC stories.

Pens and notepads can create barriers. With minimal training anyone can learn how to use a video camera, allowing people to tell their MSC stories in a familiar context. The process itself is fun and direct, and the results can be played back and reviewed immediately. This also helps to avoid situations where project staff end up having to speak on behalf of communities, using media that are often incomprehensible to the people themselves.

Participants work together to plan short MSC films using the storyboard method (see photo).¹ The local screening of MSC stories encourages broader participation and could speed up the process of story collection as more people choose to get involved and contribute their own stories. Communities can be asked to vote on the stories, enabling us to move towards quantifying local consensus, and provide more valuable local evaluation. This process, and the reasons for selecting certain stories as most significant, could also be filmed, and the footage added to the end of the individual stories. This can occur at all stages in the MSC process, providing the community with accessible and engaging video feedback and a glimpse into the world of decision makers. Our experience has shown that this can contribute to local empowerment, as the people can see where their

¹ For more information about the exercises and games used in the process, see Insight's recent publication, *Insights into participatory video: a handbook for the field*. Available from Insight or as a free download (see details at end of article).



films/stories have travelled, and the impacts they have had at the different levels.

The fact that MSC stories can be watched rather than read will also appeal to those project managers, administrators and decision makers who feel overburdened by paperwork. When the films are shown outside the community itself, subtitles or audio translations can be added, making the MSC video stories accessible to much wider audiences – local, regional and even global. As with stories, video helps to connect people to the reality on the ground. There is a human connection that comes from seeing someone speak, even if it is on video. If we can't bring the decision makers to the field, then we can try our best to bring the field to the decision makers!

Requirements for PV

Whilst special equipment is needed to make and show videos, a growing number of NGOs and even community-based organisations now have their own video players, and some also have video cameras. Video films can also be easily copied onto CD-ROMs and can then be viewed simply using a laptop computer or via the Internet. In this way, PV can bring local experiences and knowledge into a global network, allowing all relevant actors to learn from each other.

Combining PV and MSC: an example

In November-December 2005, Insight worked with the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability (Citizenship DRC), an international network of researchers and practitioners from Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Nigeria, South Africa and the UK, to evaluate the work of the DRC over the past five years. We used a combined PV/MSC approach for the evaluation.

The process

Twelve DRC researchers took part in a two-day introductory participatory video training. They learnt how to use the video equipment through participatory games and exercises. We discussed the MSC approach and how to produce MSC video stories. The stories could reflect changes observed at the community level, the institutional level, the personal level or any other changes. The trainees then used their new PV skills to reach out to other delegates at the DRC conference, interviewing them about their own MSC stories. The material was edited in the evenings and presented to all the delegates at a planning meeting on the final day of the workshop. This was the point when delegates were given the chance to evaluate the different stories and decide which was most significant and why.

What was achieved?

The participants developed nine short MSC stories. These were all very individual and creative, and included role-play, drawings and photographs. The researchers who took part enjoyed filming and it generated a lot of laughter. The simplicity of the MSC approach combined well with our storyboard approach, helping individuals move from words to a more visual language and encouraging them to be creative and simplify their messages. As a creative and fun process it forced people to think and act a bit differently from the way they usually would in a formal conference context, and helped develop an open environment for sharing and exchange.

The films communicated aspects of the researchers' work in a very clear and accessible way. Delegates got to know each other's work better through the short films, and a number of key areas of change were highlighted.

Those who had the PV training wanted to use the methods in their wider DRC action research work. Many other delegates saw the value of PV in promoting broader participation in the process of knowledge generation and representing local views and knowledge. Insight was subsequently invited to provide PV capacity building to all seven DRC country partners.

Lessons learnt

During Insight's experiments combining the MSC technique and PV, many lessons have been learnt:

- MSC and PV can be integrated in very exciting and dynamic ways, which need to be developed further in the future.
- MSC stories can be documented by the project communities themselves, requiring little training and skill.
- PV tools can be used effectively to generate video feedback

from higher up the decision-making chain.

- Recording MSC stories on video means that the process of sorting and ranking them is much faster and simpler, and the accessibility of video as a medium means that the process can be opened up to far more people.
- The storyboard method developed by Insight means that even without editing, good short MSC films can be easily produced and reviewed by key stakeholders.

PV could be used to great effect in the MSC evaluation

process, with the following advantages:

- It encourages broad participation in the evaluation process.
- MSC stories can be easily shared, opening up new possibilities for wider communication/dissemination.
- Video can be used and understood by anyone, including the non-literate.
- It helps strengthen the participants' control over their stories.
- It has great potential for building broad consensus within a community.

CONTACT DETAILS

Chris Lunch
Insight
3 Maidcroft Road
Oxford
OX4 3EN
UK
Tel: +44 7766 178533 (UK office)
+ 33 468 249627 (France)
Email: clunch@insightshare.org

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FURTHER INFORMATION

To see examples of participatory videos and case studies from around the world, including the DRC MSC films, go to www.insightshare.org

Insight holds regular introductory and in-depth courses in PV facilitation. The next five-day introductory participatory video course takes place in Oxford, UK from 10–14 September 2007.

Insight's recent publication *Insights into Participatory Video: a handbook for the field* includes a CD-ROM with a selection of video films made by local people and a training film and is available to buy from their website (UK£15) or download as a PDF at: www.insightshare.org/training_book.html