

Community-based research, mutual learning and participatory dissemination

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Community natural resource management and conservation strategies integrate valuable and inseparable ecological and cultural elements. Wherever indigenous peoples or rural communities relate to their environments, they make daily decisions regarding the management of their territories and resources, and where these decisions and practices lead to the conservation of habitats, species, ecological functions and associated cultural values (Borrini Feyerabend and Kothari 2008), we find key examples of biocultural diversity (Boege 2008). Currently, such community-driven strategies are presented as panaceas to prevent and solve many of the social tensions that arise from conventional approaches to conservation, as they work to protect nature through community customary governance while allowing communities to continue using resources through traditional management (Bandeira *et al.* 2005, Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2004, Bray *et al.* 2003). To substantiate the efficacy of such community conservation solutions, several strands of current research seek to assess the effectiveness of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) in biodiversity conservation (Shahabuddin and Rao 2010, Bajracharya *et al.* 2005, Dalle *et al.* 2006, Johnson and Nelson 2004). However, due to the biocultural character of ICCAs, a critical evaluation of their effectiveness must include conventional biological indicators, coupled with social, cultural and economic indicators (Conservcom 2009-2011). Research should also follow an inclusive multicultural approach (Shoultz *et al.* 2006) that recognizes and includes both those external groups who can contribute useful research tools, and the local groups who know, use, protect, classify and constantly draw on their environment.

This paper presents the approaches of a) community-based co-enquiry and research and b) mutual learning and participatory dissemination within the project “Assessing the effectiveness of community-based management strategies for biocultural diversity conservation” (Combioserve). This Latin-American/European project aims to identify the conditions and principles of successful community-based conservation in four selected locations in Latin America based upon a collaborative research process between Civil Society Organisations (CSO), Research and Technological Development institutions (RTD) and local people. Community-based co-enquiry, mutual learning and participatory dissemination are the preferred modes of interaction between these actors.

Community-based co-enquiry refers to a multicultural and interdisciplinary research approach to understanding and defending local strategies of resource management. This approach will be developed in the project through the design and adaptation of protocols and tools for ecological, social and ethnoecological research. The selection and adaptation of methods requires the RTD partners of the project (3 in Europe and 3 in Latin America) to propose academic methods for the analysis of community-based conservation strategies, and the three Latin American CSOs to contribute the participatory methods they use. Based on these

proposals and contributions, the Global Diversity Foundation (GDF) team will lead the design – with intensive input from all partners – of innovative methods for community-based researchers, non governmental organisations (NGOs) and research centres which hybridize academic and participatory modes of research.

These methods will be (1) summarized in step-by-step, ‘how-to’ protocols for use by community- and institutionally-based researchers and then (2) tested by community researchers in communities in Oaxaca, Mexico where GDF has led a collaborative research process since 2007. Finally, the methods will be transferred interactively to the other field sites in Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico. The transfer will be carried on through one week workshops that will allow GDF to work intensively with the RTDs and CSOs in each of these countries to gain competency in the community-adapted research methods and to implement the co-enquiry approach at the specific field sites. The workshops will feature hands-on approaches to learning the methods and skills that are described in the co-enquiry research protocols.

The multicultural approach goes beyond research and applies also to the design of innovative and participatory models of sharing and dissemination of advances, methods and results both internally between all project participants and externally to other communities, community organizations and scientific institutions. This process includes the development of a communication strategy in partnership with communities using participatory modes of project dissemination at multiple scales. The tools to be used include the creation of an intranet for real-time sharing of project updates and materials; the production of participatory videos of project advances, methods and training events to document and share multiple aspects of the project; community exchanges and cross-visits inside Mexico; exchanges through participatory videos for the communication between the communities in Brazil and Bolivia; an internet web page to share project outcomes with community members, researchers and policy-makers who are seeking support and collaboration in designing and implementing socially equitable biodiversity conservation projects; the organisation of an international conference on community conservation that will favour debate and cross-cultural communication; and the creation of a manual of community-based research and co-enquiry on community conservation.

Some of the important advantages of the community based co-enquiry, mutual learning and dissemination approaches is that they prioritize the use of the project results to meet local needs and solve problems related to biodiversity use and management, strengthen community conservation efforts and ensure the quality of life of those whose livelihoods depend on biodiversity. The integration of community representatives as researchers enables academics to fully understand and more effectively address the needs and problems that arise in community conservation initiatives. At the same time, upon recognizing and integrating the management, knowledge and learning systems of local communities, research partners can develop critical assessments tailored to local needs and visions. Finally, the participatory dissemination approach raises public understanding and awareness of the key debates, public policies, methods and strategies related to community conservation.

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