Participatory Video (remote, online)

Participatory research methods for sustainability – toolkit #2

Participatory Video (PV) is geared towards fostering dialogue around a shared issue. Videos developed with smartphones and similar devices are created by participants as a tool for communication and reflection, which can support many different steps along a participatory research journey. Videos communicate the participants' perspectives, while the integral group-based learning process creates a space for critical reflection, solidarity-building, skills development and the inclusion of less literate participants. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the method has recently been adapted for online, remote facilitation, which entails ethical challenges and time commitments, but can effectively support communication across social and physical distances.

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Participatory Video (PV) is a method that involves supporting individuals in a group setting to co-produce videos. It is a community development, research and advocacy tool that has recently been adapted for online, remote facilitation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Marzi forthcoming). As with the in-person methodology, an online PV process is geared towards fostering dialogue around a shared issue. During the process, smartphone videos are created by participants as a tool for communication and reflection. PV captures situated viewpoints, while fostering intra-group communication, peer-to-peer learning and skills development. PV also enables participants to communicate their ideas to an external target audience, which may include communities in other areas, policy-makers, or scientists.

PV can support many different steps along a participatory research journey. In the early stages, PV may be applied to support the co-creation of video-based funding proposals or the development of group plans (box 1). Further into the research process, videos can be created by participants for project documentation and reflection purposes, or for participatory monitoring and evaluation (Lemaire and Lunch 2012). Towards the latter stages, PV could be used to support dissemination of "best practices" or to communicate results and lessons learned (Richardson et al. forthcoming). In these ways, video-making by participants can support both internal and external communication processes within a research project.

The remote facilitation of these communication processes and the possibility for online PV workshops is especially valuable in the context of an increased demand for remote interaction between research partners and communities. This approach emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and is likely to gain traction in future, due to a variety of efficiency and cost-related benefits. Remotely facilitated, online PV also makes sense with regard to reduction of unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions. Further, it allows for greater flexibility in terms of how and when participation takes place and can enhance the accessibility of workshops for those who cannot easily travel, or have time/availability constraints. These online adaptations have only become possible since the growth of smartphone and internet technologies.

Procedure

The following description assumes online delivery and remote facilitation of PV workshops. There are many valuable, existing resources pertaining to in-person PV activities (going back to Robertson and Shaw 1997) that can be adapted to the digital space.

Before starting a PV process, several steps should already have taken place including:

1. co-initiation of the participatory process, whereby a core team of researchers and community partners agree on research topics and objectives,
2. consideration of purpose and appropriateness of online PV (and associated communication platforms) as a method, in relation to the research objectives and context,
3. a formal ethical review should be undertaken, including the design of an informed consent process,
4. stakeholder mapping and recruitment of core participants.

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Initial workshops integrate icebreaker activities to help people get to know each other and gain confidence with the online environment and tools. The early sessions should also include discussion of expectations and *Co-created Guidelines for Cooperation* (Richardson forthcoming), whereby the group members co-define a basic code of conduct. This activity allows facilitators to draw attention to ethical and legal issues around the creation and sharing of videos.

As part of an online PV workshop process, a short (individual or group) video-making task is set before each live session. For accessibility and inclusion purposes, smartphones and associated apps tend to be the primary operational training tools, but computer-based programs can also be used. The videos are either uploaded to a communication platform (always ensuring that privacy settings and consent processes are in place) and viewed asynchronously in advance of a workshop, or they can be watched synchronously during the workshop. In the process, facilitators support participants to develop their knowledge about video-making. Guided practice, collective reflection and peer-to-peer feedback processes are key. The different practical tasks should be designed to support inclusion and conversational exchange on the specific research topic (e.g., effects of climate change in the community).

When participants have developed the necessary competencies, they work together on planning and creating a video that can be shared. Facilitators support group discussion and decision-making around the purpose, core message, story-line, target audience and communication style of the videos. Participants share ideas and decide how to tell the story (e.g., who to involve, which locations and shots to use) and facilitators support with planning and consideration of ethical issues. Clips and drafts are reviewed collaboratively as part of an ongoing workshop process.

Remote facilitation of editing with online groups needs to be carefully adapted to the particular needs, aims and situation of both the project and the individual participants. They might edit videos individually, work together in small (offline) groups, or collaborate online. Alternatively, participants' footage might be shared with a nominated editor. Collaboration and participation can be practised in different ways, but interactive feedback cycles are central to supporting any participatory editing process and workshops for collectively reviewing edited footage should be part of the process.

Skills and resources needed

In terms of requirements for *facilitating* an online PV workshop, one needs to determine the most appropriate language for the workshops and organise translation support if necessary. Reliable internet connection, a suitable place from which to host online workshops, a smartphone and (if possible) a computer with video conferencing capacity, are important. In terms of skills, facilitators need to develop competencies with the relevant online communication platforms, basic video-making and editing.

BOX 1: Remotely facilitated Participatory Video (PV) proposals: *Make it Grow*

The *Make it Grow* project provides an example of how online, remotely-facilitated PV can support processes of co-design and planning within a research/sustainability process. The *Make it Grow* (University of Sheffield) team collaborated with (mainly rural) non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community based organizations (CBOs) in Zimbabwe. Community groups were supported to develop skills needed to create PV proposals using smartphones (figure 1), to pitch projects to address local food security issues. Online communication platforms (including *Zoom* and *Whatsapp*) were used to host a workshop series, with each learning group meeting every week for approximately three months. After the video proposals were created, participants were supported to promote their proposals through online screening events. Researchers facilitated impact pathway assessments and conducted reflective evaluation interviews with the community group participants. Several projects won start-up grants and raised capital through online crowdfunding. After an implementation period, PV was again applied to support monitoring and evaluation activities. In sum, the online PV workshops supported participants to communicate, learn, document and gain support for their own "sustainable food" ideas.

MORE INFORMATION:
www.makeitgrow.org

FIGURE 1: Videostandstill of online PV participants from Kufunda Village, Zimbabwe, creating their own video proposal.

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Experience working with groups, ideally in the same geographical context or area of practice as the participants is desirable. A commitment to social inclusion and active listening is essential.

With regard to requirements for *participating* in an online PV workshop, participants need access to a smartphone (at least one per pair/group), internet connectivity, an editing app (free) and email (or similar e-communication) account. Basic competency in accessing the communication platform of choice is required, but other skills will be developed during the PV process. Workshops should be scheduled according to the availability of participants, to maximise participation in scheduled sessions. In terms of intentions, there should be a general interest in and willingness to create and share videos as well as a commitment to peer support and ethical conduct.

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Strengths and weaknesses

Key strengths/benefits:
- supports communication processes across (social/physical) distances,
- shares participant perspectives,
- facilitates critical reflection through the collective review process,
- builds skills and capacities of benefit to participants beyond the duration of the project,
- shows practices, interactions and contextual information less easily conveyed through other formats,
- travels and can be more accessible than written reports,
- democratises media production and "voice" in the research process, supporting inclusion of less literate participants/partners.

Key weaknesses/challenges:
- strong possibility for unrealistic expectations,[1]
- digital literacy and digital access issues affect who can participate most effectively, leading to some voices becoming more powerful or dominant than others,
- cameras might result in self-censorship by participants,
- participant anonymity (most likely, but not necessarily) lost when appearing on video, posing ethical issues exacerbated by viral/sharing possibilities of video,
- not all devices have the same capacity for running apps and storing files, etc.,

- commitment of resources and time on part of researchers and community-based participants can be considerable and finally,
- participants may decide to create a video unrelated to the original research aims.

References

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1 Researchers can mitigate this risk by taking time during the co-initiation and informed consent phases, as well as in the early workshops, to facilitate conversation around hopes and expectations (see Richardson forthcoming).

In this series, we aim to alert *GAIA* readers to useful toolkits for participatory research methods for sustainability. If you would like to contribute a toolkit description, please contact **gaia@oekom.de**.