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Video: a tool for participation**Megan Lloyd Laney**

- **Community video in Zimbabwe**

In Zimbabwe, a community of workers calling themselves *Masimanyane* (Ndebele for 'Let us Unite') are using video to break out of their cycle of despondency and hopelessness. The workers are employed by poor, small-scale farmers in one of the poorest parts of Matabeleland where few development organisations are active. The farmers have been given basic video training and the necessary equipment by FARMESA, a new, regional FAO programme which dedicates itself to finding more participative ways of working with poor farmers.

Video has been introduced by FARMESA to facilitate exchange between farmers. This enables them to put more pressure on researchers and policy makers. It provides them with a tool to make themselves heard by the authorities.

At the beginning, the community could find nothing positive to say about itself or its location. However, a small group of six representatives have unearthed a list of hopeful and innovative activities which are alive on their own doorsteps. The group have tried to discover what the community considers to be its strengths and weaknesses. Armed with the means to communicate messages to the outside world, the group have not stopped interviewing, filming, and questioning their own community since the initial training workshop was held one month ago.

FARMESA is working alongside the members to help them identify the story they want to tell and to whom. Through workshops and practical training, FARMESA hopes to

construct a participative monitoring system in which the community uses video to detect ways in which the video process is changing their lives.

Members of the community are currently writing scripts for dramas. These allow them to explore sensitive issues which they could never previously discuss. By taping these dramas they hope to stimulate discussions wider in the community.

Examples abound of video projects in which the control is with those who own and manage the equipment. In most cases the controllers are film producers, sometimes development specialists but rarely the community themselves. The FARMESA project is a strategic effort to explore the potential of this one medium for engaging participation and ensuring that 'control' is exerted within the community.

The project is being chronicled on video and through the written word, using interviews with project staff and those with whom they work. This ensures that whatever the effectiveness of this approach, it can be shared with other practitioners.

Participative video can have advantages over PRA because it is comprised of both 'process' and 'output' components. In PRA, the community can be left with little to show for their participation in the visualisation exercises. They should, of course, be given copies of the diagrams they have constructed, but this does not always happen. But after the process of video production, the community has a tangible product - the video. This reminds them that they are articulate and persuasive people with a case to make to the outside world.

The community can also use the video independently of the FARMESA project. They can use the video to convince other intermediaries that they understand their problems and can identify what assistance they might need from other service providers. Participative video also presents the opportunity to have fun: it encourages bonding across community groups which we hope will outlast the project itself.

- **Steps taken**

The community chose six people to be trained in all aspects of video production: four men and two women. To provide the community with a framework of progress, FARMESA identified the project steps to be followed.

Step One: Facilitated discussions were used to find out what kind of story the community wanted to tell, and who they want to reach. Perhaps they want to reach out to other communities similar to themselves and tell them about their work, or they may want to approach legislators about issues concerning them, such as land rights. It is up to the community themselves to decide. Several meetings are required to build consensus on the video topics.

Step Two: The community was given a one week training in basic video camera work, including picture composition, lighting and sound. They were also given the chance to see the editing process.

Step Three: The community begins recording the images and sound. We found that it was helpful to play back the videos that had been made to the community and outside advisors at regular intervals. This promoted discussion and ensured progressive learning in the technical aspects of filming. It also enabled the group to identify people with particularly good skills needed for managing sound production (to listen; to keep background noise to a minimum; turning on the microphone) and controlling the camera (an eye for an interesting frame; steady hand), who could then be used as resource people for the wider group. Filming lasted about 3 weeks in each community.

Step Four: The captured images are edited. This was done by a few community representatives, together with a professional video editor. This took about one week.

Step Five: Screening and distribution. The community stated that they wanted the video to be shown to donors because they believed that the donors would respect the fact 'that the community can do something'. Thus, along with the community itself, donors are to be a key audience of the finished product.

- **Lessons learned**

Hours of footage have been shot since the first training workshops, two months ago. FARMESA project staff are currently reviewing with the community what they have produced to date, and what product they think they can make out of it. A promise has already been made for the final video to be broadcast nationally on television by a cameraman who has taken a personal interest in participating in the project. Other NGOs are also expressing interest in the methodology. Plans have been made for FARMESA to write up the process in a practical handbook for use by all of the southern African countries participating in the regional programme.

Practical problems have not been absent: the most talented camera person of the group, who received extra training in the hope that his skills could be used by the project and by other NGOs, has taken casual work on a construction site because he needs the cash. This brings close to home the reality of development work: it may be a full time job for the project practitioners involved, but the people who are participating in the projects have also to make a living of their own, outside of the project, if they are to survive.

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