

# Culture, community development and representation

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**ABSTRACT** *Culture*, as Worsley has argued, tells us not only who we are, and what is what, but what is to be done. In this broad sense, *culture* as 'a design for living' has been central to *community development*. This article summarizes competing approaches to the role of *culture* in *community development* in general, before focusing, more specifically upon the varying uses of *community media*. *Community media* can be used to disseminate 'development' messages from the top-down. And conversely, *community media* can be used as tools for *participatory action research*. The article concludes with a case study of the use of *video* as a tool for *community participation* and *empowerment* in *Burkina Faso*.

## Introduction

Culture tells us not only who we are, and what is what, but what is to be done, as Worsley has argued so persuasively. 'It supplies a project, a design for living.' (Worsley, 1984, p. 43). Community development, in the post war period of the fifties and sixties was centrally concerned with culture, defined in these broad terms, as a 'whole way of life', a set of behaviours and values. Critics, on the other hand, have argued that community development was too focused upon cultural aspects, and placed too much emphasis upon changing attitudes at this period and not enough emphasis upon economic aspects, and underlying structural constraints (Dunham, 1970).

This article starts by setting these debates in context, focusing upon community development and culture in this broad sense – culture as a way of life – a design for living – before moving on to explore the contemporary role of culture, as creative expression within society. Community media (including visual expression, music, radio, dance and drama) have been promoted within and as part of widely differing development agendas – as top-down initiatives to change peoples' attitudes and behaviours, and conversely, as participatory strategies for cultural and political transformation, from the bottom-up (Melkote, 1991). This bottom-up, more interactive approach, to the role of cultural expression within development is illustrated in the second part of the article, through the use of video, as a tool for community participation and empowerment.

## Community development culture: background debates

The United Nations (UN) defined community development, in the post war period, as 'a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation' (UN, 1955). In the first instance, the aim was to promote integrated development and self-reliance, especially focusing upon rural communities, (with the subsequent addition of programmes geared towards urban communities). The British had developed the concept through colonial programmes for basic 'mass' education and welfare, and integrated development was subsequently incorporated into the policies of the UN and other powers, including the US.

Typically, community development programmes set out to transform behaviours and values. Cultural change was seen as a key element in strategies for economic development. This related to a wider emphasis in the sociology of development of the post war period on the key importance of diffusing modernizing attitudes and values, if 'developing' countries were to follow the path of the 'developed' West (Parsons, 1951; Weber, 1958).

The rationale for US foreign aid support in 1962 was that:

The project of successful Community Development is not only wells, roads, schools, other community facilities, and new crops; it is, more properly, the development of stable, self-reliant communities with an assured sense of social and political responsibility. (Miniclier, 1969, p. 9)

In the context of the Cold War Period, one of the major purposes was specifically to counter the threat of communism (for example in India, Malaysia and the Philippines).

Worsley has described the Indian Community Development Programme, a key initiative launched in 1952, as part of this ideological offence, to respond to the threat posed by communist revolution. Indian farmers' problems were to be addressed through education and extension, to promote rural democratization and development – but without tackling 'such sensitive problems as caste, land ownership, and labour relationships' (Worsley, 1984, p. 146).

It was perhaps unsurprising, in view of such experiences in the fifties, that the UN representatives from the USSR and Eastern Europe began to voice increasing criticisms, which have been paraphrased as follows:

You are dealing with marginal questions in community development . . . Aren't you avoiding the basic problems of social reform – land reform, administrative reform . . . the people on the bottom are never going to benefit from what you are trying to do? (Dunham, 1970, p. 88)

Community development of this type, as one African critic has expressed it, even more forcefully, was geared towards getting 'backward people in the right frame of mind' which in practice meant providing unpaid labour for

development projects, the benefits of which were disproportionately appropriated by the already powerful. And it meant, more generally, persuading the less powerful to accept the legitimacy of existing social relationships (Manghezi, 1976).

The critics of community development, like the critics of modernization theories, argued that there should be more focus on tackling economic, social and political constraints, and conflicts of interest. In Britain in the seventies, the government's own Community Development Project (set up in 1969) concluded in parallel vein, that far from being due to a 'culture of poverty amongst the poor in deprived communities, the problems in their areas reflected structural changes in the economy outside the control of the local community' (Butcher *et al.*, 1990, p. 98). This called for fundamental economic and social changes at national as well as local level. Local community initiatives had only limited potential, it was argued, and local struggles needed to be linked into wider pressures, including pressures from the labour and progressive movement. Whilst these arguments in Britain were controversial, to say the least, there was considerable agreement as the economy faltered during the international recession of the early seventies, that jobs and the local economy were central to community development. There are, of course, parallels here with the increasing focus upon income generation, in community development strategies in the Third World. 'Unless community development contributes *substantially* to economic development it is doubtful whether it will be given much weight in future national development programmes' it was argued (Dunham, 1970, p. 89).

It might have seemed, then, that cultural issues were being squeezed to the margins of the community development agenda in the seventies and eighties. The reality, however, has been more complex. Both cultural issues in general, (in the sense of culture as a way of life/design for living) and culture in the sense of community media, *have* remained on the development agenda – although generally with lower profiles. As the next section discusses, community media have been used for the transmission of development messages from the top-down. And, alternatively, community media have featured in more participative approaches to development from the bottom-up.

As Jayaweera points out:

'People also need access to, and desire to share power. They want to participate in the making of decisions that shape their well-being. They want freedom to articulate their views and perceive a right to receive and transmit information.' (Jayaweera, 1989)

## Culture in community development: competing perspectives

Just as community development itself has been approached in diverse ways, based upon competing perspectives, so have issues around consultation and participation. How far do consultation exercises actually legitimize the

agendas of decision-makers? To what extent are decision-makers prepared to hear communities' own agendas? And how do communities develop agreed agendas to meet their needs?

One aspect which has been particularly problematic has been the focus on the importance of starting from 'felt needs' – as defined by communities themselves. Classic community development texts such as Batten's work on the Non-Directive Approach have placed key emphasis upon this (Batten, 1967). But the reality has been more complex in practice, as Henderson, amongst others, pointed out:

'(P)eople obviously cannot have a felt need for something they do not know exists; whether it is the results of vaccination, the benefits of a balanced diet, the organization of a co-operative, or the existence of contraceptives' (Henderson, quoted in Dunham, 1970, p. 90).

The answer, according to Henderson, lay in the promotion of '*an educated and persuaded "need"*' (Henderson quoted in Durham, 1970, p. 91). This sounds convincing common-sense. But when the educators and persuaders are much more powerful than the communities that they are working with, (typically the case in so many community development and especially rural development programmes in the Third World) then 'education' and 'persuasion' can easily slide into manipulation and direction from the top-down.

This has been precisely the criticisms of some of the programmes which have used community media, to transmit development messages. Melkote, for example, has argued that until recently, the mass media, in general, have 'served largely as vehicles for top-down persuasion or as channels to convey information from experts/authorities to the people' (Melkote, 1991). Attempts to increase the participation of the rural and urban poor, by using alternative media, and local cultural forms, such as traditional theatre, mime, song and dance have not, by themselves, solved this dilemma. Traditional cultural forms can, after all, also be used to attempt to modernize peoples' attitudes and behaviour, from the top-down, in highly prescriptive ways.

Describing the transformation of traditional drama forms in Nicaragua in the early seventies, for example, Weaver explained that plays were developed to include didactic points:

'subtly yet tellingly introduced into the dialogue. The evils resulting from alcoholism, or the shame of being illiterate when one has the means to learn how to read and write, are brought out by "good" characters. Virtue is rewarded'. (Weaver, 1970, 45).

However useful the messages, this typifies a top-down approach; an approach which Freire, has described as the 'banking' approach; pouring information into peoples' heads, as if they were empty vessels, passively waiting to be filled (Freire, 1971).

The alternative which Freire developed, focused, in contrast, upon a more liberating educational approach, to develop peoples' critical consciousness

(conscientization) through active participation and dialogue. Freire's thought has been of immense influence, in developing alternative, transformatory approaches to community development in general, in the Third World and in the industrialised North (see, for example, Hope and Timmel, 1984). When Freire's writings were published and discussed in English, in the early seventies, there was particular interest, as his ideas resonated with contemporary debates, including (despite his own specifically gendered perspective) debates about consciousness raising and liberation, through the Women's Liberation Movement (McLaren and Leonard, 1993).

Here, however, the focus is upon the ways in which Freire's ideas have also influenced alternative approaches to culture, and to the arts, in the more specific sense of culture, rather than upon his work on literacy *per se*. Boal's work on Forum Theatre in the Theatre of the Oppressed, developed in the sixties in Latin America (and drawing upon Freire's work) provides an influential example of the development of drama, as a tool for developing critical consciousness (Boal, 1979). In Forum Theatre, Boal explored familiar local issues to create a dialogue between actors and audience. The dramatic process involves halting the play, and inviting the audience to argue and propose ways forward. Boal's work has been a key influence, both in the North and the South. Ngugi's work has provided another influence, too, in this case exploring the development of drama as a process of political conscientization and social change (Etherton, 1982).

These alternative approaches make connections between knowledge and power, and the role of critical knowledge in enabling the relatively less powerful to deconstruct the mechanics of power, providing tools with which they could more effectively challenge the powerful.

## Participation, representation and communication

Participation, representation and communication by people at the margins of civil society, their relationship to government and to development agencies and the ways in which such communications and representations are received and responded to, can be seen as lying at the heart of development, but also as we have already suggested, as its continuing point of failure.

Participant communication implies the public's involvement and management of communication systems, including decision making and dissemination. Conversely, however, the danger is that participation in representation becomes simply a rhetorical term, effectively empowering those with the loudest voices. Perhaps the most important question is about the effectiveness of projects which intend to operate through a participatory approach. To make an open and transparent assessment of the relationship between intention – the rhetoric – and the different constraints, requires monitoring at all stages of the process.

As Peter Oakley has argued:

Eventually all statements on participation come down to ideological origins . . . authentic people's participation in development projects is only authentic where the participation is central to the project's activities and where the analysis employed by the project sees participation as essential to the empowering of local people. (Oakley, 1995, pp. 160–161)

Although both politics and culture – ideology and custom – will effect who participates within a community, and who will not, transparency about these issues between project designers and participants is always crucial.

Wright makes the point that:

If people are the agents of research, then they, with the help of a researcher, in the role of facilitator, set the agenda and define the issues to be investigated (Wright and Nelson, 1995)

To set agendas, people need to research and prioritize. These concepts of people participation in research and decision making have been around in development circles since the early 1980s. Participant Learning Approaches (PLA) and their precursors, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participant Rural Appraisal (PRA), form the basis for much current thinking about participation in contemporary development (Chambers, 1992; 1994). The common concept, at the base of all these approaches, is about the cultural validity of the information researched within the local context, at the time. Participatory research or learning approaches encompass a number of activities which enable participants to discuss the socio-political and economic power structures within the community, including issues of gender, age and economy (Braden, 1998).

Much of the information produced and shared through these activities may not be new to the participants, but it may have been implicitly known by some, rather than explicitly available to everyone.

## **Participant Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participant Learning Approaches (PLA) in practice**

People use maps and diagrams drawn on paper or in some places, in dust on the ground, or undertake group walks and discussions along the routes familiarly taken to the shops, to grazing grounds, or to fetch water. Women and men describe the landscapes from their own perspectives. The information gathered in this way is presented by the participants in each group to others in the community. Differences emerge and solutions can be discussed. From a global perspective of the whole locality, they are able to discuss who owns which land, who produces what, who benefits. As a result, different views of the social, economic and environmental world of the local group is built up by the participants and the focus of the later participatory research activities is developed and facilitated on the basis of these perspectives. The layers of the onion of local relations, conflicts, wealth and poverty, can gradually be peeled back, and objectively discussed.

In common with most human interactions, PLA and PRA methodologies, are as effective or as ineffective as their facilitators. This would not, however, be a complete picture of the hazards of participatory research. The use of PRA or PLA is also determined by the socio-political contexts in which they take place, and in which the information that they throw up is received. As PRA/PLA has become more widely used, it is sadly the case that the socio-political macro context upon which the effective use of the results of participatory research and learning depends may be forgotten, or at least forgotten so far as peoples' continuing participation is concerned.

Participation without representation and communication is an illusion. 'Practising representation' (Braden, 1998) of a genuinely participatory nature needs to begin at local level, and to be continued, to enable people to address the various layers of authority which affect their lives – from those within their own neighbourhoods, through to local authorities and policy makers. Practitioners need to address issues of who is being represented and who is listening. Villages are not homogenous, conflict-free communities. They can be divided by class, caste, gender, wealth, power and education. The concept of representation addresses the issue of rights and justice, and places the issue of who is participating, as well as who is hearing, within the frame of participatory learning.

Participatory approaches raise concerns about the degree of bias brought by an outsider to a project context. The risk is that the presence of the powerful outsider will evoke the kind of responses that the people suspect they will want to hear, or that they hope will influence them,<sup>1</sup> with the result that neither party is able to learn anything useful. The programme officer, or the community video team, going into an area with technical equipment, inevitably bring a cultural message along with them.

Whilst taking account of these factors, the intention behind these participatory approaches is nevertheless to address the culturally specific nature of information. This highlights the importance of rapport between the outsider and local people, accepting cultural difference, and the complex points of view that this implies. The goal is to avoid dominance and bias between outsider and insiders, and between the different social and gender groups within the participant community. The central idea focuses on talking with people and learning with, and from them, rather than on a relationship in which questions are defined by the outsiders alone.

Participation is a multi-dimensional undertaking in any development context. As Edwards says, quoting Schon, the reality which faces all practitioners in the field can be compared to a 'swamp' and in the swamp *lie the problems of greatest human concern* (Edwards, 1995). We may continue to debate about how political and cultural relationships affect participation, and the degree to which it is possible or desirable for outsiders to intervene in these relationships. But we must also be concerned with sustainable processes of representation.

1. For example, they may simply see the chance to offer 'a shopping list' of needs.

The New World Information Order, including world-wide television, offers representations that are neither necessarily truly representative nor communicative, and yet the technology itself is not intrinsically culturally specific. There can be a symbiotic relationship between the participatory uses of video in community development, and the critical readings which communities can and do then make of world wide television. Participatory community uses and familiarity with the medium may offer a stepping stone for communities, enabling them to reclaim the technology, transforming and extending the languages of production.

## Using video to retrieve and represent

At one level, 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 resonance with Lacan's idea that image is outside Self and that identity is constructed through language (Lacan, 1978). Lacan suggested that identity can be strengthened (or weakened) by interactions with others. Identity, in this sense, is a construction which reflects the language of the Other. Hearing oneself talking at one remove, on a video screen, for example, can offer the opportunity for objectivity about Self, for retrieval of one's own language, which is afforded by few other media. The adjustments that we can make to our own identity also result from our observations of the reactions of others. Effective communication is learnt in this way. But particularly, in the case of those at the margins of civil society, the experience of being ignored or belittled may have been historically negative. Practising representation using video between groups such as different age or gender groups, within the same community, can be a first step towards reversing this negative history.

Video can enable under-represented people to use their own visual languages and oral traditions to recuperate, debate, and record their own knowledge. These recordings offer the possibility for additional uses by excluded people – to enter into negotiation with others. The recordings and discourses of women – who in some contexts are excluded from representation in the more public debates of male fora – can, for example, be transformed from representations in the private domestic spheres into representations in the semi-public or public spheres. The filmed image can offer this new and distancing authority.

Video has frequently been used to record the PRA process. But video has only recently been seen as part of the process itself. Yet video, like other participatory research tools (maps, transect walks, ranking exercises, and so on) can be seen as a means of focusing and of enabling people to see the everyday in a new way, objectifying discussion and points of view, while adding emphasis and attention. It can enable communities to critically analyse their own structures, problems, conflicts and decision making processes.

## A case study from Burkina Faso

One group in north-east Burkina Faso decided to explore the problem of finding water in the village through a small drama. This had been planned with the villagers on the preceding day and was rehearsed, and recorded, using the edit-in-camera technique, the following morning, and shown back on the same afternoon.

The starting point came from a story told by a group of women about fights which had taken place around the only water pump in Tarbandin during the dry season (when all other water sources in the river beds were dry). Women who had been queuing all day in the hot sun, at the pump, started to squabble and ended up fighting each other.

During the long discussion, under a huge tree, which is the meeting place in Tarbandin, men discussed this story. Achilles, the water engineer, asked the villagers what they had done in the past, before the water authority built tube wells. Some of the men began to describe how they had divined water, and how they had dug communally for wells. Meanwhile, Adiara worked with a group of women, and asked them how women in the village could raise a problem in the public village forum. She was told that women would appeal to a husband in their own compound, and ask him to take a particular matter to the chief, and that the chief would then give permission for a village meeting to be called, at which the husband could raise the topic.

From these discussions, Adiara asked the women to act out a number of scenes, to tell the story about the fight at the tube well. The women rehearsed three scenes. In the first, women are waiting in line at the tube well. Hot and tired, they are beginning to get cross with each other. One with a small child on her back, right at the end of the queue, tries to persuade others to let her go forward. A fight develops, several dozen women, screaming and slapping. The woman with the child gives up and sets off back to the village with an empty calabash. In scene two, she arrives at her compound. Other women are there, brushing the ground, preparing food at the doors of their huts. The woman goes to each group asking for just enough water to give her child a drink and a wash. All refuse. The woman stands in the centre of the compound and appeals to all the women. The problem is the same for everyone. The men must be persuaded to take action. A third scene shows three women persuading one of the men in the compound to get some action.

The women's group showed their three scenes to the men under the tree. Achilles asked the men, 'What would you do?' The men thought about this and said they would call a meeting. They would probably then send a delegation to the water authority to try to persuade them to build a second tube well.

'What if they don't agree, or say it's too expensive?' asked Achilles. The men thought again, and talked once more about the old days when they built their own wells. They explained that there is a problem, in any case, with the

existing tube well. When the pump goes wrong, the top of the well is too narrow and they cannot take the pump off, themselves, to maintain it. This led to a discussion about the possibility of the men building a well themselves, to their own design and then asking the water authority to simply supply the pump. Three more scenes are developed and rehearsed by the men.

In what will become scene four of the film, the husband who has been lobbied by the women in the women's compound, addresses the chief, who is sitting under the Boa tree and asks him to call a meeting, because the shortage of water is making the women fight. The village drum is used to call the meeting and more men gather under the tree, with a circle of women standing listening behind. The men decide to send a delegation to the water authority. Scene five takes place in Achilles' office; a table and chair set up some distance from the tree. Achilles appropriately plays his own boss. He explains to the village delegation that there are just not the funds for a second well and pump. The delegation leaves, downcast. What do we do now? someone asks. 'In the past we built our own wells. We could still do it. Someone amongst you has the know-how. Let the men who know show the others. What is more, we could make a well which will allow us to fit a pump which we can maintain and repair ourselves. This will cost less, and we should ask the water authority to meet us half-way and find us the funds for the pump, when we have dug the well' says the chief.

When everyone had seen these scenes rehearsed, the filming began. Women took roles – the crowd at the water pump, the sweepers – in the compound scene; the men – at the village meeting. It seemed that everyone had a role. Everyone was going to tell the story. The scenes were shot in sequence, beginning at the beginning and ending at the end of the story. There was much discussion about where individual scenes would begin and end. If the young mother was last seen setting off back to the village with an empty calabash, where would she be seen next? Let us see the compound next, with all the women sweeping and cooking, then she can come in and start to tell her story and beg for water . . . and so on. Everyone enjoyed it. It was hard to hear the show played back because of the laughter, but everyone knew the story by then.

The production had already passed through four participatory stages:

1. The group village discussions with the facilitating team about water in general and about well-building in the past.
2. The story planning facilitated by Adiarra with the women and Achilles with the men. Both the facilitators had introduced key questions: Adiarra had asked, 'what would you do next?'; Achilles had asked, 'what did you do in the past?' These were simple questions, which provoked thought and produced the opening for the villagers to think about choice.
3. The rehearsal, by the women for the men, gave the previous discussions a narrative form and placed the whole exercise in the familiar realm of story telling. Traditional story telling takes two principle forms; the

account of why things are as they are; and the account of morality, or how things should be done.

The form offers the possibility for invention, but is traditionally part of the cultural identity of the tellers; not, that is, of the outsiders. The continuation of the story by the men, in rehearsal, developing the story stimulated by the women, can be seen both as entering the realm of invention, but also as returning to traditional morality, and, perhaps, as re-taking power over their own lives. They looked for their own solutions when rejected by authority, and saw their roles as negotiators, who had the ability to criticize the water authority's previous solutions and to propose their own. Their own solutions took into account knowledge gained, or reassessed, indigenous knowledge, about their own well-building capacity.

4. The recording and performance produced a retrievable record of the story, which was embellished in performance and involved the whole village as extras, in the same way as much traditional story-telling involves embellishment, and the audience as a participatory chorus.

The case study from Burkina Faso draws upon experiences of using community video in the South. But community video has, of course, been developed in the North too. And increasingly, community video is being used as part of initiatives to explore the interconnections between the two, between community development in the North and community development in the South, in the current global context.

In Britain, a group from Devonport Action Against Poverty in Plymouth used video to explore the causes and specific characteristics of poverty in their area. They drew maps to define the area they familiarly felt to be their neighbourhood. They showed how it had been divided by outside interventions; a large central area of the town had been taken over by the Ministry of Defense for the naval dockyard; specific streets had been selected for Single Regeneration Budget money; all without the participatory understanding and consent of local residents. In this context, the Devonport group of local residents and volunteers was able to use video to research and build a local agenda and consensus amongst people in their neighbourhood. They took their tape to other forums, including Oxfam's National Assembly and the People's Conference at the G8 Summit in Birmingham (May 1998).

## Conclusions

Recent discussions within the field of participatory development, have examined how culturally dominant languages, economies and forms of government have restricted the ability of the poor and as well as the governments of poor countries, to determine their own development.

Working from the evidence, across a wide range of disciplines, about cultural bias and cultural identity and the ways in which meaning is constructed, the proponents of the participatory use of video have looked at both the

technological possibilities, and the limitations of the camcorder. They have argued that the camcorder can be used to learn about and to teach the construction of meaning, its retrieval, and its testing, with local people. While at the same time, it can offer participants, the possibility for representation in wider spheres. Crucially, it offers the possibility of making transparent the transformation of people into images and sounds in the recorded media.

The limitations implicit in the use of the camcorder relate to the training and the equipment required. While the equipment used for these processes need not be expensive, it is critical that those operating this think of themselves as facilitators, with video skills, rather than as film-makers with development skills. The traditional hierarchies of director, camera person etc., must be abandoned if local people are to take over the direction of collecting their own research material. All too often, participatory video simply reproduces the dominant forms of television developed in the commercial sector. There is a need to challenge this and indeed to challenge the priorities within development thinking, more generally, towards a greater concern to enable local people to gain experience of self-representation.

Community video can be a valuable tool, promoting more interactive forms of communication. Communities can use it to represent themselves more effectively. Participatory research can become more dynamic and more culturally specific in terms of its visualization. And participatory community uses and familiarity with the medium may offer a stepping stone towards reclaiming the technology, transforming and extending the languages of production. Community video can also be engaging and enjoyable – an important factor, if people at the margins of survival are to be persuaded to give of their time, in order to participate.

This is not to suggest that video offers any kind of quick-fix, short-cut to participatory development and community empowerment. We must also be concerned about sustainable processes of representation, as part of continuing strategies for development, addressing issues of accountability and transparency, as well as of responsibility that must extend to all the players in the development process, including development programme workers and local and national governments. When it is not possible to meet social needs in specific situations, for instance, the reasons for refusal also need to be transparent. This is key, if communities themselves are to be empowered to envisage alternative strategies.

These concerns apply to participation in development, more generally, too. Community participation has enormous implications for the ways in which the roles of developers, development organisations and government are defined. We have suggested that participatory research and representation using video can offer ways in which the voices of even the least literate, even the least powerful, can be heard. That still leaves the question of who is really prepared to listen?

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