

Kenema youth change lives and perceptions with participatory video in Sierra Leone

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Introduction

Imagine a group of illiterate youth in the remote town of Boajibu in Kenema, eastern Sierra Leone, standing on the banks of the Sewa River holding a sophisticated digital video camera, doing a number of shots.

In another part of the district, some youth are conducting interviews with market women, health workers, local council officials and chiefdom authorities on camera. Later they will all meet to carefully select and edit the footage to produce a video telling their own stories about some of the many problems that make life particularly hard for them.

This article describes how the Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) and the Kenema District Youth Coalition (KYDC) are using participatory video (PV) as an advocacy tool and to engage in dialogue with local government, helping to build the youth's capacity to engage in governance processes.



The shaded areas show the districts of the country in which NMJD is working.

Background

Despite making up 55% of the country's almost six million people, the youth of Sierra Leone are the most neglected and socially-excluded (Dizo-Conteh, 2009).¹ The political cliché that youth are the leaders of tomorrow holds little meaning for them.

¹ Sierra Leone's national youth policy describes youth as young people between the ages of 18 and 35 years.



Children wait to cross the Sewa river on a dugout canoe beside the broken ferry in Boajibu.

Box 1: What is PV?

Participatory video is a set of techniques to involve a group or community in shaping and creating their own film. It is a great way of bringing people together to explore issues, voice concerns or simply be creative and tell stories. This process can be empowering, enabling a group or community to act to solve their own problems and also to communicate their needs and ideas... As such, PV can be a highly effective tool to engage and mobilise marginalised people and to help them implement their own forms of sustainable development based on local needs.

Source: *Insights into participatory video: a handbook for the field* (Lunch and Lunch, 2006).

Several factors have contributed to this: poor budgeting and planning, a weak economic base, pervasive poverty, corruption and a lack of good governance. These are issues affecting everyone, but youth have been affected disproportionately. Moreover, youth lack the capacity to mobilise and organise themselves into strong groups that can hold duty bearers accountable.²

In 2007 in Boajibu and Kenema, the youth needed this kind of engagement.³ The ferry that links Boajibu to Gendema had broken down, with a lot of hardship as a result. Children paid two thousand Leones (about US 50 cents) daily to get to school on dug-out canoes.⁴ The price of food had also risen because farmers could not get to local markets. And in Kenema, piles of unattended rubbish were an eyesore and a serious health hazard. The Kenema City Council whose responsibility it is to keep the city clean paid little attention to this unsightly situation.

It is because of problems like this that the youth are concerned. Their stories are rarely reported in the mainstream media. They are desperate to tell their stories to

their young colleagues, elders and policy makers. They want to tell them that if provided with skills and training they can contribute to the development of their communities and demonstrate their capabilities and leadership qualities. They want society to see them from that perspective.

Perceptions of youth in Sierra Leone

During the 11-year civil war, the youth were both victims and perpetrators. Some young men were conscripted against their will. Others saw in the war an opportunity to register, in the most violent manner, their accumulated disillusionment with society. Young girls have been equally socially excluded. Many were forcefully conscripted, sexually abused, or forced into prostitution.

Sierra Leonean society has come to associate youth with violence. And as the saying goes, give a dog a bad name to kill it. In political terms 'youth' is often understood as young, 'idle' men or 'the lost generation', referring predominantly to men who are excluded, unable to provide for a family and/or perceived as a potential security threat.⁵

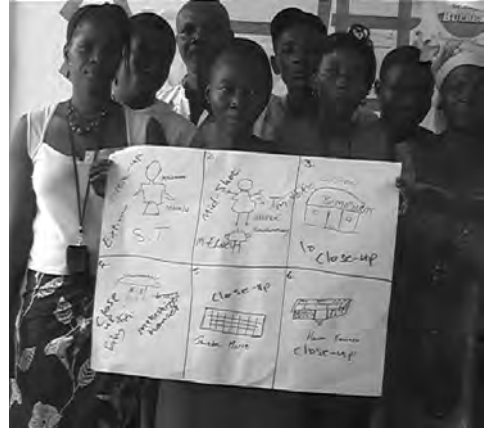
² For a definition of duty bearers, see the glossary, this issue.

³ Boajibu is the headquarters of Simbaru chiefdom in Kenema district. It was once a thriving diamond mining community, but comprehensively destroyed, looted and abandoned during the war. The youth of Boajibu are members of the Kenema District Youth Coalition.

⁴ Per capita income in Sierra Leone is less than US \$1 a day.

⁵ Statement made by the Deputy Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Youth and Sports, Dr Algassimu Jah, at the commissioning of the youth centre in Kenema in July 2010.

Photo: Boajibu PV video screenshot



Video screenshots of youth and community members creating their video storyboard in Boajibu.

Changing these perceptions about youth and helping them to realise their potential is no small challenge. But it is one that the youth of Kenema and Boajibu are now addressing using PV. This is truly revolutionary in Sierra Leone in the sense that youth – as well as those of the communities they are filming with – can now communicate their ideas, concerns and aspirations directly with duty bearers.

NMJD and CAFOD UK

The Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD)'s PV project was launched in November 2007. Funded by Cafod, the project aimed to enhance the skills of youth in the east and southern regions of Sierra Leone and to use PV to engage with duty bearers.⁶ NMJD invited the Kenema District Youth Coalition to work on the project with them. They had been working with the coalition on youth empowerment for many years, and saw PV as another opportunity to continue this partnership. Together with Cafod UK, NMJD contracted Insightshare to work with NMJD staff and youth groups on the PV youth empowerment project (see Box 2).⁷

Box 2: Who is NMJD?

The Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) is a national civil society organisation. It was established in 1988 in Kenema, eastern Sierra Leone. It works towards building a just and self-reliant Sierra Leone, helping to equip the marginalised and exploited with the necessary skills and knowledge to take control of their own lives.

NMJD works in four programming areas: governance and accountability, peace and security, mining and extractives and youth empowerment. Youth empowerment started in 1999 against the background of youth's lack of access to employment, education, training opportunities and a voice in decision-making processes.⁸

NMJD and Insightshare developed a two-year strategic plan and a proposal. The goal was to:

- improve the quality of PV and make it a more valid advocacy tool for the community as a whole;
- encourage broad participation, local ownership and empowerment; and
- enhance the effectiveness of communication with the community at every level from planning to implementation, advocacy to organisational development.

⁶ Cafod is the official Catholic aid agency for England and Wales. It works with partners in more than 40 countries across the world to end poverty and injustice. Cafod's office in Sierra Leone has funded the PV project since 2007. Cafod also appointed its advocacy capacity support officer as the PV focal person.

⁷ Insightshare is a UK/France-based company that focuses on developing PV methodology.

⁸ See: www.nmjd.org

Photo: Foya PV film screenshot



Residents in Foya are advocating for the construction of a new bridge. Community members use a problem tree to analyse problems caused by the dangerous bridge.



Photo: Insightshare

Young participants in Foya Village, Sierra Leone, during a PV training facilitated by Insightshare in November 2007.

Box 3: Kenema District Youth Coalition

The Kenema District Youth Coalition (KDYC) has a membership of 60 groups across the district with a membership ranging between 20–45 members per group. Eight are predominantly female groups. Some members of the coalition are ex-combatants that fought with various factions during the war. The executive committee of the coalition comprises 25 members: 10 are females, 15 are males. Kenema is the operational headquarters of the coalition.

Training of trainers

Insightshare flew to Sierra Leone to meet with NMJD, Cafod, KDYC and other local communities in Kono and Bo districts. At these meetings they identified youth for the training of trainers. Selecting participants for the training of trainers was done in three phases. The first involved identifying organisations and groups to invite to participate. We then distributed questionnaires to youth who wished to participate in the training. Next we invited everyone to an orientation meeting organised by NMJD and Insightshare. This was to introduce the purpose of the PV project and to allow NMJD trainers and Insightshare to get to know those they would be working with directly in the first phase of the project.

The number of youth we could train was limited by the available trainers and video equipment. The final selection of 15 youth was based on information generated

during the previous stages, as well as their time availability, interest, commitment and recommendations from the heads of the groups they were representing.

The 15 youth participated in the PV training in Kenema in December 2007. The initial reaction of youth to PV was awe and disbelief. They had believed that uneducated people like them could never use a video camera and produce a film. But all were curious to learn and to be the first to produce their own films. They were trained in community-level facilitation, the use of video equipment and other participatory tools. The training was divided into two phases of seven days each. Insightshare further trained five youth in basic video editing for five days.

At the end of the first training, the trainees divided into three teams to visit communities in NMJD's operational districts. The purpose was to assess the level of knowledge, skills and confidence that the trainees had acquired in facilitating PV, and introduce PV to those communities. Each team was accompanied by one of the international trainers Paul Higgith (Cafod) and Nick and Chris Lurch (Insightshare). They coached and mentored the process and helped to edit the initial films with the youth groups. The youths then trained other youth and community members in Boajibu, Koidu, Foya and Kenema in the use of PV.

Photos: Kono PV film screenshots



Residents of Kono making a PV film about the negative impacts of mining on their community.

Working with the communities

It was important to create good relationships with local communities first. To ensure this, the groups paid courtesy calls to the community leaders and explained the concept of PV and their mission to them. This helped them to better understand and support the PV project and was critical to its success.

On the third day of the training in Boajibu and Kenema, it was the youths' turn to tell their own stories using the skills they had acquired. In Boajibu, the village town crier went around the village inviting people to go to the *barray* in the morning after prayers.⁹

The youth from the first training facilitated the process of identifying problems facing the community – lack of decent school facilities, domestic violence, poor roads, housing and poverty. Using simple ranking and consensus, the community prioritised its poor road network and housing as issues they wanted to make a film about – and have the relevant authorities address.

Once the problems were prioritised, the youth began working with the community to develop the video storyboard. The groups in Koidu, Kenema and Foya followed the same processes. This involved the full participation of the community.

Box 4: Participatory video editing

Editing PV is an ongoing process. It starts from the moment the first shot is taken. Each filming is followed by a playback session, in which everyone watches and discusses the footage. The playback sessions are also used to review filming plans, draw lessons and further plan.

In our case, this back and forth continued until everyone was satisfied that the right shots had been taken and the message fully captured. Having taken the shots and conducted the interviews, the youth trained in video editing then worked with NMJD's information, communication and technology (ICT) officer to do the final editing. This helped to ensure the film was produced within an appreciable time frame. Where necessary, translations and sub-titles were also added.

They assigned roles and responsibilities such as who would narrate, who would do the filming and in what location. The storyboard also served as a checklist when groups then went to the field to take shots. After each filming session, they converged, mostly in the evening, to watch the footage and ensure that it represented the general consensus (see Box 4).

Telling their stories

It was now time to tell their stories. The Boajibu and Kenema youth wanted someone to **listen** and take **action**. Their stories were about desperate situations. So they wanted to show the films to the authori-

⁹ *Barrays* are places where community meetings and other events are held. They are also used for local court sittings.



Photo: Insightshare

Community screening of PV in the paramount chief's compound in Boajibu, Sierra Leone, in November 2007.

ties concerned. They wanted to show the film about the ferry to the Sierra Leone Roads Authority (SLRA).¹⁰ The other, about the rubbish situation, they wanted to show to the mayor of Kenema city and his councillors. But would these authorities be persuaded to attend a screening?

In Boajibu the youth first met with the paramount chief to discuss their PV work and gained her support and approval.¹¹ Hundreds of residents and chiefs were then invited to watch the public screening at her home. Gaining the chief's support was crucial. 'I believe there are people out there who are willing to help, but they have never heard about a place called Boajibu,' she said. The chief urged the youth to show the film to the SLRA in Kenema and the reaction of SLRA was immediate. They repaired the ferry and got it working.



Photo: Shirley Sia Simbo, NWDJ

Rubbish collection site at Fornikoh in Kenema, Sierra Leone, constructed by the Kenema City Council.

In Kenema, the youth first met with the mayor and some councillors to assure them of their genuine desire to work with the council in addressing problems such as the rubbish which affected the city. This initial meeting set the tone of subsequent meetings in which other actors in the municipality attended.

¹⁰ The Sierra Leone Roads Authority is responsible for the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of roads and ferries across the country. They can outsource where the technical expertise is not available.

¹¹ Paramount chiefs are traditional rulers that are elected to rule over chiefdoms. They are not elected by universal suffrage, but by Tribal Authorities (TA) who represent tax payers in the chiefdom. To be elected paramount chief, one must belong to a ruling house. Once elected, they rule for life. Chiefdoms are political units in the governance of the State. There are 149 chiefdoms in Sierra Leone.

Photos: Boajibu PV film screenshots



Participants mapping the locations for filming in Boajibu.



A youth videos participants while they create their video storyboard in Boajibu.

The youth screened the film about the piles of rubbish to the mayor, councillors and other council staff. While the screening initially generated heated discussions as to who was to blame, this soon gave way to constructive dialogue, in which representatives of the Sierra Leone police, youth-serving NGOs, Ministry of Youth Employment and Sports, Commercial Bike Riders Association and a trading association participated. A series of meetings then followed, between the council, youth and other concerned citizens and institutions.

The Kenema youth played an important part in raising awareness about waste management and the need for residents to collaborate with the council in this. The council has now constructed permanent garbage sites all over the city as a long-term measure to keep the city clean at all times.

Impacts

The inclusion of youths into decision-making processes and other aspects of governance show that young people are now not only taken seriously, but can also influence decisions on issues that affect them and their communities.

Councillor Amidu Bah, aged 34,
Chairman, Education and Sports
Committee, Kenema City Council.

These films have helped to improve relationships and change people's perceptions about youth in a relatively short time. Some youths have since been elected to decision-making positions in local governance. Nine youth were elected councillors in the district and municipal council elections of 2007. Three are heading standing committees. The health and sanitation, youth and sports committees of both Kenema city and Kenema district councils are now chaired by youth. More communities have also elected youth as section chiefs and village headmen.¹²

This cannot be attributed exclusively to their participation in the PV project but the project probably helped make it possible. These communities now have greater trust and confidence in the youth, who have demonstrated leadership qualities and skills and have, in turn, become duty bearers for their communities.

Reflections on the process

Because of our involvement in decision-making processes in recent times, youth are experiencing significant development in different areas in Kenema district. For some of us that have been elected to the local councils, younger youth are today looking at us as role models.

Councillor Alicious Vibbie, aged 30,

¹² Section chiefs and headmen are appointed by paramount chiefs to preside over sections and villages.



Photo: NMJD

NMJD animators during PV training at the pastoral centre in Kenema, Sierra Leone, December 2008.

Chairman, Transport and Communication Committee, Kenema City Council.

The relationship between youth and state functionaries in Sierra Leone is now gradually changing. The impact of the PV project in Boajibu and Kenema indicates that with regular engagement and constructive dialogue, youth and their leaders can form strong partnerships that are helping to anchor meaningful development in their communities.

Setting up a meeting with members of the political class in Sierra Leone is a difficult task. Suspicion always exists between civil society organisations and State functionaries. The task is still harder when it involves youth. But community leaders were impressed with how the youth of Boajibu and Kenema were engaging with their communities using PV. They saw them as an emerging cadre of youth who had both earned and deserved their support. This contributed to the willingness of the chiefs in Boajibu to support them, which also influenced officials of

the SLRA in Kenema to watch the films that the youth themselves had produced. This was a key step in engaging with the SLRA and advocating for the ferry repairs.

PV is a catalyst for us youth in Kenema to draw attention to our unfortunate situations. It is evidential. It helps us to think critically and dialogue creatively. But we the female youth are still not using PV effectively to highlight our peculiarities.

Victoria Vandy Bernard, aged 25, Vice Chairperson, Kenema District Youth Coalition.

Youth are now being entrusted with leadership positions in local councils and communities. But the focus seems to be more on young boys, leaving out young girls. The nine youths that were elected to councils in 2007 are all males. Either the girls lack the confidence to compete with their male counterparts, or there are still cultural barriers that prevent young girls from holding governance positions.

Further, youth are in a transitional phase of their lives. This means there should be ongoing PV training to replace those moving out of the project, to ensure that the skills and capacity-building needed to continue using PV remain within the youth groups involved. To do this, further funding is needed to support the project. Also, we have found that the most appropriate cameras for PV are those that use tapes. But with the rapid advancement in technology, these cameras are fast disappearing from the market and being replaced by those that use memory cards. These are currently too sophisticated for the participating communities use.

Ways forward

NMJD has since facilitated and supported other communities, including youth groups such as the Bike Riders Association and the Affected Property Owners Association in Kono district.¹³ ¹⁴ The Foya Youth Association in Bo district has also established local PV groups. These groups were trained, supported and PV equipment made available to them by NMJD. To ensure that they have access to the equipment, NMJD and the youth have drawn up checklists to ensure the equipment is used for constructive PV e.g. the purpose of the film, who will participate in the process, who are the target audiences and why and how will it be used.

NMJD has also trained all its staff in PV, who work directly with these communities. With an understanding of PV, they will find it easier to provide supportive supervision to the local PV groups.

Also, although the youth of Sierra Leone have achieved much in changing perceptions and increasing their participation in governance, they still have a long way to go. They will need to work together to make their dreams of engaging in governance a reality. This involves

scaling up PV activities by increasing the number of youth groups involved in PV, as well as the number of activities that these groups undertake and the diversity and relevance of issues they engage in. Once the use of PV has been strengthened in the project communities, NMJD plans to work with other CSOs outside the project area to set up PV groups there. And one way to start the ball rolling in this direction will be to hold a mini film festival for all youth groups presently using PV in their work.

Conclusion

PV allows young people's voice to be heard. Now that we have started realising how important PV is, we will try to increase our use of it in our activities, particularly in knowledge-sharing and advocacy.

Emmanuel Farma, aged 33 years,
Chairman, Kenema District Youth
Coalition.

PV may be a relatively new tool in development communication in Sierra Leone, but it has proven to be a powerful one that can compel leaders to listen and act. Youth are using PV to advocate for change. They believe, and rightly so, that pictures tell very powerful stories, and are accessible to the literate and illiterate alike. PV is helping to restore their lost voices and provide them with more confidence so that they can continue to engage in governance processes in the future.

PV is not just for youth. It is for everyone who has a story to tell. It can be used in research, project planning and implementation, monitoring and evaluation. We believe that PV can help to bring about the change that youth are yearning for. That someone, somewhere is waiting to listen to them – and that with PV, they can start to make their dreams a reality.

¹³ Commercial bike riders in Kenema; some of them are ex-combatants. The association is a member of the KDYC.

¹⁴ Communities affected by Kimberlite diamond mining in Kono district, eastern Sierra Leone.

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