

# Participatory Video and Visual Sovereignty in San Land Rights Advocacy

A Kalahari Case Study

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Received: 17 October 2023 | Accepted: 28 January 2024 | Published: 23 March 2024 | DOI:

[10.5281/zenodo.18943597](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18943597)

## ABSTRACT

Indigenous San communities in the Kalahari Desert face protracted struggles over land tenure and resource rights. While participatory visual methods are increasingly used in advocacy, their specific role in advancing visual sovereignty—the right to self-representation and control over cultural imagery—within land rights campaigns is underexplored in the African context. This study examines how participatory video documentation is utilised by San communities to influence land rights advocacy. It specifically analyses the processes of production, the narratives constructed, and the perceived impact on advocacy strategies and community agency. A qualitative case study was conducted using ethnographic methods, including participant observation of video production workshops, in-depth interviews with community filmmakers and advocacy leaders, and thematic analysis of video artefacts and campaign materials. The analysis identified three interlinked themes: the reclamation of narrative authority, the strategic negotiation of vulnerability and strength in visual storytelling, and the use of video evidence to counter state discourses. A concrete finding was that over 80% of interviewed participants described the process as fundamentally shifting their advocacy from reacting to external agendas to proactively setting them. Participatory video functions as a critical tool for visual sovereignty, enabling San communities to articulate land rights claims on their own terms. This practice strengthens advocacy by grounding it in culturally resonant narratives and evidentiary forms that challenge dominant political narratives. Support for indigenous land rights should include sustained funding and training for community-owned media initiatives. Policymakers and NGOs must create formal channels to integrate community-produced visual evidence into land negotiation and legal processes. visual sovereignty, participatory video, land rights, indigenous advocacy, San, Botswana, narrative authority This paper provides a novel analysis of participatory video as a mechanism for visual sovereignty, demonstrating how it transforms advocacy from a reactive to a proactive, community-led practice in the Kalahari context.

**Keywords:** *Participatory video, Visual sovereignty, San communities, Kalahari Desert, Land tenure, Indigenous advocacy, Decolonial methodologies*

### Article Highlights

- Analyses how participatory video enables San communities to reclaim narrative authority in land rights campaigns.
- Identifies the strategic negotiation of vulnerability and strength in community visual storytelling.
- Demonstrates the use of video evidence to counter state discourses on land tenure.

### Policy Implication

Support for indigenous land rights must include sustained funding for community-owned media and formal pathways for visual evidence in negotiations.

*This case study offers a framework for visual sovereignty in indigenous advocacy.*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Argues for formal channels to integrate community-produced evidence into legal processes.</li></ul>	
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