

Working with Questions:

Who is Participating in whose Process?

As development workers from government or NGOs or even as activists many of us imagine that because we have the skills and confidence, we are best placed to lead change programmes, to be in charge, to ensure that nothing goes wrong. And so a school may get built or a law changed. But the people have not been empowered, only used by us, and when the need comes for change again they still feel helpless and need us to come. This is what lack of sustainability means.

Often donor or government funding insists on a whole sophisticated plan being developed up front (by next week!) and so the usual procedure is for “experts” to do some research and put together a plan and then try to sell it to the community, hoping they will “take ownership”. But they don’t.

Essentially they are participating in someone else’s plans and process.

Or local government sets up a series of committees and consultations where the community is invited to comment on new policies or initiatives or even participate in the development of solutions to problems. Hoping they will take ownership, but they don’t.

We now know, however, that it is possible and far more productive to turn this process upside-down.

People and communities can develop their own initiatives and call their own planning processes, like meetings inside the community run by local leaders, where we can support them, if needed, by participating in their processes. We need to be keeping our hands off the steering wheel.

Here is a last story of a practice that understands this principle:

Indigenous people behind the camera:

Valuing local knowledge and building resilience, horizontal linkages and global voice

This is the story of how indigenous farmers in India, Peru and other countries are using video technologies to document and revive local knowledge, to enable and facilitate their own form of knowledge-sharing and solidarities, and strengthen resilience for the future.

Millet is a staple food crop first grown by our earliest ancestors. Millet is valued for its nutritional value and ability to endure long periods of storage (it remains fresh for 30 years or more). However, the Green Revolution in India has resulted in subsidised rice flooding local markets, and making it less financially viable to grow millet, altering diets in the process. In North East India, it is undergoing a revival with the help of community video processes: young people from the Khasi Hills documented the know-how from their local elder, on video, and engaged the younger generation in learning how to harvest the elder’s small plot of millet. This small act has led to a striking revival of millet-growing in the village and from only two families growing millet, every household now cultivates this crop.



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Growing millet isn't just culturally symbolic, it enables local farmers to challenge the dominance of industrial-scale mono-culture, re-take control of the local food system, and provide food security for their families. Millet is grown through Jhum cultivation. This is the traditional rotational agriculture practiced in the region which communities believe regenerates the forest and enables farmers to grow up to fifty crop varieties in one field. Millet provides many of the proteins, vitamins and minerals lacking in rice. As a slow burning carbohydrate, it provides a more filling meal for hard working farmers and unlike rice, which requires up to 3000 litres of water per kilo produced, millet has the ability to flourish in drought prone areas without irrigation, and without the need of fertilizers.

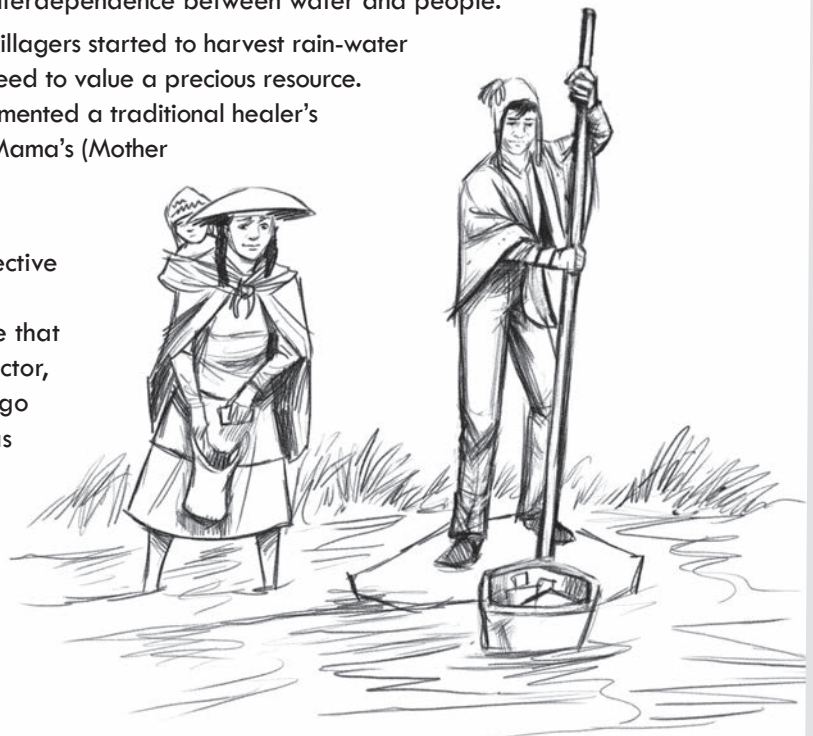
Our approach, known as participatory video, is based on Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and focuses on supporting individuals to grow in critical consciousness to act in the world around them. In the case of the Khasi Hills, the video project has led to a programme, funded by the Indian government, to promote traditional agricultural practices across the North East region; supporting the training of indigenous youth in participatory video to enable them to document and share knowledge on food and culture.

In Cusco, Peru, Andean communities are facing increased seasonal drought: the glaciers, their main source of water, are melting at rapid speed due to global warming. When the springs dry up at these altitudes, there is no alternative but to leave the village and migrate down to the towns and cities. One of the responses to this was a participatory video project, initiated to highlight the importance of nurturing the village springs. This led to the revival of an important annual ritual to clean up and celebrate the springs, following a five year ban on such "pagan activities" ordered by the Mayor. At the ritual, village musicians play and sing to the springs, brightly woven clothes are worn by dancers to honour Mother Earth and the invasive water-sucking plants around the springs are removed and replaced with indigenous trees and local medicinal plants. Ritual has restored the interdependence between water and people.

As a direct result of the video project, villagers started to harvest rain-water from their roofs as they remembered the need to value a precious resource. Another video project followed which documented a traditional healer's plant knowledge, in celebration of Pacha Mama's (Mother Earth) healing power.

We have dozens more examples of participatory video as an open and collective process where people come together to engage in a conversation around an issue that is important to them. There is no one director, scriptwriter or producer. Everyone has a go at using the camera and contributes ideas to shape the video. The participatory process is built on these four cornerstones: participation, reflection, empowerment and action, and this is recognized and appreciated by the indigenous peoples we work with.

Local facilitators guide others through that process, and the process is as important as the video product, in many cases even more important. The focus on collective engagement is what generates the power to act. In Peru they call participatory video 'seeing beauty', because through it they are respecting and honoring Pacha Mama. Participatory video has been a process towards respecting and acknowledging their local knowledge, their ways of seeing.



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Global participatory video programmes have been designed to bring indigenous peoples together to learn and support each other across borders, to help them feel less isolated, and inspire them to value their knowledge. Through building resilience, traditional communities can choose to resist external, destructive forces, and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Many of our indigenous partners face the loss of culture and changes in traditional land use and traditional foods, disappearing knowledge, young people moving to the cities, health issues like diabetes, illegal logging and mining on their lands, violence and militarisation by the state, intolerance of traditional and spiritual beliefs.

Community screenings create safe spaces to witness diverse perspectives, reflect upon the possible solutions, and galvanise collective action. Participatory video promotes locally-led change since it reveals and amplifies local solutions.

Video screenings and dialogue events are attended by groups of all generations drawn from across the surrounding areas. The local team organises events that integrate participatory dialogue, video screenings, and group discussions, concluding with commitments to respond and take action in their respective communities.

In the Philippines, communities expressed their amazement at learning about other indigenous peoples from around the world. They expressed how video technology has created spaces for 'meeting' other indigenous peoples with common issues such as climate change, and common challenges such as safeguarding the land, culture and resources.

This has made a big impact in the numbers of young people they have managed to mobilise. By valuing local knowledge, participants' sense of identity and power has grown, they feel strengthened and empowered to make a difference at community level; which in turn leads to these stories being documented and shared in international arenas, where they also have an impact.

Community members, trained as participatory video facilitators, travel afar to train others. Irma, a local herbalist and gourd carver journeyed from her village in Peru to facilitate video projects for the Kuna in Panama; and Raymundo, an alpaca herder from the high Andes, facilitated projects with the Comcaac in northern Mexico. Jemimah, a young Maasai from Kenya, helped women from neighbouring pastoralist tribes articulate the issues facing them as a result of climate change.

Our practice is 'each one teach one', and we support trainees to pass on what they have learned to other indigenous groups: to bring people together to share solutions and to build mutual support and solidarity. Participatory video is enabling the surfacing, strengthening and expression of indigenous voices. These communities are empowered to make a difference locally, and be heard globally.

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Find out more: www.insightshare.org

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