INTRODUCTION

The international conference *Community Conservation in Latin America: Innovations in Research and Practice* took place in the Mexican town of Xico, in the state of Veracruz, between November 6 and 9, 2014. The conference was organised by the COMBIOSERVE consortium, a group of research institutions and civil society organisations carrying out a European Union funded project (under the aegis of Framework Programme 7) entitled *Assessing the effectiveness of community-based management of biocultural diversity.*

Gathering 160 participants from all over Latin America and beyond – 55 of which were members of indigenous and rural communities – the conference's innovative format brought indigenous and community experts, academics and practitioners in dialogue on equal ground. Participants discussed cutting-edge research on community-based management practices and their impact on biocultural diversity and livelihoods.

Over the course of the three days, nine academic panels provided spaces for researchers – both academic and community-based – to present their findings on topics ranging from local processes of community reconstruction to gendered knowledge, through innovative, participatory methodologies for assessing community-based conservation and the relationship between agricultural production and community conservation. These proceedings contain abstracts for all of the presentations as well as full articles for download for most of the presentations.

The presence and active participation of community researchers involved in research projects all over Latin America was a core theme of the conference. Community researchers are those community members that
have been involved in collaborative research with academics or practitioners on the topic of community conservation, as was the case in the COMBIOSERVE project. The conference also welcomed a number of academic researchers hailing from indigenous communities. As a result representatives of the communities being discussed participated in all of the conference sessions, including most of the academic panels, providing unique and progressive insights into questions that have traditionally been the province of the institutional sciences.

Besides participating in the academic panels, community researchers were also provided with two platforms for engaging in direct dialogue, a format that suits the precepts of collaborative methodologies. One of the dialogues covered participatory video-making and its use for advocacy and research. Community videographers from Oaxaca, Campeche and Sonora presented their communities’ participatory videos, followed by which the COMBIOSERVE ‘video letters’ were screened. The video letters were developed in the COMBIOSERVE project to allow communication and exchange between community researchers from the different fieldsites. Following these screenings, a dialogue on the opportunities and challenges for community video teams took place. The dialogue highlighted the great desire and motivation among communities to share their stories via video, the fundamental need for further support to underwrite production costs, and the lack of resources for proper dissemination to the general public. The video letters and videos on community research were emphasised as important tools of engagement and exchange between community researchers living at great distance as well as of dissemination of efforts and results to the general public. The discussion concluded that it was important to maintain the dialogue between teams working on community video-making through ongoing support by facilitators.

The second community-centred event was the ‘Community researchers’ dialogue’ which aimed to provide a space for all of the community researchers present to discuss their experience carrying out collaborative research with academics. Moderated by Octaviana Trujillo, Professor of Applied Indigenous Studies at Northern Arizona University, and Romelia Barnett, a Comcaac (Sonora, Mexico) community researcher, the session featured video letters and other participatory videos specifically on
community research topics, followed by dialogue among community researchers with a few comments from the public. The first half of the session focused on community research, and the second half on dissemination of results.

In keeping with a central theme of COMBIOSERVE – methodological innovation – the conference offered the choice between four workshops for hands-on learning about specific and often original methods used during the project. The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) shared their innovations in the elaboration of participatory approaches to building future scenarios for resilience and adaptability. By exploring the diverse future scenarios under conditions of socio-ecological change, communities are better able to plan, react and adapt to these changes. UAB’s workshop was popular with practitioners and academics wishing to learn how to develop these scenarios in collaboration with the communities they work with. UAB also hosted a special video screening to share the videos they prepared to illustrate the process of future scenario-building carried out in the three COMBIOSERVE fieldsites.

Carlos del Campo of Global Diversity provided a workshop on the Theory for Inventive Problem-Solving (known as TRIZ, its Russian acronym), which is a toolbox of methods used to systematically analyse information and situations in order to make decisions. Del Campo’s use of TRIZ – an approach most used in the context of engineering and to some extent in education – in the context of socio-ecological decision-making is highly original, pioneering a new approach to community-based decision-making based on a simple yet effective tool for analysing systems.

Researchers from the Universidade Estadual Feira de Santana (UEFS) offered a workshop on participatory mapping in a co-enquiry framework which explored methods and techniques of mapping in the context of traditional communities and indigenous peoples, social and participatory cartography, and ethnomapping. The Mexican Instituto de Ecología provided a workshop on participatory monitoring in a co-enquiry framework, during which the challenges and opportunities of co-enquiry monitoring were discussed and practical discussions on how to develop co-enquiry research questions and implement the co-enquiry research cycle were facilitated.
The conference was opened and closed by two keynote speeches. Opening the conference was Hugo Aguilar, sub-secretary for indigenous rights in the Secretariat for Indigenous Issues of the Government of the State of Oaxaca, who spoke on indigenous peoples' rights in the context of conservation. The conference's was then closed with a keynote by David Barkin from the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico, who spoke about intercultural dialogue as a mechanism to build bridges between different cosmovisions and realities.

The conference's focus on the expertise of indigenous and community-based practitioners and scientists, and its invitation of community experts to discuss issues of science, politics, and research with academics and practitioners, was progressive and successful. Community researchers and other community members feel like their perspectives and inputs were essential to the proceedings, empowering them to continue to demand their participation in research and decision-making that affects them. Simultaneously many academics and practitioners reacted very positively to the shift in conference dynamics and the exploration of new themes of discussion that community members brought to the table. The conference's deliberate attention to collaborative methodologies was also steeped in advocacy: academic deliberations were often indivisible from issues of social justice. In this sense, the work of the conference joined the work of all those communities, civil society organisations, academics and practitioners who are using collaborative research as a road towards community self-determination, empowerment and autonomy (see Smith 2012).

In a world where the environment is every day more ravaged by excess and mismanagement, community-based knowledge and practices for conservation and management of biocultural diversity offer hope and solutions. The importance of these approaches is being recognised from the grassroots to the global level. The decennial World Parks Congress, organised by the IUCN, reaffirmed the importance of community-based management practices for conservation during its recent iteration in Sydney, Australia in November 2014. The COMBIOSERVE conference Community Conservation in Latin America contributes timely and indispensable evidence that
communities are not only actively managing their biocultural heritage, but also adapting to changing environments and seeking new solutions in a rapidly changing world. The conference provided a platform for sharing innovations, results, strategies and enthusiasm for community-based conservation, and its outputs will be useful to a wide audience of community experts, practitioners, academics, policy-makers and anyone interested in how communities are managing their biocultural diversity.

REFERENCE: