

**THE USES OF VIDEO IN A PARTICIPATORY-ACTION-RESEARCH
PROCESS FOR PEACEBUILDING. The Interpeace experience.
2005**

1. The Purposes of Video Documentaries.

Interpeace project teams shoot video footage and produce video documentaries for different purposes:

- a) **Research:** It is an additional and more holistic record of an interview or a (focus) group discussion, in addition to written notes taken. Following a series of group consultations in a given area, the team may also use some of the video footage when feeding back to their interlocutors and checking their interpretation of what they have heard – before they leave the area. Transcripts can be made from the video footage, which also captures non-verbal clues.
- b) **A preparation tool for facilitators:** Video footage can be reviewed by facilitators to prepare for a next meeting of the same dialogue group, to review their facilitation practices or to support the skill development of other facilitators.¹
- c) **A trigger for discussion:** Showing some footage of another group in society discussing a key issue is often very stimulating for a new (focus) group to get engaged on the topic. Showing footage of people discussing sensitive or fairly ‘taboo’ topics can also encourage and liberate another group to dare to talk about it.²
- d) **A facilitation mechanism during an extended discussion:** A facilitator can take the group back to something that was said before and captured on video, to stimulate further reflection on a point or how it was made. This requires a certain technology and attentive facilitation.
- e) **Bringing ‘public opinion’ to a socio-political elite – and vice versa:** Elites tend to seclude themselves in urban areas and within elite circles. Video documentaries capturing what the population at large thinks about key public policy and governance issues can be a powerful eye-opener. Alternatively, where the media do not reach very far or only disseminate ‘official’ discourses, video footage of interviews and discussions with elite members taken to the population at large can offer different images and send different messages.
- f) **Facilitating “indirect listening” across geographical and political divides:** Where different groups for geographical, social and/or political reasons cannot or do not want to talk to each other, showing videoed conversations of one group to the other can be one opportunity to create an experience of ‘listening’, and possibly seeing the humanity of the other. Depending on what is appropriate and possible at a given time, video footage of conversations *within* each group can

¹ IRDP for example recently produced a film intended to support the skill-development of the facilitators of five local ‘dialogue clubs’ that their process has generated. The film shows how the IRDP ‘researchers-facilitators’ prepare and handle public debates; it is not a ‘facilitation training’ film per se.

² Substantively our films have focused on the issues affecting the society at large. None of our project teams so far has endeavoured to explore, in discussions and in a film, how people think and feel about the fundamental relational aspects (i.e. so called ‘social capital’) such as ‘reconciliation’, ‘trust’, ‘consensus’, that are the basis for workable societies.

- gradually transform into “indirect dialogue”. Video documentaries can also provide a first ‘bridge’ between for example refugees and the diaspora and those that live in the area of origin.
- g) ***Protecting the project team***: The video footage is also a form of ‘evidence’ that the project team correctly captured and transmitted the views of sections of society, and did not manipulate the various perspectives in support of their own personal views.
 - h) ***Providing evidence of interpersonal transformation***: Video is the most powerful way to ‘show’ changes in attitudes, discourse, interactions that constructive dialogue can help to bring about. Video footage here becomes a monitoring and evaluation tool.

The video documentaries are also used for *purposes beyond the participatory-action-research process* itself. They can be used to give *external actors* an unusual window into what *internal actors* think³, and how they express and debate key issues in their own societies. Video documentaries can accompany and *support a fundraising drive*⁴ or a *project report* to donors, as well as a *publication of research results*. The video documentaries constitute however also an important social and historical record of the society, and can find a place in public and educational institute *libraries*⁵ and be used in the *teaching* of e.g. history, social and political sciences.

2. Ethical Challenges of Filming.

There are obviously logistical challenges to filming and showing films especially outside urban centers. There are also ethical challenges in filming (e.g. do you continue filming when someone gets very emotional?) and editing (e.g. could you put an interlocutor at risk?). Filming during interviews, focus group discussions and public debates can also become a distorting factor, as people start making statements ‘for the camera’, or prominent people seek to dominate the discussions because they are ‘on camera’.

3. Production Decisions.

Finally, there is the challenge of the many production decisions. The first key questions will be:

- What target audiences do you want to make the film for (e.g. local and national actors, international assistance actors, a general public or an audience that is well informed about the situation, opinion and decision-makers etc.)? A film that is produced in function of certain target audiences may not be equally ‘powerful’ for other audiences – perhaps the same footage needs to be reworked in a different production.

³ We have no films so far that mostly capture discussions and debates within the external assistance community, to show it back to them and also to local / national audiences!

⁴ This was the first purpose of the first videos of the Palestinian and Israeli projects, which were made after a mere three months into the process.

⁵ The Academy for Peace and Development in Hargeysa, Somaliland, has explicitly acknowledged this purpose and sees its visual and written documents as a ‘resource centre’ about and for the people of Somaliland.

- Does the film have to stand alone, or is it produced to be part of a presentation? If the film has to stand alone, then the wider context, the context within which the filming took place, the purpose of the film, and any other ‘guiding commentary’ on how to understand and interpret what is being seen and the intentions of the filmmakers will all have to be explained within the film – which does take time and leaves less viewing time for the more substantive issues.

Both these considerations will already have influence on the length of the film. Certain audiences have ‘little time’ and the key messages need to be gotten across quickly. Others will not only be willing but even eager to watch a longer film that provides a wider range and more in-depth perspectives. As explained, a film that has to stand alone risks becoming longer because the ‘accompanying commentary’ has to be brought into the film. If a copy of a film that is not meant to stand on its own is being distributed to a certain target audience e.g. a range of donor agencies, the ‘accompanying commentary’ will have to be put on paper and sent with it. By and large a length of between 10-20 minutes is manageable for most audiences and appropriate for most of our purposes. Some of our project teams for example have made several short films around specific topics (‘entry points’)⁶. Longer ‘documentaries’ capturing more extensively a wide range of views⁷ may however be very worthwhile, to protect the team and as larger social documents.

Another key production decision is whose voices prevail in the film? Will it be the voices of the people interviewed and in debate, or the commentary of the ‘project team’? Partially this will depend on the purposes and primary target audiences: do you want to get key messages across rapidly, or do you want to give space for otherwise ‘unheard voices’ to be transmitted? By and large our preference should be for the voices of our interlocutors, rather than much commentary from the project team.⁸ They should speak for themselves and be heard in their own language, i.e. where translation is needed, let us use subtitles. Voice-over should be avoided.

Here too finer production decisions come into play: you can cut short snapshots of different people making an articulate comment on a particular issue (e.g. a thematic editing of the footage)⁹ – or you can capture a group of people in debate, and allow the audience to get a feel for the flow of that debate, both in its substance and in the verbal and non-verbal interactions between those debating.¹⁰ We have to bear in mind that not all audiences can absorb a ‘rapid’ pace of images and information, not everyone has a lifetime of daily TV watching behind them. Using sophisticated production software can also become a trap in this context: while it allows fancy effects such as images flowing over into each other, or a ‘double screen’ (e.g. two people speaking on the same topic at separate times and in separate locations put side by side in the same image on screen), the

⁶ E.g. PEV Macedonia’s “Entry Point Videos”

⁷ E.g. IRDP’s “The Truth Heals”.

⁸ As was the case in the first PEV Macedonia films

⁹ A tendency in the films of our Somali colleagues

¹⁰ E.g. “Hungry Hearts” from our Israeli team

visual ‘complexity’ thus created may actually distract our audience from the substantive issues we want to bring across. In our films the people should speak, not the technology.

A sensitive issue is whether to identify in the film itself the locations and / or the people speaking in the film? On the one hand this adds to the credibility of the film as a ‘research product’ and as part of a ‘broad-based’ dialogue. On the other hand it may put those thus identified at a certain risk. By and large our project teams have chosen to identify by name public figures whose faces are known anyway, and otherwise to identify the location (e.g. village) where a debate took place and sometimes the (first) name of an individual captured at more length.

Whether to insert footage from other sources (e.g. historical footage) into your film is another production decision, but will of course also depend on its availability to you, and on the copyright.¹¹ Depending on the topic and the footage, it might be valuable more for external audiences but also for local / national audiences.

Another production decision relates to the insertion of maps, of still photos and / or statistics in the film. Again, this will depend very much on the main purposes of the film and the key target audiences.

All our filming project teams tend to bring in ‘traditional’ music and songs – music being a universal language and a common reference that even otherwise opposed people can share and enjoy together, and songs that carry their own meanings and expression? Some have even produced films that just have one or more meaningful songs, and images – no voices, no commentary.¹² These can be particularly evocative for national audiences.

4. Together: Researchers and AV unit.

The above considerations related to the purposes of the film and key production decisions signal very clearly that the filming and production process are not and cannot be the sole responsibility (and authority) of our ‘AV colleagues’. If this is an essential tool in our approach, as well as a communication tool about our respective organisations, researchers and the management team have to be actively involved and work closely together with their AV colleagues.

¹¹ Our Somali colleagues have several films with historical footage inserted as well.

¹² Some film products of our Somali colleagues.

