

Cathy Vaughan: Responses to additional questions

Below are some thoughts in response to some of the questions that appeared in the webinar chat bar:

Why did you make a film? Was the process and result of the photo project not enough to talk with authorities and decision makers concerned?

We (the participants and I) decided it would be useful to make a short film (which can be accessed at <http://www.mightyfilms.com.au/tokpiksa.html>) to disseminate findings of the project more widely than was possible through the Photovoice process alone. The Photovoice process enabled us to engage with local and provincial authorities and decision makers, but this was primarily at the time that the project was running, during the exhibitions and shortly thereafter. A film on the other hand can be used to prompt discussion of the issues for years after, and can be distributed widely to donors and agencies. It was also important for me personally to be able to disseminate some of the findings associated with the research widely in PNG and elsewhere – my thesis is online (can be accessed through LSE) and in libraries in Port Moresby and Goroka, but who is going to read a thesis! I am glad that we committed to doing the film – the participants loved seeing themselves on camera – though next time I'd try to get funding which would enable a more participatory approach (more consistent with the intent of the project).

How is Photovoice different or similar to participatory video?

There are certainly similarities between Photovoice and participatory video. Similarities include the emphasis on people representing themselves and their concerns; the use of visual media to engage participants and their intended audience in debate; and the advocacy potential of the approaches. Both tools have an emotional or affective impact on participants and their audiences. Differences probably lie more in how the methods are used – both can focus primarily on the product (the photographs or video), rather than the process. While participatory video practitioners and the participatory video literature emphasizes the process, having observed one video project recently I can see that the need for people to become familiar with the equipment and the technology/skills for editing, adding sound etc., can become the focus rather than the discussions around the issues that are raised by the method. Mind you, this can also happen with Photovoice – it just wasn't my experience.

Video and photographs both engage the audience – but I wonder if they do so differently. I don't know. Because (even short) films tend to convey a lot of information at once, and introduce a lot of topics, it may be difficult to reflect and think about each individual topic at the time a video is being shown. This doesn't mean that people wouldn't go home and think about and reflect on all the topics that were raised by a film, but I think discussion with the producers of a participatory video after a screening of their film would be quite different in some ways to the conversations community leaders might have with photographers about their

individual photographs at an exhibition. And I do think there is (or perhaps can be) something quite reflective about walking around an exhibition viewing the different photographs and stories. Having said that film can arguably have a great emotive (and therefore motivational) impact. So there are some differences perhaps. I should say I don't think either method is better or more useful than the other – I am a big fan of video – but that they do 'feel' a bit different.

Other differences that were very salient in the past (cost, availability/portability of equipment, community exposure to the tool) are becoming increasingly less relevant with the widespread availability of portable video cameras including in phones.

You mentioned mobile phones and my question is about how technologies have moved on. What potential is offered by digital photography and video via mobile phones and other devices including i-pads and cameras? I guess for these there are questions of accessibility, cost and safety of the equipment? Most youth are familiar with such technologies even if they don't have them, so how do they feel about being issued with disposable cameras?

At the time of data collection in PNG there was very limited mobile phone coverage, and phones and calls were extremely expensive. There was no coverage at all in two of the sites, and very poor (standing on top of a hill with your fingers crossed) coverage in the third. This is no longer the case – there is widespread coverage in much of the country, and lots of young people have phones (if no credit!). However, in PNG for the moment at least, few youth have phones with cameras. This will change of course. In this case study I used disposable as opposed to digital cameras for two reasons – cost and safety. As this project was unfunded it would have cost me too much to have a digital camera for every participant and I felt strongly that all participants should have a camera, that they shouldn't have to share etc. Digital cameras are getting cheaper (and film processing more expensive) all the time, so this probably wouldn't be such a consideration today, (though this does introduce the ethical challenges associated with introducing a relatively valuable resource into a community, and the potential for jealousy, division etc). The second issue was safety of the participants. Participants were somewhat exposed by their participation – another ethical issue rarely talked about – it was a very odd thing to be doing, wandering around the village taking photos. Digital cameras are an asset that few people have access to, and crime rates are high in PNG. I didn't want to put any of the participants at risk of being mugged for their camera. The participants did not feel affronted by being offered disposable cameras, and did not have access to computers to download and store digital images in this case.

The context is obviously changing fast and in many, perhaps most, settings now digital photography and/or video through mobile phones may be more appropriate. I mentioned the work of Ivo Burum on mobile journalism – you can read more about this here: <http://burummedia.com.au> Slightly different intent to his work, but speaks a lot to the potential of participant generated content (images, stories, video) being used for things like programme monitoring and evaluation. There is a lot of work being supported around the world where community members use mobile phones

to contribute to project monitoring – often through sending texts to report of interactions with or outcomes of projects to evaluators. Why not have people produce photos and video too? Could be a very powerful approach to local people monitoring the impacts of projects that are supposed to be benefiting them, and a way of holding implementers and governments to account. Visual content could also be incorporated into monitoring approaches such as Most Significant Change.

Do you envisage some linkages between this approach and Stepping Stones?

I think the two approaches would link very well. Peer groups of older and younger men and women could all illustrate what they perceive to be the most important issues in their lives through photography (and video for that matter), discuss the photographs in peer groups (I think this part is really important – for both Photovoice and Stepping Stones, very much builds on feminist Nancy Fraser’s notion of ‘counter publics’, spaces where people can retreat and regroup and find the right words to express themselves in wider groups), and then share them with the wider community. It would be interesting then to think through how the community as a whole could work through deciding which images to exhibit to say regional politicians. If someone out there is already linking the two approaches for working I’d love to hear about it!

Can you name three most positive points about the methodology? Can you name three of the biggest disadvantages of working in this way?

For me, some of the most positive aspects of the methodology would be:

- potential for positive impacts on participants themselves (research as potentially transformative rather than primarily extractive)
- the emotional engagement inherent in the method. It engages participants, they keep coming back, you build relationships with them over time – I think because they get inspired/angry/motivated/proud... and because it is fun!
- access to perspectives that you would never get in a traditional in-depth interview (where the questions, prompts and probes are still largely driven by the researcher, no matter how unstructured the interview may be).

Challenges I have faced include:

- people misunderstanding what you are doing/have done based on the very wide range of practices people are referring to when they say they are doing ‘Photovoice’. Just loaning a group of young people your camera for the afternoon and asking them to take some snaps that you use to illustrate your report is not Photovoice (in my view), though I’ve seen it referred to as that
- time and cost. If done in depth, it is not qualitative research ‘on the cheap’ and requires quite a bit of energy!
- being able to think through the ethical issues that come up along the way (I think this is true of all participatory approaches). Some can be predicted and have been written about, but others will pop up out of nowhere and you have to be able to be flexible, think on your feet, seek guidance as you go.