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Film making as an instrument of research communication and capacity development

MARTIN GRUBER

Summary: BIOTA produced three films to communicate its research activities to different audiences between 2007 and 2009. The first film “Wiza Wetu! – Our Forest!” depicts the illegal logging of trees in the Kavango Region of Northern Namibia. It aims to raise awareness about the problem and introduce alternative modes of income to local communities. The second film “Biodiversity is our Life” documents landuser perspectives on biodiversity issues such as the use of natural resources, biodiversity perceptions and biodiversity change, as well as sustainable resource management. It was screened to researchers and policy-makers during the “Convention on Biological Diversity” COP 9 conference in Bonn in May 2008. The film “Bridging the Gap” was made by BIOTA para-ecologists as part of a training workshop and presents the para-ecologist programme from the para-ecologists’ perspective.

All films were made with different degrees of collaboration and participation. The films therefore not only contributed to the communication of research results to various audiences and to raising awareness about existing ecological and social problems. They also constituted an important aspect of capacity development and stakeholder involvement in the project.

Introduction

Film as a medium has played an important role in the communication of BIOTA’s project activities and research results. Between 2007 and 2009 the project commissioned three films, which were intended for different purposes and audiences. What these films have in common is an anthropological as well as participatory approach, which implies that local stakeholders were included in the process of filmmaking in some way or another. This chapter will provide a brief overview of BIOTA’s filming activities and their contribution to the project’s internal and external communication as well as their role in capacity development.

Ethnographic and participatory film

Ethnographic filmmaking is a method of research: the conceiving of a film, as

well as the shooting and editing are parallel analytical processes that generate insight into the subject matter, which is represented in the resulting film (Ruby 2002). The inclusion of members of the groups being studied into the filmmaking process has a long tradition and is one of the hallmarks of ethnographic filmmaking (Rouch 2003, MacDougall 1998). Some anthropologists make the technology available and teach their informants how to make films themselves. Their aim is to either analyse the films and draw conclusions about their subjects’ perspectives on reality and their culture (Worth & Adair 1975) or to offer their collaborators a way of expressing themselves to a wider public in their struggle against oppression (Turner 1992). Some of these ideas have been integrated into the method of “participatory video” (PV) by development experts. The beneficiaries are enabled to communicate their different views, initially within their peer groups, and then to outside audiences

such as representatives of donor organisations or the government (Braden 1998).

Following these ideas, development as well as research projects such as BIOTA can benefit from the use of film in various ways. Firstly, film constitutes a powerful means of communicating research results and project activities to different groups of recipients. It is possible to reach large numbers of people—both broad and specific audiences alike—through different channels such as screenings as part of awareness campaigns, conferences, TV broadcasts, or the distribution of DVDs to journalists and policy-makers. Film is particularly suitable for reaching non-academic audiences since the medium is capable of presenting the complex findings of scientific research in a concrete and tangible way. Secondly, ethnographic filmmaking serves as a method of research, as described above. This aspect is especially promising if representatives from local stakeholder groups participate in the process of filmmaking because the resulting films can be seen as the participants’ own representations. This additional perspective contributes to the understanding of their daily lives, worldviews, norms, problems, etc. Thirdly, participatory filmmaking is an important tool for capacity development. The participants of such film projects not only take advantage of a thorough training in camera use and editing, but conceiving and executing films is a complex and demanding procedure that prepares the participants for other difficult tasks and thus increases employment opportunities. Lastly, there is potential for participatory films to include local stakeholders in research projects. Enabling stakeholders to participate and contribute actively is likely to strengthen their ownership of the project and identification with its goals. This positive effect can be passed on to the audience of the film. Through certain components such as common

language, known places, personally known protagonists and so on, the recipients of the film are involved and identify with its subject matter. We experimented with many of these aspects in the different films produced for the BIOTA project. Here we describe these projects and our experiences in more detail.

Wiza Wetu! – Our Forest!

The first film produced within BIOTA Southern Africa, was made in cooperation with BIOTA anthropologist Michael Pröpper in 2007. Pröpper had been doing anthropological research in the Kavango Region of Northern Namibia for several years. During his fieldwork on the cultural dimensions of biodiversity, he realised that the illegal logging and trade of trees is one of the main threats to the environment in the area (see also Chapter IV.1).

In order to raise awareness about the ecological consequences and inform the local population about alternative modes of income, he had the idea of using film as a means of communication. Pröpper approached me and together we developed and produced the 53-minute film in the Rundu area (Electronic Appendix). In order to make the film as meaningful and authentic to local audiences as possible, we included two local stakeholders in the film crew. The region's BIOTA paracologist Robert Mukuya (Photo 2) was not only our main informant and link to the local communities but was also involved in the conception of the film and played the main character. In the film, Mukuya visits different places, which are significant for the production and trade of illegally harvested wood and talks to relevant people. As a local expert on biodiversity he investigates the different aspects of the problem, explains them to the audience and guides through the film. Raphael Sikumba, who had been working for Pröpper as an interpreter and field assistant before, was employed as a production assistant (Photo 1). He was trained as a camera assistant, made many suggestions regarding the content and style of the film and was especially important as a translator and during filming and editing. Apart from these two collaborators in



Photo 1: Raphael Sikumba and Martin Gruber shooting the felling of a tree for “Wiza Wetu!”. Photo: Michael Pröpper.



Photo 2: Robert Mukuya watching the broadcast of “Wiza Wetu!” on national television. Photo: Michael Pröpper.

the production team, we included various local stakeholders and resource-users as protagonists. Some of them were interviewed as experts to explain their view of the situation; others, like the traditional authorities, were given a platform to make a political statement at the end of the film.

A re-enacted sequence at the beginning of “Wiza Wetu!” in which three villagers perform the illegal felling of a

tree is of special interest. The approach of improvising significant situations from the protagonists' lives goes back to ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch's work of the 1950s and 1960s and was termed “ethnofiction” by film critics (Stoller 1992). The underlying idea is that the fictional framework provokes the protagonists to act out and discuss important issues in ways that would not be probable





Photo 3: Jeannete Swartbooi and Reginald Christiaan interviewing Snake Vilho Mtuleni for “Bridging the Gap”. Photo: Ute Schmiedel.

through conventional documentary approaches (Sjöberg 2008). This method can therefore disclose hidden aspects of the protagonists’ realities. In our case it would not even have been possible to document and discuss the process of felling a tree without potentially harming the protagonists, since the action is illegal and might have caused their prosecution. Consequently the film crew decided to work with “ethnofiction”. We obtained a permit from the Namibian Authorities to fell a tree in the forest near Rundu and hired a few young villagers who would usually log illegally to carry out their work for the film. Our protagonists not only demonstrated the logging, which gave an impressive illustration of their hard and strenuous work, but also improvised some discussions about the problems connected to their clandestine activities. The conversations contained important information that might otherwise not have been revealed. This example demonstrates compellingly how fictional elements can be used as an alternative method of enquiry. It was of no surprise to me that local audiences especially appreciated this particular sequence. The enthusiasm and conviction with which the protagonists acted out the situation, makes the film a fascinating and authentic document. I assume

that re-enactments and other fictional approaches are especially popular amongst local audiences since they draw on local story-telling traditions and media preferences and thereby playfully combine information with entertainment (Gruber 2008).

An important aspect of the project was the distribution of the film amongst rural communities throughout the Kavango Region. The forests in the Kavango are mostly communal land, which implies that its resources belong to the public. Nevertheless, only a few individuals usually benefit from the illegal activities by generating a private income, while the majority of the population loses out – through decline of natural resources and ecological destruction. The aim of our film was to initiate a critical discussion amongst the landuser communities that would ideally contribute to more sustainable management of the forest and a fairer distribution of the forest-related income. The para-ecologist Robert Mukuya was equipped with a generator and video projector and travelled to numerous villages all over the Kavango Region. He screened the film, answered emerging questions and moderated the discussion amongst the viewers. Unfortunately the reception of the film was not analysed in any structured way, but according to Mukuya, the

film raised many questions and initiated intensive discussions amongst the local viewers. It therefore contributed to raising awareness in the intended way. Apart from these screenings, the film was also adopted by the Namibian Directorate of Forestry and the German Development Service (DED) in order to inform rural communities interested in establishing Community Forests about the concept of community based natural resource management. Furthermore it was broadcast twice by the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation’s (NBC) national TV programme and contributed to the discussion at a national level. Additionally, BIOTA distributed hundreds of DVD copies of the film to other researchers, journalists and policy-makers. “Wiza Wetu!” was presented to academic audiences at the Universities of Basel, Göttingen and Hamburg and it was screened for several weeks as part of an exhibition about BIOTA para-ecologists at the Bio-center Klein Flottbek at the University of Hamburg in 2009. It is evident that the film reached a large and diverse audience and therefore contributed significantly to the communication of BIOTA’s research.

Biodiversity is Our Life

The second BIOTA film was produced to inform an audience of researchers and policy-makers about landuser perspectives on biodiversity during the “Convention on Biological Diversity” COP 9 conference in Bonn in May 2008. The 10-minute film was screened as a loop at the stand of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research as well as during the BIOTA-Side Event at COP 9. “Biodiversity is our Life” introduces the BIOTA AFRICA research project by dealing with issues such as the use of natural resources, biodiversity perceptions and biodiversity change, as well as different strategies of sustainable resource management.

The idea behind the film was to convey authentic local perspectives by editing amateur footage shot by researchers as well as para-ecologists and other non-academic African project members. While six representatives from the different



parts of BIOTA in West, East and southern Africa initiated the project, I was hired to draw a concept and do the actual editing. During an initial meeting we decided to apply a participatory approach, which gave the six BIOTA members a high degree of decision-making power and responsibility. They made suggestions regarding the content and style of the film and contributed by selecting, classifying and translating the footage to be edited. Since all decisions were made collectively and the participants in the project were spread all over Germany, communication had to be facilitated by phone-calls and email-correspondence. During the later editing stages, the participants could access the different versions of the rough-cut via the internet. This collective approach proved to be efficient since all participants were satisfied with the process and its outcome.

The challenge was to edit roughly 20 hours of video footage into a 10-minute film, but from an early stage it became clear that there was not sufficient material. On the one hand the quality was often not good enough due to low camera quality and unskilled camera handling. On the other hand, the footage consisted mostly of interviews and some observational material, while the necessary contextualising images of landscapes, plants etc. were missing. In order to compensate for missing images, we decided to include still photographs taken by BIOTA researchers during their fieldwork. Additionally we had to rely on a voiceover commentary to convey the missing information and as a binding element. The film was screened and distributed during the COP 9 conference and on other occasions. The original idea, to tell the story through images taken by local stakeholders and project members, was only partially realised. This experience highlighted the necessity to train project members in filmmaking in order to use their footage for future projects and it therefore inspired the BIOTA film project discussed below.



Photo 4: Jeannete Swartbooi filming Robert Mukuya and Wynand Pieters.
Photo: Ute Schmiedel.

Bridging the Gap—para-ecologists in action

The 20-minute film “Bridging the Gap” is the outcome of a para-ecologist training workshop held in South Africa during April 2009 (see also Article III.8.3). The documentary introduces the para-ecologist programme to a broad audience and presents the para-ecologists’ expertise to other research projects, and conservation- and development agencies. The film was conceived and shot entirely by the para-ecologists (Electronic Appendix). The idea behind this approach was not only to teach local project members practical filmmaking skills that they could use for the project, and that would qualify them for future employment. More importantly, the participatory process of conceiving and making the film also afforded the participants the opportunity to (re)define their role within the project and within broader contexts. The filmmaking was thus meant to strengthen the ties between BIOTA and the para-ecologists, to open up new perspectives on the project, increase their work-related motivation and strengthen their self-awareness.

Ute Schmiedel, the coordinator of the para-ecologist programme, initiated the film workshop as part of their annual training. We jointly conceptualised, or-

ganised and moderated the three week-long workshop, which took place in the small village of Niewoudtville in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. None of the para-ecologists had any significant filmmaking-experience and we began the workshop with a theoretical introduction to documentary filmmaking, followed by practical training in camera and sound recording as well as different interview techniques (Photo 3). At the same time, the para-ecologists discussed the aim as well as the content and style of the film. It was decided that the main intention of the film was to inform other researchers and NGOs about the BIOTA para-ecologist programme. Additionally the participants also wanted to create a film that they could use to present themselves and the work they do to colleagues, friends, family, and also to potential future employers. Another important goal was to motivate the youth from the underprivileged communities where the para-ecologists come from, to get involved and seek further capacity development that might help them to find a job.

When discussing the content and structure of the film, the para-ecologists decided to start the piece with a personal introduction by each member to provide an idea of the cultural and personal diversity of the group. They also wanted



Photo 5: Martin Gruber, Wynand Pieters and Richard Isaacks discussing during the editing process. Photo: Ute Schmiedel.

their daily work to play a central role in the film and they therefore filmed three typical work situations, namely their job at the BIOTA Observatories (Photo 4), a livestock census, and community outreach work. During the shoots, the participants switched their responsibility for each scene so that everyone had worked as director, camera-operator and actor at least once. The end of the film is comprised of a sequence on the participants' training and of an outlook on the participants' future. All sequences were specially arranged for the film but still convey an authentic image of the routines of the para-ecologists. While the shooting of the film was accomplished entirely by the participants, I operated the editing machine with the para-ecologists repeatedly giving feedback and making suggestions (Photo 5). In terms of the methodology, it would have been preferable to have the participants do the editing on their own but it was impossible to teach the rather complex editing software within the limited time of the workshop. Nevertheless the participants had a high degree of decision-making power and were responsible for the implementation of this complex project.

"Bridging the Gap" was screened at several international conferences and, like "Wiza Wetu!", at the para-ecolo-

gist exhibition at the Biocenter Klein Flottbek of the University of Hamburg. Numerous DVDs of the film were distributed amongst interested researchers and policy-makers in the field of biodiversity research. Unlike "Wiza Wetu!" this film was not based on a "research with the camera" approach as postulated by visual anthropology. Rather, it is a self-representation of the para-ecologists and an introduction to the para-ecologist programme of BIOTA. The film's greatest potential lies in the area of capacity development, empowerment and stakeholder inclusion.

Conclusions

All of the films described above were based on an ethnographic and participatory approach—but to varying degrees and with different intentions. At the same time, each of the productions experienced particular challenges. "Wiza Wetu!" constituted a genuine platform for discussion and negotiations between a diverse group of stakeholders. The film represented the different perspectives and communicated them to a wide audience, and it thereby contributed to setting the agenda and raising awareness about illegal logging in the Kavango Region. The use of "ethnographic"

tion" proved to be highly effective since it allowed documenting and discussing issues that would have been difficult to record using other approaches. One of the film's limitations regarding participation was that the members of our German-Namibian production team made most of the important decisions on the content and structure of this film on their own. It would certainly have changed the outcome of the project if we included other stakeholders in these decisions. Another limiting factor was our decision not to focus on politically sensitive issues, such as mismanagement and corruption, in order to avoid political tensions and the impression of a post-colonialist research agenda that implicitly blames the Namibians exclusively for the situation. When some of these issues arose during our research, we had long discussions on how to deal with the situation. We finally decided not to highlight them in the film but to concentrate on a completely different aspect, namely alternative modes of income through forest resources.

"Biodiversity is our Life" was participatory in the sense that a large group of people was involved as the authors of the film. It was a very positive experience to bring all the different parties together and find collective solutions. The film is also interesting regarding its use of amateur footage, which evokes a feeling of presence and directness that is difficult to achieve with professional recordings. African resource-users are presented as local experts with a strong and compelling voice that might not reach Western audiences otherwise. Difficulties that occurred in this project were mostly of technical nature, which highlights the need for training. In this regard, it is important to compromise between the authenticity of footage taken by non-professionals and the requirements of a film produced for a broad audience.

"Bridging the Gap" is founded on a high degree of participation as the authorship and most of the technical production was handed over to the protagonists. This makes it a self-representation more than a film "about" para-ecologists. Even though we wanted to control as little as possible, it must be acknowledged that the organisers of the workshop influ-

enced the content and style of the film to a certain degree. At the same time, there are always many other factors that influence such films, which makes the notion of capturing an “unspoiled” or “non-Western” perspective through this method impossible. Nevertheless it is a very specific point of view that is presented in this film, namely the perspective of young women and men who were struggling to make a living before they received training and work in the BIOTA project. It is therefore not a neutral film about the para-ecologist programme but a positive, and even partly idealised, image of the protagonists’ role within BIOTA and society at large. The fact that the protagonists chose to convey such a positive impression is likely to be motivated by their optimistic perceptions of BIOTA’s activities—for their personal situation as well as for the wider community. The energy and involvement with which the participants took part in the project made it an exceptional experiment.

In summary, the filming activities within BIOTA played an important role in the overall project. On the one hand, they contributed to the communication

of research results to various audiences and to raising awareness about existing ecological and social problems. On the other hand, they constituted an important aspect of capacity development and stakeholder involvement in the project. Film as a method of research was however not comprehensively applied within the project. In order to take full advantage of the potential that the medium of film offers to development and research projects, the practices described in this chapter should be developed further.

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The films “Wiza Wetu!” and “Bridging the Gap” are provided as avi files on the CD (back of Volume 3). They can also be ordered free of charge as long as stock lasts from Ute Schmiedel (Uschmiedel@botanik.uni-hamburg.de).