

Video lets villagers **make their voices heard**

Communities in **Malawi** are using video as a tool to make their voices heard by policymakers. Because the video can be played back as soon as it is recorded, villagers can practise, rehearse their presentations, and critically review them.

Then, their representative can present their case at crucial meetings, reinforced by the video statements from villagers. Through this process, communities discover new skills: researching, analysing, expressing themselves, making presentations, negotiating and team building. They become self-confident. Women speak up, even outside their communities. Spokespersons find out who to meet with, and what they need to do to become part of decision making. Villages get together to plan around common needs. And, their representatives become accustomed to reporting back. Proven in Malawi, these dialogues are now spreading to **Sierra Leone, Vietnam, Ghana** and **Uganda**.

Promoting dialogue between rural communities and policymakers

All too often policy decisions are made on issues that affect rural people without their views being heard. But this has changed in Malawi. Since this project took off in the mid-1990s, villagers have learned how they can present their views to government officials at different levels. Using video lets rural communities watch and listen to themselves and to critically review their statements before presenting them to government and policymakers. But it doesn't stop there. The village representatives, who speak at the regional or national forum and present the video statements, also use video to report back to their village members on the policymakers' response.





Recent work by ActionAid in Malawi and Sierra Leone has kept up the interaction and dialogue between villagers and the government. But they've also formed alliances among villages. Information put together by one village is shared with surrounding villages, and alliances are formed based on their common needs.

This approach can be used across all communities and sectors. In fact, it shouldn't be restricted to one particular sector because it aims to help marginalised communities to put into words their priorities and solutions, and these often cover more than one sector.

A growing success

By 2003, ActionAid and local government staff in Malawi had helped 20,000 rural people to learn how they could work together and set up a dialogue with government. One village alliance in Malawi grew quickly to engage about 10,000 people. They were involved in putting together a presentation made to the local authority. The presentation and the government responses were filmed and the video was shown back in the community.

Some issues put forward by the villagers and the local authority were too costly, or too technical (a bridge and a road to give access to local markets, hospitals and schools), for the local authority to take on. The alliance, together with local authority representatives, had to take their case to the national government in Lilongwe.

Commitments made by donors and the national government at this high-level meeting were recorded as an audio-visual report back to the participating villages. In the meantime, the initial village alliance had grown to 20,000 people.

What accounts for this success?

Using video has broken down communication barriers - such as reliance on written reports and use of English as the dominant language.

Communities now plan and mobilise resources based on identified common needs across the whole district rather than just their own village.

Both staff of NGOs and local government, and communities have gained new skills. NGO and government staff can now facilitate research and record and edit video. Communities have acquired skills in analysis, self-expression and presentation, negotiation and team building.

This has led to increased community self-confidence. For example, women now speak out even outside their communities and are represented in decision making at all levels.

Both NGO and local government staff, and the communities they work with, now know who to link up with at the district level. This helps them understand how the district government operates and how decisions are made.

A few problems remain

This approach focuses on helping the rural poor to engage with government. So it ought to be popular with the villagers that participate – as long as the process is facilitated properly.

The facilitator - usually from an NGO or local government - who helps the community express their needs and make the videos, has to be good at working with people, but also needs technical skills in video production and editing in the field.

The attitudes of staff in government departments and NGOs, including policymakers and those providing front-line services, also need to change. These people need to be able to facilitate this kind of process, helping rural communities to put into words their visions and, most of all, to be able to respond in the right way – something that requires changes in thinking, resources and organisational culture.

For more information

For further technical information go to the RIU online database at www.researchintouse.com/database and type in **FRP48** or email riuinto@nrint.co.uk

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