



## VI. Evaluating co-enquiry research processes

In this section, we describe our experience of collaborative evaluation of community-based research in the Chinantla fieldsite communities. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) is the term often used to discuss processes of project monitoring and assessment that actively involve community members (Gujit and Gaventa 1998; Estrella and Gaventa 1997; Blauert *et al* 2000). PM&E has benefited mostly from experiences and reflections in the field of development, although some scholars have also begun to publish on evaluations of community-based participatory research projects (Schulz *et al* 2003).

The basic principles of PM&E are (from Gujit and Gaventa 1998; Coupal 2001):

- (1) Participatory monitoring and evaluation should be an ongoing and central element of the implementation of any project; the PM&E process should be established with the beneficiaries of the project at its outset;
- (2) It is a process that requires reflection, self-reflexivity, respect, openness to change, flexibility, etc.;
- (3) Its object is capacity-building of beneficiaries, increased ownership of the project and multi-stakeholder accountability;
- (4) The process of PM&E is planned, managed and implemented by project beneficiaries (and other stakeholders), with the support of a facilitator;
- (5) An important focus of PM&E is indicators of project progress; these are to be designed, and used to evaluate results, by project beneficiaries;
- (6) The approach is adaptive, and each project will require its own framework for PM&E.

The PM&E approaches are rich in ideas and progressive approaches for engaging community members. However, for the purposes of co-enquiry in the Chinantla region, the authors of this manual chose to adopt a less structured approach than that proposed by PM&E authors. In our experience, in the Chinantla context, highly structured approaches, particularly when engaging with the entire community, are not very efficient or easily appropriated locally. If participatory evaluations are too structured, they may simply be seen as yet another 'task' the community is given as part of the project, rather than an empowering tool. Therefore we have often chosen to carry out blend of periodic structured evaluations with the whole community and group-based ongoing dialogue with community researchers and members.

Although there are a wide variety of methods for carrying out participatory evaluations with indigenous and local communities, the authors share the ones we have specific experience in. These are (i) the evaluation mural, (ii) the bag of surprises, (iii) evaluation cards, (iv) reach for the stars, and, last but not least (v) Freirean 'culture circles' and problematising dialogue.

### Pre-evaluation exercise

In GDF's experience working with community researchers in Malaysia and Mexico, we learned that what the funders wish to see in an evaluation differs from what the



community considers important to evaluate. Similarly, that which the external support team thinks it is important to evaluate may be different to that which the community wish to see evaluated. Nevertheless, it is important to accept that the work teams and the community have limited time and energy and it is difficult to carry out an evaluation that includes all interests. Therefore, GDF staff designed a pre-evaluation exercise for the community in order to find a consensus on what the expectations of the evaluation are.

This exercise is carried out in a number of steps with a small group from the community, usually the community research team and any other individual who has been involved in the activities, including community authorities. One can use the exercise of ‘concerns and expectations’ (see below) in order to help participants understand *what* will be evaluated and *why*. The objective of the exercise is to identify as broadly as possible the project themes that the whole community wishes to evaluate in depth. The small group can carry out subsequent meetings with other members of the community in order to ensure the themes are appropriate. Finally, a larger workshop with the whole community is held.

### Step 1

During the first evaluation meeting with the small group, the following questions are explored:

- What are the aspects of the project that we would like to evaluate with the whole community? These can be, for example:
  - The collaboration agreement
  - Activities carried out with the community
  - Results of the research to date
  - Community participation
  - Participation, role and approach of GDF and the community researchers
- What kind of feedback would we like to obtain from this evaluation? The questions that the group develop, could include:
  - Does the community understand what the project is about?
  - How satisfied are the members of the community with the project so far?
  - What do the community members think the strengths and the weaknesses of the project are to date?
  - In what way do community members think that the project can improve in the future, and what are our future challenges?
- What kind of evaluation activities can we use to obtain this feedback? The proposals developed may include:
  - A community workshop open to all the members of the community (How many workshops are necessary? How large would each workshop be?)
  - Other techniques like interviews
  - Combining methods – a community workshop, a questionnaire, and interviews with key informants (How much time is necessary to apply these methods? Could a combination of methods yield repetitive information and result informant fatigue?)
- Who should be present in the evaluation activities?
- When can the evaluation activities be carried out?



- What must we do to prepare, develop and document the evaluation activities?  
Who will be responsible for each task?
- What will these activities cost?

**Step 2.** Based on the answers given and the small group dialogue, agreements are reached regarding what will be done, the tasks to be fulfilled and the division of responsibilities. The planning of subsequent meetings with other members of the community to ensure the themes are appropriate and encourage wide participation in the evaluation activities.

**Step 3.** Subsequent meetings with other members of the community to ensure the themes are appropriate.

**Step 4.** Community evaluation workshop, designed during Steps 1, 2, and 3.

### **The concerns and expectations exercise**

This exercise has as an objective to reflect on any concerns that emerged during the course of the co-enquiry process, and that the group wishes to explore during the evaluation workshop with the whole community, and to verify if they still exist. It also seeks to explore if and how expectations in the community have changed over the course of the research process. The technique used is a simple answer of 'agree' or 'disagree' with regard to the statements given. In the example given for an evaluation activity with Chinanteco community researchers, the concerns and expectations were as follows:

#### *Concerns*

- Not being able to answer the question
- Not being able to adapt to participatory techniques
- Not learning participatory techniques
- Not being able to apply the techniques to the themes
- Not being able to get involved effectively
- Not having time to participation
- That my ideas may not be respected
- That the workshops and learning will not work and I will be as I was before
- That I will not be motivated to change methods (to a co-enquiry approach)
- Fear of losing authority
- Fear of losing competence and lack of coordination with my colleagues
- Fear of not being able to use the methods appropriately
- Fear of being questioned by the community
- Fear that we will not be able to do what we say we will do

#### **Expectations**

- That the techniques contribute effectively to facilitate community research
- That we can recognize our shortcomings and that we receive support to be better researchers and colleagues
- To learn to be motivated for participatory techniques
- To get to know each other better to deal with our differences



- To be able to apply what we learn creatively
- To get to know our colleagues in different ways
- That the work and workshops take place in a relaxed way
- That we can give and receive experiences
- That we learn the methods by practicing them
- To discover the need to change values
- To achieve good communication and open participation among community members
- That the methods simply and render more productive our learning process

**The evaluation mural<sup>1</sup>**

This method can be used to evaluate project participant’s general feelings about their participation in the co-enquiry research process. It involves drawing or printing the following table in a large enough poster format to carry out a collective activity. The mural is pinned to the wall for all to see. If all participants are able to read, the coordinator invites everyone to stick small stickers on the cell that they feel most in agreement with. If there are participants who cannot read, the coordinator reads the content of the poster and asks the participants to give a show of hands when they agree with a response. These responses are taken note of on the mural. The mural given here is an example, taken from an evaluation of community researchers’ experiences as part of a co-enquiry research team.

During my work as a community researcher...	Responses			
	☺☺ Strongly agree	☺ Agree	☹ Disagree	☹☹ Strongly disagree
... I listened to my colleagues	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹
... I expressed my opinion	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹
... I made suggestions	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹
... my suggestions were reflected in the results	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹
... I learned new skills	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹
... the information generated will be useful to my community	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹
... the way we worked as a team was appropriate	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹
... the time we spent in meetings and	☺☺	☺	☹	☹☹

<sup>1</sup> This technique was contributed by Isabel Ruiz Mallén from UAB



workshops was appropriate				
... I would recommend to other communities to participate in processes such as these	😊😊	😊	😐	😞

## The bag of surprises

This method can be used to evaluate activities carried out by groups in the community, e.g. the community researchers. Firstly, evaluation questions are prepared and written each on a piece of paper; all the questions are placed inside a bag. In a session with the whole community (or research team, depending on the scale of the evaluation), each person takes a question and answers it immediately. The rest of the group is then given the time to comment on the answer, while a designated person takes notes of the results of the evaluation.

The questions can be broad or defined. It is suggested that a few funny/fun questions be inserted in order to make the evaluation more entertaining. It is important to adapt the language and content of the questions to suit local perspectives and understandings. In the example relating to community researchers' perspectives on their co-enquiry experience, the authors used the following questions (although it is highly recommended every co-enquiry process develop their own tailored questions):

- What did you like best about the work<sup>2</sup> you participated in?
- What did you like the least about the work you participated in?
- What were the problems or obstacles you encountered in the work?
- Were all the tasks proposed completed?
- Were you motivated by the activities proposed?
- What can the community researchers do to make the work more satisfactory?
- In what way has the experience served you personally?
- What do you think the opinions of the elders [/relatives/authorities/youth and children] are regarding the work?
- Imitate an animal
- Share a joke

The authors also used this technique to evaluate the relationship between GDF and the community researchers, asking questions such as “Why do you think GDF is interested in carrying out work with community researchers?” “What aspect of GDF’s process did you feel most/least comfortable with?”, and “What can GDF do to make this kind of work more satisfactory to community researchers and the community as a whole?”.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘work’ is used here as that is how Chinantec community researchers refer to their participation in co-enquiry. However, as mentioned, the language and concepts used in the questions must be adapted to local circumstances and worldviews.



## Evaluation cards

This method can be used to exhaustively gather and discuss a group's opinions on a number of different themes. Each participant receives a series of coloured cards (one colour per theme or activity being evaluated). Each of the cards shows a question to which the individuals must answer. The authors used this approach to evaluate the community researchers' perspectives on the relationship between the co-enquiry process and the community at large. However, this method is ideal for any group who can read and write. The following questions were used:

- How as the community integrated into the research process'
- What kind of information was collected?
- Who is missing from the interviews?
- Who (in the community) knows of the work that is being carried out?
- Who else ought to know about this work?
- How can we present our work to the community?
- Who does this work serve?
- What is this work useful for?

The coloured cards, upon which answers have been written, are then collected and collated by colour, and answers are discussed in a plenary session.

## Reach the stars

This method can be used to evaluate learning among community researchers and members. Prior to starting the process, the facilitator prepares 20-30 evaluation questions. Pinned to a wall or a blackboard are 20-30 cardboard or paper stars with a number written on the back. After the formation of a number of groups, one participant from each group picks a star and reads out the number. The facilitator reads the question that is associated with the number, and the person who picked that star answers the question with the help of his/her group. If they answered correctly, they keep the star; if not, the facilitator replaces the star with the others. Those with the most stars "win" the game.

## Freirean culture circles and problematising dialogue

As described above, in Chapter III, 'culture circles' were a method developed by Paulo Freire to support groups in the use of dialogue for resolving their problems. In the space of a culture circle, members of the group sit together in a circle and dialogue freely: both words and silences are permitted, and both must be engaged with critically. Culture circles can also be carried out through walking or hiking dialogues that conclude with a sit-down circle. In the context of evaluating co-enquiry research processes, culture circles are an ideal format to use as an ongoing or regular process of evaluation, for example weekly or monthly.

Although the group should feel free to implement their own version of the culture circle, it usually follows the steps: enunciating generative themes, problematising dialogue, problem-solving, and action at a personal or societal level. Generative themes are key ideas, words or phrases that represent issues the group or community is contending with at that point in time. In the context of evaluation, these generative themes can be broadly related the process of co-enquiry and community integration in the process, or more



specifically related to how the community researchers are coping with their role and responsibilities.

GDF has used culture circles and problematising dialogue effectively in the context of a community research team that was negotiating some challenges regarding its position within the community. In order to implement these “co-relief” sessions<sup>3</sup> the first step was to allow all of the members of the team to share those aspects of their work in the community research team that were causing anxiety, tension, anger or sadness. During this step every one listens to the speaker without making comments. All of these issues, and the emotions they provoke, are written on a flipchart. The second step is to examine the issues and associated emotions arising and to ask whether anyone else has anything to add – regarding how they felt – to the issues and events mentioned. The third step is to choose one particular event, issue or emotion that affects all of the community researchers upon which to carry out a ‘problematising dialogue’.

Problematising dialogue, as mentioned in Chapter III, involves identifying, problematising and deconstructing issues that are important in the lives of the participants. This is a process whereby all of the assumptions of the participants regarding the generative themes are opened up for scrutiny and discussion. In the context of an evaluation of the research process, any insecurities with regard to the project progress or problems the community research team may be feeling with regard to the rest of the community can be aired and examined through gentle dialogue. The problematising dialogue can be complemented with a systemic analysis of the issue (see above, the CRP on Innovative approaches), with a view to solving any problems arising. The outcome of the problematising dialogue for evaluation is a group or a community who has carried out an in-depth and critical reflection on the research project and process, and found solutions to problems they encounter. It is very effective to repeat the process regularly, because through dialogue, new generative themes and problems are revealed.

Although the culture circle is often a technique proposed by the facilitation team, the community may also have its own systems for profound collective reflection, and these should be integrated into the evaluation process as much as possible. Sometimes community members already have experiences with Freirean culture circles, in which case the process can be built using their knowledge and perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Chinantla, these sessions were called ‘co-alivio’ or ‘co-relief’ sessions as they involved community researchers providing support to each other by providing a space for open sharing of concerns and worries, and listening to each other.



## VII. Disseminating the results of co-enquiry research

In this chapter, we present ideas for participatory dissemination of project results.

### Participatory video

Participatory video has been around for almost 50 years.<sup>4</sup> Its basic premise is that communities can make their own videos for advocacy, learning, communicating and sharing stories. Video making is relatively easy to learn and accessible to people with no formal education. Participatory video forms a core element of communication and dissemination in COMBIOSERVE. The fieldsite communities and CSOs have made a diversity of project-related videos,<sup>5</sup> including videos of the project workshops, exploring their participation in the project, and about community issues. The fieldsite communities also communicated amongst themselves using video letters: these are short videos in which community members, usually community researchers, discuss the results of their research and issues they are facing in the community. Rather than repeat the excellent work of participatory video specialists (see the Resources section), in this manual we will concentrate on the more innovative use of video letters in the COMBIOSERVE project.

### COMBIOSERVE experiences with video letters

The video letter format works as follows: community researchers from one site send an initial video letter: these are watched and critically discussed by other teams who then respond with their own video letter. These videos are usually no more than 5-10 minutes long, and presented by one or at most two individuals speaking to the camera. In the COMBIOSERVE experience, the community researchers from all field sites appropriated the process, choosing to speak their own languages (with subtitles) and to discuss either the progress of their research or local issues they were facing.

#### Voices from the communities: video letters

During the final COMBIOSERVE conference, *Community Conservation in Latin America: innovations in research and methods*, held in Xico, Veracruz, Mexico from 6-9 November 2014, two community researcher dialogues were held during which video letters were discussed. Presented here are some of the conclusions drawn.

Video letters were highlighted, by community researchers, as ways of getting to know other communities' realities and ways of life. It is empowering for them to know that other communities far away are facing similar issues and engaging in similar struggles to protect their biocultural heritage and maintain their livelihoods. Furthermore, community researchers from Calakmul suggest that video letters can have practical outcomes, for example by sharing techniques and ideas for pursuing research as well as for dealing with everyday problems, such as domestic animal illnesses. Community researchers also deemed the video letters a useful format for disseminating their research efforts and results to the broader public. The community video

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory\\_video](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_video) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Challenge\\_for\\_Change](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Challenge_for_Change)

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.combioserve.org/en/video> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/combioserve>



teams noted that discipline and facilitators' support are necessary for the video letter format to work as a mode of communication between far-flung communities.

Community researchers from different fieldsites agreed that it is important that these videos are used cautiously and respectfully, and that if any sacred or secret knowledge is exposed that they should not be made public. Nevertheless, it may be important to record this knowledge for future generations. In this case, there must be clear and stated embargoes on who can see the videos, and how they are shared. Simultaneously, important knowledge can be shared and passed on within the community, for example in community schools, by using the video letter format.

The following webpage collates all of the video letters produced as part of COMBIO SERVE: <http://www.combioserve.org/en/video/letters>

## Publications

A foundational rule of co-enquiry is that the data and results of the research belong to the community as a whole. Therefore, the decision to disseminate the results of the research beyond the community involved must be made by the community members themselves in accordance with customary decision-making procedures.

### Voices from the communities: publishing our research

During the community researchers' dialogue held at the COMBIO SERVE conference (see previous page), community researchers from different countries mentioned the importance of being in control of the publication of results. This does not only mean having decision-making power regarding what the academics they have been working with publish, but also being in charge of publishing the data they are collecting. While they concede that they need support from friendly researchers and/or facilitators to continue the research and to develop their publications, some insist that they would like to begin publishing their research in the community's name and being in control of that which is being published. Conversely, in some cases communities do not wish to be named as authors on publications in which they have participated, due to the possible political repercussions of the publication.

If the community wishes to disseminate the results to outside audiences, they must decide which audiences they wish to reach, what they want to tell them, and how they want to present the results. All of these decisions must be made by consensus and through processes of reflection that give community members the time to reflect on the possible consequences of sharing or withholding the results.

If the community decides to publish research results on paper, it is likely that the facilitation team will be responsible for securing an appropriate outlet for the publication and for helping to produce the publication. The community at large will give final validation to any article prior to its publication. Ideally all the members of the research team involved would share the authorship of the article, although in some cases the community may wish to either be the sole authors or not appear at all on the list of authors. All of the decision-making processes regarding publication are to be carried out with full community participation so as to ensure maximum transparency and to avoid the possibility of conflict once results are published.



From the outset, the community assembly (or other decision-making body) formally decides what information will be available to the external institution for publication and how it will be used. In the event that the community does not want to make a decision on the results at the outset of the project, an early agreement should nevertheless be made in order to establish that the FPIC process determines the use of results at the end of the project. Moreover, community members have the right to change their minds as the research progresses and flexibility must be built in to the original agreement: it may be that at the outset of the project, the decision-making body agreed to allow all results to be publishable, and yet decides, upon conclusion of the research, that it would not be appropriate for some or all of the results to be in the public domain. However, in some communities, the consequences of placing information in the public sphere might not be known: it is the duty of the facilitation team to share and facilitate a community debate on the possible negative and positive consequences of publishing research results.

If there are conflicts *within* the community regarding how to use results, the facilitation team cannot be expected to take a mediating role, although they may request the opportunity to share their perspective during the community-led debate and decision-making process. As mentioned above, it is the duty of the facilitation team to explain what the implications of their use of the information may be for the community, and to respond to any doubts or queries the community members may have. Above all, respect for the communities' FPIC processes will guide the facilitation team in the event that a situation of conflict arises.



## VIII. Co-enquiry, emancipation and advocacy

One of the principal ambitions of co-enquiry is to contribute to social justice. Rooted in the goal to decolonise research practice, co-enquiry's ultimate aim is self-determination, empowerment and autonomy of the communities leading the research (see Smith 1999). While these are lofty ambitions to strive for in the long term, most co-enquiry processes often attain more modest social justice goals in the short term.

Given that the research products of co-enquiry are developed to respond to community needs, communities and their supporters can use these to advocate before internal and external institutions to various ends. Publications, videos, and other products can be deployed externally, for example with political actors, to mobilise for changes demanded by the communities, or to support legal cases. They can be used internally to revitalise cultural expressions, engage community members in reflections about their decision-making and futures, or implement activities to ameliorate community livelihoods. In belonging to the community, the knowledge generated by the co-enquiry research can be stored and repurposed for use the future.

Another way in which co-enquiry processes contribute to social justice is by disseminating the use of the process itself, contributing to the development of new knowledge and ideas for implementing collaborative research, growing the network of practitioners of co-enquiry, and expanding the demand for such research to be funded across the board. In particular, engaging with indigenous approaches to research can bring about radical new learning for academics (see Ideas box p.17-8). Bringing the two foundations of indigenous thought – *relationality* (i.e. that every being, including researchers, is constituted by its relations) and *accountability* to these relationships (Wilson 2008) – into everyday conventional scientific practice has the potential to transform it as well as the institutions housing it. Developing, enhancing and deploying co-enquiry processes wherever possible in scientific research may prompt academics, even those thoroughly rooted in conventional research approaches, to embody these grounding and respectful perspectives into their practice.

For the transformative potential of co-enquiry to be fulfilled, researchers are consciously active and engaged in the social, environmental and political issues faced by the communities they collaborative with. They are committed to 'staying the course' with the communities they are engaged with despite the local or academic dynamics they encounter. They are required not only to adopt a critical perspective on positivist approaches to research with communities, but, some would argue, establish a position of resistance as well (Ristock and Pennell 1996; Smith 1999; Brown and Strega 2005). They must be at ease with the knowledge that they will occasionally, or even regularly, be placed in uncomfortable positions as they straddle different worldviews, ideologies and institutions. They must be prepared to learn about themselves, even when what they might uncover is unexpected or dismaying. They will also discover the deep joy and satisfaction of taking emancipation – theirs included – as their principal working objective.