10

Communities meet policy-makers through video-supported analysis: rural energy issues in Malawi

Su Braden and Valerie Nelson

- ### Introduction

In March 1997, villagers contributed to the Malawi Government policy on rural energy and natural resource management by presenting their video-based research. This article discusses some of the steps in a progressive sequence of reflection involving different participants and audiences over a 14 month period.

The original research task had been written behind the desks of various international and Malawi Government partners. Their interests had led to a narrow research question that seemed to favour external technological solutions, such as energy-saving stoves. However, the research process showed that this would not sufficiently address the complexity of rural contexts and perceptions surrounding the use and conservation of natural resources. More importantly, to understand rural energy from the perspective of villagers and for solutions to be implemented locally, a more open approach was needed that would enable communities to understand and approve of the policies resulting from the research. Developing a coalition between communities and policy-makers would make it more likely for rural people's perspectives to inform or influence the policies. Therefore we[1] chose a

participatory approach, using video as a tool with communities to research, reflect and analyse their own problems, and to represent themselves directly with policy-makers.

This action-research approach is an example for extending participation from the village level to national policy-making processes. This article describes the steps we took.

- ### Broadening the research question

Based on a literature review by one of the authors, we renegotiated the original research question from the specific issue of adopting fuel-efficient stoves to the more integrated question of how villagers access, use and conserve natural resources. Changing the research question to incorporate villagers' realities had crucial implications for the research methodology, how analysis was structured in that process, and presentation of the findings. If village research partnerships were to be honoured throughout:

- the research team would need to reflect the breadth of village experience;
- the process would need to include learning about facilitating participatory research and representation: village learning would need facilitation so that village participants could make new connections, share and analyse existing knowledge, and agree and make representations of their ideas and knowledge; and,
- the villagers' research and findings would need to be represented in the final reporting process, making inevitable the use of an appropriate non-written reporting medium.

---

[1] The research team included researchers from the Ministry of Energy and Mining, the Ministry of Information and the Department of Forestry, local NGOs, and two expatriate consultants (the authors). This article is based on 'Communities meet Policy-makers: from institutional research agendas to community research and representation' by Su Braden and Valerie Nelson.

• An evolving approach

The use of video in the research evolved slowly. The first step was a PRA training, followed by three weeks of PRA fieldwork in the first village, Pansuwo (Nsanje district). Several months later, a video training followed. Subsequent fieldwork took place in the two other villages, Chitimbe (Thyolo district) and, then, Chiling'oma (Rumphi District) – again after several months. The final phase in which the villagers took their findings in the form of video tapes to a meeting of Government policy makers, donors and NGOs, took place in August 1998 - 14 months after the first steps had been taken. Their tapes were accompanied by a technical report which includes transcripts of the tapes.

• Learning en route

The groups involved in the field work represented three main language groups and three broad cultural contexts: the villages, Malawian researchers, and expatriate consultants, not to mention differences within each of these groups. During the first steps of the work, we noticed some of the problems of using PRA in cultural contexts where learning is traditionally perceived as 'absorbing and repeating' (James 1996). This contrasts with PRA-based learning that does not seek repetition, but instead aims for reflection and innovation. Applying PRA methods in villages is frequently understood to form the beginning and end of the participatory approach. As PRA training often emphasises methods rather than the facilitation of sequences of learning and the representation of this learning, participation is diluted. The maps, rankings and other diagrams can mask the importance of group ownership and analysis of the findings - and can do damage by replacing ordinary dialogue, exchange and conversation. While the outcomes may produce information for written reports, they often lack a community voice and community understanding of the implications of the work in which they think they have 'participated'.

In the first village, Pansuwo, the Malawian researchers applied the full menu of PRA methods with painstaking rigour. How or whether these processes led the villagers to communicate any new understanding to each other, or to those beyond the village who might help or advise them in the future, is unclear. Nevertheless, the findings indicated considerable local knowledge about the causes of environmental degradation and possible solutions, not least of which was overcoming poverty.

The findings emphasised the need to consider cultural issues in researching rural contexts, and therefore, the limitations of a mechanical application of PRA methods. When PRA methods are used automatically, information about the causes and results of poverty may be elicited. But without facilitation of discussion and analysis by the 'participating' community, the meaning of this information and the kinds of actions that the different groups within a village might be able to take - or the help and advice they might be able to seek from outside - will be omitted. The villagers themselves are left with very little benefit.

As we gained confidence and saw problems, we adjusted our work in the next two villages. We moved from a fairly mechanical and extractive application of PRA methods in Pansuwo, to a more relaxed and creative approach using video and drama in Chitimbe, to a more thorough integration of villager learning and analysis at their own pace in Chiling'oma.

• Integrating video

After the PRA work in Pansuwo, we looked at how some of the tools and processes of PRA can be used with video to enable local groups to reflect and analyse their findings and to take over the processes of research (Braden 1998).

During the video training, the research team discussed, for example, how villagers could be enabled to distinguish problems that are due to external factors, from those that are affected by the part their own culture plays in creating a stalemate in resolving issues. For example, power relations within a village affect decision-making on land allocation and tenure. Such learning and debate can enable villagers to draw up action plans which help them decide the main issues they wish to resolve, the causes of these problems and their possible solutions (see Table 1). Video, used to record,

2

review and analyse these discussions encourages thinking about communication: what needs to be communicated better between different groups within the village and what needs to be communicated beyond the village. In this way the village Action Plan leads into a village Communication Plan on which development activities rest.

By the end of the three-day video training, in which these and other aspects of participatory video-making and use were discussed, the research team revised the research objectives to include an aspect that was central to our analytical process: *'to facilitate villagers to communicate the findings of their research and their learning directly to policy-makers through the presentation of their video reports at the final research review workshop'*.

The additional tool of video produced more material and increased the workload for the research team. Logging (the transcription, translation and noting of shots and sequences of the tapes) was undertaken in the evenings by team members. The recordings of villagers' activities and discussions were edited roughly with the village editorial groups - portions that they chose to remove were taken out, debates were edited and organised to give emphasis to appropriate links. The rough edits were shown back and cross-checked with the participants

in the villages. The village editorial groups spent evenings and several days reviewing tapes, listing the issues which had arisen and planning feed back sessions with other village participants.

The research team learnt by experience that too many new PRA methods introduced often confused village participants. Whereas using the methods selectively and sparingly and sequencing them carefully, with on-going reviewing of the recordings, enabled villagers to participate more fully in developing their own findings (see Box 1).

This process of research, learning, reviewing, and sharing information between the village participants, and their organisation of their own conclusions and plan, was all recorded and formed part of the final video production which the villagers showed to policy-makers in the capital Lilongwe. In each village the editorial groups acted as presenters on camera, introducing the processes as they occurred.

The rough edited versions of these tapes were put together by the research team using an edit suite in the Forestry Department in Lilongwe, and team members took the final versions back to the villages for checking during the time between the field-work and the presentations to policy-makers.

Table 1. An example of problems, causes, solutions, and communication required from Chiling'oma village

Problem	Causes	Solutions	Communication
Shortage of farming land	overpopulation	family planning and prevention of in-migration	villagers, headmen/chief
	increased number of estates	more controlled allocation of land to estates, education on problems of estates	villagers headmen/chief Ministry of Lands and Valuation
	allocating land carelessly	chief should not allocate land carelessly	villagers headmen/chief
	loss of land due to flooding	tree planting in catchment areas and along streams: making ridges across the slope: learning good agricultural methods	villagers, headmen/chief, Forestry, Rural Foundation for Afforestation (RUFA) farmers, Ministry of Agriculture, RUFA, World Vision villagers, headmen and chief, Ministry of Agriculture, ACTIONAID

_____

BOX 1.
A SEQUENCE OF LEARNING

In Chiling'oma, the issues of land shortages, levels of soil fertility and land degradation had been discussed as a result of village maps and matrices. The researchers suggested that the editorial team use the camera to record a transect walk along the river which was the cause of problems in recent years. The editorial group recorded on video their descriptions of various land use zones and the effects of deforestation on the flow of the river.

After reviewing the tapes with the researchers, the editorial group called a village meeting and mapped out on the ground the course of the river from the tea estates in the hills, down to the village. They divided this map according the environmental zones they had identified during the transect walk.

They then fed back what they had learnt about land degradation in an amusing drama which they had rehearsed that morning. Standing on the map with hoes in their hands, per zone, pairs of 'farmers' complained about the problems they found on their land, relating how problems were linked between zones. The drama ended with howls of laughter after release of a well-recognised truth about local bribery of chiefs for land rights, which `escaped' in dramatic form.

After this lively session, the editorial group unfurled a large sheet on which they had drawn a summary of problems and causes of land degradation, and explained the same information but now in a more serious way. The editorial team asked their fellow villagers to help find solutions to these problems. They asked: Which problems can we solve ourselves? Which require outside help or advice? And to whom do we need to communicate this?

- **Initial outcomes**

The research team made a comparative analysis of the findings from the three communities to inform and contribute to the policy-making process and to draw out the implications of the villagers' research for the key organisations and individuals involved (e.g. Forestry Department, Ministry of Energy and Mining, NGOs). The research confirmed that rural energy should not tackled through technological solutions that are isolated from local contexts and locally perceived needs, of which poverty, survival and environmental degradation were key in all three case studies.

The changes in the methodology used in the two later fieldwork sites in the villages of Chitimbe and Chiling'oma meant that the villagers were able to carry out their own research and analysis of their problems, and to better understand which problems are internally and externally determined. The Pansuwo information was produced by villagers in a problem-ranking exercise. In Chitimbe and Chiling'oma villages the information was produced by villagers in developing community 'Communication Plans'. These Communication Plans helped villagers to understand what needed to be communicated to different groups and authorities within the village, and to authorities outside the village (i.e. policy makers, national authorities, NGOs) for change to occur.

In the first round of analysis, this column was just labelled `authorities beyond the village'. In the second round of analysis, the villagers expanded it to analyse who was responsible and who would need to be addressed. For example, they were able to understand and separate the different responsibilities of the Forestry department and the Ministry of Energy and Mining. Some aspects were also moved back to the column of what they needed to communicate to each other.

- **Finally … villagers meet policy-makers**

In March 1998, villagers travelled from Chitimbe and Chiling'oma[2] to Lilongwe. The villagers from Chiling'oma arrived first and they showed their video to the Director of Forestry. This meeting provided an important opportunity for the village representatives to communicate the findings of their research and receive a direct response from policy makers. A few days later, the villager representatives from Chitimbe arrived. When the two groups of villagers met they presented their videos to each other and shared their experiences.

_____

[2] Weather problems prevented villagers from Pansuwo attending the Lilongwe meeting.

_____

4

The final workshop represented a key stage of the community learning and communication process, with villagers presenting their research findings through the village videos[3] to a range of representatives from different government Ministries, NGOs (Malawian and international) and donor agencies. Handouts were provided to all participants which highlighted the implications of the research for different government departments and NGOs.

The villagers were proud to be involved in a national policy-making process, to be listened to by senior staff in government and to be given an immediate and direct response. One Chiling'oma villager said *"we feel like MPs representing our villages"*. The analysis process had helped villagers to review critically their decisions about whom needed to be addressed about which issue and how their presentations were received and understood by policy makers, NGOs and donors.

During the workshop specific issues raised in the village videos were discussed by the participants, for example forestry corruption and control of trees on customary land. In the Chitimbe village, villagers complained that the government had taken away ownership and control of these trees, leading to increased degradation, and were keen that powers be restored to customary authorities. A senior Forestry Department official explained that recent changes in Forest Policy and legislation in Malawi were already addressing these issues, but difficulties in interpreting and implementing the new policies are being encountered and no information has yet reached the village level. The villagers were able to gain new information about government policy, but at the same time the forestry staff present may have recognised the need for greater communication and dialogue with communities. This type of analysis was possible because of the face-to-face encounter between representatives of all the players, and a carefully considered representation of their issues through the villagers' videos.

---

[3] The Chiling'oma video is entitled " Kulila Kwa Chiling'oma" which means "Chiling'oma Village Cries" and the Chitimbe video is called "Mudzi Wa Chitimbe" which is translated as "Chitimbe Village Speaks". Copyright belongs to the villagers.

In small groups, workshop participants responded in the form of specific suggestions to address village needs, and broad changes in approach, such as:

- the need for an integrated and holistic approach to rural problems and development;
- the need to establish lines of communication between village groups, local government and NGOs, with more direct representation; and,
- the need to support and strengthen existing village committees on health, education, agriculture (it was noted that this might require resource input in training, proposal writing, management, and transport to enable villagers to attend meetings beyond the village).

This list was a direct outcome of extending participation in analysis about local issues beyond the village boundaries.

• Conclusions

Influencing policy through layered analysis

It is still too early to know if the research process affected policy. But early indications include an agreement reached by workshop participants on the need for an integrated and non-sectoral approach to resolving rural development needs. This agreement was only possible through the sequential process of 'layered' participation, involving different groups at different moments in specific ways.

Participation by the Ministry of Energy and Mining indicated that the findings are more likely to inform new rural energy policies and programmes. The Forestry Department is taking forward the idea of participatory policy-making at different levels, for example, by using the village videos in extension training. Meanwhile, the international NGO, ACTIONAID are planning to support further village planning processes in Chiling'oma and Chitimbe. While not everyone was involved all the time, people and groups were engaged enough in the analysis or found enough in the villagers' analysis, to be motivated to act.

Sustained support

Villager representations to policy-makers should be an on-going process of communication, rather than a discrete event - indicating the importance of a strategy of progressive learning about analysis and using the outputs of analysis optimally. For example, we found that villagers initially needed to be accompanied in feeding back the outcomes of this kind of representational workshop to the village. But by the time the Lilongwe workshop took place, they had grasped the material and were able to explain the research process and findings clearly to others. To enable analysis that emerges from local processes to reach policy makers requires other practical support, such as training is in proposal writing and transport for villagers to attend meetings elsewhere.

We faced practical constraints that will limit ongoing impact. Our work was not linked directly to an ongoing development initiative, with no funds for follow-up. The wide organisational base, while good for influencing a broad base, does, however, means that there is no team that can continue facilitating village level analysis. This highlights the importance of a strategy of skill-building based on continuity of support.

Wider application?

A potential use of this approach is in attempts made to "combine institutional and people participation" (Warner 1997), where the focus is on building consensus and preventing conflict between stakeholders and where certain groups (such as poor rural communities) are marginalised from the negotiating process. Clearly strong analysis that can bridge different perspectives is critical in such situations.

Our approach, which uses video as a key method to facilitate participation, provides a non-literacy biased example for strengthening community involvement in policy-making and environmental management. Village use of video as a mediation tool (Braden 1998) can help to analyse sensitive issues, such as land allocation and tenure. Although, the approach was used only on a micro-scale within this project, the process if continued can be cumulative, with villagers who have participated in the process, taking the process to other neighbouring communities. However, analysis that spreads and 'scales up' would clearly need to be accompanied by other methods and strategies in which video could still play an interesting catalytic and provocative role.

- **Su Braden,** Barefoot Training and Production and the Agricultural Extension and Rural Development Department (AERDD), The University of Reading, 3 Earley Gate, Whiteknights Road, PO Box 238, Reading RG6 6AL, UK. Email: s.e.braden@reading.ac.uk and **Valerie Nelson**, Social Sciences Department, Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, Central Avenue, Chatham Maritime, Kent ME4 4TB, UK.

REFERENCES

Braden S with Than Thi Thien Huong (1998) "Video for Development. A casebook from Vietnam" Oxfam Publications, Oxford, UK.

James R W (1996) "Traditional Sequenced Training Model: A procedure for cross-cultural training". Training Management and Development Methods. Vol 10\4 Aug.

Warner M (1997) "Consensus Participation: an example for protected areas planning" . Public Administration and Development, Vol 17, 413-432.

6