Participatory Video and Empowerment
by Anna Colom

Summary

This is a short summary of the paper: 'Participatory Video and Empowerment. The role of Participatory Video in enhancing the political capability of grassroots communities in participatory development'. This analyses the potential of Participatory Video (PV) as a unique empowering process that enhances the political capabilities of grassroots communities to influence those with power over them.

Since 'empowerment' and 'participation' are concepts that have often been misused and criticised in the discourse and practice of development, the paper undertakes a theoretical analysis of the depoliticising effect of participatory approaches and an analysis of the ways in which participation can be truly empowering, mainly through a deep analysis of the power relations that can lead to the creation of political spaces.

The main criticisms to participatory development lie on the argument that, by homogenizing communities, participatory approaches mask or simplify complex power relations and political dynamics between castes, gender, ethnic groups, etc. Indeed, different case studies in the paper expose that some PV projects failed as empowering tools because not enough attention was paid in understanding the power relations between the participants and the community. In one of the projects analysed in the paper, for example, the partner organization only found out during the evaluation that all the participants of the PV workshop belonged to the same clan and it was not certain that this group was representative of those with the less voice and power in the community.

As a form of participatory communication, the potential of PV as an empowering tool lies not so much on the final product (ie. the video) but mainly on the process of empowerment that leads to the increase of the political capabilities of the community, which allows for the creation of a political space from where the participants can influence the processes of decision making that affect their wellbeing. This empowerment takes place through a 'Freirean' process of awareness and involves the following stages: (i) the identification of the sources of oppression and the obstacles that hinder the development, the rights and the wellbeing of the community; (ii) the increase of self-confidence as individuals and as a community on the right and the need to raise a voice against these obstacles; (iii) the identification of potential solutions; and, finally, (iv) the assertiveness that leads to collective action in communicating the message vertically to those with 'power over' as well as horizontally.

Through the techniques and steps that involve the making of a video, PV allows for the group to undertake a dialogical process that leads to a 'conscientizaçao' (in Freire's terms) or awareness stage, similar to the process described in Freire's pedagogy of liberation. The empowering potential of PV can also be understood in the framework of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, a type of research that involves the collective action of a group to identify a set of problems and to come up with potential solutions that can change the situation.

Video as a format has specific advantages that distinguish it from other participatory tools and that are part of the empowering process. Video breaks the illiteracy barrier and, since it uses voice and visuals, it greatly adapts to the local ways of cultural representation. Besides, it extends the dialogical process from the participants of the

workshop to the whole community, through street and public screenings, where the feedback from the community is taken into account by the workshop participants.

Finally, video as a format allows for the message to be easily transferable, without being altered, through the different institutional levels of power and through the civil society network in order to lobby policy-makers and those with power over. The different cases in the paper also show that video tends to work as an especially effective tool to catch the attention of policy-makers, who might otherwise ignore the demands of certain underrepresented groups.

The importance of understanding the specific context and of allowing for the dialogical process to take place means that PV needs to be understood as a contingent process and that the facilitator needs to adopt the role of a co-learner of this process of conscientisation.

It is because of this focus on power relations and on the dialogical process within the group that, in attempting to give a voice to oppressed communities, PV has a greater potential as an empowerment tool than a project where cameras are simply handed over to a group that is taught filmmaking skills with the main aim to make a video.

Therefore, NGOs and, in general, any development agency attempting to empower marginalized communities by giving them a voice, will find in PV a very useful tool but only if three key elements are considered:

The first one is the importance of understanding and taking into account the relations of power within and between all levels and stakeholders involved (community, participants, facilitators, partner organisations, and donors). This implies a deep understanding of the context, and its local politics and dynamics.

The second is the importance of seeing PV as a process, and not as a product. This requires a specific role of the facilitators of PV as individuals who are sensitive to the dynamics of the context, flexible and who, rather than dictating it, become co-learners of the dialogical process involved in the facilitation of PV.

The third element involves a sustainable approach to any PV workshop. Some of the cases analysed in the paper find that the long-term benefits of PV are not maintained if the project consist of a one-off activity and if the group does not have access to the equipment once the activity is finished. Even if the group will have been able to go through the process of awareness and will have gained the self-confidence and assertiveness to speak up for their rights and needs, they will lack the tool that allows them to create a political space from where to influence those with power over them. It is in this line that the paper explores the benefits of community video as a more sustainable use of PV. One-off PV projects can still be successful if it is ensured that the group can keep having access to equipment once the activity is over.

Please feel free to contact the author (details below) if you wish to read the whole paper, where the relationship between PV and power is extensively analysed and from where you can access further resources and authors listed in the bibliography.

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