

Participatory development communication: between rhetoric and reality

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Does Participatory Development Communication (PDC) create dialogue and empowerment? This is the main question that the research I carried out for my dissertation at the University of Reading in 2008 searched to answer. My analysis of PDC as a phenomenon within communication for development focused on community-based level interventions in Latin America and Africa, which use participatory video or participatory photography and group discussion as the main tools of action with the intention to create dialogue and empowerment. This article reflects on some of my research findings.

Introduction

This article research is focused on the use of participatory development communication (PDC) to facilitate dialogue and empowerment in community-based level interventions in Latin America and Africa. Within the field of communication for development, PDC has been used for the last thirty years as a tool to achieve dialogue and empowerment in development projects, particularly through video, photography and group discussion. To be able to analyze this phenomenon, this research unpacks the mechanisms at work behind PDC, their connections and challenges, as well as its intended outcomes, both in theory and practice.

The methodology used included literature review, interviews with eight development practitioners that have been in the field in the last five years, and case study analysis of eight projects implemented in Latin America and/or Africa in the last 12 years built on primary sources of information (internal NGOs' documents and interviews with planners and/or trainers). It is important to clarify that the research is the result of a desk-process involving only planners and trainers, without

consultation of the participants in each one of the case studies – this is a limitation of the study.

In theory, PDC does facilitate dialogue and empowerment. Being a methodology that was born from communication for development and participatory processes, it proposes a horizontal knowledge-sharing approach through media and interpersonal group communication that combines the ‘mirroring’ features of video and photography –focusing on what is worth looking at and valuing people’s knowledge- with a space created to mimic grassroots communication through group discussion, allowing stages of exposure needed in decision-making processes to critically and collectively analyse abstract topics of reality.

Although participatory video, participatory photography and group communication have been recognised theoretically as important tools to create space for dialogue and empowerment, they present many challenges and difficulties for development professionals in the planning, training and local management stages. The intended outcomes of dialogue and empowerment should be placed at the centre of the discussion among the stakeholders involved in a process of change before starting the implementation of the different stages. This may conclude in a positive and sustainable space for the ‘community’ or intended beneficiaries that are striving to create social change and become drivers of that change.

Participatory development communication

It could be said that participatory development communication was born from development communication and participatory research, as defined by Bessette (2004), and ratified by the Communication for Development Roundtable organized by FAO in 2005, as “a planned activity based on the one hand on participatory processes, and on the other hand on media and interpersonal communication, which facilitates a dialogue among different stakeholders, around a common development

problem or goal, with the objective of developing and implementing a set of activities to contribute to its solution, or its realization, and which supports and accompanies this initiative.” The similarities with participation are manifested: the realization of an intervention that generates dialogue and collaboration. But, in this case, it is specifically achieved through communication tools.

Participatory video (PV) is a good example of PDC. As Braden explains (1998), “video pictures act as a mirror. Participants can see and hear themselves talking and they can retrieve what was said in the way that it was said. This process of reflection has a resonance with Lacan’s idea that image is outside self and that identity is constructed through language. Hearing oneself talking on a video screen can offer the opportunity for retrieval of one’s own language and self, which is afforded by few other media.” And this can happen because, as Odutola (2003) says, the objects and subjects of production are the same.

Similar to PV, participatory photography (PP) democratizes the image-making dynamic and gives non-professionals the power to show and speak their own realities, as Clover (2006) explains: “Whereby marginalized or disadvantaged people are provided cameras and the opportunity to document, analyse, and make meaning of their own experiences and realities through images and symbols of their own choosing”. She sustains her argument stating that several scholars have agreed upon this – including Daniels 2003, Evans 2001, Gallo 2001 and Wang & Burris 1994 – as well as affirming that PP is a tool that emerged from documentary photography in anthropology, based on learning for empowerment, action and agency.

The combination of media and interpersonal communication to achieve effective interventions has been recognized in development communication, as Waisbord (2001) highlights referring to research done by Flay and Burton in 1990 and Hornik in 1989. As Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998) explain, “people exposed to information material may understand its

significance in different ways, but the analysis and discussion that follows will help to clarify the issues and lead towards a consensus view.” For this reason, interpersonal group communication “seems to be a prevalent strategy among participatory communication projects”. (Inagaki, 2007)

According to Inagaki (*ibid*), “group communication is a form of interpersonal communication and takes place in settings where people engage in discussion on matters of collective or communal importance”. Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998) affirm that group communication is key in the process of an effective intervention because localized information needs to be analysed and debated. On the other hand, Mezzana (1996) highlights that GC is important for its relationship with grassroots communication, being a way of making an effective connection and promoting integration with the communication network already present in the community.

How has group communication being blended in participatory development communication projects? In the case of PV, for instance, local viewings after the production of a video set the ground to discussion and exchange of ideas (Lunch, 2007). For Okunna (1995) group communication acts as the formal instance of feedback for the community and is the cornerstone of the project. “People get to hear and see what people like them are doing, and this helps them to organize activities for their own development”. Moreover, Wang & Burris (1994) explain that this space allows participants to critically and collectively analyze their reality providing them with knowledge that results in practical and directed ways of action.

In the case of PP projects, Wang & Burris (*ibid*) exemplified their position with a case where rural Chinese women were able to find similarities and differences in their lives through discussion related to their photographs, concluding that “the goal of the large and small group dialogues is to cultivate people’s ability to take individual and collective action for social change”. Cook & Hess’ analysis (2007) emphasises a

different aspect of the process, stating that “photographs provide an opportunity to have group discussions around a visual prompt which makes it easier than trying to talk about something in the abstract”, which allows the main actors of the project to explore the reasons behind those photographs without the intervention of an outsider.

After half a century of evolution, communication for development presents PDC as a crucial driver of the participatory paradigm. Originated from theoretical contributions of development, communication, anthropology and social psychology, PDC has been introduced by development practitioners as a possible pathway towards the creation and support of social change. Particularly, the combination of participatory video and photography with group discussion has been rendered into a ‘magic formula’ to be applied in community-based projects.

What happens in the ground? Voices of planners and trainers

As Braden (1998) stresses in her PhD thesis, “the potential values of the participatory uses of video *and photography* do not automatically resolve all the problems of management, planning, intention versus reality, timing, sustainability, training and facilitation that affect other participatory learning approaches.” (italics added) Richardson (1996) agrees saying that it is not a simple matter. The planning and training process should consider multiple variables: a participatory context in contraposition with the traditional top-down approach in training; field experience and reflection to promote attitude and behaviour awareness as well as change (Chambers, 2005); analysis and clarification of the intended outcomes through the process of asking and answering questions; identification and consultation to the diversity of stakeholders involved in the planning stage; and the exploration of indigenous

communication activities that are functioning in the heart of the community.

How do PDC community-based projects achieve dialogue and empowerment? This is the question that fosters my analysis of multiple case studies with an exploratory perspective. I propose that it is key to analyze which place is given to the intended outcomes of dialogue and empowerment in each stage of the implementation of participatory video or participatory photography projects in the field: planning, training and local management system (continuity).

For this purpose, eight community-based projects that use PV or PP and group discussion that have taken place during the last twelve years in Africa and/or Latin America were selected as units of analysis, based on primary sources (NGOs' internal documents and interviews). The case studies (table 1) were selected with the intention of showing examples of the variety of experiences and development issues in which PDC has been put into practice in the last decade to achieve dialogue and empowerment, and cover children and youth, disabilities, agriculture and pro-poor markets development, advocacy, and gender. Participatory research was not included due to the differences and particularities of research processes.

No.	Project	NGOs – Planners	PM	Country/ies	Objective	Development area of work
1	Sight of Emotion	Sight of Emotion	PP	Mexico	Communication, Sensitization and Integration	Disabilities
2	Foto Libras	FENEIS – GEMA	PP	Brazil	Personal and professional opportunities for young deaf people, visibility and deaf rights	Disabilities
3	Shooting Jozi	Global Studio 2007	PP	South Africa	Work in collaboration with local community members, creative documentation	Advocacy in urban and periurban development
4	Documentation of rural experiences through ITCs	AGRECOL Andes Foundation	PP	Bolivia	Knowledge management for generation, recreation and diffusion of knowledge	Agriculture and pro-poor markets development
5	Markets & Livelihoods	Practical Action UK and InsightShare	PV	Peru	Capacity building of trainers in Practical Action Peru and local agriculture promoters for pro-poor market development	Agriculture and pro-poor markets development
6	Beyond Vision	PhotoVoice and JUCONI	PP	Ecuador	Self-development, self-advocacy and vocational training for street children	Children and Youth
7	Empowerment through arts and media	PLAN International	PV	Africa and Latin America	Youth empowerment to use arts and media for decision-making participation and self-advocacy	Children and Youth
8	Communicator Mayan Women	NUTZIJ	PV	Guatemala	Indigenous women participation in community development through video and ICTs	Gender and community development

Table 1 – Case studies

Several dimensions were set to create an analytical framework for the first part of the cross-case analysis, which is complemented with a description using a template to facilitate comparison (available in the complete research paper). Table 2 shows each case study by its correspondent number in each dimension. In relation to the level of participation (see figure 1), only one case study used *participation by consultation*, while two implemented *functional participation*, four cases are based on *interactive participation*. and the last one was born from *self-mobilization*. Both functional and interactive participation build local institutions with diverse levels of decision-making. All the case studies are or tend to be long-term processes of different graduation, except the one related to consultation.

Dimensions		<<	<	<>	>	>>	
Level of participation	<i>Passive</i>		3		6, 7	1, 2, 4, 5, 8	<i>Interactive</i>
Time	<i>Short-term</i>	3			2, 6, 7	1, 4, 5, 8	<i>Long-term</i>
Goals	<i>Top-down</i>	3, 6, 7	1, 5	2, 4		8	<i>Bottom-up</i>
Empowerment Definition	<i>Manifest</i>	1, 2, 3, 6, 7		5, 8		4	<i>Latent</i>
	<i>Top-down</i>	1, 3, 6, 7	2, 4, 5		8		<i>Bottom-up</i>
Dialogue definition	<i>Manifest</i>	1, 2, 6, 7		5, 8		4	<i>Latent</i>
	<i>Top-down</i>		1, 4, 5	6, 7	2, 8		<i>Bottom-up</i>
Focus	<i>Media as output</i>	3	7	4, 6, 8	1, 2	5	<i>Process as output</i>
Previous research	<i>Formal</i>	1, 6, 8	7	2, 3, 5			<i>Informal</i>
	<i>Top-down</i>	1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 6					<i>Bottom-up</i>
Evaluation	<i>Formal</i>	1, 2, 4, 6, 8	5	7		3	<i>Informal</i>
	<i>Top-down</i>	1, 6, 7		3, 8	2, 5	4	<i>Bottom-up</i>
Group discussion	<i>Formally organized</i>	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8		3			<i>Informal</i>
Training	<i>Media exclusively</i>	3		1	2, 6, 7, 8	4, 5	<i>Media and participatory approach</i>
Local management system	<i>Implemented</i>	1, 2, 4, 5, 8	6	7		3	<i>Not implemented</i>

Table 2 - Analytical framework for the cross-case analysis



Figure 1 – Ladder of participation (Based on Veneklasen and Miller classification, 2002) (TP or M: Token participation or manipulation)

Goals

In relation to the set of the goals, the majority of the cases (five) had a top-down approach, while two cases had contributions from the participants in the process; only one adopted goals completely set in a bottom-up process. Due to the diversity of areas of development work, they offer a range in focus from media to process as main outputs to build on the outcomes.

All the cases except one include ‘power to’ as one of their goals, while half of them include ‘power within’ and/or ‘power with’, and only one includes ‘power over’ (see box 1). At the same time, three of them mention dialogue and sustainability and six include advocacy as goals.

“At the core of the concept of empowerment is the idea of power.” (Page & Czuba, 1999) In this research, empowerment was addressed using the categorization of power over, power to, power with and power within, that has become a normative typology in the development literature. The concepts can be briefly explained as (Veneklasen & Miller, 2002):

- Power over: often defined as ‘relational’ because the gaining of power of someone entails the loss of power of someone else.
- Power to: implies the concept of capacity. It is the power to grow by working on the improvement of one’s abilities, skills, and capabilities.
- Power with: is the power of trust; the power shared by people within their own organisation in order to achieve common goals and build collective strength.
- Power within: is the self confidence to develop individual and group awareness of the existence of rights, entitlements, and opportunities.

Outcomes

Six of the eight cases mention empowerment as an achieved outcome. At the same time, three cases included dialogue as an outcome and five mentioned advocacy too. Other outcomes that were reported consist of: networking, creation of livelihood opportunities, peer educators, creative documentation, media itself, motivation, participation, commitment, responsibility and confirmation of the need of an improved internal coordination.

Planning

At different levels of formality or informality, all the cases except one have done some previous research to plan the projects, but their commonality is that all have used a top-down approach. In relation to the definition of both intended outcomes –dialogue and empowerment- half of the cases present clear definitions in their project descriptions, while the other half are

distributed among those who describe them indirectly and those who implied their meaning in the goals or intended outcomes description. How are these definitions set? In the case of empowerment, all the case studies with only one exception defined it with a top-down approach. Dialogue presents more variety of approaches by combining NGOs and participants' perspectives in different graduation, with only one case differing (top-down approach only). In table 3 the meaning associated with empowerment and dialogue can be appreciated.

Case No.	Empowerment				Dialogue
	Power within	Power to	Power with	Power over	
1	X	X			Definition supportive of empowerment
2	X				Definition supportive of empowerment
3		X			-
4	X	X			Definition supportive of empowerment
5	X		X		Definition supportive of empowerment
6	X	X			Definition supportive of empowerment
7	X	X	X	X	Definition supportive of empowerment
8	X	X	X	X	Definition supportive of empowerment

Table 3 - Meaning attributed to empowerment and dialogue

Some particularities of the planning process to be highlighted from the experiences include clear and formal identification of

different facilitator roles and task division per role and/or per stage of the project, as well as pilot processes to extract learning points and readjust the approach and/or the participants targeted.

Training

In relation to the training stage, all the cases have mixed training in media and the participatory approach, including group discussion formally in the plan. The only exception is the short-term project that has had a media focus and has used group discussion with an informal approach with some guidelines to follow. Table 4 presents the points to highlight in each case related to the approach towards empowerment in the training process.

Case No.	Training – Points to highlight in relation to empowerment
1	'Power within' was approached with fun and freedom-related activities without a media as an output goal; participants selection of topics; encouragement to go out from 'comfort zone', psychological support in training; group discussion. 'Power to' was approached with media as an output goal and technical training; related to working skills and livelihood opportunities.
2	'Power within' was approached in the first stage of the training; diverse and multiple use of group discussion; participants selection of topics. 'Power to' was approached in the peer-educator stage with technical training.
3	'Power to' advocate was approached through participation by consultation; creative documentation with freedom of topic; no formal training or formal implementation of group discussion.
4	'Power to' and 'power within' were approached at the same time, with focus on a participatory approach and tools to be a local facilitator, as well as skills related to ICTs (digital camera and computer); group discussion formally addressed.
5	'Power to' was addressed with focus on a participatory approach and tools to be facilitator. The use of games and group discussion was formally addressed, with particular emphasis on participatory storyboard to generate community dialogue.
6	'Power within' was approached in the first stage of the training, with participants decision-making on topics and workshop administration (ex. timetable and places); group discussion and group dynamics exercises formally implemented. 'Power to' was approached in the second stage with technical training, networking and creation of livelihood opportunities, as well as peer-education training.
7	'Power within' and 'power to' addressed at the same time. Fun-related activities, participatory mapping, formal implementation of group discussion, media and ICTs training.
8	'Power within', 'power to', 'power with' and 'power over' addressed at the same time. Participants' decision-making on agenda setting and issues to be trained on in relation to community interests and their commitment for being chosen as community workers, what provides a redistribution of 'power over' decision-making and leadership positions for the participants (women) inside their communities. Training related to video and ICTs skills plus issues selected by them.

*Table 4 - Training related to empowerment***Evaluation and continuity**

With exception of the short-term project, all the cases have carried out evaluation at different levels of formality. Five cases have mixed bottom-up and top-down methodologies, while the other three have set top-down approach. The methodologies used in each case are presented in Table 5.

Case No.	Methodologies of evaluation
1	Ongoing process. Psychological, quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Psychological tool particularly to measure 'power within'. Evaluation with each stakeholder involved in the planning, training and advocacy/fundraising related activities.
2	Elaboration of lessons learnt for next phases. Qualitative methodologies and participatory evaluation. Evaluation with each stakeholder involved in the planning and training stages.
3	Mass media and exhibitions hits.
4	Elaboration of lessons learnt for each phase. Participatory evaluation moving the project from interactive participation to self-mobilization.
5	Qualitative methodologies and participatory evaluation.
6	Psychological, quantitative and qualitative methodologies applied to the different stakeholders involved. Psychological tool to measure 'power within' and tool to measure skills improvement for 'power to'.
7	Daily informal evaluation during the training; quantitative and qualitative methodologies applied to the different stakeholders involved.
8	Participatory video used as evaluation methodology.

Table 5 - Evaluation methodologies

Finally, a majority (five cases) have fully implemented a local management system, while two cases are in the process of implementation (reported at time of research). Only the short-term case has not implemented it. In table 6 the description of the steps taken towards the implementation of a long-term process is summarized.

Case No.	Local management system – Steps towards implementation of a long-term process
1	Fundraising events as part of the participants' role in sustainability and livelihood opportunity, generating advocacy and visibility. Peer-educators training.
2	Peer-educators training; creation of their formal space for planning, meetings and generation of the next phase.
3	No actions.
4	Local facilitators trained; follow-up advice and support; third stage of self-mobilization and community development planning process.
5	Trainers are training local facilitators. Implementation of PV in some communities. NGO re-adjustment of internal procedures to fully implement PV in their projects.
6	Networking for livelihood opportunities. Peer-educators training.
7	Equipment support through local partners or groups already in place. Online network for advocacy and creation of global youth space.
8	Community worker signs a commitment to fulfil the role for which the community has presented her and agrees knowledge transference to the community. Network of community workers for exchange and support. Livelihood opportunities.

Table 6 - Local management system. Steps for implementation.

From the cross-case analysis we can establish that the wider the participation, the longer the period of time needed for implementation. The focus, moreover, can vary from product (media outputs) to process as outputs according to the context and development issue(s) addressed by the project. Surprisingly, for participatory processes, the preliminary research is done with a top-down approach, in contrast with the evaluation, which in many cases was done through participatory methodologies.

In relation to empowerment and dialogue, both concepts are formally addressed in the planning and training stages, but empowerment particularly is conceptualized in a top-down approach. During the training, group discussion is formally addressed in both PV and PP, while it involves not only media but participatory approach capacity building in different graduation.

Finally, for the majority of the projects that have implemented or are implementing a local management system for a long-term process, the main constraints highlighted by the sources are difficulties to generate funds and have access to infrastructure (including physical space, electricity, films, computers, printers, cameras, among others).

Some lessons learnt

The theoretical and practical analysis has left some other implied considerations visible for future contributions towards improvement of PDC to facilitate dialogue and empowerment. Academic discussions related to participation generally place themselves in favour of or against top-down and bottom-up approaches, with a naive optimism or a highly critical position, engaging in an almost black or white debate. The case studies have shown that reality is grey rather than black or white. Depending on the stage that the community or beneficiaries are in the ladder of participation (see figure 1 based on Veneklasen and Miller 2002), a mixture of both approaches is needed to successfully help the community groups go deeper in a social change process that may be already taking place.

At the same time, some of the non-negotiable aspects that partners should consider are research, participation in goal setting of the intended beneficiaries, commitment towards a long-term process to avoid manipulation of the intended beneficiaries, and recreation of the concept of empowerment through a clear participatory definition of the meaning attributed to the buzzword.

In addition, a project as agreed among partners should lead the process of funding, and not the other way around. This was particularly clear in the cases that managed to implement a long-term project as they were the ones leading the funding conditions, and not adapting the project to the aid system.

Some of the questions that have arisen from the analysis and could be considered in future research are:

- To whom does the project belong?
- How do the beneficiaries describe dialogue and empowerment?
- Which are the non-negotiable aspects for each partner?
- Why are the research and evaluation non-participatory in a participatory process?
- Is there a long-term commitment of the partners to follow-up the process of local management system?
- Is it possible to extract learning points from self-mobilization, or is self-mobilization context-specific?

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Soledad comes from the communication field, with experience in communication strategy in diverse organisations in Argentina. After doing an MSc in Communication for Innovation and Development at the University of Reading (UK), she became increasingly interested in participatory communication. Since 2009, she has been working for InsightShare, an organisation pioneering participatory video for social change, as an Associate. See www.insightshare.org. For the full dissertation, e-mail: [smuniz\(at\)insightshare.org](mailto:smuniz(at)insightshare.org)

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