

Participatory Video: Rural People Document their Knowledge and Innovations

Indigenous knowledge and local initiatives are usually documented and disseminated by outsiders, who make their own interpretations in the process. Participatory Video (PV) provides an opportunity for rural people to document their own knowledge and experiences and to express their wants and hopes from their own perspectives.

The process of PV

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

- The rural people rapidly learn how to use video equipment through games and exercises facilitated by outsiders;
- The facilitators help local groups to identify and analyze important issues in their community and to plan 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, setting in motion a dynamic exchange of ideas and perceptions.

All people in a community, whatever their formal level of education, can use video to communicate their perspectives. PV is a potentially strong complement 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. PV provides a channel 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 can also be used for lobbying and advocacy pur-

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poses by showing them to policymakers at the local, national or even international level.

PV presents an "inside" view in a lively way. The films can be easily understood and stimulate the interest of people at all levels. The video medium is easily transportable and easily shared; in other words, it has a big "spread effect".

Example from Turkmenistan

A recent example of PV is the Insight project carried out in 2003 in Turkmenistan, Central Asia, with support from the British Embassy and in association with the European Union Tacis program. Between 2001 and 2003, Tacis had set up five Voluntary Farmers Associations (VFAs). The aim of the PV activities was to help strengthen these fledgling community-based organizations. The approach was to enable members from two of the VFAs 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 VFAs 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 VFA concept gained. This process also helped villagers to identify present challenges and opportunities for development and to explore ideas for the future.

One of the main problems identified by the villagers was that many of them had little knowledge of family farming. For 70 years, a centralized state-farm system had prevailed, in which each person's task had been very specialized. 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 emphasized the need to learn from the more experienced local farmers and to re-discover traditional methods of conserving water, storing produce, drying fruit etc. 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.

Babakuly's film

Babakuly wanted to make a short film, involving neighbours, friends and relatives, to explore the benefits of using greenhouses to maximize 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. He also emphasized the need for the farmers to access greater scientific understanding: "We need to analyze the composition of our soils. If we knew how to do this, we could adjust the type and quantity of fertilizer used and increase productivity by up to three times!"

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.

The members of the VFAs were quick to appreciate the potential for 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 ex-

change of ideas and experience and encouraged others to become involved in the PV project.

Working with women

In a Islamic country such as Turkmenistan, it is often a challenge to include women in the process of community action research. The team that was facilitating the PV process included a female trainee, who came from Ashgabat, the capital city. Her assessment was that the PV methods were able to achieve results in situations where other methods of Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) 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 as workshop tools

Within a month, the facilitator of the PV process in Turkmenistan compiled an edited collection of the short videos. This version was first shown to villagers in the communi-

ties where the films had been made. It was then used 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. Insight and Tacis staff will continue to monitor and assess the impact of this work on the local level.

In Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, the PV facilitator arranged a screening of the completed film to 30 guests at the British Ambassador's residence. These included high-

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level representatives from a number of international donor agencies, embassies and local organizations 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 VFAs throughout Turkmenistan.

The day after the film screening, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) invited the PV 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 (see box). 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 program and expressed their support for the continued spread of the VFA model.

The potential of PV in promoting local innovation

PV is a medium based on visual and verbal communication. As such, it has great potential to enhance indigenous means of communication - also primarily visual and verbal. Clearly, special equipment is needed to make and show videos, but a growing number of NGOs and even community-based organizations now have their own video-players, and some also have video cameras. Video films can also be easily copied onto CD-ROMs and can then be viewed using a laptop computer or via the Web. In this way, PV can bring local experiences and knowledge into a global network, allowing all relevant actors to learn from each other.

Major lessons learned

- The project in Turkmenistan has shown that local people are quick to take control of the PV process and to recognize its potential as a tool for sharing experience and local knowledge between different groups of farmers.
- PV can be used as a means of collecting, validating and disseminating farmer-developed technologies to audiences across national boundaries, whether they are farmers, researchers or policymakers.
- Having a woman in the PV facilitating team made it much easier to work with women in a Islamic country and, thus, to bring women's perspectives into community analysis of the situation and possibilities.
- PV films about farmer innovation and experimentation can help to bring farmers' own voices and images to the attention of policymakers in agricultural research and development (ARD). It is one way of bringing farmers' perspectives into multi-stakeholder platforms on the subject, and can stimulate other stakeholders to open up these platforms directly to farmer researchers. In this way, farmers can gain greater influence in decision-making about the ARD agenda.

This article was written by Chris Lunch of *Insight*, which is a UK-based organization that uses Participatory Video as a powerful research and development tool. They have over 15 years' experience in facilitating projects at grassroots level, working with communities, NGOs and governmental organizations in Central Asia, Mali, Cuba, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nepal and the UK. Participants have included refugees, users of mental health services, street children, pastoralists and farmers' cooperatives. For more information, contact: clunch@insightshare.org