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Escaping from the visual: story of a failed Participatory Video experience in rural Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the limitations of participatory video (PV) starting from a failed implementation of this method during fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on gendered community water management in two rural villages in central Tanzania that spanned from April to December 2022. The initial eagerness of the participants to take part in the collaborative video turned into an escape from the visual, and the promises contained in a range of debates on the use of PV did not hold. Participant engagement, community empowerment, inclusion of marginalised viewpoints, and the transformative potential of PV struggled to perform in this case study. Eventually, the use of video stood in the way and emptied the participatory process of its ability to release its transformative potential. Moreover, the complexities of my positioning in the field, oscillating between different perceived roles, influenced the PV process and played a role in people's gradual withdrawal from the visual. These are the themes around which this paper revolves, with the aim of contributing to the body of literature reflecting on knowledge co-production in contexts characterised by unavoidable and systemic imbalances and barriers.

Keywords: Participatory Video, Visual Methods, Tanzania, Women, Failure

1. Where did the participants go?

It is early afternoon in Pandambili, a small village in central Tanzania. I am standing in the afternoon sun with the camera in my hands and I am wondering what has just happened. The shooting of the collaborative video with the members of the local community water organisation I am working with has just finished and in just a few minutes the participants have vanished around the corner of the closest house.

Participatory video (PV) came as the last activity of some longer ethnographic fieldwork developed over eight months (April to December 2022). Access to the field was mediated and supported by LVIA, an Italian NGO that has been active in Tanzania since 1983[1].

[1] Information retrieved on the NGO's website (https://lvia.it/paesi/tanzania/#toggle-id-1) that retraces the activities of LVIA in the country.

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PV was part of a set of different qualitative methods that included interviews, photo elicitation, and participant observation that were employed to investigate the gendered uses of community water management in Chamkoroma and Pandambili (see Figure 1 for an overview of the research area), two rural communities in central Tanzania. The participants in the PV were the elected members of the village community water management committee, who after discussing internally whether or not to take part in the videomaking activity, agreed and decided how to use it. The objective that they identified for the video was first to show the criticalities of local water management, and then to propose concrete solutions based on their experience in daily water management. The target for the video were the District officers of the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Agency (RUWASA). This is because District offices play a key role in rural water management as they are the place where strategic decisions are taken about the planning of interventions and the allocation of resources among the villages under its jurisdiction. However, they often do not have enough resources to organise field visits in the villages to meet with local water committees. The video could have then contributed towards filling this communication gap and facilitating the flow of information from the village to the District.

During the video shooting session, participants were curious about the camera and thrilled to watch themselves in the camera display, shy at the beginning and increasingly confident with the passing of time. However, at the end of the shooting session such emotional charge and involvement quickly disappeared. The catalysing tool of video seemed to have overpowered the rest of the knowledge production process and the PV was reduced to a mere performative act that ended with the switching off of the camera.

In fact, I had just enough time to remind the participants of the next meeting in which a first version of the video was going to be commented and – if needed – modified, and they were leaving in a hurry saying they were expected to attend a funeral. I did not yet know that this hurried escape from the video activity would have prolonged throughout the next steps of the activity and that from that moment on it would have been impossible to meet again with the participants to watch the video together, discuss it and if needed, modify it. In fact, even when we met in the village streets or I contacted them on their phones, the people that a few days before had enthusiastically looked at the preview of the videos on my little camera display would politely agree to meet again but then they would never show up. Again, and again.

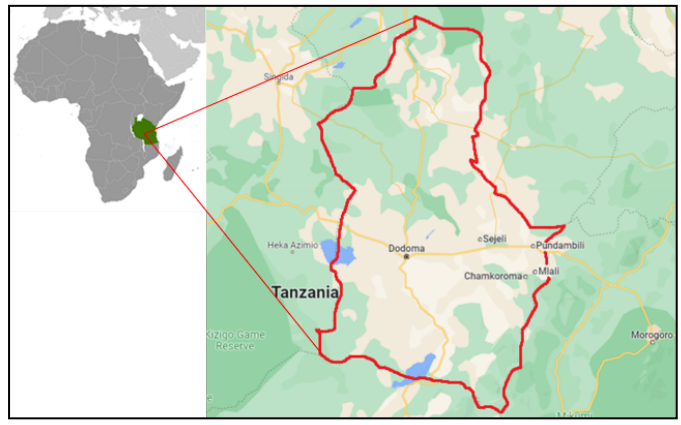

Figure 1. Map of the Dodoma region indicating the location of the research area and the villages included. Source: Re- elaboration of the Author.

As a result of this continued fleeing, it was impossible to run any feedback session or screening of the final video.

Alongside the surprise and confusion for this dynamic and the feeling of failure, what I experienced was disappointment towards some of the promises that the majority of the literature around the use of video as a research method makes. Literature on PV often describes it as an effective tool for engaging people (White, 2003) (Shrum et al., 2005), empowering participants and communities (Bery, 2003; Chiu, 2009), including marginalised points of view (Braden, 1999), stimulating deeper reflectivity (Takeda, 2021),... Starting from an experience of failure, this paper reflects on some of the limitations of participatory video arising from more recent critical literature, in which the celebratory conceptualisation of PV as a catalytic tool in knowledge production processes (Walker and Arrighi, 2013) is discussed and problematised.

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2. The promises of the visual

The visual occupies a prominent role in the discipline of geography at all levels including education, training and research (Tolia-Kelly, 2012). Videos together with maps, images, photos, diagrams, etc. are extensively used in geography (Rose, 2003) and constitute a tool to produce, present and convey convincing meanings and interpretations on the different ways through which the relationship between human societies and the lived environment plays out. Furthermore, its use of multiple languages is seen as holding a stronger expressive capacity than strictly verbal means and it is therefore conceived as able to increase the participation and engagement of audiences (Jiang and Kobylinska, 2020). In the PV process here discussed, this magnetic power of the visual failed to work and instead of benefiting from its power of attraction, it faced an opposite effect of repulsion.

Being interested in feminist and decolonial approaches on the way in which knowledge is produced, what fascinated me about PV is the fact that it is often described as able to enable participants to rearrange their position towards the knowledge production process in a unique way (Russell, 2007). In fact, the use of video de-links the ability to communicate and share ideas from reading and writing skills (Braden, 1999) making knowledge production more horizontal and able to integrate marginalised points of view (Batallan et al., 2017). Coupled with participation, collective videomaking is presented as an effective method to foster empowerment for people and communities that would not normally be able to have their voices heard (Low et al., 2012). This is because participatory approaches such as PV have their roots in the development practice rather than in academy (Jupp, 2007), meaning that they were inspired by the desire to have a positive impact in the places in which they were employed. PV also benefits from the engaging power that tools like cameras have in captivating people's attention and curiosity (Shrum et al., 2005). The so called "fun factor" (Milne et al., 2012) arising from the use of these tools - that in some cases have never been used before by the participants - is supposed to contribute to a more active and continuous participation of the people involved. The strong interactive nature of the video tools is therefore thought to foster engagement and boost participation, making research more accessible, enticing and impactful. Video is also said to "provoke opportunities for reflexivity" (Takeda, 2021) within the research process. Looking at the recording of your face, body, home or environment should in fact offer the chance to take a step back and see these elements from a certain distance, as something that can be discussed and deconstructed in this way.

3. Mapping motivations behind participation

In PV – just as in all participatory methods – participation has been conceptualised as something unstable that relies on how the research process is able to consider the subtle, multi-layered and ever-changing motivations of the people involved (Mistry et al., 2016). These motivations can be influenced by several local dynamics and be more or less evident and controllable. One is connected to the more or less consolidated ways in which participating communities usually interface and understand the presence of outsiders in their environment. In the case of this research, my presence was embedded in the village of Pandambili in rural Tanzania that has its own history of contact with external actors. Specifically, the community has had regular contacts with international NGOs, missionaries, businessmen (usually white and western) that offer different opportunities, such as the implementation of development projects, the distribution of free clothes and other items, or again investment proposals in the local sunflower oil production. Clarifying my role of researcher was therefore difficult. Tensions linked to my positionality in the field also arose from the power relationship that occurs between researcher, assistant and participants. Such relationship within this "triple subjectivity" (Caretta, 2014) is one in constant evolution and may create unexpected and problematic dynamics (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012) (Macfarlane, 2022). In this scenario, the willingness to maintain good relationships with people perceived as potential benefactors (people like me), may have created pressure to

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comply with the researcher's proposals and, in this way, saying "no" to the PV was not an option. The occurrence of a particularly busy time for the community is another dynamic that shaped participation. Due to unforeseen delays in the fieldwork, the presence on the field was postponed by one month and so it coincided with the weeks right before the rainy season. During this time, the community is usually busy preparing the crop fields as most people depend on a rainfed agricultural system and this reduces the time available for other activities. According to Christina Mvungi, the local assistant who accompanied me in the research process, the fact that the participants were invited and expected to prolong their participation after the shooting of the video to discuss and eventually modify it was not clear to them. In fact, they considered their involvement in the activity finished with the turning off of the camera.

Mapping the dynamics that have contributed to shaping local participation or better, non-participation, in this PV experience, it can be useful to understand the context characteristics and ground the video activity on the field. In fact, such stratification of motivations contributes to building situated forms of participation that emerge from praxis (Takeda, 2021; Barreteau et al., 2012; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013) that influence how successful different research methods can be.

4. The video as an end to itself and the importance of positionality in PV

Initially, the gradual disinterest that turned into the fleeing of participants from the PV made me question the solidity of the "temporary connection" (Jupp, 2007, p. 2838) with the community that the research assistant and I had carefully nurtured and invested in since the beginning of the fieldwork. This is because by definition participatory methods rely on the willingness of people to actively contribute to the research process and such willingness is rooted in the ability of the researcher to build trust and mutual understanding (Mistry and Shaw, 2021) and navigate the abovementioned multifaceted motivations that shape participation. However, as suggested by Jupp (Jupp, 2007, p. 2841). I tried to engage productively in the face of such difficulties and to put them into a methodological perspective. What happened has called into question the common idea that visual representations such as videos can be considered a universal language that have an innate catalysing power in participatory approaches (Young and Barrett, 2001, p. 143). In fact, the use of an engaging tool such as the video did not shield the research from the problematic aspects of participation itself and resulted in turning the PV into a little fun activity for the participants and a source of frustration and sense of failure for me. The idea that videomaking could strengthen the involvement and interest of people in the research materialised only partially. Although the video certainly contributed to the arousal of curiosity and involvement of the participants, it was actually perceived more as something that was an end in itself, rather as something that could have a transformative potential. Such potential was linked to the fact that the video in question was aimed at reaching the administrative level of the District, with which communication is often difficult. The activity abruptly ended before its potential to stimulate reflexivity could be explored and before it was possible to see "how the participants themselves change" throughout the PV (de Lange and Mitchell, 2012).

In the light of what emerged in the mapping of motivations shaping participation in the PV activity presented in the previous paragraph, the unfulfilled promise to act as a catalyst towards the research activity and topics only tells part of the story. Considering the difficulty to navigate the multiple and sometimes conflicting positionalities (Sultana, 2007) that as researcher I found myself engaging with throughout the fieldwork is therefore key (Rose, 1997). Conducting research in a context characterised by significant axes of difference and inequalities of which I was acutely aware[2], definitely played a role in how the PV unfolded.

[2] This awareness was manifested through "material and symbolic differences" (Sultana, 2007, p. 377) that mediated the relationships with the members of the rural communities.

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It happened several times during the fieldwork that people approached me asking if I wanted to invest in the local economy, finance their children's education, build a well, etc. This made me aware that in the eyes of some of the community members I was often positioned not only in reference to my research activity, but also as a member of those "wazungu[3]" implementing development projects and charity missions. The fact that an NGO known by the community and active in Tanzania for years mediated my presence on the field, made the distinction between these perspectives on my positionality more complex and simultaneously true. Therefore, agreeing to participate in an activity (such as the PV) proposed by someone that is perceived as a potential bearer of positive change to the community was the only option. What the participants felt free to adjust in terms of participation was manifested in their degree of involvement in the PV which did not, however, coincide with my expectations in this regard.

5. Conclusions

Reflecting on my experience in the use of participatory video has brought to light the limitations and criticalities that this method has once confronted with the dynamics of real fieldwork. What emerged echoes and brings to the field the more critical views that literature on PV is developing and calls into question the celebratory narratives around the method (Milne et al., 2012; Jenkins et al., 2020; Buckingham, 2009).

In Pandambili, the visual did not act as a bridge between knowledge production and social action. It did not facilitate but rather became something that stood in the way and emptied the participatory process of its power to redefine what is possible to achieve through it (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2006) and of realising its transformative potential.

Moreover, such failed participatory video revealed how much this method is linked to the situated characteristics and fragilities of the context in which it is used. The fact that, just like other participatory methods, PV relies on the active contribution of the participants on what we researchers understand as "field" but for them is the place in which their everyday life develops and unfolds makes it vulnerable to the multi-layered and ever-changing motivations, impediments and private commitments that shape people's participation. In the case here presented, the researcher's expectations, faith and enthusiasm in the method did not match the participants' motivations and availability in participating in such a demanding activity. The multiple nature of my positionality in the field oscillating between different perceived roles, also influenced the PV and played a part in the gradual escape from the visual. Lastly, the cultural and language barrier may have not been adequately overcome as the implications of what it meant to be part of a PV activity were perhaps not clear to the participants from the beginning.

This story has shown how precarious and complex the union of the visual and participation can be. Ultimately, it can be read in conjunction with the body of literature that questions the universality of the sense of sight characterising Western knowledge production systems (Oyěwumi, 2005) especially when conducting international fieldwork in places with histories of colonisation that are far from the centres in which hegemonic narratives and discourses are produced.

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[3] In Tanzania, the Swahili term "wazungu" (plural of "mzungu") is used to indicate white people. For more on the term see Edmondson, 1999.

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