
Article:
Richardson, P. orcid.org/0000-0003-4518-1055, Tolange, D., Plummer, A. et al. (1 more author) (2023) Disrupting patterns at the end of an agricultural research project: experiences with community cinema and participatory video. GeoHumanities, 9 (1). pp. 273-285. ISSN 2373-566X

https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566x.2022.2115935

GeoHumanities

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgeo20

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To cite this article: Pamela Richardson, Deepak Tolange, Alexandra Plummer & Brigitte A. Kaufmann (2022): Disrupting Patterns at the End of an Agricultural Research Project: Experiences with Community Cinema and Participatory Video, GeoHumanities, DOI: 10.1080/2373566X.2022.2115935

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2022.2115935

Published online: 21 Oct 2022.

CREATIVE ENDINGS FORUM: PRACTICES AND CURATIONS

Disrupting Patterns at the End of an Agricultural Research Project: Experiences with Community Cinema and Participatory Video

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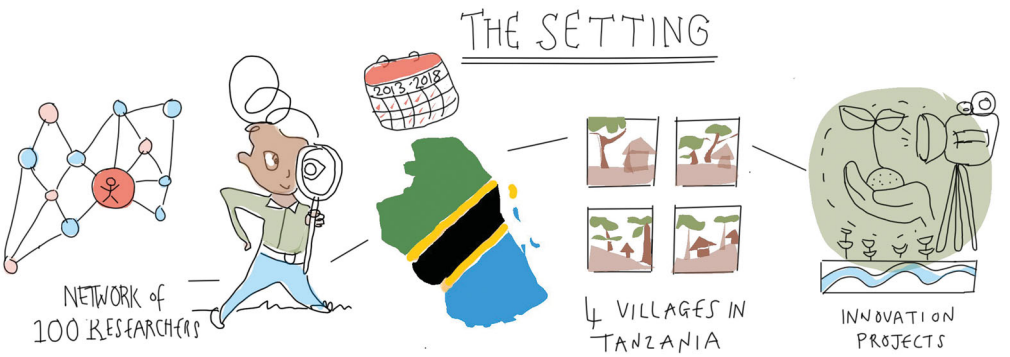

FIGURE 1 The project setting.

Initial submission, October 2021; revised submission, May 2022; final acceptence, May 2022.
Published by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

A large international Agricultural Research for Development Project (AR4D) funded by the German government operated from 2013 to 2018 in four villages in the Morogoro and Dodoma regions of Tanzania. It involved fourteen organizations, about one hundred researchers and non-governmental professionals, as well as several hundred farmers across the four sites, all contributing towards innovation strategies that aimed to "safeguard food security through the use of science, technology and knowledge transfer" (Trans-SEC 2021). By 2017, more than 600 households had participated in the project and hundreds of visits, meetings, workshops and training activities had taken place. As one of eight project partner institutions based in Germany, we[1] used participatory methods that enabled farmer groups to develop their own innovations, which included soap-making and a bicycle rental enterprise (Richardson-Ngwenya et al. 2019). In the closing phase of the AR4D project, our institution had the task of facilitating knowledge exchange processes within and between the project villages and we also hoped to support a critical feedback process to find out about how the process of participatory action research (PAR) had been interpreted and experienced by the villagers. We wanted to support such a feedback process in order to learn from this experience, to inform future participatory research strategies (Figure 1).

Over the preceding four years working in these research-saturated[2] partner villages, we observed that some *problematic* patterns of interaction between the project staff and the farmer-participants had become firmly entrenched (Goff 2001; Hayward, Simpson, and Wood 2004). For example, gatekeepers and incentives were important elements of the "pattern" shaping fieldwork interactions between researchers/facilitators and farmer-participants (see Figure 2). Firstly, the project protocol recommended that visiting researchers should contact designated individuals (i.e., gatekeepers), who included paid project field officers, government extension officers and village leaders. These gatekeepers would then make contact with selected community members and request that they attend a particular project event. Secondly, it was stipulated by the project consortium that villagers should be financially compensated (i.e., given a payment or incentive) for attending such events, in the region of €2 each per session.[3] This is a common practice that fosters transactional[4] relationships, especially in AR4D projects, the ambiguous ethics of which is a much-discussed theme among geographers involved in research in the Global South (Hammett and Sporton 2012).

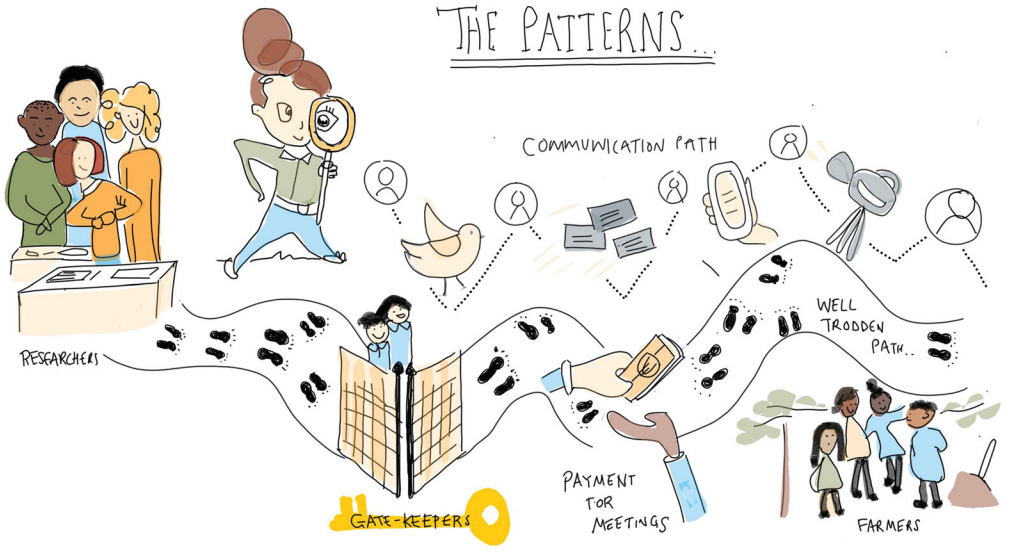

FIGURE 2 The patterns established through use of gatekeepers and incentives.

As a result of the combination of these two fieldwork practices (gate-keeping and payment), we had observed that the same well-connected and centrally located villagers tended to be ever-present at meetings and that some participants seemed to be highly motivated by the money gained from showing up, quite fairly under the economic circumstances (cf. Janes 2016; Kincheloe 2009). Through PAR, we (and other project partners) had attempted to appeal to the intrinsic motivation of participants by giving them some autonomy within the innovation process. Nevertheless, it remained unclear to us if villagers were engaged in the project for learning and/or benefitting from the food security innovations, or, if they were simply interested in attending the meetings for the financial incentive. These observations contrasted with the fact that feedback from participants about the project itself tended to be very positive (Mieves, Ngwenya, and Kaufmann 2017); we suspected that there were different ideas and perceptions about the research interactions between the villagers and ourselves. Moreover, we realized that in a setting shaped by past experience of AR4D as transactional, extrinsic (i.e., monetary) motivations and expectations were ongoing, even when more participatory and collaborative interaction modes were attempted by scientists.

In the remaining sections of this paper, we detail our practical attempts to disrupt these patterns of extrinsically motivated interactions through: (a) avoiding well-trodden communication paths between researchers and farmers, that always involved the same "gatekeepers," and; (b) renegotiating the project protocol of paying participants (i.e., providing a financial incentive) to attend meetings/workshops. We integrated these logistical disruptions into a creative and participatory methodological process involving Participatory Video (PV) and Community Cinema (CC), described below.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES TO DISRUPT THE PATTERNS

During the closing phase (Year 5) of the project, our[5] mandate was to facilitate knowledge exchange (between farmers/villages) and dissemination of project results. We built on our previous PAR activities where participatory visual methods had been used, but this time organising reflection and feedback sessions involving video-making workshops and CC events. CC, or "Mobile Cinema," is ideally a volunteer-led, film screening in a public space, with no entry fee (Argenti and Signa 2014). Participatory video (PV) is a method of involving a group or community in creating their own videos, ideally to the extent that they conceptualise, plan, direct and shoot their own short video (Milne, Mitchell, and De Lange 2012). The PV workshops supported participants to communicate their perspectives and also to take action on what they wished to communicate with their videos and to whom. The process of collaborating to make the videos also encouraged creativity and reflexive conversations, as participants planned, created, reviewed and shared their own videos.[6] The audio-visual format was conducive to enabling the expression of embodied and vernacular knowledge (Richardson-Ngwenya 2013), as well as fostering the inclusion of non-literate participants (Mistry and Berardi 2012). The CC events provided a community forum in which to engage with innovation-related information, to share experiences of the project and to discuss the information presented in the participatory videos. This methodological approach acknowledges that in the context of geographic fieldwork, creative and co-creative practices, or "creativity as method" (Veal and Hawkins 2020), can lead to interesting

and potentially disruptive forms of representation, intervention and knowing (Hawkins 2015). Moreover, our creative methodological experiment in the final phase of this project embraced the idea that "our creative methods might not only focus on finished products but also what can be learned in the processes of creative doings" (Hawkins 2015, 247). Might these creative methods enable more authentic collaboration and feedback processes to emerge?

To disrupt the established/common patterns shown in Figure 2, the facilitation team first spent some "open schedule" days in the village (getting to know the place, strolling, socialising, etc.). After a few days, they organized informal, open invitation, cost-free, CC events in central village locations; in other words, outdoor screenings of agricultural innovation videos. They invited people that they met in the village, at the shops, and members of farmer groups that they had previously worked with. The hope was that people would attend out of curiosity, rather than out of a sense of obligation or immediate financial expectation. We would wait to see what kinds of invitations, ideas or questions might arise from those who attended the initial CCs, so that the fieldwork activities could unfold more organically, according to participant interest and requests. This aimed to avoid the usual gatekeepers and to open opportunities for some collaborative and creative activities to be invited by participants and/or offered without financial incentives.

In total, three months were spent across three study sites for this "closing" phase of the fieldwork, in Idifu village (in the Dodoma region) and Changarawe and Ilakala villages (in the Morogoro region). Figure 3 shows the activities that took place, which involved community screenings events and both ethnographic/observational and participatory video-making activities.

FIGURE 3 Various fieldwork activities that took place over 3 months in 2017.

Experiences with Community Cinema and Participatory Video

In the following text boxes, we offer six informal, photo-journalistic vignettes, describing memories of fieldwork events that were felt to be significant with regard to disrupting the patterns. Narrative is drawn primarily from the facilitator's field notes, supported by photos and videos.[7]

1. An unexpected invitation

On the day that the field team arrived in Idifu, we take a stroll around to get to know the village and to look for places to organise CC events. After a few hours, a middle-aged man approaches and greets us and, seeing the camera, invites us to take pictures. After some conversation, he asks if we would like to make a video of a ceremony that will take place at his relative's homestead. We accept this invitation.

When we arrive at the homestead a woman is grinding millet; a few others make a fire to cook ugali and in the corner of the compound, a dozen boys sit inside a hut. The boys start to sing, dance and then march off towards the Baobab forest. We are told that the ceremony is for the boys' circumcision and the initiation ritual is called "Jando."

Women are not allowed to see the ritual so Mwambe, our translator, stays behind while I (Tolange) follow with the camera. For half a day, I interact with the group using guess-work, gestures, facial expressions and a few words of kiSwahili. Later in the week, I will put together a film for the group to keep as a memento and to view together at the first CC event…

2. The first Community Cinema event

FIGURE 4 First Community Cinema event in a classroom in Idifu village, Dodoma region, 2017.

While waiting for the laptop to charge using a solar powered battery, we edit together a short video about the Jando ceremony. We decide that screening this video to the community could be a good entry point for meeting more farmers who have been involved in the project. The families that had been part of the ceremony are invited, as well as other community members we've met over the past few days including some of the farmers who had previously collaborated with Richardson and team. We tell everyone we invite that the film screening will be informal, free and open.

(*continued*)

The first Community Cinema event is not easy. Although everyone was invited to join at 6:00pm, villagers arrived after 7:00pm. A few people start to complain that they don't like the venue (a school hall); they ask for chairs. I (Tolange) feel a little lost in translation while the group discusses what to do. Finally, after much debate and confusion, a classroom is agreed upon and everyone moves.

There are now around twenty-five people of different ages; mostly men, some women and a few children (Figure 4). The Jando video is the main attraction and after seeing it once, it is replayed multiple times at the audiences' request. I (Tolange) then share a photo presentation (about my Journey from Nepal to Germany), to also share about personal experiences. Then, we all watch some agricultural videos. The attendees choose three more videos to watch from our computer and the first cinema event concludes with a short discussion. Everything seems to be going well after the initial delays and the effort feels worthwhile….

Then… some attendees ask if they will now receive their payment. We are frustrated, as we had had tried our best to communicate that this was a "free" and open event.

3. Take two: Trying again with the Community Cinema

The family that hosted the Jando ceremony ask us if we can organise another screening event at their house. We agree, but this time, they tell the family - emphatically- that we cannot provide "incentives" (specifically, they say that they cannot provide chairs, mattresses, money, or other demands).

At this event, participants help with adjusting the setting for better projection of the videos. Some sit on the floor and some stand (Figure 5). By the end of the event, there are around 80 people present. There are no complaints, demands or requests for monetary incentives. This second CC event feels exciting and positive.

FIGURE 5 Community Cinema event at the home of Jando ceremony family in Idifu village, Dodoma region, 2017.

4. Farmers become filmmakers

FIGURE 6 Participants in Changarawe shooting their video.

FIGURE 7 Participant showing another how to operate a video camera, during a PV workshop.

(*continued*)

*PV workshops are organised for six farmer groups that had been involved in the project over a few years and had implemented their own innovations (*Figures 6 and 7*). The PV-making workshops are optional and uncompensated; drinks and snacks are provided during a break, but no monetary incentive. The workshops result in the farmers making their own short videos about their respective innovation projects including soap-making and improved cooking stoves. The groups take advantage of the opportunity to produce their own videos in various ways. One group presents their problems and requests further assistance in a video (*Video 1*). Other groups document their success and advertise their business to other farmers (*Videos 2 and 3*).*

Participatory Video Link 1: Maize shelling machine innovation group https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7J4_vQKElU&t=16s.
Participatory Video Link 2: Pyrolizer group
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNtMAdJUNb8.
Participatory Video Link 3: Improved cooking stove group
https://youtu.be/_JB8dXgg07Y.

5. Community Cinema sparks village debate

*After the participatory videos are complete, another CC event is organized. Around two hundred villagers gather at this screening and the crowd grows steadily as the videos are shown (*Figure 8*). With the "farmer-filmmakers" now in the audience, the heightened sense of involvement and participation is palpable. Unlike the first cinema event, there are no complaints about the lack of chairs, location or monetary incentives. Instead, with very little facilitation, the conversations flow around how farmers could utilise the information in the videos to improve*

FIGURE 8 Final Community Cinema events include screening six videos made by farmer groups from Idifu, Changarawe and Ilakala.

(*continued*)

their livelihoods. Attendees debate questions of innovation success and failure. A young woman remarks how she is inspired by the film from Changarawe. "The land in Changarawe is green"; she says she is now determined to plant trees in Idifu. A man comments that he did not know that maize cobs can be used to make fuel (which had been demonstrated in a video made by one of the other farmer groups). An elderly woman voices her liking for the video about improved cooking stoves and how it saves trees. She now wants to implement this at home. With participants sharing their experiences freely and exchanging ideas, there is a real sense that the patterns of the research process are being successfully disrupted… for the evening.

(UN)CRITICAL FEEDBACK FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

Whether a result of miscommunication, or cultural norms, during the PV workshops and the feedback meetings, the team found it difficult to generate critical feedback from farmers about how the project had operated and how the innovation processes had been facilitated. The transactional quality of the feedback meetings and of many other previous project interactions had created a situation in which participants perhaps felt compelled to behave "cooperatively," in order to benefit from the cash incentive. However, the PV workshops, local video-making and CC events allowed the participants to be more creative (and less direct) in communicating their critical feedback. They used the video-making opportunities to their own advantage; this allowed the facilitation team to change the pattern of providing a monetary incentive to participants, as the video process and outcome was incentivizing in itself. Critical feedback was heightened during the final four CC events, when the participatory and locally produced videos were screened. During these events, the audience members addressed and conversed with each other, in relation to the videos; often bypassing the facilitators. During these conversations, critical remarks and feedback flowed more easily. In these settings, we heard farmers criticising the project communication channels and of disappointed expectations around project assistance. Villagers who had not been directly involved in the longer-term project attended the CC and provided insight into local (but external) perceptions of the project: on one hand, non-project members were eager to get involved, but on the other, they criticised those involved for not taking enough personal responsibility. The dependency of the project-affiliated groups on external support was also snubbed and some voiced that the project groups were "not serious."

It was troubling for researchers to learn about these criticisms only at the closing phase of the project. But in part, this was a positive outcome of "disrupting the patterns"; only when established gatekeepers did not control meeting attendance did such conversations take place. The criticisms voiced around problematic dependencies (i.e., project workers and inputs coming from outside) reminded the team of the underlying power relationships and historical legacies that were shaping the AR4D project as a whole. Within this context, disrupting the patterns in the ways that we did led to some positive experiences and created momentary spaces for more authentic (or, less transactional) collaboration, reflection and feedback.

CREATIVE LEARNINGS

Presenting Tolange's photo journey and the freshly-made local films, as well as some agricultural videos selected by the attendees, sparked the villagers' interest in both the team and in the process of using video to communicate their knowledge. CC events thus provided a situation for farmers to experience the value of video as a communication tool and motivated them to get

involved in producing their own (participatory) videos about their innovations. The PV and CC process enhanced communication and exchange about the project innovations, both within and between communities and allowed for participants to learn from each other. The groups were intrinsically motivated to produce videos that served their own purposes, such as videos for promoting their own businesses or requesting support. Removing the monetary incentives implied that people's participation in the PV workshops and/or CC events was driven by non-monetary motivations, including skills development, innovation-related learning, enjoyment and social exchange, business promotion, and perhaps other reasons related to expectations of benefit.

Although attending and making a video about the local circumcision ceremony was totally unexpected, off-topic and unplanned, accepting the invitation led the team into creative encounters that opened up space for community members to approach the facilitators (rather than the other way around). Following the invitations from villagers-to-facilitators, rather than going through established project gatekeepers, also meant that non-project members got involved in the creative activities, with different motivations. This was the case when the team accepted invitations to make a video with salt collectors in Idifu, and also with a group of women who processed baobab fruits, and then again when invited to make two further ceremonial videos in Changarawe (after villagers there saw the films made in Idifu). Although the above were not participatory videos, these tangential, co-creative doings meant that people became interested in the PV and CC events - and the field team - on different terms. The creative activity of video-documentation proved to be highly appealing to some villagers and it led to new kinds of encounters and new modes of representation in the context of our fieldwork. However, the lack of monetary incentive by no means indicated that participants did not *expect* or *hope* for some form of capital benefit; nor does it imply that we think participants should *not* be compensated financially for collaboration in such projects.

CONCLUSIONS: DISRUPTING THE PATTERNS?

FIGURE 9 Visualisation of our attempts to disrupt patterns of interaction between researchers and participants.

In many other settings, PAR approaches have sparked the intrinsic motivation of participants from the outset (Restrepo, Lelea, and Kaufmann 2020). However, our experience in Tanzania showed that participatory approaches, creative methods, and reflexivity of facilitators does not automatically lead to active participant engagement and collaboration, particularly in research-saturated areas. Over four years, we found that the historical legacies of AR4D projects in the partner villages—working with established gatekeepers and offering cash payments[8]—had created an entrenched pattern of interaction that was based on transactional relations. The contrasting positionalities of the (highly mobile, sometimes European, usually urban) project researchers and facilitators, vis-a-vis the (also diverse but much less mobile, rural African) participants, also already affected expectations of the project. These legacies, practices and expectations created patterns that affected our capacity to build collaborative relationships and to support critical feedback processes.

After struggling (but trying) for four years to build non-transactional collaborations in the partner villages to co-develop innovations within a PAR framework, we were on the one hand eager to learn about the communities' reflections and feedback on the process and on the other hand, we wanted to give the participants a more active role in communicating their innovation-learning, to exchange with other farmers. These issues were important, given that (a) we had received very little critical feedback up to this point, (b) the project was soon coming to an end and (c) having gone through a four-year innovation process, there was undoubtedly new knowledge and participant expertise that could be of long-term benefit to the wider community. To support more open, critical and reflective communication processes, we attempted to establish a different interaction mode, hence disrupting the patterns. Changing the researchers' mode of engagement with participants by following invitations rather than approaching the gatekeepers, as well as engaging people in creative, participatory, video methods, proved to be significant. *In some moments,* but most especially during the CC events where participants expressed that they gained new insights and inspiration through the video-mediated interactions with different farmer groups (as we convey visually in Figure 9), the changes we made opened up a space to support more meaningful and effective reflection, feedback and sharing processes.

NOTES

1. Authors 1 and 4.
2. In addition to the activities of 100+ researchers in this AR4D project, these four villages had been selected by the Tanzanian project partners on the basis of contacts and relationships built up through previous project interactions.
3. This is equal to the daily pay rate of a farm worker.
4. Transactional relationship defined here as interaction between people, driven by motivations and expectations often involving monetary incentive.
5. By the fourth year (2017) of this project, DITSL's cumulative fieldwork time amounted to about 20 months.
6. In this project, the farmers did not perform the editing, but the process was participative to the extent that the facilitator (Author 2) used the group storyboards to put together an initial draft of the video and then consulted with the group (sitting together around a laptop) to cut the final videos and add the titles, music, etc.
7. Originally (co)created by Author 2.
8. Not to mention top-down, or non-participatory forms of agricultural extension activity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank all the members of the participating farmer groups in Tanzania for their active participation in the action research process. We are also grateful to Carin Mwambe for her work as field assistant/translator during this stage of the fieldwork, and to Julia Cain for her suggestions in relation to this article.

FUNDING

This work was supported through the project, "Innovating pro-poor strategies to safeguard food security using technology and knowledge transfer: a people-centred approach" (Trans-SEC) (#031A249F), funded through an initiative for research on Securing the Global Food Supply (GlobE) by The Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Germany (BMBF) in cooperation with The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany (BMZ).

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