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TITLE: OVC Participation in Documentary Projects: Giving Due Consideration to Methodology and Ethics

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Abstract

One strategy for integrating child participation into HIV/AIDS programming is to provide Orphans and other Vulnerable Children (OVC) with the training, materials and support to document their experiences. Documentary photography and video can inform program design, complement advocacy efforts, enhance psychosocial support, develop children's capacities, and generate opportunities for peer education. However, in order for participatory documentary projects to reach their potential, methodological and ethical issues must be considered. This presentation highlights how these issues were addressed in three participatory documentary projects undertaken by Catholic Relief Services/Zimbabwe (CRS/ZW) and its partners. Based on these findings, the presentation advocates for easy-to-use methodological and ethical guidelines that organisations who undertake such projects can employ. It then recommends critical components of these guidelines.

Introduction

CRS/ZW encourages its community-based partners to utilize participatory documentary initiatives with OVC. For example, in 2004, CRS/ZW's STRIVE project produced a short documentary film called "The Children They Are Left With", which follows four members of a child-headed household as they play, cook, study and farm together in rural Zimbabwe. The film was created through the collaboration of a director, a community partner, and all four members of the household, aged 8 to 15. It features video and narration by the children themselves. In addition, two STRIVE community partners in the Harare area have facilitated "kids with cameras" projects. Child Protection Society (CPS)

worked on its project with members of a youth club, while Inter-Country People's Aid (IPA) engaged children in an informal settlement.

Materials and Methods

For this presentation, interviews were conducted with the facilitators of the "kids with cameras" projects, the director of "The Children They Were Left With", and the child filmmakers. The author also undertook participant-observations of the film being screened and discussed by both adult and child audiences. Unfortunately, locating and interviewing the children who participated in the "kids with cameras" projects was not possible due to the dissolution of the youth club, in one case, and the displacement of the child participants due to a government "clean-up" operation in the second case.

Findings

1) Before participating in the documentary projects, the children, parents/guardians, and other key stakeholders were well informed. All the children signed informed consent forms, and their parents/guardians signed permission forms. At CPS, project facilitator Lucy Wilson also held an informational meeting with participants' parents/guardians at the start of the project.

2) Children were involved at almost every stage of each project; however, each project also presented certain limits to their participation. After learning to use the cameras and taking dozens of photographs, the children at CPS selected the photos they wanted to share, wrote accompanying captions, and then presented their photos at two public exhibitions. The one stage in which children were not involved was the selection of project participants. This exception was due to the youth group's existing selection procedures, as well as funding limitations on the number of children who could participate.

IPA's "kids with cameras" participants were trained by Harare-area children who had previously participated in a similar initiative. IPA's participants were meaningfully involved in many stages of the project, including selecting which photos to exhibit at the

2005 Harare International Festival of Arts. However, their participation in project follow-up has been limited by a government clean-up operation which displaced them.

Child participation was critical to the creation of “The Children They Are Left With”, and the four child filmmakers also have been involved in the film’s dissemination. However, some film screenings have occurred without the children’s knowledge due to the difficulty of getting this information to their rural village. To extend child participation in the film, groups of children have published written reviews of the film for child readers.

3) Documentary projects and follow-up activities require significant time and resources.

4) How children perceive their documentary work, how children at large respond to this work, and children’s motivations for participating in documentary initiatives may all differ from adult viewpoints and assumptions. See the sidebar for two examples.

5) Children’s ongoing feedback about the project is vital. For example, some children told Wilson that they wanted more film and more instruction, while others indicated how homework and household chores made it difficult for them to complete their photography assignments.

Recommendations

These findings demonstrate that documentary projects with children cannot be initiated without considering methodology and ethics. The creation of easy-to-use guidelines for such projects would encourage more organizations to facilitate them, and also help ensure that these projects are truly participatory and do not in any way compromise child protection. Based on CRS/ZW’s experiences, recommendations for key features of these guidelines are as follows:

Methodological considerations

1) For a project to be truly participatory, children must be involved in as many stages of the project as possible.

2) To maximize a project's child participation benefits, engage children beyond those directly involved in the documentation. For example, groups of children can review a documentary film or a photo exhibit for a newspaper or newsletter.

3) To cater for children's evolving capacities, create a variety of entry points for child participation. Strategies must be developed to ensure that projects do not overlook the capacities of very young children and disabled children.

4) Dedicate adequate time and resources to project planning, implementation, follow-up and dissemination.

Ethical considerations

1) Meet with the children's parents/guardians and community members, including traditional leaders, to explain the project, how children will be involved, the children's time commitment and the expected results. In addition, the general concept of "child participation" should be discussed with parents/guardians because child participation may challenge traditional views of children as passive and obedient.

2) Parents/guardians and, if applicable, traditional leaders should be asked to give written permission for children to participate. When working with child-headed households, be aware that although the children may not have a guardian, they may have a community volunteer who works with them, and this volunteer's permission should also be sought.

3) Create informed consent forms for children to sign that explain each stage of the project, the project timelines, how they will be involved, and the range of ways in which the final product may be used. It is vital that children fully understand this form. Therefore, it should be written clearly and simply and, if necessary, translated into a local language.

4) If there is some aspect of the project in which children cannot meaningfully participate, adults must be upfront with children about the reasons for this situation. Under no circumstances should children be "deceived" into thinking their opinions will

have an impact, when the decisions are, in reality, out of their control. For example, there might be donor-specified project requirements.

5) Children must have the space and opportunity to share their own views of their documentary work. This happens, for example, when children caption their photos or present their work at exhibits and screenings. Such activities also give the audience greater insight into the works' meaning. The integrity of a child's caption and voice must be maintained, and must not be overridden or overwhelmed by adult perceptions or assumptions.

6) Respect children's wishes for which items are displayed to the public. Wilson found that there were amazing photos that the children decided not to display because they were too personal. Under no circumstances should the child's decision be reversed.

7) Keep children up-to-date with the use of their documentary work. Informing children and their parents/guardians about the ongoing uses of their work is a respectful step. As much as possible, children should be able to access updated information about their products' impact on audiences, including peers and policymakers.

Conclusion

Undertaking participatory documentary projects with children requires a great deal of thought about methodology and ethics, and easy-to-use guidelines on methodology and ethics would assist organisations in this thought process. The recommendations presented here should be key components of these guidelines.

Useful Resources on Participatory Documentary Work with Children

Ewald, Wendy. 2002. *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*. Co-authored by Alexandra Lightfoot. Boston: Beacon Press.

Schenk, Katie and Jan Williamson. 2005. "Ethical Approaches to Gathering Information from Children and Adolescents in International Settings: Guidelines and Resources." Washington, DC: Population Council.

Sidebars

Two Examples: The Differing Perceptions of Adults and Children

1) How would you caption these photos by Rajabu White, aged 12, who participated in CPS' kids with cameras project? Look at the photographer's captions below. How are your perceptions of the photos similar or different to his captions?



a)



b)

a) These on the pictures are my friend who were running out for lunch. They are thinking the plan can they get home quickly and come be to school

b) This boy were at school. They are my friends and they were at break time so they were fighting for food. They were all hungry. I was excited by the way they eat they food.

2) Following a screening of "The Children They Are Left With" for more than 60 adults in Harare (see photos above left), the discussion focused on why the film did not highlight community efforts to help the children and how NGOs could address the gender inequalities apparent in the film. Meanwhile, children who reviewed the film (see photo above right) were less concerned with how communities and NGOs could help the children, and more concerned with how the children were able to help themselves. One group of child film reviewers, aged 10 to 14, stated that:

We want our friends to watch the film because you don't know what the future holds, and you might find yourself in the same circumstance as the children in the film. We learned from [the children in the film] about positive ways of coping, and that you must use the resources your parents leave you wisely so that you can have a brighter future. We think this movie was made for young people so they can see that if they were in similar circumstances they should not just fold their hands, but make things go on through their own means. It is important to know that there is hope.



In August 2005, the 2005 Zimbabwe International Film Festival (ZIFF) invited the four children who helped create “The Children They Are Left With” to present their film at ZIFF and answer questions from the audience. CRS/ZW staff carefully explained the invitation to the children, their community “auntie” (a volunteer mentor) and the traditional village leader. The children signed informed consent forms, and both the auntie and village leader signed permission forms. To prepare the children for answering audience questions, CRS/ZW staff talked with them about the types of questions they might be asked, and how to deal with questions they might not feel comfortable answering. After the event, CRS/ZW held a de-briefing session with the children, so that they could reflect on and talk about their experience.

“[T]he goal, at every phase of a project, is to make sure that children want to participate. I generally start with a loose syllabus, which is deliberately abandoned as kids gain confidence with the camera and begin to have their own ideas about the films they want to make. [A]s a teacher, I think the most important thing is to create a space where children feel free to mess up, because over time they will begin to get things right and they might even discover new ways of doing things that nobody has ever thought of before”.

-- Peter Jordan, director of “The Children They Are Left With”, a short documentary film created through a collaboration with children, and produced by CRS/ZW