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Giving people a voice rather than a message

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• Introduction

Video and TV will soon reach the remotest villages. It is easy to see how it can spread ideas from the dominating centres of the world, but can it also be used the other way around? Consider the following example of when world systems suddenly become vulnerable to authoritative arguments made by local people, who have never before been asked for their opinion on matters of policy and planning.

The scene is a local primary school crowded with serious-looking Maasai men. A traditional meeting, an Enkgwana, has been organised by the local leaders to voice people's concerns over a management plan for the Ngorogoro conservation area. S. holds the stick to which the microphone is attached and looks straight into the lens with wide-open eyes. He is seizing an opportunity to address that other world directly. He knows he will be translated and that he will be seen saying this:

'One thing amazes me. It seems to me the whole world is lacking sense and there's no-one to point it out. Just look around - the parts of the world left with wildlife have pastoral people. Why do the 'experts' and the 'guardians of the wild' come here after having failed to conserve trees and wildlife in their own places of origin? They come here to support themselves.

'Which world in the whole universe was created without trees or wild animals? Why should we, who have always had everything, be shown how to conserve? There is no need to pay government employees to protect this land. It is the residents themselves who are

most capable. All this money could have been used to help the rest of the world.

'The world should know that we are not people who eat the soil until it is finished. The world should learn from us how we Maasai manage our lands'.

Six months later, a threatened international conservation establishment is still struggling to explain away these allegations. The local authorities have prohibited the Maasai from using video in the conservation area. The Ministry has withdrawn approval of the management plan. Letters are written to FAO in Rome to make them stop the distribution of the video. But it is the Maasai participants in these meetings who own it and they do with it as they wish. They intend to show it to the president who is planning to visit the area.

Who is involving who in whose projects?

The dominant approach to video in development has been as a development mass-media. Video has been used mainly for educating people in the modernisation process, for disseminating messages that are formulated by experts and designed by professional producers. During the same period of time, but on a much smaller scale, video has also been used in a totally different way: for giving people a voice rather than a message.

Communities have made their own video to help themselves and their neighbours to understand and build self-determination. Projects have tried to use video to get into a communications loop with local people. The case narrated above is an example from the Forest, Trees and People Programme.

Integrated rural development

The Rural Integrated Project Support (RIPS) is a Finnish initiative for integrated rural development in Tanzania. When the RIPS programme was reviewed during 1993-4, the notion had been established, at least at a rhetorical level, that rural development should build on local resources and grow from the bottom up, rather than from state-led implementation of centralised plans. Instead of providing packaged knowledge and ready-made solutions for passive target groups, extension agents were required to facilitate local processes of learning between different stakeholders. Projects were seen as negotiated undertakings based on mutual learning followed by collaborative action for change.

Methods for participatory learning, such as PRA, that draw on visualisation, dialogue and group dynamics, were employed. But the initiative to change still came from above. RIPS was a contradiction: a donor-led programme that tried to impose a shift from a top-down interventionist approach to a learning process approach. It worked against the entrenched tradition in which development projects belong to systems of institutionalised patronage. But when working groups, trained in PRA, started to prepare new projects, coalitions began to emerge between consultants, government officers, field staff and rural people which promised more space for local initiatives.

Video was introduced to such working groups when we found that we were unable to communicate the outcomes of participatory, experiential learning. Face-to-face communication draws on vast resources of tacit knowledge, metaphors, performative and narrative forms that cannot be captured in written reports and plans. The officers' reports didn't capture the knowledge that was produced in the field. The contrast and dialogue between different perceptions didn't come through. We couldn't share the experiences that lead to learning, either with the neighbouring village or with the ministry or donor staff in the capitals.

The coastal livelihoods project became a test of how to use video. The working group

arranged a week-long workshop in Sudi village with invited fishermen from the entire coast, from Kilwa to Mtwara. In the past we had tried to keep cameras in the background. If we were recording PRA work on video, we would ask people to try not to take any notice of the camcorder. In the Sudi workshop, we put the camcorder and a microphone with a long extension cable in the centre. We banned notebooks and said that we should only do things that could be communicated on video.

Everything that was recorded in the day was played back to the whole Sudi village community in the evening. It didn't take long for the workshop participants to discover how they could control the process and after two days they already had a clear idea of what could be communicated on video. The roles of the villagers and 'outsiders' changed dramatically compared to similar exercises that had been documented on paper.

After the Sudi workshop, six of the participants took part in editing and toured with the video to forty villages along the coast. They kept on recording additional material, that, thanks to the digital technology, could subsequently be incorporated in the video. They went to Dar Es Salaam, showed what the people were saying to several ministers, and recorded their comments for incorporation in the video that was, again, played back in the villages.

The project became a group narrative, and telling the story became the very action that led to change. At one point in the process, fishermen, village women and officers gathered around the editing computer to build a web of images and narratives. Thus, very local and private experiences were being connected to national and official issues in a way that we had never experienced before. An interactive communication loop was established between micro and macro levels. A connection between the agency of local individuals and the anonymous structural forces behind development became clearer.

Video and conflict: the ability to reconstruct someone else's reality

In the beginning we thought, naively, that video would help to build consensus on issues. Not so. It turned out that participatory video reveals conflict like no other medium. It does so by contrasting local perceptions with 'official truth'.

There is a consistent pattern in our experiences. Local people first of all use the opportunity to make themselves heard in order to raise bitter complaints about government institutions and projects. In Tanzania they often do so in a very outspoken manner, seemingly without fear for the consequences. In some cases, government officials and donor representatives have received such complaints with an open and constructive attitude that has led to mutual learning and conflict resolution. In other cases, authorities have denied that there is conflict and have questioned the motives behind recording such complaints.

In Ngorogoro, video led to a crisis in the relationship between local people and government authorities and donors. A draft management plan had been prepared for the area by the conservation area authority (NCAA). Planners reported that the Maasai had participated in the planning and agreed to the plan. A video of six Maasai traditional meetings in which the draft plan was discussed told a different story. The Maasai did not understand the document. Although they were consulted, they did not feel they were given a fair chance to contribute. They claimed their views were severely misrepresented in the plan. Some fear that the plan secretly aims to force them to leave the highlands, just as they were once evicted from the Serengeti.

The video of the six community meetings was used to communicate a reply to the NCAA. A group of elders, one from each meeting, was to deliver the tape to the NCAA board. But neither the NCAA nor IUCN, who acted as consultant in the planning, could accept the allegations raised in the video. They denied the authenticity of the tape, as if the participants had been actors. They tried to convince FTFPP not to distribute it and

prohibited the Maasai from video recording meetings in future.

Some lessons for video-makers stand out for reflection

When people express themselves in their own language through their customary institutions, they easily come to produce representations of reality that are incompatible with assumptions on which development projects build their legitimacy. The Ngorogoro video mercilessly revealed that the management plan was built on a lie about people's participation. The planners had no way of handling this insight with their positivist professionalism and instrumentalist toolkit. Therefore they reacted by discrediting the video as being 'wrong', 'biased', 'unbalanced' and not 'true' (in contrast to their own representation, the plan, understood to be 'objective' and 'impartial'). The plan was ready, their job done. The communication problem had been reduced to the pedagogical problem of how best to get the message across to the other parties.

But the Maasai used the video for a different purpose. In the videotaped meetings, they were constantly pulling the planners into the picture as stakeholders, asking questions about which values and interests guided them. They saw the planning process as a power struggle and were ready to turn every exercise of fact finding or extension into a negotiation process.

The polarisation of the conflict marginalised us, the providers of the video facilities. We felt responsibility for continuing the process, but we couldn't find a way. The residents were prohibited not only from showing the video, but also from continuing to record. We offered to support NCAA to produce their own video in the Maa language, through which they could explain their arguments, but they were not interested. They thought our real interest was to discredit them. Instead of seeing the video as an opportunity for dialogue with residents, they sought to minimise the damage done to their reputation.

Video as process

Sikai Ole Sereb, a traditional Maasai leader, says in the Ngorogoro video:

'All of us are blind. The only people who now have open eyes are you sons who went to school. When some of us look at this document, it's like a nightmare. I participated in this since we took part in NCAA meetings. They took our voices, our words and our pictures. We are given this document but we can't tell what is in it. The only thing I can understand is my own photograph. Since we are illiterate we cannot see any tricks that might be there.'

The Ngorogoro case illustrates how project coalitions can use video to get involved in local processes of negotiation and extend that process over space and time. Video allows for different actors to negotiate issues in a much more equal way than through written language. The outcomes can be verified by all stakeholders and communicated even to illiterate people. As digital technology simplifies production and reduces costs, new ways of replacing printed media with video throughout the projects cycle can be conceived. By shifting the focus from the product to the process - from the film to the making of it - we can avoid slipping into sending messages and give people a voice.

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NOTE

This is an abridged version of a paper that was originally presented at a workshop entitled 'Engaging Participation: The Use of Video as a Tool in Rural Development', in Bagamoyo, Tanzania in May 1996.