

Participatory Video as a documentation tool

Chris Lunch

Local initiatives are often documented and disseminated by outsiders, who make their own interpretations in the process, and use them for their own ends. Or, they are not documented at all. Participatory Video provides an opportunity for rural people to document their own experiences and knowledge and to express their wants and hopes from their own viewpoints. Insight, an NGO based in Europe, was set up in an attempt to enable communities and groups around the world to carry out their own form of sustainable development based on local needs. Insight tries to do something which is very straightforward and very obvious – placing video cameras into the hands of those who know best. It doesn't matter if they are literate or illiterate, if they are rich or poor, male or female, old or young – the visual method allows everyone to record and tell their story, and to get their voice heard. If a picture speaks a thousand words, then a video must speak a million!

All people in a community can use video to document and communicate their experiences and perspectives. Participatory video is a potentially strong addition to existing farmer-to-farmer and community-to-community mechanisms for exchanging information, such as story-telling and local markets. The completed films can be used to promote awareness and exchange within the same community and in other communities.

Why participatory video?

Participatory video can be used in improving documentation and communication skills, in advocacy, and in problem-solving, all of which contribute to community empowerment. Participatory video is based on visual and verbal communication. As such, it has great potential to add to indigenous means of communication and documentation which are also primarily visual and verbal. Participatory video provides a way for farmers to communicate their ideas, innovations, theories and decisions not only to each other but also to formal researchers and development agents. The films produced give real insights, going beyond statistics and reports. These films can be shown to villages, groups, politicians, scientists, aid organisations and decision makers locally, nationally and globally. Participatory video presents an "inside" view in a lively way.

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

The participatory video process

The process is, in essence, extremely simple, and the equipment required is increasingly affordable. This is the way the process works:

- Local people learn how to use video equipment through games and exercises facilitated by outsiders.
- Facilitators help the participants to identify and analyze important issues in their community by adapting a range of participatory tools and then planning how to show this on video.

- The video messages are directed and filmed by the local groups.
- The footage is shown to the wider community at daily screenings.
- A dynamic exchange of community-led learning, sharing and exchange is set in motion.
- Completed films are used for communication with and between many different people and organizations.

Example from Turkmenistan

A recent example of participatory video is the Insight project carried out in Turkmenistan, Central Asia, in association with the European Union Tacis programme. Between 2001 and 2003, Tacis had set up five Voluntary Farmers Associations. The aim of the activities was to help strengthen these new community-based organisations. The approach was to enable members from two of the associations to communicate what was involved in setting up such an association and what they regarded as the benefits. By explaining the aims and objectives of the farmers associations in a clear way to local and national policymakers, researchers and international donors, the idea of farmer-led innovation was promoted and support for the Voluntary Farmer Association concept was gained. This process also helped villagers to identify challenges and opportunities for development and to explore ideas for the future.

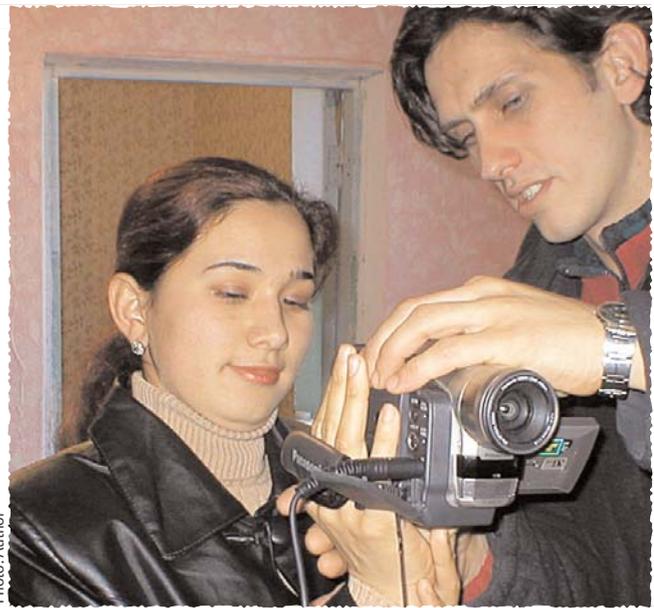


Photo: Author

Handing over control of the camera and the process.

One of the main problems identified by the villagers was that many of them had little knowledge of family farming. For 70 years, a centralised state-farm system had prevailed, in which each person's task had been very specialised. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the gradual deconstruction of the state farms, the villagers now lease land from the State and are responsible for every aspect of the farming process, including repairing irrigation systems and growing, harvesting and selling the produce in the newly-emerged free market. The villagers emphasised the need to learn from the more experienced local farmers and to re-discover traditional methods of conserving water, storing produce, or drying

fruit. This traditional knowledge still exists, but is held by only a small number of individuals. There are also some individuals in the villages who were highly trained in their given area during the Soviet period and who are now applying this knowledge in their own household plots. The members of the Voluntary Farmer Associations were quick to understand the potential of video to record and disseminate the various kinds of knowledge more widely and to give less experienced farmers the chance to learn from the village “experts”, innovators and keepers of traditional knowledge. Within a very short time, they were already planning and shooting their own short training films, showing tools they had developed, explaining how they were made, giving tips and advice on how to care for particular plants, and so on. They also decided to make a film with a local elder who was highly regarded as an innovator and specialist in growing flowers to sell on the market (see box). During the process of making these short films, footage was regularly shown to the wider community in evening screening sessions. The villagers were proud to see themselves and their neighbours in the films and felt that their knowledge and experience were being recognized and valued. These community screenings also generated a local exchange of ideas and experience and encouraged others to become involved in the participatory video project.

Babakuly's film

Babakuly wanted to make a short film, involving neighbours, friends and relatives, to explore the benefits of using greenhouses to optimise production on small household plots. He started his film by interviewing his uncle, the first in the region to build a greenhouse (30 years ago) and now successfully growing roses and cut flowers for the local market. The uncle explained the importance of sharing experiences since there was so much to learn. Babakuly then arranged a filmed discussion between him and a neighbour, in which they calculate that one fifth of the total yearly income from greenhouse-grown products (which sell for five times the price of seasonal vegetables) can cover all associated costs. Babakuly ended his film by explaining that, despite obvious financial benefits, many farmers cannot use greenhouses because of either lack of knowledge or lack of funds for building materials. He suggested that locally made videos could be used to convey information to the farmers, and that small, short-term loans should be made available to help them start.

Working with women

In Turkmenistan, as in many other countries, it is often a challenge to include women in the process of community action research. The team that was facilitating the participatory video process included a female trainee. Her assessment was that the participatory video methods were able to achieve results in situations where other methods of Participatory Rural Assessment had failed. She gave, as an example, the first workshop which local women attended. “The women didn't want to draw anything or discuss any issues. They told us they were too busy and wanted to go home. We then started to use participatory video tools and they became very excited. We did the ‘Name Game’, where each person has the chance to interview and film and speak into the camera. When we watched it together, they found it funny and were proud of what they had achieved. It really broke the ice and they became more confident and interested in our project. The next day they invited us to their house and gathered more women.” Local women were soon taking the video equipment around the village and conducting interviews with other villagers (generally women). They also produced short films. One of these focused on the mini milk processing plant installed by Tacis. Milk production and processing is an increasingly important means of income

generation. Not all women know how to produce high-quality products and many are inexperienced in dealing with the needs and opportunities of a free market. Once again, video in the hands of local people was able to illustrate and share the ways in which old and new knowledge is equally important in post-soviet Turkmenistan. These and many other essential aspects of village life and indigenous knowledge could not have been represented without the full participation of local women.

Using the videos for learning

Within a month, the facilitator of the participatory video process in Turkmenistan compiled and edited a collection of the short videos. This version was first shown to villagers in the communities where the films had been made. It was then used in workshops in other villages as a tool to provoke self-evaluation and situation analysis. The villagers could identify with the video messages made by people in the same situation as they were in. There was an approving murmur amongst the men in the audience when one farmer in the film displayed the tools he had developed for working in his greenhouses. Animated discussions followed the part of the film when a woman describes to her husband behind the camera how they prevent flies from damaging stored grapes by smoking them with a special plant (it transpired that this method was not practised, or had perhaps been forgotten, in this other village). Copies of the video were left with key people in the villages and with local video-lending shops.

In Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, the participatory video facilitator arranged a screening of the completed film to 30 guests at the British Ambassador's residence. These included high-level representatives from a number of international donor agencies, embassies and local organisations active in the agricultural sector. The reaction was unanimously positive, a lively discussion followed and several donor agencies pledged to continue supporting the development of Farmers Associations throughout Turkmenistan. The day after the film screening, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe invited the participatory video facilitator to take part in a discussion group where plans were made to develop a micro-credit scheme in these and other farming communities. This was largely motivated by Babakuly's film. The film was also shown to two senior officials in the Turkmenistan Ministry of Agriculture. They were very interested in the achievements of the Tacis programme and expressed their support for the continued spread of the Voluntary Farmers Associations model.

Major lessons learnt

The project in Turkmenistan has shown that local people are quick to take control of the participatory video process and to recognize its potential as a tool for sharing experience and local knowledge between different groups of farmers. Participants develop greater self-confidence and a sense that they can improve their own lives. Participants on a recent course in Ghana stated, during the evaluation, that they realised the value of participatory video for community documentation and participation, and that it allows the reality of community experiences and life to be explored and shared. However, how can these methods be brought in to mainstream political decision making? We think these methods hold the key to delivering those often repeated, hollow slogans: inclusion, participation and people-led research and development. ■

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