

20<sup>th</sup> AMIC Annual conference, Hyderabad, India 24-27 June 2011

## *Engaging the youth in community action: a visual methods approach to HIV & AIDS awareness*

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the findings of a film production project that involved youths in a remote rural community in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. It explores some of the processes and impacts of integrating a visual methods community action project in a local community context while targeting young people in an effort to engage them in a reflective dialogue on HIV/AIDS.

### **Introduction**

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is facing a serious HIV epidemic. The Western Highlands Province, where the film production of the experimental research project discussed in this paper took place, is ranked second highest in HIV/AIDS prevalence in the country, with young people between the ages of 15 and 35 being the most at-risk group. Care and treatment is limited to service providers, leaving villages to deal with the disease on their own. The level of stigmatization within communities is alarming and considering the increasing number of HIV positive people, campaigns need to be not only more actively engaging with communities but also integrating new communication concepts in order to fulfill the needs of today's PNG youths.

This film production project is a component of the *Komuniti Tok Piksa*<sup>1</sup> project, which is both, a research project and community action initiative. Visual research tools are used within an indigenous research framework in order to study behavioural practices, perceptions and needs in regards to HIV & AIDS in PNG. The Ruti village drama film project explores the ways in which visual methods when paired with a community action approach can be used to facilitate social change and to encourage new engagements between researchers and participants and among various community groups.

The project engaged youths who were members of an organized church group. The drama production with the title of *Broken Home* began as an idea proposed by youths who identified the common theme of polygamy and how it links to the spread of the HIV virus experienced in the community. The youths took on the challenge to develop the script, do the casting, act, direct and screen their final product. While the first screening was co-facilitated by one of the researchers, the second and third screenings were done solely by the youths during which they spent time reflecting on their film and on community feedback. The community reaction to the film making process and outcomes has so far indicated an increase in community dialogue and critical reflection on their behavior in regards to HIV & AIDS. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Komuniti Tok Piksa* is Pidgin for 'community talking through the picture'. It can also translate to community talking in parables.

production offered the youths a space to express their ideas which were recognized by the community through the screenings. It re-positioned the youths within their own community as active members and a dialogue was facilitated that cut across a previously difficult and sensitive topic. As a result for the project, the youths have become critical about their roles as advocates now seeking support from provincial groups to continue the use of media within their regional area.

Using an indigenous approach and the creative use of media tools to engaging young members of the community in participating in this project has allowed them to integrate their knowledge of cultural processes in addressing social issues related to HIV & AIDS. The open and flexible approach has allowed participants to voice their concerns and thoughts and to develop these further in collaboration with the researchers. Participatory action research concepts of dialogue and reflection, using local processes set a framework for other projects addressing social issues in the region.

### The Context

According to the PNG National HIV & AIDS Strategy 2011 – 2025, the total number of people living with HIV was estimated at **34,100** (31,000 adults aged 15 or more and 3,100 children and adolescents) in 2009 (National AIDS Council of PNG [NAC], 2010, p. 15). Toward the end of that year, a total of 11, 520 people were estimated to have died because of HIV-related illnesses and 5, 610 children had become orphans. The projections are that HIV infections will continue to rise at a less rapid rate of 1.0% prevalence among adults come 2015 (NAC, 2010, p.16). The trends of the epidemic across regions of the country are not the same. In 2009, the majority of 90% of all new case reports of HIV infections were from Port Moresby and all the Highland provinces; Western Highlands (26.3%), Eastern Highlands (11.2%), Enga (11.0%), Southern Highlands (6.1%) and Simbu (5.7%) (NAC, 2010, pp.16-17).

Despite an improvement in the knowledge of patterns of the pandemic, NAC notes that there is still a lack of epidemiological and behavioural data to steer the national response, specifically in planning for prevention initiatives (2010, p. 19).

*The dynamics of HIV transmission in PNG are influenced by a great diversity of sexual cultures, with different values, norms, beliefs, and practices. The potential for sexual transmission of HIV is heightened by early sexual partnerships, including polygamy, extra material sexual partnerships and inter-generational sex; the exchange of sex for cash, goods and services; low and inconsistent condom use; high levels of sexual violence and rape; mobility; and the use of penile inserts and modifications. (NAC, 2010, p. 19)*

Awareness campaigns in the country have also faced enormous challenges due to these reasons, diversity in cultural and traditional beliefs and modernization being chief among them. Social marketing is increasingly being used to sell HIV & AIDS prevention, especially through mass media product marketing strategies “with very limited success” (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006, p. xvii). NAC has undertaken a number of initiatives to create awareness with many church-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and corporate organisations developing various strategies.

One other major campaign has been the *ABC of HIV & AIDS*. The strategic application of abstinence, being faithful and use condoms is being argued as the cause of a decline in prevalence rates in Uganda (Berry and Noble, AVERT.org). The authors note that a simple key message of *zero-grazing* was

advocated by the Ugandan government who mobilized their population and community-based organizations, utilizing word of mouth to spread the message. The power of donor aid provisions to Uganda (through US AID), had further negotiated the ABC by filtering pro-abstinence as a prerequisite for aid, forcing governments and organisations to promote a saturation of awareness messages throughout the country. Despite those successes, coming from a country almost similar, especially in diversity of cultures and languages, the ABCs in PNG's awareness strategy has faced considerable lack of negotiation with some influential churches being anti-condom coupled with various social undercurrents.

A medium that has shown some success comes through the arts in theatre and television drama. People are appreciating edutainment (informative and entertaining) also because it is reaching a largely illiterate population who might not have regular access to mass media (Corrigan, 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, if the focus is on socio-cultural change, the intervention has to "focus on what is circulating within the social domain, what is shared within the community...which will not change any individual behaviour directly, but it will address the climate [and] set a frame for discussion" (Lie, 2008, p. 293).

Moving away from mass media campaigns, a couple of initiatives sought to use the arts as a means of both awareness and research – innovating the response to HIV. *VSO Tokaut AIDS Awareness Community Theatre Project* is an action research project that trialled community led theatre in rural communities (Corrigan, 2006, p. 5 and Levy, 2008, p.1). The visual quality of theatre defied language barriers as messages were played out to reflect to communities, their realities. Similarly, the approach of *Community Conversations* has been adapted by the national AIDS Council. Dialogues are facilitated within communities to identify the driving forces of the epidemic, specific to local settings (Reid 2007).

The success of these recent research and awareness initiatives has been in its localized approach, appropriation of technology and valuing of community experiences and beliefs as a way of both facilitating the message creation and creation of knowledge among participants. Such approaches are reinforced in a recent literature review (King and Lupiwa 2008) which showed that cultural diversities, sensitivities and fear are delaying the success of the national response to HIV & AIDS

### **The *Komuniti Tok Piksa* project: visual methods and indigenous research**

*Komuniti Tok Piksa* springs from the fundamental idea that sustainable approaches to slowing the spread of HIV and AIDS need to be developed by communities themselves in order to be successful. To facilitate this process, KTP has developed a number of creative research approaches that seek to move beyond the collection and analysis of research data, to involve participants actively in the creation of prevention messages that can be used to educate others in PNG.

Here it is essential to facilitate a dialogue between researchers, participants and communities. Previous prevention messages have often been one-way, not responding to the communities' communication structures and communication needs. While visual technologies are only partially available in PNG communities, they enable – when used appropriately – a responsive process allowing for reflection and dialogue to emerge.

The *Komuniti Tok Piksa* project seeks to facilitate such 'visual dialogues' in the Highlands region of PNG (Thomas, Papoutsaki and Eggins, 2010). The camera whether video or photography is used as a tool to collaboratively produce visual material to research, reflect and eventually create messages for potentially larger audiences. By doing so, the locally specific driving forces of the HIV and AIDS epidemic are discussed and solutions developed at the local level. The visual material challenges perceptions, opinions and viewed collectively prompts community discussion.

The level of participation is determined by the communities, whether they contribute to the visual products by being interviewed or telling their stories or whether they actively participate in taking pictures. Considering the rapidly emerging technologies in PNG communities it is particularly youths that can be mobilized by the use of technology. By engaging actively in a creative and technological process they engage in content and form new relationships in the community. While KTP's approach might be easily defined by the novelty of bringing technology into PNG communities, it is its underlying concepts and processes that allow for technology to be used in culturally responsive ways and in ways that communities determine as appropriate. The foundation for that lies in an indigenous approach to research and practice.

Bringing in new technology into communities that might otherwise not have access to inevitably creates tensions. So does research approaches that do not fit with community approaches. An indigenous approach to research, in our case a Melanesian approach, allows the KTP researchers to ensure that communities have a say in the research process and that they take ownership of aspects of the research process. Understanding communities perceptions does not only require using tools that might provide a better platform for dialogue but also to create a basis for research project to follow the community structure and rules.

An indigenous approach to research values relationships and trust of participants. It takes them on board not as informants but as co-researchers and as significant guidance in the research process. Relationships to each other are acknowledged and form the basis for any action research to continue. Knowledge is regarded as relational (Wilson 2008) and the relational accountability of the researchers becomes paramount to the research process.

Specifically, the Melanesian research approach (Vallance, 2007) used here allowed the researcher (Eggins) to anchor the research project within shared values (held by Ruti people and researcher), taking in both environment, social, communication, religious spiritual beliefs and community interaction as fundamental to the research experience and impacting the data. The relational encounter of the researcher and community within those spheres creates an enabling environment for the research.

## **Methodology**

This project combined an Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn, 2003) and Visual Methodology (Prosser and Loxley, 2008; Thomas, Papoutsaki and Eggins, 2010) working in harmony with an Indigenous Research approach (Wilson 2008, Bishop 2005; Vallance, 2007). The research design acknowledges that socio-cultural history, community context and specific situations play a critical role in determining the methodological approach and impact of project initiatives (Pawson & Tilley 1997) such as this one which relied on local knowledge and stories to enable the community to produce the audiovisual material.

The methodology of this project mirrors the *Komuniti Tok Piksa's* participative filmmaking and reflexive viewing methodology placed in a Melanesian research framework. Essentially, this has been an inclusive, creative and relationship-based research, unlike research conducted on the basis of a more 'traditional' or Western academic model. In accordance with this approach, the process involved recruitment and ongoing training of local researchers and students. This has enabled the research to remain sensitive to community values and build on both new and established relationships with individuals and community members as the research process unfolded. Relationships were formed as the research team interacted with the community and this produced reciprocal relationships through which stories emerged, were captured on video and shared on screen with the communities themselves. Feeding back recordings served as a catalyst for community-developed HIV and AIDS prevention strategies.

The **PAR cycle** (observe-reflect-plan-act) was activated in consultation with the community youths and other members. Following initial observation – the baseline study – and community reflection and discussion, a specific set of actions was designed. This set of actions was then realized, being iteratively reflected on and revised as the research progresses and as the community was given opportunities to comment and respond. The main steps in the research process included:

**1. Consent & Community Introduction:** The local researchers first identified the community to conduct their research in. In this case the selection was influenced by an existing relationship of the leading local researcher (Joys Eggins) with this community through relatives which facilitated the entry into the group. A community introductory meeting was then held with the community and consent was gained from the community.

**2. Baseline Study:** Observation and interviews were conducted to assess the general level of HIV and AIDS education and knowledge in the community. Based on the results, the researchers worked with the community to design a method that was appropriate to their level of knowledge, the way in which information is disseminated, and the particular interests of the community.

**2.1 Community Profile and Communicative Ecology:** Part of creating a comprehensive profile of the community and its young members, the research team created a profile of the community (i.e. topology, resources) and facilitated the drawing of their communicative ecology which along with the baseline formed the basis of knowledge and information dissemination patterns.

**3. Review Research Topics & Debrief:** Having iteratively revised the research topics to be inclusive of community perspectives and needs, the researchers revised and planned the next stage. They incorporated relevant community members, as the specifics of the research were finalised.

**4. Recording or Creation:** The research team, supervised by the principal research (Eggins), recorded community narratives or facilitated, where appropriate, creative workshops with the youth. In this case, they recorded a narrative film.

**5. Downloading, Digitizing or Editing:** The filmed data were then digitized and edited on-site, involving participants.

**6. Screening or Performing:** Once the product was prepared, the community was invited for a collective viewing. The researchers together with the immediate participants then presented their artistic creations to the community.

**7. Reflection, Collective Viewing & Discussion:** Following the screening, the researchers facilitated community discussion focusing on the issues raised by the visual outcome. Open discussion about HIV and AIDS relevant to the community was stimulated.

Throughout this process, a combination of data collection methods was used, including participant observation, diary and field notes, base line survey and communicative ecology mapping from the research team members and on several occasions by the youths themselves who were asked to keep diaries (a combination of written and audio recorded notes) and map their own communicative ecologies). Data was collected during two field trips to Ruti village in the Western Highlands of PNG between August 2010 and January 2011. The processing of findings followed a linear narrative structure incorporating data from the different stages of the process followed by a thematic analysis.

## Getting a sense of the community

### *Forming Relationships*

The relationship of the researcher with the community, as well as the relationships within the community itself impacted the community's perceptions of the project. The balance of relationship plays out in various forms, through 'politics' both literally and within community contentions, in uncertainties about the project application, in hierarchies with communities, and between researcher and community.

The indigenous research paradigm, especially from a Melanesian research approach, accepts relationships as fundamental to the experience. The submersion into community relationships including those between researcher and community forged by the researcher to unpack the experiences in order to find the thematic undercurrents that influence the way people make decisions. The indigenous researcher is also a stakeholder in the relationship web and thus obliged to maintain it, taking the role of the researcher to another level, this of a 'critical, reflexive, stakeholder researcher'. The researcher's relationship to the community must be clear and significant enough to make you a stakeholder to the relationship.

*Joys came here through a connection; you young people sitting here know this. She came and slept in my house and worked with the youths and you showed your film in other communities. I am very happy about this. (Gigau, Closing comments, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

The youth participants understood the need for a strong relationship. The project created a new group among the Ruti youths, one that is seldom together due to community contentions or that some are away in schools. These divides were not as obvious during the workshop and screening times and often any contention towards the project was either disregarded or spoken in whispers. This in turn shows that the youths were willing to protect their work and achieve new grounds with it.

*Because everything we do promotes our community, district, province and country, we have to work together. Us youths here gathered, must hold hands in order for things to work well. Despite whatever doubts we've had, we've worked together as a team. Both boys and girls must cooperate here. We must maintain what we've done the next time this team comes back and I'd like us to maintain respect. Whatever you ask us to do, we will listen. At first I thought*

*we'd just be working in the community, but as we sit and reflect, I've come to understand the step-by-step process of our work. (Solo Rox, Closing comments, Jan. 28 2011, Ruti village)*

After the research fieldwork, communication was kept with the youths in order to maintain the relationship. Project outcomes must be contextualised within the relationships formed between researchers, participants and community members during and beyond the time of the project in the community.

### ***Assessing HIV and AIDS knowledge***

A baseline study, using guiding interview questions, was conducted with 24 participants from the Ruti community in order to assess the existing HIV and AIDS knowledge prior to the intervention. It was found that HIV is associated with negativity, stigma and death. PLWHA's were looked upon as victims and pity was expressed towards them. Condoms were viewed negatively as in promoting promiscuity. The overwhelming response from the Ruti community members was that following Christian principles can deter risky behaviour, especially sex. From the baseline the emphasis on being faithful, was firstly a religious one. The importance of the Church in Ruti is evident in the community mapping, communicative ecology and ensuing dialogue that being Christ-like guarantees prevention.

The youths' Christian references challenged socially tolerated behaviours such as alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity among other issues. The youths did express differences in faith and practice; some said being faithful to Christ will help you prevent contracting the virus, but continued to say that they found it disgraceful to have an HIV positive person in the family. There was a lack of knowledge about HIV diagnosis and the symptoms of the disease. The majority of the respondents identified physical appearances as signs of a person living with HIV.

Sources of awareness about HIV were largely received from faith-based and community-based health organisation who would visit the community.

### ***Understanding local communication structures***

Ruti, like most other rural communities, is experiencing a rapid shift in the way they communicate. Technological advancement and improved communications structure are facilitating new forms of relationship building. This is also impacting the decisions people are making regarding their sexual behaviours. The emergence of the mobile communication is affecting how people communicate. Easier access to others through mobile phones is affecting decisions about sexual behaviour and sexual negotiation as it emerged from the data.

A mobile phone company, Digicel, is enabling people to communicate even if they do not have phone credit. Digicel has formulated a number of packages such as the 1 toea text after 10pm, the 18 free SMS after 2 paid texting and CREDIT ME feature allow continued transfer of messages. Users have developed codes that transpire to certain messages. For examples CREDIT ME K99 translates to 'goodnight' or 'night-night'; CREDIT ME K60 translates to 'hurry' or 'sixty' in Tok Pisin and might also mean 'come' or 'go' and CREDIT ME K43 translates to 'love you'. Digicel's phone prices are lower than its competitor B Mobile, with

phones costing between K30 – K3000 depending on features in the phones. All the youths owned a Digicel mobile phone and charge them using miniature solar panels or at the local trade store for K1/hour.

Radio has always been the most viable medium in rural PNG. The media landscape is shifting though as more and more *haus piksa* (makeshift cinema houses) pop up in villages. It was interesting that the youths did not mention the *haus piksa* as much as the adults, who viewed them as having a negative influence of young impressionable people.

*We have to take care of ourselves in the village. If you have a daughter, make sure she isn't standing at the market until 6 o'clock, and boys too. Don't frequent the village cinema, gambling places and social nights. The disease is in the village. The film made reference to the city, but I say it's a lie, the disease is in the village. (Viewer 8, Ruti screening, Aug. 22 2010, Ruti village)*

*When my husband goes out to the haus piksa or gambling places, I become worried. I have a baby boy and I'm a young woman and I become worried about this actions. (Female baseline respondent, Aug. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010, Ruti village)*

There is one *haus piksa* in Ruti village and a few along the road situated within community perimeters. The *haus piksa* is usually made from bush materials and looks larger in size compared to houses. Operators might use generators or have access to electricity and charge viewers a minimum of 50 Toea to watch. They mostly show Hollywood productions of high action. Minors can be found among adults watching movies rated (R) Restricted, (MAO) Matured Audiences Only and (PGR) Parental Guidance Required. Community members feel that the films being screened in *haus piksas* encourage promiscuity.

Apart from *haus piksa*, community members showed considerable exposure to the visual medium. The collaborative creation of films was something new, but access to the visual medium is expanding with improved support structures.

*A man from Goroka had acted in a movie like this one. The movie was called O Papa God. These kinds of films have educated us in the communities. We all know about the disease. But when someone dies, we return from the funeral and continue doing the same thing. And we're still contracting the virus. (Viewer 1, Kotna screening, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

*The disease has spread to everywhere and we know this through radio, television and read it in the papers, in front of houses, they put sign boards. (Respondent, baseline, Jan. 24<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

Online access to most of the youths in Ruti is secondary, while in-school youths access it there. The youths, through the baseline survey said illicit materials were being distributed by urban dwellers that frequent the village. The youths referred to them as 'high class' people.

*The people who spread the disease are high-class people who look through the Internet and see how white people have sex. These high-class people's children also view these pictures and teach us and then we get involved in sexual activities and end up with AIDS. (Respondent, baseline interview, Jan. 24 2011, Ruti village)*

The communication landscape in Ruti is shifting and there is potential to harness a visual project in such a community. This, however, must be done carefully and in consideration of the perceptions and attitudes that exist in relation to available communication tools.

### **Knowledge and Consent**

In the first visit to Ruti, the information and presence of the research team sparked a dialogue about the project. Very often, there would be doubts about benefits and money or some kind of material gain was debated upon. That was expected and was discussed during the first visit. The doubts became more pronounced during the first village screening when a man posed a question: “What does the community benefit from this film?” This question most definitely popped up in corridor whispers, and lingered even after the last visit – leading to the misconception held among some of the youths.

While only one man asked this question in all community visits, it was nonetheless a big concern as the concept of ‘benefit’ came through in problematic encounters. The obvious response would be that the community collaborates in the creation of a visual message for social change, but the divide between monetary gain and behaviour change became somewhat skewed.

It seems impossible to remove doubts occasionally articulated by community members in regards to potential monetary benefits from the project. The immediate participants of the project, as discussed below, however, were clear about their voluntary involvement and their own benefits and that of the community in regards to the film production they proposed to engage in. The researchers sought to engage in reciprocal relationships as much as possible and to maintain an understanding with participants through ongoing discussions and reflections.

### ***Implementing the visual project***

In the process of introducing KTP to the community a group of Ruti youths came forward and expressed that they would like to produce a dramatic film based on a story idea from them. Through this process the youths’ perceptions about HIV and AIDS would be visualised. The story essentially was about a village man who leaves his family to visit a friend in the town of Lae, where he takes a second wife and faces the possibility of life with HIV.

As a team, we advised the youths about how to prepare for drama presentations and how the camera would work with them to capture the story. The participants comprised five females and seven males in the age group between 14 -27 years. The youths participated and contributed depending on their commitments at home. There was a lot of discussion about where to film, the storyline and casting. We decided initially that a narrator’s script and screenplay should be drafted for everyone. The researcher (Eggins) assisted the youths with typing the screenplay. The youths then spent a lot of time rehearsing their parts under the bamboo shades, using the script as a guide.

Over a period of one week, the team developed a screenplay, conducted shooting, reflecting and editing in the community. As we filmed, crowds of people would gather, watching the actors performing to the camera and talking among themselves about what was happening. At one point, some of the characters were shifted around depending on who could play out the role better. The main characters, Sesmo, Solo, Maria and Esther were natural actors and didn’t seem shy or disturbed by the crowd. As planned, they improvised the dialogues, bringing to it the local language and common phrases and gestures. After the shooting, we viewed the footage and noticed areas that needed improvement and also what roles each person was playing.

We spent a few more days filming other scenes and taking footage of the environment around Ruti. The youths would watch as I edited their footage on the laptop. The researcher (Eggin) talked them through how television programmes, the news or other films would be made. The youths appeared fascinated by the process and giggled with excitement about how the story was slowly being pieced together. Seeing themselves acting and dialoguing with each other on the laptop made them excited and they would pinch each other and laugh. In that process the youths began to realise the potential benefits of the project, as later articulated by participant Sesmo Teabag:

*I see the youths are showing an interest in this program because it will help us change. This is not for money or for food. I see clearly that this is purely voluntary. This is good because when we showed the film to other communities, they were able to learn. I think it was very helpful because the young people were involved. (Sesmo Teabag, diary entry, Jan. 26<sup>th</sup> 2011)*

Upon completion the film was screened in three different communities within Dei district. The first screening in Ruti village took place soon after the final cut was made. The second and third screenings took place some months later in Kotna then Kenemba. The film triggered discussions around a number of issues.

### **Feedback and Dialogue**

The film became a catalyst for dialogue; it attracted an audience and stimulated a thinking process that led to a dialogue among the group. The film idea appeared to be captivating. Audiences watched with smiles as the youths spoke in the local Melpa language and portrayed typical Hagen mannerisms and slang. Community members watching the Ruti youth's drama said the film was educational and a good initiative. The main characters quickly became popular, with children calling them by name. This shows that the drama impact was substantial as people remembered the characters, what they did and said, and the story itself. The creative visual output enables people to remember stories, the conflicts and resolutions in those stories, which all have underlying messages. These messages were unpacked as the audience began sharing their opinions about various issues following the screenings. One respondent said he appreciated the film as a tool for preserving culture.

*We've never seen a film of our community. Its something the white-man does and brings to us and so we're happy to watch our own. Some of our cultural practices, such as gathering during the mourning period was acted out by the youths and we are happy to see it on film.*

Another woman spoke about uncertainties towards their husbands.

*I see that we the mothers don't go out looking for this disease. Some women in cities do carry the virus around, but us mothers who remain in the village don't know. We think that our husbands will be faithful to us when they go out, but they bring back the virus. (Female Viewer 7, Kotna screening, Jan. 2011)*

An issue of contention discussed following the screening was the distribution of the anti-retroviral treatment (ART).

*The whiteman brought this medicin into our community and the six million people in PNG will die from this because people are knowingly spreading the virus. I appeal that we stop ART. (Male Viewer 3, Kenemba screening, Jan. 2011)*

The dialogue also entailed questions from the community about uncertainties regarding ART, where to send orphans or how many people in PNG were infected. The youths facilitated the discussion, often referring to Christ as a means for prevention and good living. The screening created a space for community dialogue, but was limited in some ways. Firstly that women spoke out less compared to the men folk who dominated the discussions. Secondly, the presence of the video camera closed the dialogue space. Most of the male viewers were talking to the camera rather than with the group.

In essence, the film caused viewers and producers to engage in critical self-reflection. They began discussing issues that they faced as a community and those they faced as individuals.

*We did not realise what was happening inside our families, our homes and our community. But now, I'm happy this project has come into our community. I drink beer, get drunk and engage in bad things and I forgot my family. When I look back now, I realise that I shouldn't have been ruining my life like that. (Youth diary entry, Jan. 27<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

After viewing the film again, the youths noted polygamy, adult peer pressure, and psychological effect on children, family well-being and alcohol abuse among other things as the biggest problems coming through in the story.

## **Discussion**

In this project, the research journey of the team members and their interaction with the community was processed in a narrative linear way that took into account not only data directly linked to the main topic but also peripheral material including observations about the community, cultural and social behaviours, reflections of the researchers as they came to certain realisations about their role in these communities and as indigenous researchers. The narrative unpacked various processes and thoughts that the local researcher (Eggin) had as a cultural insider, while bringing in voices from the community. The use of a narrative highlights various aspects of community life that community members considered important, such as food, water, land, wood and cash crops. In more traditional research discourses, these realities would not appear as strongly as it does within the indigenous research approach. This approach has generated a wealth of data that has led to thematic approach to the analysis of the findings. The authors discuss here the impact on the youths in particular as a result of their participation in the project

## **Impact on participation and community response on youths**

### ***Motivation and Empowerment***

The film stimulated dialogue and exchange of community thoughts and encouragement. The youths facilitating the process began to see the impact of their drama film and the potential it had to create dialogue. It made them realise their potentials as well and this impacted on the youth's motivation to keep working on the project. The community's encouragement and demand for more films made them excited about continuing. This also demonstrated a common desire for the project to continue to create more films in their community.

*We are happy that you came and got the youths to create this drama. We've never seen a film of our community. Its something the white-man does and brings to us and so we're happy to watch our own. Some of our cultural practices, such as gathering during the mourning period*

*was acted out by the youths and we are happy to see it on film. (Viewer 1, Ruti screening, Aug. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010, Ruti village)*

*I'd like to say thankyou to the youths, both boys and girls for making this CD (films), I like it. Overseas, they make CD (films) and the people there are able to see what their communities looked like before. Now you've made one of our village, our culture, and we like what we see. (Viewer 6, Ruti screening, Aug. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010, Ruti village)*

*Now in remote places, many people carry the virus and we don't understand our situations, so its good that you've come to these remote communities and talked to us. We're grateful. (Viewer 5, Kotna screeing, Jan 27<sup>th</sup> 2011, Kotn village)*

Importantly, all these stemmed from their initial participation and willingness to get involved, to see the challenges and rewards that motivated them in the end.

*I really agree with this project because when we showed the film to other communities, I saw that people were learning something, they understood it and agreed with it as well. I think you (the researchers) received great help because we youths got involved. (Sesmo Teabag, Diary entry 2, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

*When we showed the film in other places, I think we challenged them, we showed this to improve our community life. (Kopex Mul, Diary entry Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

*We told them we were showing a drama we made on AIDS. We explained this and the community was happy to learn from this film. (Youth reflection after Kenemba screening, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

It was observed that the youth's involvement in the production, screening and distribution of the film presented the youths in a different light within the community. There were interesting comments coming from the community, which were written as news stories later on and disseminated through the print media. The youths saw copies of the story and they became very excited. One of the said "you've exposed us youths from the back-pages of Western Highlands and we are all psyched up to do more. People are watching the film and talking about it and we're happy that we got involved".

*I want to say thank you for Joys and the team for coming to Ruti because I see that this is going to help out community. The project has brought us youths together in this community and they've shown a big interest in it and through this cooperation, I believe the community will change. I see clearly that this is voluntary work and it will encourage change. I believe in the project because when we showed the film in other communities, we challenged them. (Youth diary entry, Jan. 27<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

Apart from youth's reflection on their experiences with the project, their motivation and eagerness to work came through in other ways. During both field trips the youths always came early to research team's house, especially the males. The females came when they could. This was a dilemma, which the project needs to consider. The lack of female participation in the project reflects the lack of women's role in organised activities, especially when it comes to decision-making or oral liberty. There are seldom situations where a woman is seen addressing the community or openly voicing her opinion. Their role in the project has been minimal and a more inclusive process needs to be planned for the next phases of this project.

### **Realising a Knowledge Gap**

When the youths proceeded to screen the films, they were demonstrating a lack of basic knowledge about HIV. This also came through in some misconceptions in the baseline survey about diagnosis. The focus on

the film, especially technical professionalism as well as the audience's control over discussion topics gave little time for the youths to give correct information. Considering the fact that the film did not challenge held perceptions within the community, any attempt to give accurate information would have been as good as the facilitation of screening and dialogue sessions at that stage – minimal. The youths, did however use the film as awareness and challenged the audience to turn those negative actions into positive change. They encouraged viewers to be Christ-like and think smart during seasonal activities such as election periods and the coffee season during which sexual promiscuity is high. Common in Melpa oral tradition, the youths used parables to make a point, which can become an important component of awareness, accompanied by the visual.

This is a key finding of this whole process as it shows, not only to us as researchers, but most importantly to the youths as collaborators, the need to know about HIV. During the screenings, some viewers asked some basic questions about HIV & AIDS, but the youths could not respond accurately.

*How many people in PNG have AIDS? What province rates the highest? I'd like to know this. (Viewer 13, Kenemba screening, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Kenemba village)*

*We don't know the statistics; we've only come to show this drama film. We're not from the office of the AIDS council, we're just students. (Facilitating youth 1, Kenemba screening, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Kenemba village)*

*Now people are talking about ART and they've brought this medicine into PNG. Will this medicine save us or no? People who have the disease can die and those of us who do not have it can live on. (Viewer 2, Kenemba screening, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Kenemba village)*

*Regarding your question, if a knowledgeable person was here, he could answer your question. We are students here. (Facilitating youth 2, Kenemba screening, Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, Kenemba village)*

In the cyclic process of creation, viewing and reflection, there needs to be an intervention from experts. The awareness the youths now have to the need for HIV & AIDS information validates an input from both medical and other experts who can work at the community level to disseminate information targeted to the youths.

As researchers, we stand corrected as not all accurate information circulates within communities, and at some point an intervention from without is needed.

*We all know that there is knowledge about HIV in communities. Often people bring HIV awareness into communities, and some people feel the language used is not good or the terms are too technical. (Eggins, planning session with youths, Jan. 24<sup>th</sup> 2011, Ruti village)*

In our efforts to facilitate a process that was endogenous, we began to understand the paradox of the entire project. Perceptions of HIV & AIDS are misconstrued because of the information gap. As a group within the Ruti community, the youth need access to correct information. Having an expert assisting raises the profile of the youths in the community and increases the impact of their awareness efforts. There is potential for the group to become an important source of information and reference for community members.

Through the cyclic process of participatory action, the youth's production and reflection, enriched with the research process, and awareness for the need for accurate information warrants a continuity of the process, which should now set the group on a new path of challenging norms and effective raising of

awareness, one that stems from community experiences, enhanced by new and correct information and disseminated by community members themselves.

## Conclusion

The project's approach has begun to show that visual based, participatory action research (PAR) provides a powerful means for engaging local communities in discussions about HIV/AIDS that have the power to alter and refine people's perceptions and values of disease, care and health behaviour. The footage and images circumvented language, literacy, and cultural taboo barriers. Because the footage and images were anchored to experiences of the community itself, they became tools for reflection, discussion, idea generation and norm re-evaluation. Dialogue among community's young members was powerful in that learning was communicated in ways that were meaningful these young people and accepted among other community members.

The open approach to let the participants guide the creative process presented various outcomes. It allowed the researchers to better understand community perceptions including scenarios of risky behaviour. The viewing of the Ruti film drama stimulated important community discussion among audiences. The product therefore serves as a stimulator within the local context, yet its value for wider audiences needs to be assessed by the research team. The film might re-inforce negative community perception towards HIV and AIDS and requires re-assessment in terms of its educational value to other communities.

The desire by the youth to shoot another film or re-fine the one they shot as well as their wish to know more about HIV facts, is an important sign for community mobilisation and their willingness to listen to messages around HIV and AIDS. In realising their potential role as HIV community advocates, it is now them wanting to receive information and pass it on to others. This demonstrates a shift in HIV and AIDS communication. This community mobilisation is crucial in establishing a foundation for behavioural change in communities in the PNG Highlands.

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