Social research

Abandoning the ivory tower

The role of researchers in coastal communities needs to be critically examined to foster a responsive and collaborative approach

How do we make community needs and visions central to government fisheries policy, fisheries management and international agreements? This is a central question that plagues activists and their supporters in coastal communities all over the world. To have some chance of being heard and respected, and to make convincing policy arguments, we need to understand the facts of any issue, the linkages attached to it, and the probable results of various policy directions. For this, we need focused research that is carried out by competent researchers who have the best interests of the community in mind, and who are responsive to community information needs.

When women fishworkers, community organizers and researchers met in Newfoundland for the *Gender, Globalization and Fisheries* conference in June 2000, we looked at some of the ways in which researchers have worked in, and with, coastal communities in the past. This issue was raised by various researchers who were concerned about some of the intrusive methods currently in use in the social sciences, and also by a shellfisher whose experience as a subject of government research had been frustrating and distressing.

We also dreamed about how it could be, and developed lists of urgent research topics for the Atlantic Provinces of Canada. Many of those issues have been reflected in the recent special edition of Yemaya. In this article, I will share some key points arising from our discussions on the role of the researcher.

Unfortunately, almost everyone who has had some experience of research in coastal communities can remember when arrogance, poor communication and inappropriate methods caused problems, and there are all too many examples of academics stripping information out of communities and then disappearing to build their reputations through publications, without returning any benefit to the community. Happily, there are also researchers whose work is an example of how to do things well, in respectful collaboration with fishworkers.

Community activists and advocates are often battling entrenched government policy, embodied in an inflexible bureaucracy. Frequently, they are trying to deal with factors that are beyond local control. Sometimes, there is no other option than to resort to court action. Whether the fight is for fair access to local marine resources, healthy working conditions, restrictions on destructive gear types or rational federal policy on joint-venture agreements, people in coastal communities often need outside support. Academic researchers who have established credentials bring legitimacy, in the eyes of bureaucrats, when they decide to work with community activists. They have the power to bring information from the outside and the skills to excavate information from within the community. As an outsider, a researcher can trigger deeper analysis and challenge local assumptions. Also, researchers have tools and methods that, if transferred, can be useful for local activists.

Ethical approach
To realize her/his potential, a researcher must have an ethical and thoughtful approach, a commitment to work with people for social change, and a willingness to take the time needed to develop trust. Establishing trust can take a long time and be hard work. In most cases, it requires the researcher to actually live in the community.

The researcher should be aware of her own assets and strengths, and offer them to the community, rather than coming in with a pre-set agenda. Community people need to know why, and for whom, the research is being done. It is vital to ask the 'right' question, or at least one that has practical significance for the community. Project design is critical. A project must include / accommodate a process through which local control or at least real input is possible at the design stage. The design must also include a realistic budget and time allowance for returning information to the community in user-friendly forms.

The design should be conscious of gender inequities. While it is important to respect local culture and tradition, the researcher must also be ready to find creative ways to break down traditional barriers to participation of marginalized groups. A community is rarely homogeneous. There are many voices and perspectives, and it is the role of the researcher to ensure that marginalized and minority views are uncovered and considered.

Sometimes, researchers act as if the data they collect belongs to them or to their institution. In fact, information drawn from the community belongs to the community. Information concerning natural resources or traditional knowledge should be treated as confidential, and released to the public only with permission. Primary information, especially maps, should be handed over to a local institution (museum, library, council office).

Optimally, research is nested in a larger programme of community development, and there are linkages to local leaders and institutions. Many community activists have found that participatory analysis, involving a wide range of societal groups, is most fruitful. It is also important to transfer tools and information that allow or promote follow-up activity by community-based activists.

It is important that the research does not make excessive demands of the community or disturb livelihoods. Gathering research data as quickly as possible may seem like the most important task in the eyes of a researcher with a deadline to meet. However, if the participants in workshops, mapping exercises, interviews, etc. feel bullied or stressed, they are unlikely to provide the quality of information that is required.

Asumptions challenged
Above all, a researcher entering a community must be humble, willing to challenge her own assumptions, and willing to change them! Listening is a key skill. It is also important to watch out for unexpected impacts of the research process. Are you opening wounds or sparking conflicts? If a sensitive topic is

opened up, there must be a process for closure and healing. Some methodologies that can be found in books simply do not work in many situations. Intrusive and potentially degrading methods, such as wealth ranking, should be avoided, unless there is some compelling need as well as informed participant consent.

Another area where researchers often trip up is in their use of language. Plain language works best, and is essential in all reports returned to the community for future use. When designing a research or development project, build on the community's strengths, don't dwell on the problems. If a researcher recognizes and supports community capacity, the process will be easier and the outcome will be enriched.

Nobody is perfect, and often a researcher will make mistakes in spite of having good intentions. We need to learn from our mistakes, as well as build upon our successes. For this to work, researchers must take time to share information and experiences with other researchers, and open themselves and their work up to critical evaluation. Performing collaborative and comparative research is fruitful, because then you can uncover linkages and find common ground among coastal communities that struggle with similar or related issues.

Having personal and profession integrity is very important. It does no good if, at the end of a fruitful project, the researcher bows to political pressure or is swayed by the prospect of future financial benefit, and allows research reports to be changed or misrepresented by other parties.

The issues facing coastal communities are so critically important, there is no justification for frivolous or strictly academic research. Nor can research results simply be produced and then left unused. Researchers should have a concrete plan for using their results to develop policy recommendations that will then be sent to government and to the media.

Researchers who hold positions in wealthy Western academic institutions have an added opportunity and responsibility to facilitate the work of community activists, junior researchers and colleagues based in developing countries. There is room for more university-sponsored training programmes for community researchers and activists. In many cases, fishworkers and activists are not made to feel welcome in academic circles, and universities have no clear mandate and mechanism for community service. It will take time, but academic staff can help to develop long-term and responsive links between the university and communities. One approach is to demand that fishworkers and community facilitators participate in committees that develop university programmes. Where there are Women's Centres, rural women should be invited to the Board of Directors. There should also be a place for Southern researchers on Northern campuses, and especially in university funding and development committees. Academic institutions must be challenged to develop and follow a code of ethics that supports respectful collaboration and community-led, participatory research.

Even the most committed and careful of researchers face hurdles that can make it difficult or impossible to design and carry out fully collaborative research programmes. One obstacle is the general lack of funding for proactive or preventative activity. Funding often becomes available only at times of crisis, and, therefore, the research responds to problems, instead of helping to avoid them. Even if there is access to timely funding, the money may have strings attached.

Other obstacles
Funders often try to dictate priorities and research questions, and they frequently have unrealistic deadlines that do not allow time for developing respectful relationships, performing participatory exercises or developing reports in the local language. Other obstacles may be thrown up by the community itself. For instance, women tend to get split along class lines, and they are often not recognized as legitimate fishworkers. The media can also interfere with progress, as it generally wants to focus on only negative news. This creates unnecessary stress and can inflame conflicts, just when the community needs to pull together.

Government policies are frequently anti-female and work against healthy family and community life. For example, there is little recognition among government staff or by medical and other professionals, of work-related illness prevalent among female fishworkers. This sort of ignorance among people who should offer assistance, can make it difficult to argue for the need for research, attract funding and promote positive change.

Despite the obstacles and demands, productive, collaborative research that can help communities deal with urgent coastal and fisheries issues is possible, and it is very important that researchers rise to this challenge. Gaining strength through networking and partnerships is an important piece of the process. Participants in the *Gender, Globalization and Fisheries* conference have made an important start, and continue to grasp hands across the expanse of continents and oceans, via the Internet and through publications such as *Yemaya* and SAMUDRA Report.

This piece is by Irene Novaczek (inova@isn.net), an independent fisheries consultant based in Prince Edward Island, Canada