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PHOTOVOICE AS A TOOL FOR PLANNING AND MEASURING IMPACT OF COMMUNITY-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

RENEWING RESEARCH MODELS AND PRACTICES

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Abstract — The aim of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of PhotoVoice as a tool for engaging resource-poor communities in impact assessment. The paper draws on the experiences in two distinct geographical areas, of SaveAct and its partners, which have been piloting hybrid models of support for poor and vulnerable communities seeking more sustainable livelihoods.

PhotoVoice has been hailed as a relatively simple empowerment tool for articulating the voices of poor and marginalised members of society by capturing the conceptual framework of a development project in the unmediated voices of the participants. In addition to assessing programmatic effectiveness, PhotoVoice is seen as a way of strengthening participatory methodologies.

This paper sets out both the opportunities and challenges encountered by the organisation and its partners in the process of introducing PhotoVoice -- particularly the use of videography -- into a rural context. It reflects practically on ways in which the process might be improved and/or simplified when introduced to communities with little or no experience of digital technology.

The reflections in this paper suggest that the success of PhotoVoice is not guaranteed and is heavily dependent on the close management of the process by individuals skilled in the methodology and its capacities. This is particularly pertinent in an under-resourced context where levels of technological proficiencies among participants are low. In the final analysis, however, indications are that adaptations to the process in accordance with local context are likely to produce rich rewards.

Key words : Participatory visual planning; impact assessment; participant self-documentation; assessment of project design relevance, qualitative assessment tools, PhotoVoice

"You will have to forgive us for knowing that something different was happening, something definitely worth investing time, money, even careers in. We at Freedom from Hunger know very well how difficult it is to capture with the methods of science this transformational experience we can see with our own eyes . not in special cases picked out for fundraising collaterals, but over and over again as we visit and talk with more and more of these participants… . This difficulty reflects an inadequacy of method rather than a lack of "evidence" in the broader sense of the word. We researchers have to try harder and more often to capture this more complex and elusive reality."[1]

INTRODUCTION

SaveAct[2] is working with the Farmer Support Group (FSG) and other South Africa-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) in the fields of livelihoods and social security.

The partners have been piloting hybrid models of support. The basic premise is that sector-specific activities are inadequate in responding to the multiple challenges of rural households in South Africa. These communities are characterised by high levels of chronic illness and death, and a very underdeveloped smallholder farming sector, with limited production for markets.

Within this context, partners have been interested to better understand the effectiveness of their work, and the extent to which hybrid models add value and are experienced as complementary opportunities. For example, does the support for farmer action research and development, alongside access to larger lump sums of money made possible through savings and credit groups create a substantially improved environment in which people can develop or expand their livelihoods?

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[1] Dunford, C., Gash, M. & Kotara, B.G. « Different levels of ʻKnowingʼ the Impact of Microfinance ». Posted on Hunger Blog, May 6, 2010. www.freedomfromhunger.org/blog/?p=34

[2] SaveAct is an NGO which promotes sustainable livelihood development through the promotion of savings and credit groups in South Africa. For further information on SaveAct, its partners and their programmes, refer to www.saveact.org.za, www.cead.org.za (for FSG) and http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu.

After consultations with the Center for Regional Change at the University of California, Davis (UCD) and several other actors within the broad frame of community economic development (CED)[3] an action research pilot was developed across two sites in two provinces of South Africa: the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

The PhotoVoice (PV) tool, including the use of digital still pictures and video, was selected as a means of gauging the changes occurring over time within participating communities as a result of the partnersʼactivities, the effectiveness of the activities and the way in which participants experience and represent the presence of SaveAct and its partners.

1. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM AND WHY PHOTOVOICE?

The problem facing SaveAct and its partners was how to undertake effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment (IA) in a situation in which livelihoods are extremely complex. SaveAct has invested heavily in M&E, deliberately seeking to develop rigour in its methods and achieve a balance of quantitative and qualitative data in the face of several indications that its work was having powerful and positive effects among its participants.

Shortly after inception, SaveAct developed baseline and follow-up questionnaires which attempted to measure income and expenditure across households. It aimed to build up a detailed picture of livelihood strategies and assets, and assess changes over time. Alongside this process, various qualitative methods were used, including focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews.

SaveAct followed this path for three years. The qualitative methods, particularly the semi-structured methods, produced rich accounts of change in peopleʼs lives, including a growing sense of agency and renewed hope. However, the quantitative data revealed little of what was required. Randomised control groups were not part of the original design and there was no way of measuring the effect on data of phenomena such as the global recession. In addition, reluctance by most participants to reveal income details meant data had to be treated with caution. Even where participants were willing to disclose personal income information, the problem remained of trying to work out income in an environment characterised by low levels of financial literacy, seasonal fluctuations and multiple income sources, ranging from social grants, to remittances and semi-subsistence agriculture.

The question of establishing impact is a recurrent theme in much of the discourse within the micro-finance (MF) sector, across both its ʻprovidersʼand ʻpromotersʼ[4]. Within the Community Economic Development and Innovation Community of Practice (CEDICOP), there was an understanding of the challenges faced. There was also interest in working with

SaveAct in piloting PV and Participatory Video . not only as a means to better understand and reflect the effects of our work to ourselves and our sponsors, but as a way of creating space for community partners (SCGs and farmer learner groups [FLGs] in the case of FSG) to engage in self-documentation and reflection with a view to developing a more institutionalised action-learning-reflection culture.

PV is regarded as one of a potential suite of tools and methods in SaveActs revised M&E framework. For FSG in particular, PV is viewed as a tool to enhance the participation of farmers in action-learning, and as a tool for farmer-led documentation.

2. **SPECIFIC APPLICATION OF PHOTOVOICE BY SITE**

SaveAct was interested in testing PV in different situations for various reasons:

- − a wider sample would teach us more about the reliability and versatility of the technique;
- − SaveAct was interested in specific questions and documentation of particular features across different sites (see below);
- − in the Prolinnova[5] pilot of FAIR (Farmer Access to Innovation Resources), there was receptiveness amongst stakeholders to learning from a variety of approaches to IA. Prolinnova, in collaboration with the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD), was in the process of developing and piloting an IA tool. Contrasting approaches would enhance the learning process. Locally, FSG was also keen to extend its use of PV as part of its farmer-led documentation work.

In the case of FAIR (KwaZulu-Natal) in particular, the intention was to establish whether there was evidence of complementarity at work at household level in the group-based strategies of the FLGs and SCGs. The intention of the SaveAct SCG model is to enable households to have access to larger lump sums of capital and consumption smoothening, and the creation of more scope for farmers to draw on their knowledge from their FLGs to expand and/or improve livelihood-rendering production activities. Could the PV tool be effective in testing whether this hybrid approach was working in practice?

In the case of the second project site where LEAP (Local Economic Action Partnership) is working in the Eastern Cape, the aim was more general: to encourage people to relate their stories from which their peers and the project implementing partners could learn about the effects of the activities. Because many groups comprising people living with HIV/AIDS had adopted the savings model, SaveAct was keen to understand whether their coping and adaptive strategies were being strengthened. Were members of groups also able to increase their investment in productive and consumptive activities, and how was it practically enabling members to cope with the disease? What was the role of social capital in this process?

More generally, the project sought evidence to support the idea that a more integrated, hybrid way of working with poor communities is more effective and relevant than prevalent sectoral approaches. Specifically, the partners were eager to establish whether a focus on

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[5] For more information on Prolinnova -- Promoting Innovation in Ecologically-oriented Agriculture ó see www.prolinnova.net

social and economic empowerment would release a sense of agency amongst participants. Would this translate into new initiatives that draw on various lessons and opportunities across sectors, and ultimately lead to improved scale and quality of local livelihood activity? Would this, in the end (in the case of FAIR), also provide impetus and demand for Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs), which is an integral aspect of FAIR?

Across both sites, partners were also attracted by the possibility that PV could act has a catalyst for local dialogue within and across groups, and could be useful in enabling action-learning-reflection cycles.

Finally, if PV proved effective, the initiative was seen as a good opportunity to develop capacity within the NGOs and CBOs in its application.

3. **THE PHOTOVOICE TRAINING METHODOLOGY**

PV is an action-research technique which involves giving people cameras with which they can capture images of events, problems or concerns in their community in ways that can encourage dialogue and promote social change. According to Carolyn Wang, a founder of the PV methodology, ‰Photovoice is a method that enables people to define for themselves and others, including policy makers, what is worth remembering and what needs to be changed."[6]

One of PVs attractions is its versatility. It can serve multiple purposes and audiences ranging from programme supporters, including funders, to external and local peer groups, the local community members who are involved as subjects, and staff within the organisation itself.

4. **EXPERIMENTING WITH PHOTOVOICE: THE PROCESS**

4.1 Choosing the tools

The partnersqengagement around PV commenced with video conferencing during which concerns were raised about the potential challenges of using video as opposed to still photography, the former being more technologically difficult and more resource-intensive. Those facing the M&E challenges outlined earlier sought reassurance that answers could be found through PV. After many hours of video conferencing, emailing and blogging, it was decided to pilot the use of video. Five Flip video cameras were purchased[7]. The cameras are small, robust and marketed as user-friendly. They involve an ‰aim and shoot+technique, followed by downloading to a computer for editing.

4.2 Preparation and training

SaveAct and David Miller arranged three days of orientation training for project partners in FAIR and LEAP. Representatives from NGOs and some CBOs were invited. PV specialists from the University of California at Davis Center for Regional Change and Department of Human and Community Development accompanied project partners on a day in the field and were part of initial interactions with community leaders and group members in exploring PV.

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[6] Available at http://heb.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/24/3/369
[7] See http://www.theflip.com/en-us/products/Ultra.aspx

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An initial session on technical aspects of Flip cameras and editing footage was planned, but was not offered for logistical reasons. The main orientation training employed simulations and a variety of interactive activities to address four main topics:

− Potential approaches to using PV in the context of participatory planning and evaluation;
− Visual literacy (e.g. elements of a compelling photograph or video);
− Video production; and
− Strategy development around coaching local participants through a process of using PV in participatory evaluation and planning.

The orientation training was designed to launch local work, with the expectation that in-country resources could be tapped to support the technical elements of photography, videography and visual editing, as well as overall evaluation and/or planning processes into which PV would be integrated.

4.2.1 FAIR, KwaZulu-Natal

In the FAIR pilot, participants were initially given Flip cameras to take video footage which was to be watched at a workshop. It was anticipated that the footage would facilitate and enhance the group discussion. The process was attended by challenges associated with use of the technology and participatory methodologies. For example, the battery life of the laptops was too short to show films and the sound and visual quality of the footage was frequently compromised by poor filming techniques.

Because video was in some respects found to be less enabling of discussion than still photographs, it was decided to start with still cameras and integrate photographs into the video at the end of the process. The decision was motivated by the following factors:

− Photographs are part of most family histories and are generally more familiar;
− Still camera technology is comparatively simple;
− Participants are able to construct storyboards[8] using still pictures;
− Focus group discussion is enhanced by using still pictures.

Based on this decision, a community introductory workshop on 24 February 2010 was held to prepare community members to capture their individual or group stories showing impact (positive or negative) of the development programme or intervention. Development champions were targeted in all communities and FSG was instrumental in sending invitations and managing workshop logistics.

The meeting introduced people to the idea of PV. They were shown how to use the cameras. Some volunteered to tell their stories and a timeframe for taking photographs was agreed upon. Time was given for all participants to take pictures which were printed and displayed, as shown below.

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[8] A storyboard is a guide to making a video. It contains a script and planned visual content to match it.

Presentations made by participants at a PhotoVoice planning meeting in February 2010

A number of participants offered descriptions of their achievements without an analysis of what those achievements meant for their lives, farming practices or innovation. According to research psychologist Dr Mary van der Riet, this is not atypical; an appraisal process needs to be led or facilitated, and is usually a most important part of the exercise[9]. At the workshop, probing questions were thus required to encourage people to begin to offer information on changes and impact.

Further adaptations were made: a digital recorder was used to record sound rather than have facilitators take notes, in order to enhance flow of discussion. After the session, another workshop was arranged to discuss impact based on pictures taken. At the second workshop, facilitators established whether there were any missing pictures based on stories told at the first workshop. Individual interviews were held with all participants. Some additional pictures were taken by the facilitators based on the discussion in the personal interview. This was filmed using the Flip camera.

In summary, there were five phases:

−   **PV introductory workshop.** The storyboard concept was explained and a decision taken that participants would use the still digital cameras only;

−   **'Beefing up'.** After viewing and printing pictures taken by the participants, individual interviews took place, which also gave participants more privacy to tell their stories;

−   **Filming**. Pictures and recorded discussions were reviewed with the participant. Still pictures were rearranged into a storyboard format with the participant and helped guide the discussion and preparation for filmed storytelling. Once the individual was

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[9] Personal communication, 2010.

prepared and relaxed, the shoot began. The Flip camera was used at this event. In some cases, tripod stands were used to achieve a steady picture.

- **Filling in gaps and reviewing video material.** Permission was secured from the participants to show their videos to others. This was a critical stage, as participants started to see the relevance of the PV process and impact and opportunities associated with the development programme. The outputs at this stage were stories taken from video footage and transcribed into English, with an associated narrative told by the facilitator of the overall story. This formed the basis of material for final production.

- **Selection and editing.** Video material from a large number of stories was selected and edited. English sub-titles were placed to correspond with the local language narrative. Films were then produced to a format for uploading to YouTube to enable viewing by the research team. Four stories were produced in this way over approximately four days in a studio. Whilst participants were not involved at this point for practical reasons, the editing and story-telling was strictly in line with the narrative and storyboard put together by that participant.

Phase 4: Participants viewing their videos	Focus group discussion after viewing videos

4.2.2 The Eastern Cape

In the Eastern Cape, a different process was followed. After training, SaveAct staff and partner organisations met as a team and identified categories of people to approach to share their stories. The categories were:

- People who are HIV-positive who could talk about their experience before and after SCG membership, and their future plans;
- Hawkers who are SCG members and members of HIV-support groups (Masangane[10]) to gauge whether businesses had improved following SaveAct enterprise training;
- Ordinary SCG members living in either Xaxazana or Mafube;
- Those less supported by SCG mentoring.

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[10] Masangane is an organisation offering support to HIV-positive people.

Staff introduced the methodology to five SCGs, one in each of the above categories. The workshops orientated SCG members around using Flip cameras. Dates were set for filming, as most participants wanted SaveAct staff to help with the process. In some cases, SaveAct did the filming; in others, participants took the footage.

Three hawkers took their own footage. One asked questions, one took the footage, and the other told her story, and then they swapped. When capturing the story of the HIV-positive person, SaveAct staff interviewed and captured the footage. Staff held a brainstorming exercise before the interview to identify relevant questions. After the interview, they took pictures of the surroundings to help piece together the storyboard.

For the third category . ordinary SCG members . staff held an introductory meeting to show participants how to use the camera and set a date for footage capturing. At a second meeting, people told their stories and developed simple storyboards . some people drew pictures, and one person narrated her experiences of her brick-making business.

On the third visit, staff went to homes to film short clips representing significant objects purchased or developed as a result of SCG participation. These included water tanks, food gardens, a newly-cemented building and a new bedroom suite. The clips also recorded participants·hopes for the future.

At the end of the process, SaveAct had five basic narratives, which are yet to be developed and edited:

- Mrs Mngomeni, a widow looking after four children;
- Lerato, a Masangane support group and SCG membe r, who is HIV positive;
- A group of three hawkers belonging to Masangane and SCGs;
- A combined group from Lukanya and Siyazama SCGs recounting one narrative about what people do with their money;
- A group story from Sinobomi focused on the lives of a single parent abandoned by her husband, and a grandparent without an income looking after children.

In order to address concerns that the process was extractive, it was decided that the footage should be shown to participants to encourage them to reflect on the experience and talk about what they had learnt. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, this had not yet happened.

4.2.3   Results thus far

Translating and sub-titling the footage proved to be inordinately time-consuming. Invaluable assistance was provided by skilled staff at the Digital Film Making Unit, at the Centre for Visual Arts, UKZN, which made their resources available at a low cost and produced four short films, two of which, based on KZN footage, were posted on YouTube on 4 May, 2010[11].

At the time of writing, it had not been possible to return these films to the storytellers and to continue the interaction with community participants. With their permission, however, it is hoped to screen these stories amongst other groups as part of a process of sensitising people to new possibilities.

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[11] These films may be viewed by going to http://www.saveact.org.za/impact/current-reports and clicking on the links.

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However, comments on the clips from partners and development actors thus far have been encouraging. It would appear that the stories have wide appeal across different stakeholders. They also hold the promise of inspiring other poor and vulnerable communities.

Importantly, they show impact and provide evidence that supports the way in which SaveAct and FSG are working in partnership, each with distinctive contributions which, when combined, add value to their respective inputs.

In addition, the stories speak to the concerns that SaveAct was probing with respect to the design of FAIR in the sense that they are accounts of how people have taken advantage of different opportunities that emanate from FAIR's hybrid nature. The stories illustrate impact at a household level, whilst holding out the prospect of impact at other levels. For example, in her narrative, Ms Madondo of Potshini, Bergville, notes how others noticed the achievements of her SCG and how, in a short space of time, the number of SCGs in her community has grown.

> **Ms Madondo:** We would take loans to buy building material. We would take turns in taking loans. I was the first one to borrow/ take a loan. We also used the share-out to buy roof material and to pay for the builders. In the same year my husband was able to buy cows. The house is still under construction. Community members noticed some changes and became very interested in the programme. To date, there are nine groups here in Potshini. We did not stop saving since we did very well in the first year.

This implies the possibility of a significant shift in the way in which individual households go about their business and cooperate in developing new social security and livelihood opportunities across several households.

In her narrative, Ms Khumalo, also in Potshini, describes how social capital was generated to the extent that food-garden activity between certain households was resuscitated. With renewed cooperation through savings, they felt ready to work together again:

> **Ms Khumalo:** SaveAct came to Potshini. We were trained to do community-based savings. We grouped ourselves based on the level of trust … We saved the entire year … Everything was very successful. I was able to buy an amplifier with speakers, a television set and DVD player.

Owing to the small size of the sample, the fact that the stories were not selected randomly and the absence of a control group, it is obviously not possible to draw any firm scientific conclusions from the PV project. However, the stories are still valid and powerful in content.

With respect to the Eastern Cape, further attention is needed in clarifying the objective and possibly selecting one or two stories from which films can be made.

5. **REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT**

5.1 PV using photographs

The use of PV photographs as a stimulus for dialogue within focus group discussions worked well. It is important that this process be well facilitated to enable lessons to be derived and action plans developed. Where there are hundreds of SCGs in a region, the resource demands of replicating the tool across every group through skilled facilitation is not financially feasible. However, it is possible that by working with a few groups and training them in the

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methodology, followed by peer exchanges, that it could spread. Periodic support from NGO and community-based facilitators could support such a process.

5.2 PV using video production

Applying PV with video footage is more costly and challenging than using still photography, particularly when working in remote locations where people have limited experience with technology. While Flip cameras are good for a particular purpose, making them the centrepiece of the process had the unfortunate effect of creating barriers between unconfident users and the process.

It is estimated that some ” 15 000 was expended in this process. However, the cost may be low in comparison to a typical IA process conducted by external evaluators. One of the biggest advantages of PV videos is that, unlike lengthy written reports which have value to a few sponsors and key decision-makers, PV is likely to foreground different issues and stories with wide appeal. A powerful narrative in a short film can inspire and generate change. It is obviously desirable to use such methods together with triangulation, if resources permit.

Our experience suggests that the filming should come towards the end of the process, after testimonies have been shared informally and relationships of trust have been established which are conducive to deeper sharing and identification of interesting stories. The nature of the target audience is pertinent. Who selects stories and for what purpose are questions that need to be worked out with all participants. If the intention is merely to document a story from a particular household then it is possible to skip these initial steps and focus resources towards a particular output. Under such circumstances, costs could be considerably reduced.

In countries such as South Africa there are several skilled people to assist with final production of videos, with editing, with over-dubbing and sub-titling. In less-developed countries this may prove more challenging.

It took considerable time and perseverance to develop a workable method for PV and at times we came close to conceding defeat. On reflection, it is clear that the initial training period was too short and the process was complicated by the fact that partners had ambitious and varied ideas about what they wanted to achieve with PV. There was a risk throughout that valuable resources were being committed to a demanding process with little tangible benefit. Thus, it was critical to maintain a focus on clear and tangible outputs.

Having now reached the point of possessing some rewarding outputs, the process is not over. We are now to grapple with how to use the films, identify their audiences and critique their quality. Unless this process is led by individuals with a fairly sophisticated understanding of PV and its capacities, there is a risk that scarce resources will be diverted from other important work within the organisation.

Sustained and effective use of PV would imply retaining some dedicated capacity in this field within an organisation and certainly, some internal capacity has been built during the process. Time will tell whether this capacity meets the needs of partners.

The resource implications of this kind of practice are often underestimated and NGOs will need to work hard to generate the resources needed to sustain the work. If PV is to play a meaningful role in evaluation and planning it will need to be well directed and analysed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

PhotoVoice is undoubtedly a versatile and powerful tool. It has potential to engage stakeholders and provide a medium for expression through which people can articulate their aspirations, reflect on what they have learnt or what has changed in their lives, and tell stories about their experiences. This can enable local action planning or provide feedback to actors in the development process about the effects of their work and provide narratives that can encourage or promote certain practices and approaches.

However, such outcomes are by no means assured. As with many participatory tools for planning and evaluation, a high level of specialised skill is required to manage and direct the process, even at micro-level. This implies significant cost. However, it is also true to say that most participatory learning and action tools require similar skills.

A focused and specific purpose helps to reduce complexity and cost, and brings greater certainty of useful outputs. With this comes a trade off, as the more focused and deliberate the process, the greater the risk of such processes becoming less accessible and not being sufficiently shaped by community participants.

There is an important space for participatory video, but it found its place only in the end stages of PV and this pilot, and for particular purposes: recording experiences for the benefit of actors in the development programme to better understand their work; and for other people (including potential community participants) interested to learn about livelihood and financial service strategies and how they can be utilised to overcome poverty.

Agencies that bill PV as a simple and effective tool are either succumbing to market-speak, or perhaps have never had an opportunity to practice it themselves. With all these cautions, however, the partners remain committed to using this tool and refining the process for doing so. The dynamic and analytical dialogue that it precipitated amongst participants in focus groups discussions and the final videography produced has provided rich learning about activities and processes in communities.

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