Video Sabou et Nafa: community voices joined in a common cause

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In July 2002, Communication for Change (C4C) and La Cellule de Coordination Sur Les Pratiques Traditionelles Affectant La Santé des Femmes et des Enfants (CPTAFE) — the Guinean affiliate of the Inter-African Committee for the Prevention of Harmful Traditional Practices — launched an initiative to help combat female genital mutilation (FGM) and support practices beneficial to the welfare of women and girls through use of community-based, participatory video activities. The current article offers an overview of the major activities and achievements of this partnership, known as Projet Video Sabou et Nafa, as well as a review of challenges encountered, comparisons with similar initiatives, and lessons drawn from the experience.

Background

The practice of female genital cutting, also widely known as female genital mutilation (FGM) or excision, is nearly universal in the West African nation of Guinea. According the most recent Demographic and Health Survey for which data is available, 99% of Guinean women have undergone excision, and the practice exists in all four regions of the country (DNS and Macro International, 2000). As in most countries where it persists, "tradition" is the most frequently cited reason for carrying out excision (Carr, 1997: 8; DNS and Macro International, 2000); religious observance is also a strong factor, despite the fact that it is not mandated in the Qur'an or any other religious text. Although many Guinean women recognize health risks related to the practice of excision (Yoder, Camara and Soumaoro, 1999: 26), the social pressure supporting its perpetuation is formidable. Most parents who have their daughters excised believe they are acting in their child's best interest. Many are convinced that excision will decrease a girl's sexual drive, increase her marriageability, and help insure fidelity. Excision is also widely viewed as a necessary part of a girl's passage to womanhood. To some, non-excision implies a state of uncleanliness; indeed, several traditional names for the practice evoke images of bathing or purification (Yoder, Camara and Soumaoro, 1999:17-18). Further, the custom carries economic benefits for the practitioners (known as "exciseuses") who receive money or goods for their services.

Usually performed under unhygienic conditions, and often involving the use of a single cutting tool for several girls, excision can result in trauma, shock, infection and hemorrhage as well as long-term conditions such as infections of the urinary tract, keloid formation, dysmenorrhea, vesico-vaginal fistulae, and difficulty during intercourse and childbirth (Slack, 1988: 451-453; Toubia, 1994: 712-714). The possible transmission of HIV through use of the same implement for multiple excisions and the risk of heightened susceptibility to HIV infection among excised women, due to tissue scarring in the

genital area that results from FGM or other factors, are areas of ongoing research (Morison, Scherf et. al., 2001; Brady, 1999).

In Guinea, a law expressly forbidding the practice has existed since 1969 (Yoder, Camara and Soumaoro, 1999: 8); however, it has not been enforced, and many Guineans are unaware of its existence (Keita and Blankhart, 2001: 135). Although building public awareness of the law is considered an important component of prevention, many anti-FGM activists consider that a focus on legal/punitive measures carries the risk of creating backlash or sending the practice underground. Overwhelmingly, advocates working to end FGM in Guinea, as well as in other countries where the custom persists, have favored approaches that stress public education and community outreach. Their efforts have gained in both prominence and diversity over the past decade. In addition, global anti-FGM efforts have shifted from emphasizing the detrimental health consequences of the practice — a strategy that resulted in some instances (e.g. Egypt) in the "medicalization" of excision — towards a more broadly informed, multi-faceted approach. This approach is based upon close understanding of the social and cultural attitudes surrounding this deep-rooted practice, and often integrates development, gender, and rights-based components.

The leading organization working to end FGM in Guinea is La Cellule de Coordination Sur les Pratiques Traditionelles Affectant la Santé des Femmes et des Enfants (CPTAFE), the national affiliate of the Inter-African Committee for the Prevention of Harmful Traditional Practices. Founded in 1988, CPTAFE's activities have included training workshops for midwives and traditional birth attendants, advocacy meetings among local officials and religious leaders, mobilization campaigns among youth, theater presentations, sports events, a television documentary, and numerous radio broadcasts. One of the organization's signal achievements has been a series of *dépots de couteaux* — celebratory public events at which community members and local authorities gather together to witness excisors laying down their knives and to renounce collectively the practice of FGM. To date, *dépots de couteaux* have taken place in five prefectures in the interior (Kouroussa, Kerouané, Kissidougou, Dalaba, and Mamou) as well as in the capital, Conakry.

Early marriage, polygamy, and scarification are among the other detrimental customs addressed by CPTAFE's outreach activities. At the same time, the organization promotes beneficial traditional practices such as breastfeeding, helps spread information on STD/AIDS prevention and positive reproductive health behaviors, and advocates on behalf of educational and socioeconomic opportunities for girls and women.

Based in Conakry, CPTAFE has committees in each of the country's four geographic regions: Upper Guinea, Middle Guinea, Lower Guinea, and the Forest Region. The work of these regional committees, in turn, is complemented by the activities of smaller CPTAFE *antennes* at the prefectural level. The organization is volunteer in nature and its membership is diverse, including educators, health professionals, rural radio personnel, leaders of women's associations and labor groups, young people, and community supporters from various backgrounds.

Although some of Guinea's religious leaders have shown resistance to FGM prevention efforts in recent years, CPTAFE maintains strong and supportive relations with the Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and Communication as well as other government entities. Within the past few years, the organization has received support from Canadian, European and U.S. agencies for a variety of activities, including training and alternative enterprise development for former *exciseuses* and development of radio programs.

Other Guinean organizations that address FGM within the context of broader agendas include human rights and youth associations, local NGOs such as L'Association d'Aide pour la Promotion de la Femme, and the drama group SABARI (Keita and Blankhart, 2001: 136). Recent externally-funded initiatives include dialogue-based "action research" activities and ethnographic studies supported by Gesellschaft ue fuer Technische Zusammernarbeit (GTZ) (von Roenne, 2004; Keita and Blankhart, 2001).

Project development

In mid-2001, discussions began between CPTAFE and Communication for Change, a non-profit training organization based in New York City, on the possibility of undertaking a joint participatory video project. From the outset, dialogue focused on the potential of community-based media to complement CPTAFE's existing public education efforts and, in particular, to help strengthen the outreach capacities of its regional committees.

Participatory video for social change
Working in collaboration with non-governmental and community development organizations in several countries, Communication for Change (C4C) has helped establish participatory video projects that focus on enabling women, young people, and other frequently under-represented groups to articulate their concerns and depict their own experiences. In Bangladesh, C4C helped the social development organizations Banchte Shekha and Proshika form video teams that address women's rights, dowry issues and spousal abuse. In partnership with Action Health, Nigeria, C4C trained teenage peer educators to create videos that promote the spread of reproductive health information among adolescents. At the time of preliminary discussions with CPTAFE, C4C's most recent project had involved the training of community video teams comprised of women and girls in peri-urban Cairo and several villages in Upper Egypt. This experience proved particularly informative for the proposed Guinea partnership, in that female excision was among the issues that the Egyptian video teams had chosen to address. (Some similarities and contrasts between the two projects are discussed below.)

Several factors informed CPTAFE's interest in undertaking community video activities. Chief among these is the sociocultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity that characterizes Guinea's various regions. Attitudes and beliefs surrounding excision, the age at which a girl is subjected to it, and in some cases the form of the practice itself, vary from region to region. In the view of CPTAFE's Secretary General, Dr. Morissanda Kouyaté, FGM

prevention efforts must be highly specific in nature if they are to be credible and effective. Dr. Kouyaté considered that participatory video capacity would enable local CPTAFE teams to create programs that address and respond to local perceptions regarding traditional practices. He also felt that video skills could facilitate the documentation and sharing of local achievements, such as *dépots de couteaux* and development of alternative enterprises for former excisors. Additionally, CPTAFE video teams could help advance the organization's consciousness-raising goals regarding other important health and social development issues.

The broad popularity of video as a medium further recommended its use as an outreach tool in the Guinean context. Screenings at local "video clubs" habitually draw large crowds, whether in small villages or in Conakry and other cities. Although CPTAFE had already undertaken several successful collaborations with the national and rural radio stations, many members felt that the immediacy and visual impact of video would lend a new dynamic to their efforts. The organization also had some prior experience with video production, having collaborated with the state television station (SOTELGUI) in producing *Le Fardeau* ("The Burden"). This documentary conveys an important anti-FGM message, was nationally broadcast on several occasions, and used in many other fora. However, the program is general in scope and was not translated into each of the country's local languages. Furthermore, contending with the busy schedule of the television staff proved a major challenge during production and post-production. Community video offered CPTAFE and its *antennes* the prospect of being able to create locally oriented videotapes on an entirely independent basis.

Given the nature of the organization's activities, many CPTAFE members already had considerable experience in community outreach and mobilization. Furthermore, those members working as journalists for the country's well-established rural radio stations were skilled in carrying out interviews, planning programs, addressing sensitive issues, and thinking strategically about media messages. These factors provided a strong groundwork on which to build participatory video capacity.

First steps
A planning trip undertaken by C4C in early 2002 provided the opportunity for in-depth discussions with CPTAFE members from the central and regional committees, and resulted in the development of detailed project objectives and a phased program of implementation. In Phase I, teams would be established in three areas: Upper Guinea, Middle Guinea, and Conakry. In Phase II, activities would be extended to the remaining two regions of the country.

Inclusiveness was a key factor in identifying project participants. C4C and CPTAFE agreed on the need to involve individuals diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity who shared a deep commitment to CPTAFE's mission. Strong interpersonal abilities and the capacity to share skills with others were likewise important criteria; the identification of "in-house" trainers was a key consideration from the project's outset. Literacy was not deemed a requirement for participation. (In the event, most participants read as well as spoke French, which was the language of training.)

The individuals who took part in participatory video training included CPTAFE members from various levels of the organization, from the Executive Committee to the sub-regional/prefectural *antennes*; among them, young men and women, rural radio journalists, teachers, health workers, and former excisors who had renounced the practice of FGM and become advocates for its abandonment. The majority of project participants were women. At the time of the initial training workshop, the youngest participant was seventeen and the oldest sixty-nine. Valuing the life experience and abilities of participants from very different backgrounds — the radio journalist or youth club coordinator based in the regional capital, the traditional midwife from a remote village — constituted an essential aspect of training and implementation.

Implementation overview

The first CPTAFE/C4C workshop on participatory video took place in July 2002. Twenty-one participants —seven from each of the designated Phase I regions — took part in the 12-day training, which began in Conakry. Over the course of the first few days, participants became familiar with the equipment, viewed and discussed various examples of video work that promotes health, human rights, and community development aims, and reviewed the goals and objectives of the project. As the workshop progressed, they honed their "active listening" and interviewing skills, practiced shot identification and "storyboarding," undertook increasingly challenging shooting exercises, and formulated initial production plans within the context of specific regional needs. In particular, participants developed team skills in identifying and outlining key program elements, essential for the sequential shooting and "in-camera editing" approach that C4C has found most practical for community-based work.

During the first week of the workshop, participants also chose the project's name. The words *sabou* and *nafa*, shared by all three of the key languages spoken by team members (Malinke, Poular, and Soussou) signify, respectively, "opportunity" and "benefit."

The second part of participant training took place in the field, with teams returning to their respective regions with their new production equipment: a Super-VHS camcorder, microphones, headsets, a battery-operated TV/monitor for field use, a VCR, a full-sized TV/monitor, a small generator, tapes, and accessories. This was complemented by an additional set of playback gear (VCR and large monitor) that could either be installed in a central viewing space or transported, as needed. (nb: Most of this equipment had been purchased in country; only hard-to-find accessories were obtained elsewhere. This measure helped establish local sources, insured the appropriateness of the technology and the availability of parts and repair expertise, and also avoided heavy customs fees.)

The apprentice video teams engaged community members in the planning and production of videotapes on different aspects of FGM and girls' and women's welfare. Team members then presented the videotapes to local audiences, inviting their responses and promoting discussion around the programs' themes. In some cases, videos were filmed in

the morning and screened in the evening. By the end of this intensive field-training period, each team had sharpened its conceptual and technical skills and designed an action plan based on local outreach priorities.

During the first ten months of the project, the *Video Sabou et Nafa* teams produced over 15 videotapes on topics ranging from the benefits of family planning and the consequences of FGM to various income-generating opportunities for women. Screened at community "playback" sessions, the tapes served as triggers for facilitated discussions among various audience groups, including secondary and college-level students, members of women's associations, expectant mothers, and men. Team members elicited viewers' comments on the quality and content of the videotapes, as well as ideas for future programs.

In May 2003, the initial *Sabou et Nafa* teams met to exchange experiences, review videotapes produced since the project's start, address challenges encountered during their work, and consolidate technical skills. The gathering concluded with a half-day "video festival" during which participants presented recent productions to guests from various ministries, donor agencies, and non-governmental organizations. In addition, four team members were designated to carry out the training of new participatory video teams in Lower Guinea and the Forest Region. This training took place the following month, thereby extending project activities to all areas of the country.

In the year that followed, the teams produced new videotapes on such issues as HIV/AIDS prevention, girls' education, and the dangers of early marriage as well as FGM. Key events, such as *dépots de couteaux* and celebrations in commemoration of International Women's Day, were documented by teams in Conakry and the interior. In addition, the project participants originally trained by C4C continued to train other individuals as team members and as community-based "video auxiliaries."

In December 2004, members of all of the community video teams gathered in Conakry to share their experiences and discuss ways to continue their work into the future. Participants also took part in assessment activities, offering their reflections on the project's accomplishments, strengths, and shortcomings and its effect on their lives and communities. (Excerpts of these comments appear throughout the balance of this article.)

Scenes from the field: production, playback, and community discussion

Since the project's outset, *Video Sabou et Nafa* teams have created over 30 videotapes on women's and children's health, socioeconomic opportunities, and community-specific initiatives. These range from full-length dramas to documentaries that incorporate personal testimonials, poetry, and musical performances. In several cases, videos have been filmed in partnership with other health and development organizations. The following summaries offer some examples of the content and uses of *Video Sabou et Nafa* productions:

- Youth members of the video team in Labé (Middle Guinea) performed and filmed an open-air drama entitled "*Halte a L'Excision*" ("Stop Excision"). The play depicts the death of a young girl following circumcision, the bitter regret of her mother, and the excisor's remorse. This video was shown at several schools in the Labé area, reaching approximately 500 students, and was also aired on RTG (Guinean national television).

- Two *Video Sabou et Nafa* teams filmed programs in partnership with regional branches of L'Association Guinéean pour le Bien-Etre Familiale (AGBEF). One video describes the detrimental effects of FGM in the context of women's reproductive health; the other details the various methods and advantages of family planning. Future CPTAFE-AGBEF collaborations are under discussion.

- Working in collaboration with a local acting troupe, a team in Upper Guinea filmed a feature-length drama on the consequences of unwanted teen pregnancy and the dangers associated with the use of traditional "remedies."

- "*Akhadan*" ("This Must End"), an anti-FGM video produced by the Middle Guinea team, was shown in August 2003 at the Conakry Peoples' Palace as part of advocacy efforts addressing violence against women. The program was viewed by, among others, the country's First Lady and Prime Minister.

In mid-2004, one of the video teams had the opportunity to focus on the issue of gender violence as it affects refugees in the country's Forest Region. Commissioned by the Guinea office of the American Refugee Committee (ARC), the team produced a documentary on ARC's gender-based violence prevention, response and legal aid activities benefiting refugee women from Liberia and Sierra Leone. This videotape was subsequently shown during a U.S. Congressional briefing on gender-based violence in conflict settings.

Generating dialogue
The primary aim of the *Video Sabou et Nafa* project is promoting dialogue and reflection among community members. In order to enable productive discussions after video screenings, teams usually try to limit audience size to no more than 30 or 40 viewers. In some cases, holding separate screenings for various groups within the community — for example, women, men, adolescent girls, and boys — can help promote open exchange on sensitive issues. These community "playbacks" frequently prompt heartfelt comments and the sharing of personal stories. A man who attended one screening in the Fouta Djalon region (Middle Guinea) spoke of the death of his young niece following her excision. One woman told of the difficulties she'd experienced during childbirth because of FGM; another revealed that she suffered from a vesico-vaginal fistula. In Kankan, Upper Guinea, a young woman said that she wished she could restore what had been taken from her when she was excised. A mother expressed deep regret at having excised her daughter. Another woman stated, "We were victims, but our daughters won't be."

Following some screenings, audience members have volunteered to help spread the messages contained in the videos they've seen. Some viewers have gone a step further, openly declaring their resolve to not excise their daughters. It is difficult to ascertain whether such spontaneous resolutions are followed through. In at least one instance, however, it appears that a pledge prompted by a *Sabou et Nafa* production was kept. A drama on the consequences of early marriage, filmed in Kissidougou, spurred one man in the audience to speak of the plans he'd made for his high school-age daughter to marry an older man. This father stated that the video he'd just seen had convinced him to change his mind. A year later, team members reported that the man had kept to his decision, and that his daughter was unmarried and still in school.

In addition to promoting discussion around the issues raised in their tapes, the teams have used playback sessions to invite viewers' ideas on subjects for future programs. In this way, team members maintain an ongoing dialogue with their constituency —"permanent contact with the community," as one participant put it.

> *This project has contributed a great deal to the community — notably, consciousness-raising and exchanges of experience between different groups.*
>
> *Video Sabou et Nafa* team member

Projecting local images of change

An essential quality of community-based media is its capacity to depict examples of positive change that exist close to home, and therefore carry an immediacy and credibility that more distant models may lack. Another fundamental feature, illustrated by myriad rural radio and alternative media initiatives worldwide, is that of inclusion: namely, providing an opportunity for the experiences of diverse individuals to be articulated and shared with others.

In the case of *Projet Video Sabou et Nafa*, productions have involved close collaboration with community members young and old: students, teachers, farmers, seamstresses, craftswomen and apprentices, cooperative members, and local influentials. One of the earliest programs made by the Middle Guinea team was filmed in the village of Dalaba following a local *dépôt de couteaux* (public laying-down of knives). The video team interviewed members of various women's groups as well as former excisors who had recently joined local cooperatives, depicting a range of ways in which those practitioners have found alternative sources of income. Since then, teams in the various regions have made videotapes on a diversity of women's activities, from collective gardening, cloth-dyeing and ceramics production to soap-making and the extraction of shea butter. These programs not only provide models for those who seek options to practicing excision as a means of income; they also offer examples that can help other women learn new skills and gain greater self-sufficiency.

The teams' participatory productions involve community members as agents of change in other ways as well. Early in the project, the Upper Guinea team filmed a short drama intended to persuade family members to abandon girls' excision. The script was based on the personal experience of a young team member; the actors included her friends and relatives. In the drama, a grandmother expresses her intention of having her granddaughter excised during the period of summer vacation — an all-too-realistic scenario. She asserts religious and cultural bases for the practice. However, the words of a trusted friend and of a neighborhood midwife persuade her that excision is unsupported by religious tenets and poses a threat to her granddaughter's welfare. Local audiences appreciated the clear information delivered in the video, as well as the presence of a widely respected community figure in the role of the grandmother who ultimately renounces the practice. Positive modeling, both on-screen and off, proved a powerful factor in viewers' receptiveness to the video's message.

Challenges, constraints and responses

The chief constraints that faced the project were linked to funding issues and to various logistical factors. Funding uncertainties created delays in fully equipping each project community, and temporary measures to share video gear among teams proved problematic in practice, as described under "Lessons and Observations" (below). Long distances and difficult terrain between various communities within the interior added to these challenges. In addition, the programming of the final exchange gathering among all the video teams, originally planned for mid-2004, had to be delayed until the year's end owing to funding issues.

Furthermore, despite initial hopeful signs, funds sufficient for carrying out a multi-faceted, community-based project evaluation were not obtained. Instead, a small-scale, internal assessment activity was undertaken during the final exchange gathering. Participants offered individual responses to a series of questions regarding achievements, challenges encountered, and the perceived effects of the project on their lives and communities. (This exercise served as a follow-up to information on participants' expectations and concerns regarding the project, gathered prior to the first training workshop.) Other assessment activities included a pair of in-depth interviews and an open group discussion that addressed participants' hopes for the project's future. Although limited to the perspectives of the team members, the information gained through these activities helped underscore both the strengths and shortcomings of the project, and provided first-hand feedback of value to both partner organizations.

In implementation terms, setbacks to video activities arose from certain teams' lack of access to equipment for extended periods of time. In one case, this occurred because an equipment-sharing plan between two communities — intended as a temporary arrangement until each community could be completely outfitted — was not followed. In another instance, the theft of the camera and other items halted project activities in the Forest Region. (To their credit, both of the equipment-deprived teams continued to follow

the action plans they had developed, carrying out other types of awareness-raising activities on the topics they had prioritized.)

Some challenges were related to the geographically diffuse but administratively centralized structure of the local partner organization. Although CPTAFE maintains active regional and sub-regional committees, most of these *antennes* have few material resources available to them. As an example, access to means of transport — to carry equipment to various sites during the course of production, or to enable playback sessions at different locations — proved a greater problem than anticipated. The few vehicles to which some members had access were not available as regularly for team activities as expected, and the hiring of local taxis became a regular need. In addition, the second year of the project saw a significant increase in fuel costs in the country. These issues were addressed at least in part by the establishment, during the follow-up workshop, of "mini-grants" for each video team. These one-time disbursements, in the amount of 300,000FG (approximately $150) each, were intended as the basis for rotating production funds, to be replenished as possible through teams' taping of such events as graduations, conferences, and meetings and through commissioned videotapes for local organizations. Although the replenishment scheme had mixed success, the discrete sums helped support several new production activities.

> *I encountered some difficulties: namely, the transport of the equipment to certain work locales, on account of the accessibility of the routes, and the lack of means.*
>
> [Among the obstacles were] *difficulties in mobilizing people…the lack of financial means for consciousness-raising activities in rural communities (the sub-prefectures).*
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> *Video Sabou et Nafa* team members

The drawbacks of centralized administration of a geographically wide-flung project are illustrated by another example. Equipment acquired for two community teams during the second phase of the project sat in storage in the capital for several months before reaching the sites for which it was intended. This resulted in lost time and erosion of technical skills gained during the follow-up training. The delay was attributed to the local partner's need to arrange secure transport and make an official delivery of the equipment to the project communities, both of which were located in the far interior. This process had to be overseen by the organization's top representative, who had many other responsibilities and was often travelling out of the country. Such situations may well be unavoidable when working with small organizations contending with limited human and material resources.

Communication was another area in which challenges proved greater than expected. Gaining detailed updates on activities in the interior proved especially difficult. Communication between regional and especially prefecture-level teams to the main

CPTAFE office in Conakry was sporadic; consequently, information about project status between workshops often reached Communication for Change belatedly. As a result, the U.S. partner was unable to offer timely advice in response to certain situations, such as the theft of the video gear in Kissidougou and the difficulties in equipment access experienced by one of the sub-regional teams.

Other constraints were related to CPTAFE's volunteer nature. Team members were inevitably faced with the challenge of balancing their involvement in the project with family obligations, livelihoods, and other commitments. This tension was exacerbated by a nationwide economic crisis that emerged in late 2003 and heightened over the course of 2004. In combination with a growing state of political instability in Guinea, this situation contributed to a significant decline in both production and playback activities for many video teams during 2004. Rising costs of food, fuel, and other basic needs, and a resulting preoccupation with matters of daily subsistence among both team members and their local constituencies, were cited by participants as major obstacles during this period.

Lessons and Observations

- ***The priorities of the local partner should take precedence.***

As with any social development initiative, it is important for partner organizations in a participatory communication project to establish common objectives and indices of achievement in the planning stages. However, situations may subsequently arise in which it is necessary to respond to changing conditions or a shift in local needs. The perceived priorities of the local partner should be kept foremost in this case.

In Guinea, the original project objective was to establish five participatory video teams: one for the central CPTAFE committee in Conakry, and one in each of the country's four regions. It was initially anticipated that the teams in the interior would be located in the respective regional capitals (where the regional committees are based), with travel to area villages as required by production and outreach activities. However, the organization's leadership considered it vital to include CPTAFE members from key sub-regional (prefectural) committees in the training as well; among them, individuals from villages that had taken part in *dépots de couteaux* (laying-down of knives ceremonies) and who were compelling spokespeople against harmful practices. Enabling these village-based activists to carry out their own video activities emerged as lead priority for CPTAFE because of their central role in promoting local anti-FGM resolutions as well as their access to interior communities where the practice is especially ingrained. C4C sought to be responsive to the needs of its local partner, and available resources were therefore turned towards the goal of fully equipping four prefectural-level teams as well. In light of limited funding, this meant that certain other activities could not be carried out. In addition, it meant that activities were broadly spread, which increased the logistical complexities related to transport, follow-up, and monitoring. However, the investment proved beneficial in other ways, as the village-based teams have produced some of the project's best work.

- *Each designated participatory video team should have autonomous use of, and full responsibility for, their production and playback equipment.*

In Guinea, efforts to share video production equipment between communities within the same region were developed in light of CPTAFE's strong wish to include certain strategically important villages in the initiative, as described above, and because it was not possible to completely outfit each team from the project's outset. Although equipment sharing between certain sites (Labé and Mamou in Middle Guinea, Kankan and Kouroussa in Upper Guinea) had some limited success, it was ultimately not practical or conducive to the overall success of community media activities.

In general, equipment sharing — or any other arrangement in which gear is not located within the designated project community — prevents regular, assured access and a sense of community proprietorship. In Guinea, specifically, it proved problematic because of the distances and difficulty of terrain involved, the cost of transport, and the reluctance of some regional coordinators to abide by agreements for sharing (even when transport costs were provided), apparently through concerns for the safety of the gear.

This lesson is informed as well by C4C's experiences in Egypt. Under the "Video and Village Dreams" project, equipment was transported between project villages in Minya Province because the distances involved were not great and because the key local partner, a well-established Egyptian non-governmental organization, could maintain the gear in security and facilitate regular exchanges through its field personnel. It is even possible that the arrangement created a sense of cooperative effort and responsibility among project villages. However, it appears that after the central implementation period, the local partner's involvement in activities diminished, including support in facilitating transport.

When individuals have gained skills in the use of new tools but subsequently lose access to them for any reason, it not only leads to erosion of skills through lack of practice; it is also disheartening and inherently disempowering.

For these reasons, it is recommended that equipment sharing between communities not be undertaken unless absolutely necessary, and unless the partner organization has exceptionally strong oversight capabilities and resources to insure the efficient and timely movement of gear. Even then, this approach is inadvisable except for limited periods of time. Instead, every effort should be made to establish autonomy for community video teams in terms of both skills training and production/playback materials.

- *In a participatory video project, the most important results usually take place "off-camera."*

Participatory communication initiatives directly invert the priorities that drive mass media operations, in which the prime concern is the final "product," and results are measured in quantitative terms of viewership and ratings. In a participatory video project,

the processes entailed in the preparation, creation, and use of each program are fully as important as the finished tapes themselves. As noted by Rodriguez (2001: 127), these processes "engage both producers and audiences in complex dynamics that go far beyond the normal production and appreciation of an audiovisual text." The collaborative effort involved in deliberations over content and approach, or in seeking the cooperation of community members who will help illuminate the themes being addressed in a tape, are among the many acts of dialogue and communication that contribute to the evolution of the initiative as a whole.

Development takes place at the individual level as well. Less visible than group processes, these can be difficult to document or even perceive unless one gains access to the "back story" that informs what is seen before the camera. As her directorial debut, a young woman scripts and shoots a drama that encourages women in her natal town not to excise their daughters and granddaughters during the summer vacation; one of the community's most prominent matriarchs endorses her work. The young woman, it emerges, was excised by an elder female relative during a holiday in the interior, and nearly lost her life as a result. It is difficult to guess at, much less make an attempt to measure, the sense of personal agency fostered by using newfound technical skills to recreate a critical event in one's life, substitute a different and far happier ending, and use the resulting program to sway public opinion.

Perhaps no less important than the depiction of positive models onscreen is the example of women and young people wielding cameras and creating programs for the benefit of the community. In notes documenting a screening of their videotape on child nutrition, the Conakry team reported, "The women [in the local audience] really appreciated the program, [and] they were happy to see that the *Video Sabou et Nafa* team is made up of more women than men." The sight of village women using video equipment and producing well-crafted programs carries its own message of competence and self-efficacy.

> *...the community didn't know that a young woman was capable of producing a video.*
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> *People didn't know that even older women could handle the camera.*
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> *Video Sabou et Nafa* team members

In part because of the interplay of such dynamics at the individual and collective level, the potential long-term effects of a participatory video project can extend beyond the expected outcomes of a "communication" intervention. Teamwork, advocacy, decision-making, and leadership skills are integral components, as well as outgrowths of, participatory communication. The difficulty of measuring such factors is one of many

reasons that the value of participatory communication initiatives can often be underestimated, or inadequately represented, through traditional models of evaluation.

"Capacity-building" is among the greatly overused terms in the lexicon of development; nevertheless, it serves as a shorthand description of one of the benefits of genuinely participatory communication activities.

> When people learn to make a meaningful and compelling video program, to master a new and sophisticated tool, or to facilitate a group discussion after viewing a relevant video program, they develop communication skills that increase their visibility in the community. Even after putting down the camera, cassettes and VCR, participatory video producers remain experienced communicators….Strategic thinkers and communicators are important and valuable assets, not only to their organizations, but to their communities and nations as well. They are the ones who will ask challenging questions and inspire others to make changes to improve their lives. (Stuart and Bery, 1996)

Correspondences and contrasts with other projects

Participatory video for prevention of FGM
Although we are not aware of other projects apart from C4C's previous work in Egypt that expressly use participatory video to help end the practice of female excision, examples abound of community and alternative media in the service of health promotion, indigenous rights, community development, and consciousness-raising. Before comparing relevant aspects of the *Video Sabou et Nafa* project to some of these initiatives, it may be useful to draw a few points of contrast with the Egypt experience.

Under the "Video and Village Dreams" project (1997-99), women in three Upper Egypt villages and one periurban zone of Cairo received participatory video training within the context of a community education and leadership initiative. The earliest tapes created by these teams addressed such issues as literacy, nutrition, and sanitation. As the teams' skills level and confidence grew, and as their work gained support within their communities, they began to take on more sensitive topics, including child labor, early marriage, and women's roles in the community. Several of the teams felt it essential to address female excision, which is almost as widespread a practice in Egypt as in Guinea (El-Zanaty and Way, 2001), but was rarely addressed in public at the time, especially within conservative Upper Egyptian communities. Three teams eventually produced documentaries on FGM, its consequences and its lack of religious basis, but they did so only several months into the project. These tapes, which featured medical personnel and religious leaders as well as community members who opposed the practice, successfully sparked local dialogue. By approaching the issue gradually and securing the participation of highly regarded individuals, the Egyptian teams helped insure the credibility of their efforts and increased the likelihood that their message would be positively received.

The overall cultural environment in Guinea presents a strong contrast to that of Egypt, and the level of public discourse on the issue of FGM is at a very different stage. The Guinean teams, working on the foundation of CPTAFE's past efforts and within a context of relatively broad public acceptance of such discussions, have been able to address the topic of excision in a direct manner from the outset. As a result, they have focused on responding to community-specific attitudes regarding FGM and on disseminating models of local services or interventions (e.g., health clinics, alternative income-generating activities, *dépots de couteaux*) that support the movement towards abandonment. In both the Egypt and Guinea projects, all decisions regarding prioritization of topics and timing of productions were made by the local teams, based on their close understanding of the sociocultural climate in which they lived and worked.

Developing local talent
In some initiatives involving the participatory use of media, material is shot by a trained video team or professional cameraperson under the guidance or "direction" of community members (Aufderheide, 2000; Crocker, 2003; Dagron, 2001: 284-285). Such material may be used for advocacy or negotiation purposes, or to initiate a dialogic process of feedback and response (Dagron, 2001: 284; Braden and Hong, 1998). In other cases, local video teams carry out filming while the editing of the gathered material is done by others, with varying degrees of input by community members (Crocker, 2003; Dagron, 2001: 117; Singh, 1998). Under certain models, such as those of CESPA in Mali and CESPAC in Peru, footage shot in one or several communities has been refined or shaped into pedagogical aids with the assistance of specialists in particular fields of development (Dagron, 2001: 62, 119). In still other instances, video material gathered in specific communities is used for purposes of documentation or project development, essentially as a type of field research tool in support of Participatory Rural Appraisal or Participatory Learning and Action methods (Braden and Nelson, 1999).

From its outset, *Projet Video Sabou et Nafa* was designed to be as community-based as possible in terms of both production and final use of tapes. In function of their chosen theme, team members seek out local experts: a nurse at a village health center, a young girl benefiting from a literacy program, the mother of a non-excised daughter, the head of a local women's cooperative. Interviews and other sequences are often played back immediately after recording for the benefit of those featured in the scene, and modified if needed based on the feedback received. As described, the tapes are primarily used to profile positive models, highlight initiatives or concerns that merit attention, and promote local dialogue. Some tapes have been shared with communities in other regions of the country; this exchange always takes place with the express agreement of the original production team.

Edit-free "editing"
One of the factors that enables this autonomy is the production method embraced by the project. In light of the decentralized and multi-site nature of activities, preference was given to "in-camera" editing techniques. Although many participatory video projects, including several of C4C's past collaborations (Video SEWA in India, Action Health in Nigeria) have included the training of participants in post-production, this was deemed

unnecessary as well as impractical for the Guinea initiative. The cost of post-production equipment, the time required for editing training, the paucity of regular electricity in the interior and security issues were all factors that weighed into this joint decision. Even more important, however, were considerations of access and sustainability. Post-production can create considerable lags between the filming of material and its being shared with the community; focus may shift from the collaborative processes entailed by community production to the honing of a fine-tuned, finished "product." Advanced editing skills tend to become concentrated in the hands of a small sub-group of individuals; they are also considerably more difficult to transfer to new project participants than "in-camera" editing options — which, on many of the camcorders available today, include an impressive range of effects as well as basic audio post-dubbing for narration or music. Finally, and most importantly, sequential filming of video programs develops strong strategic and production planning skills on the part of team members, and helps insure that decisions about content and presentation are made jointly.

Although there are certain disadvantages entailed by this approach — some tapes, for example, contain "run-on" sequences, brusque transitions, or occasionally bumpy camera movements — the benefits have been considerable. The "editing in the camera" option has enabled the part-time, volunteer *Sabou et Nafa* production teams to create a diversity of videotapes quickly and efficiently. In some cases, videos have been filmed during the course of a day and screened for community audiences the same evening.

We projected a film on FGM, the consequences upon the girl in the short and long term, and parents were sad to see this. They said, "Really, we understand now why FGM isn't good…" Because when you tell, tell, tell, there are some who might understand, especially literate people, but non-literate people, you need to show them the video, to show them the images.

Tady Camara, *Video Sabou et Nafa* team member
Kouroussa, Upper Guinea

Collective screenings for "conscientisation"
In some participatory communication initiatives, video programs are broadcast via a local television network. In Guinea, as previously described, the work of the *Sabou et Nafa* teams is usually shared through community viewing and discussion sessions (*séances* or "playbacks"). In this and in some other respects, the *Video Sabou et Nafa* approach bears certain similarities to that of Brazil's T.V. Maxabomba. The Rio de Janeiro-based project — initiated, like *Video Sabou et Nafa*, by a non-governmental organization dedicated to public education and outreach — also conducts collective viewings followed by facilitated discussions. Whereas *Sabou et Nafa* sessions take place in social centers, youth clubs, and schools, T.V. Maxabomba projects its programs in open markets, squares, and other public spaces. Maxabomba's mass screenings reach audiences of up to 200 or 300 people (Dagron, 2001: 98); the *Sabou et Nafa* teams seek to limit their *séances* to smaller

groups, so as to enable general discussion. As previously noted, the Guinean teams have also found it effective in certain cases to hold screenings for individual groups of women, men, married couples, young girls or boys, given the sensitive nature of some of the topics addressed.

Another point of contrast is in the scope of issues addressed by T.V. Maxabomba. Geared towards civic capacity-building, the group provides information on national-level concerns — the political scene, national debt, employment, environmental deterioration — with the aim of helping people understand the forces that affect their lives and encouraging them to take active part in civic life (Dagron, 2001: 99-101). A real distinction of T.V. Maxabomba's work is its depiction of such "macro" issues in ways that render them compelling and immediately relevant to peoples' everyday lives.

The work of *Projet Video Sabou et Nafa* is considerably narrower in scope as well as fundamentally non-political in tone. The Guinean teams' focus on portraying local models of change evokes the work of Video SEWA in India, whose programs on collective bargaining methods and innovative production techniques help inform and mobilize women in other areas (Stuart, 1992). At the same time, however, the central mission of the *Sabou et Nafa* teams is essentially one of mass "conscientisation" on a subject of national concern; that is, a harmful customary practice that is prevalent in all regions of the country.

Questioning harmful customs, upholding traditional values
Numerous participatory communication initiatives — among them, the Chiapas Media Project in Mexico, Brazil's Kayapo Video, and Nutzij in Guatemala — have as their goal the support and self-empowerment of indigenous peoples. In these instances, video serves as a tool for enabling self-representation through modern technology, documenting struggles to preserve land and rights, and recording and valuing customs that embody local identity (Aufderheide, 2000; Dagron, 2001: 260-262, 289-280; Guidi, 2003).

An interesting point of contrast emerges here regarding the *Video Sabou et Nafa* project, a primary aim of which is to help end a specific traditional practice. In seeking to combat female genital mutilation, many of the teams' programs assail a deep-rooted custom that had gone unquestioned for centuries — a uniquely challenging goal from cultural, communication, and public health perspectives.

The fact that the teams' productions have been very well received is likely due to several interrelated reasons. First, many Guineans are familiar with CPTAFE and its mandate; the organization's many years of "sensitization" and outreach activities on the topic of excision has opened the way to public discussion of a previously taboo topic. The fact, too, that the video teams are comprised of well-known individuals from the project communities helps to engender trust, as does the participation of respected local figures (health professionals, elders, municipal and religious leaders) in the programs. Further, in addressing female genital mutilation, CPTAFE assiduously avoids "laying blame" for the practice and always welcomes new supporters. Also important is the fact that the video

teams produce programs on other themes as well, including tapes that promote beneficial traditional practices (breastfeeding, respect for elders).

In a very different context, the Maneno Mengi project in Tanzania has made highly effective use of community-directed, process-oriented video "interventions" to help synthesize perspectives and support local advocacy efforts to end detrimental modern practices like dynamite fishing and the eviction of villagers from their land by foreign landowners (Dagron, 2001: 284-285).

Staying "on-message"

Finally, the mission-oriented nature of *Projet Video Sabou et Nafa* clearly distinguishes it from the many participatory media initiatives that foster the use of cameras or camcorders primarily as a means of enabling self-expression or of documenting, and thereby valuing, traditional ways or daily lives. As described here, the subject matter of the teams' productions is shaped by the specific mandate of the partner organization. Indeed, some community teams have received collegial rebukes if they present tapes that do not clearly serve to advance CPTAFE's mission of outreach on FGM, health, rights, and socioeconomic issues within the community.

Looking Toward the Future

At this stage, the role of Communication for Change has transitioned from that of training facilitator and project co-coordinator to long-distance advisor. CPTAFE now has the internal capacity to train others in participatory video skills: to date, the original project participants have provided various levels of training to sixty other individuals, including both CPTAFE members and community supporters. Over two-thirds of these trainees are young people, recruited as "video auxiliaries," who help plan, perform in, and film productions. Several have taken on key roles in CPTAFE's outreach activities, thereby gaining confidence and honing their skills as communicators and community activists.

> *The greatest satisfaction that the project gave me is having a good training in video, and a lot of hope for the future and* [our] *collective work.*
>
> *Video Sabou et Nafa* team member

During the two-and-a-half years since the inception of the *Video Sabou et Nafa* project, team members have sought to use participatory video to advance the following aims:

- to help individuals recognize that they are not alone in having suffered various consequences of FGM, or in opposing the practice;
- to project positive examples of those who have participated in public declarations against FGM or who are willing to advocate against it;

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- to encourage the abandonment of other harmful customs and the adoption of beneficial practices; and
- to enable the sharing of information and experiences between individuals, communities, and health and development organizations.

Priority themes for the video teams' current action plans include children's rights, prevention of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS, polygamy, and different forms of violence against women. Participants express their hopes of stepping up community video activities as the country's economic situation improves, and of practicing their particular form of media activism far into the future.

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(Additional information on participatory video projects carried out in partnership with Communication for Change is available on the C4C website, www.c4c.org .)