Beyond the Film

Innovations in the participatory use of film at international conferences on climate

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1. Introduction

'A participatory approach highlights the need for multiple pathways of communication that engenders credibility, trust, and cooperation, which are especially important in high-stress situations such as those associated with climate extremes'

– IPCC SREX

A diversity of problem-solving approaches is needed as climate change unfolds around the world. The interdisciplinary nature of addressing climate change calls for revaluing how communication between stakeholders is carried out. We believe film has an important role to play. Film is a powerful medium, capable of kindling viewer emotions and evoking changes of mind and behaviour, and thus is a promising way of eliciting positive changes in how we address climate change. But although this potential exists, we fear that as they have been used in the climate and development sector, films are having little impact on the target audience.

Clearly more creative thinking is necessary for film to stimulate responses in thought and action – from donors, the public, vulnerable communities, or other target groups. We believe that now is the time for a revitalization – even a revolution – in the use of film by organizations doing development and climate-related work. The Beyond the Film Festival (BtFF) at Development and Climate Days ("D&C Days"), alongside the UN COP18 climate talks in Qatar,[1] was intended to open this conversation. Participants engaged in an experiential peer-learning programme designed to explore how organizations can get more creative and possibly become more effective through the use of film.

With its emphasis on the importance of communication, the IPCC's Special Report on Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation ("SREX"), first released in full in March 2012, highlights the effectiveness of participatory video approaches. While the literature on the use of film in development and climate organizations is not extensive, much work has however been done examining the use of film as a tool in the health sector, including fairly complex areas of patient education and health risk management (Rich et al., 2000; Suarez et al., 2008; Gagliano, 1988). Research in the health sector has found video tools to have the potential to produce changes in attitude about the subject portrayed. Such findings point to film as a tool of significant potential value in the climate and development sector, in which complex information on human-environment systems needs to be communicated to diverse audiences.

To date, numerous organizations working in the climate and development field have employed film to engage with stakeholders, as evidenced in D&C Days film festivals prior to 2012. On the ground, researchers have illustrated the value of engaging key stakeholders in crafting their own key messages and making their own videos – for example, Baumhardt et al. (2009) "From farmers to filmmakers" with Malawian subsistence farmers.

Film is an increasingly accessible and affordable tool for disseminating climate and development information in the field; the next step is to understand how it can be used for improving decisions and action.

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[1] The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 18th Conference of the Parties in Doha, Qatar (26 November–7 December 2012).

2. 'Development and Climate Days' at COP 18

'Experiential learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience'

– D. Kolb

The year 2012 was one of transition for D&C Days at COP18: the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre ("the Climate Centre") stepped into the lead convening role for the first time. The Climate Centre's aim in this leadership role was to reinvigorate the D&C Days by coupling continuity with change: re-emphasizing the original vision of creating a space within the COP meeting for creative dialogue linking policy, knowledge, and practice, while injecting and infusing the D&C Days with innovative and participatory learning approaches.

In effecting this change towards a more innovative approach, the BtFF was created as an optional, specialized half-day event. Aimed at a smaller, targeted and less senior set of participants (up to 50 people attended), the intent was to jump-start analytical conversation on innovation and participatory elements used in climate and development film. The BtFF was structured with a threefold goal: 1) build a more participatory foundation for film use in climate and development work, 2) analyze the narrative patterns and communication strategies used by films deemed either "conventional" or "unconventional" by the organizers and curators, and 3) explore with participants how films can be used to greater benefit communities most affected by climate change, and in most dire need of adaptation and resilience building.

Why the participatory approach? InsightShare, a participatory video development organization, says: "Participatory video adds value, to encourage iterative learning and explore qualitative data often missed through traditional methods". In keeping with the broad D&C Days goal of increasing innovation, participatory learning components during the BtFF were interwoven with the more passive video viewing sessions.

Video used as a tool by the development and climate sector had become stale: films more often than not fit – and rarely deviate from – a stereotypical mould of what a standard documentary short film has looked like for many years. The issue or problem is often framed in the same way: interviewees providing their personal, on-the-ground insights and an authoritative narrator describing how we're responsible for said issue, and how we can help. These films can be characterized as unidirectional, with little or no dialogue possible with the audience. Audiences seem to have grown to expect this formula, yet are desensitized, bored, untrusting, and/or apathetic towards messages.

For the BtFF, we defined conventional short films as those that are "largely descriptive, relatively unsurprising substitutes for PowerPoint presentations". All of these employ what we call the "standard formula" in which the introduction is composed of b-roll[2] images of people, non-human species, and landscapes involved with a given climate or development subject, and a voiceover describing that subject: this type of introduction generally presents to the audience the place and people suffering from some negative environmental impact, e.g. climate change-induced drought. Following a such a standard introduction, conventional films tend to shift to an interview format, where a "talking head" (usually a person affected by the issue being analyzed or advocated) discusses how they are affected by the given problem. From there, conventional type films normally move to a discussion of what can or should be done in order for human and environmental well being to be secured.

Conventional films selected for the 2012 BtFF were a sample from previous D&C Days, with the exception of one short film from the Red Cross Red Crescent. Of note is that *all* past films examined were placed within the conventional film category, with none categorized as unconventional. This is probably because the film festival

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[2] "B-roll" is supplemental or alternate footage intercut with the main shot in an interview or documentary.

component of prior D&C Days has been focused on traditional documentary films made by development and climate organizations, whose expectations were to showcase their films to an interested audience (which took on the passive role of viewers), often with presentations by the film producers followed by question and answer sessions.

These were the conventional films screened at the BtFF (links below):

1) _Red Cross Caribbean_ – a Red Cross film on development issues in the Caribbean.
2) _Vital Roads_ – a film produced by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme looking at adaptation to Climate Change on Epi Island, Vanuatu.
3) _Carbon for Water_ – a film examining the issue of water shortages in Kenya's Western Province, by Evan Abramson and Carmen Elsa Lopez. It looks at a project that aims to reduce CO_2 emissions by 2 million tonnes a year by providing 900,000 homes with water filters funded by carbon credits.
4) _Ripples_ – a film on climate change and disaster management in Bangladesh, by Soren Vestergaard Neilsen, for RDRS Bangladesh (the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service) and winner of the 2011 D&C Days film competition.

We defined unconventional films as videos that employed some kind of novel, innovative or creative element uncommon to those films in the conventional category. Techniques used in unconventional films included framing of an issue as a story, e.g. using fictional characters and suspense rather than framing the film as an expose or objective account of a situation. Other unconventional elements included animation, participatory film making, and films with no spoken word. Figures 1 and 2 show stills from two unconventional films.
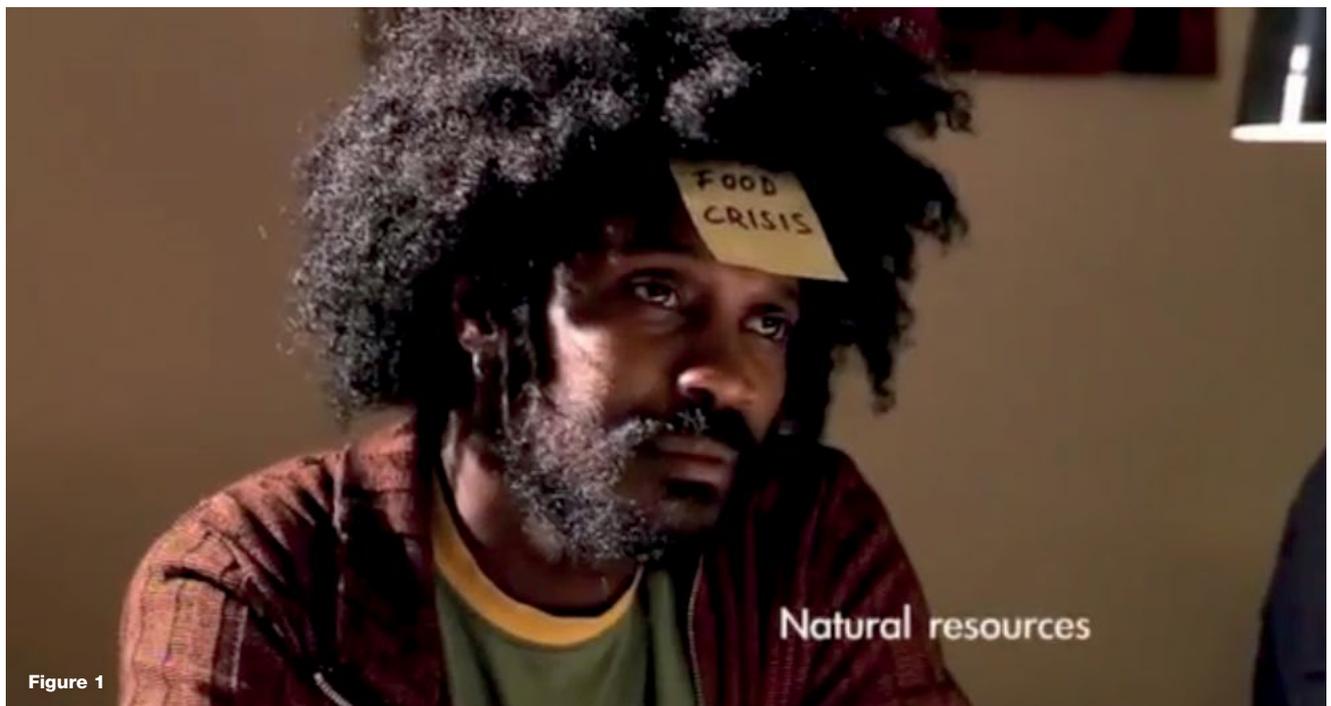
Figure 1

Figure 2

Unconventional films screened at BtFF:

1) *Red Cross Participatory Film-making in Ethiopia* – this film documents a participatory video project with farmers in Ethiopia, and was unconventional because of its use of humor.
2) Stop Climate Change – a Russian cartoon on climate change with an alien character, Earth from space perspective; unconventional because of the fictional storyline and the use of animation.
3) *The History of Climate Change Negotiations* – a (very) short film about the history of UNFCCC climate negotiations; unconventional because of the absence of the spoken word and the attribution of human characteristics to nation states.
4) *The Impossible Hamster* – a film on overconsumption and GDP by the new economics foundation; unconventional because of use of animation and its fictional storyline.
5) *Wake Up, Freak Out – Then Get a Grip*; unconventional because of use of animation and fictional storyline.
6) *The Machine* – by Rob Shaw of Bent Image Lab, a stop-motion fable about a man-made machine that knows no bounds to his power; unconventional because of the stop-motion technique and fictional storyline.
7) *Flash Flood* – a film from the UK Environment Agency on flash floods; unconventional in the absence of the spoken word and the use of humans to portray the actions of inanimate objects.
8) *The Other CO$_2$ Problem* – a film on ocean acidification made by children; unconventional because of participatory film making approach, stop motion technique, and storyline.
9) *Children believe what they are told* – a film by the Irish Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children on child abuse; unconventional because of the strong language used by its a child actor.
10) *Stop a mate driving drunk, Bloody legend* – A New Zealand public safety announcement targeted at youth; unconventional because of elements of suspense, humour and the use of child actors.
11) *Embrace life, Always wear your seat belt* – A public safety announcement for seatbelts from Sussex Safer Roads; unconventional because of suspense and abstract illustration of message.

In line with the overall theme of re-energizing D&C Days, organizers seized their first chance to make the film festival more intensely participatory, infusing it with what D. Kolb (1984) called "experiential learning". The festival had several sections: it kicked off with a participatory activity centered on perceptions of conventional

films, followed with a viewing of selected conventional films, allowing several minutes between each film to respond to a questionnaire. After viewing all the conventional films, the audience got to their feet for an interactive feedback section.

The projection of the conventional films in the early part of the BtFF served as the foundation for comparing with unconventional films and the three-step structure was repeated for the unconventional films. Two more sessions dynamically engaged participants: an active examination of what the climate and development community is doing – and could do – with video tools, described in section 3 below, and a creative exercise aimed at generating new ways to convey key messages, discussed in section 4.

3. Practitioners become critics: taking an active role to review what we do

'What I have learned to do, I learned by doing.'

– Aristotle

How do films produced by the climate and development sector affect target audiences? What can we learn about what these tools teach and what they do? What are some of the determinants of whether a short film effectively reaches the intellectual or the emotional sensitivities of viewers?

To consider and begin to address these questions, we constructed a survey for participants to fill out throughout the screening. To gauge the effectiveness of the films screened, for each film BtFF participants were asked:

1) What is the percentage of total screen time of talking heads? How much of the documentary is devoted to a person being interviewed, talking directly to the camera?
2) Does the film literally leave you with a question?
3) What do you think was the intention of the filmmakers in making this film?
4) How did you feel during and after watching?

Additionally, for each film participants were asked to circle one of nine emoticons, to indicate which most corresponded with how the film made them feel, including the option to draw in an emotion of their choosing, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Question 1 on the survey – *What percentage of screen time was devoted to talking heads?* – was chosen because it could be measured objectively. It's clear from our analysis that the films we regarded as conventional more consistently employed the use of talking heads. However, it is difficult to conclude from this finding that conventional films are more likely than unconventional films to employ the use of talking heads. We wanted to find out whether talking heads are a standard component of a conventional film, or did we choose conventional films that had a large percentage of screen time devoted to talking heads?

From the 27 surveys that were collected, 17 were at least half filled out. Fifteen surveys had question 1 (percentage time talking heads) filled out for all films. Subjectively, people were good at estimating percentage

time of talking heads: of the 15 completed surveys, 80 per cent of responses were within 15 per cent of the actual talking heads percentage, and 42 per cent of responses were within 5 per cent of actual talking head time. We used this question to get audiences to tune in to how much screen time was spent on talking-head shots, with the aim of having them begin to break down each film viewed into discrete components (landscape shots, talking head shots, action shots, etc.).

As expected, conventional films had a much higher percentage of talking-head time: with the exception of one that did not have any talking heads, all others had between 10 per cent and 25 per cent talking heads. Unconventional films had between zero and 20 per cent, with the exception of one film that had 60 per cent talking heads, with 11 out of 13 films having zero talking heads. The key lesson learned is that films categorized as conventional, and (as elucidated below) subsequently not evoking much emotional response or desire to act, featured a lot of talking-head screen time, relatively speaking.

Looking at the emotions evoked by the two categories, conventional and unconventional, revealed further interesting results. At first sight, there was little consistency on an individual level in emotions experienced by participants while watching the films, neither while watching films in each category nor when comparing emotions felt across categories. However, on closer examination we observed a pattern: some participants consistently experienced emotions at the extreme ends of the spectrum (e.g. *very* happy or angry) during the unconventional films, while their emotions tended to gravitate towards the middle of the spectrum (e.g. *mildly* sad or happy or bored) during the conventional films.

In our sample, the key result is that unconventional films consistently produced stronger emotional reactions in viewers. Unconventional film formats may thus be more effective if the objective is to induce an emotional response. Viewer experiences during unconventional film viewing – such as those featuring audience participation – may trigger emotions that have a deeper impact on viewers compared to simple, unidirectional exposure to information (Schmidt 2012) conveyed in a more conventional format. It follows that unconventional films can serve as a powerful motivational tool in their ability to captivate and inspire. However, if a film is intended merely to educate, then a more standard-formula film may work well – unless a viewer becomes too bored or disinterested to absorb the information presented.

Additional data from the survey, specifically questions 2, 3, and 4, revealed mixed reviews of both the conventional and unconventional films screened. Conventional films received a lot of criticism, with some participants noting that films selected as "conventional" were much more self-congratulatory, manipulative, and propaganda-like than the unconventional films. This was especially evident in responses to questions 3 and 4, which also included sentiments about lack of trust for the filmmaker or organization funding the film.

In their feedback on the unconventional films, several participants noted that those that played on fear or guilt "did not work". As evidenced by the written feedback, making an audience feel these emotions, while provocative, was not considered effective. By contrast, creative films with a positive spin caused a number of participants to feel happy and compelled to take action, as identified either by choice of emoticon faces or in responses given to questions 2, 3, and 4. For example, in response to question 4, some respondents wondered what actions they *could* take, and stated that they felt a desire – in some cases a strong one – to do something about the problem presented; they expressed their enjoyment through positive and enthusiastic words and phrases.

4. Practitioners become filmmakers: collectively crafting new messages

'Film is the greatest teacher because it teaches us not only through the brain but through the whole body'.

– Vsevolod Pudovkin

One of the main objectives of the BtFF was to test a participatory approach to film. With this in mind, the festival was structured with three interactive activities:

1) Participants rated and gave feedback on each film as it was screened.

2) Following each film section (conventional and unconventional), participants got to their feet for a dynamic group survey and feedback and discussion session, during which they walked about the room to sort themselves on a physical spectrum (on the ground) according to the location corresponding with their response to a given survey question, enabling all participants to get a sense of where their response fell within the range of all the other's responses.

3) During a storyboarding component of the BtFF, participants were asked to work together in groups to create a series of film storyboards.[3] In this activity, participants were first instructed, with minimal guidance, to make what they imagined to be a conventional climate and development film. Then, after the screening of the unconventional films and feedback session, participants again formed groups to design a storyboard for an unconventional film idea.

Storyboarding proved to be an excellent way to engage with and enrich the audience's viewing of both the conventional and unconventional films, by elevating them from a passive to a participative audience. Every participant had to actively consider what elements made up each of the films viewed, and then apply what they learned together to contemplate the makings of a more effective film. The storyboarding activity brought diverse sets of participants together to share with each other their creativity, personal stories and, perhaps most importantly, to develop together the climate adaptation and resilience building narratives that they felt were important and would benefit from being made into a film, as in the cover photo, which shows government officials and other delegates brainstorming storyboard ideas at D&C Days in Qatar.

Just as Vsevolod Pudovkin speaks about film's ability to teach not solely through the brain but also through the whole body, this storyboarding segment benefited from having a diverse group – or body – of participants from government officials to students to and (I)NGO personnel, all generating ideas and crafting creative storylines together.

During the conventional storyboarding session, participants produced storyboards largely in line with our idea of what a conventional film should be: narration framing the problem, meeting of "on the ground" characters through interviews etc., as outlined in section 1. During discussion, participants acknowledged that this conventional formula might be limiting and stale, but is also an affordable, fast, and relatively easy way to raise awareness on an issue. Conversely, unconventional films were seen as more exciting and with greater potential to evoke emotional responses and concrete actions. Nevertheless, not unlike many of the unconventional films screened, many of the ideas dreamed up during our unconventional storyboard session appeared difficult and pricy to execute, and potentially provocative.

See, for example, Figure 5 below which depicts a fictional "COP 38" taking place on the moon – a pricy storyline to shoot on location. Other creative ideas included a storyline focused on Fast Start Financing money

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[3] "Storyboards" are illustrations or images displayed in sequence for the purpose of pre-visualizing a motion picture, animation, motion graphic or interactive media sequence (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storyboard).

being pumped through a gigantic leaky funnel, and a film on a future "algae energy economy with shifting scales".

Feedback from the storyboarding activity demonstrated that perhaps the current out-of-date state of film used in climate and development work is not for lack of creativity and desire to push the envelope on the innovation front. Money, time and other resource constraints may be keeping climate and development films "conventional". However, lack of resources should not prevent organizations like the Climate Centre, local governments, and other non-profits from stepping away from the standard conventional film formula.

A number of films shown, including *The Other CO$_2$ Problem,* the UK Environment Agency film about flash floods, and the Red Cross film on participatory video-making in Ethiopia, are among examples of unconventional films made on small budgets – all of which evoked positive responses from participants. And conversations like those begun during the BtFF storyboarding sessions have launched the dialogue on how innovation can proceed, even for resource-strapped entities.

Figure 4

5. Learning

The 2012 Beyond the Film Festival was first and foremost intended to be a conversation starter: it was meant to initiate discussions on the state of film by climate and development organizations, and to question traditional ways of using films. Successful elements included bringing participatory components into a traditionally passive activity, contrasting the short film status quo with radical uses of film being used in other sectors (most of our unconventional films came from non climate and development fields) and attempting to distill what development and climate films can and should be trying accomplish as climate change impacts unfold.

Taking a participatory approach proved successful beyond the expectations of the organizers: the compelling storyboards generated by participants demonstrated a clear interest in crafting climate and development-themed films, and a marked difference was seen between the conventional and unconventional storyboards, essentially that the unconventional cue brought about a wide range of creative ideas, while the conventional storyboards were more similar to each other (and fit with our definition of a standard formula). The surveys and corresponding activities had participants sharing insights and receiving feedback from both facilitators and fellow participants in real time. These interactive and experiential elements of the BtFF made for a dynamic learning environment and demonstrated the benefits of augmenting available opportunities to form dialogues with the audience, the stakeholders and interested parties, thereby increasing engagement, and helping messages to "stick" (Benn, 2013, personal communication). Given these results, we believe there is clear value in injecting participatory elements into future climate and development conferences.

The after-film feedback session allowed people to share what worked and what didn't on a personal level, as well as in general within the climate and development field. It was noted for example, that many good unconventional films had a much higher production value than many of the conventional films. This led to a

discussion about how climate and development organizations can utilize the resources they have to create films that are out-of-the-box and more effective than the status quo.

While there was limited consensus, the excitement and ideas stemming from the discussion demonstrate a need for continued conversation. Questions persist. Should guilt-inducing tactics be avoided altogether? Should work be done to develop an unconventional and affordable filmmaking toolkit for development and climate organizations? Is it worth pinning down a list of filmmaking best practices by these organizations?

Addressing these and further questions, will work together to bring film communication by development and climate organizations up to speed with tactics and techniques being used to great effect in other sectors.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The new approach to the D&C Days film festival that was taken in 2012 was exciting, fruitful, and opened up many avenues for further exploration, such as conducting participatory comparisons of conventional, currently in use films, to films that are experimenting with new and innovative techniques, like transmedia. Potential exists for these avenues to be explored in future iterations of the BtFF component of the Climate Centre D&C Days. To move in this direction, one next step would be to construct a more rigorous rubric for categorizing films, maybe moving away from the conventional versus unconventional categories altogether, and moving towards elucidating other filters beyond that of talking heads, in order to look at other building blocks of film and identify those combinations that make for a effective film for a given organization's mission.

In a world where poor communities are disproportionately faced with adapting to an increasingly unpredictable and changing climate, and where communication must advance on the edge of innovation in order to grab the attention of the audience, film is an important medium – indispensible even – for facilitating adaptation and building resilience. Film must improve – become more inventive, inclusive, engaging and exciting. To this end, great potential exists for future iterations of the Beyond the Film Festival or similar events. After its successful beginning in Doha, the Development and Climate Days Beyond the Film Festival could catalyse a new paradigm in the use of film by development and climate organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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