Academic-civil society research collaboration on indigenous self-governance in Bolivia[1]

In Bolivia in 2009-2010, legal reforms were put in place that recognized the rights of indigenous peoples to create systems of self-governance or autonomy according to their own norms of decision-making. As a consequence, 11 of Bolivia's 339 municipalities have since begun their conversion into autonomous, indigenous self-governments.

John Cameron, an academic researcher, collaborated with the Fundacion Tierra (FT), an NGO that was working closely with indigenous groups and providing them technical and legal support. Together they wanted to ensure that the process of implementing the right to indigenous autonomy was documented and that the voices of local indigenous community leaders were front and centre in such research and documentation.

They made preparations to conduct research that would help promote the implementation of indigenous rights to self-governance by producing policy-relevant, evidence-based outputs for indigenous communities, government agencies, and NGOs. At the same time they wanted to build the research capacity of staff at FT as well as indigenous communities themselves. What was done to achieve these goals, and what challenges were encountered, is outlined below:

Goal 1. Strengthening capacity of FT staff:

John Cameron held regular meetings with the technical and research staff. In two-day retreats every four months they reflected upon the research findings and analyzed the ongoing process of putting indigenous autonomy into practice. Initially, they designed and redesigned reporting templates together but filling out reports proved burdensome for technical staff, so they eventually abandoned these in favour of more informal feedback and discussion. Never before had research and technical staff collaborated so closely. These discussions prepared FT staff for their important role of disseminating research findings through informal conversations at the community level.

Goal 2. Producing policy-relevant research outputs:

Research outputs were designed for a variety of different audiences (e.g. indigenous communities, NGOs, government agencies, the general public) and were disseminated through a variety of mechanisms, including a newspaper published by FT, a weekly radio program, presentations at community meetings, short online articles, and formal reports.

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[1]   This case is summarized and adapted from: Cameron, J. (2013).

Goal 3. Producing empirically and theoretically-relevant academic research outputs:

While these outputs were necessary as a core requirement of the research funding, they were the least valuable for all other actors involved with the research. For example, the researchers concluded that traditional academic outputs were not necessarily the most effective mechanisms for influencing policy and practice. Far more effective were formal and informal exchanges, conducted diplomatically and persistently, with key policy-making actors, as well as more formal meetings with indigenous leaders.

Goal 4. Strengthening research capacity of indigenous communities:

This goal shifted towards "co-production of knowledge" rather than "strengthening research capacity." Two specific strategies were adopted. First, the team encouraged indigenous communities to keep written records of their deliberations at the "Autonomy Assemblies." However, although leaders were encouraged to document their meetings with loaned laptop computers, few produced sufficiently accurate notes. Generally, it was members of the research team who produced written records of the meetings and shared them with communities. Secondly, the research team engaged indigenous leaders to produce testimonial-style accounts of the implementation of indigenous autonomy in their communities. However, it quickly became apparent that testimonial research requires very strong interviewing skills to encourage indigenous leaders to share details of their experiences, observations and stories. Even more importantly, researchers needed to take extra care to address ethical considerations when making editorial decisions. In the end, " strengthening research capacity" had as much to do with building awareness of what research needs to be conducted and how to disseminate the results as it had to do with strengthening capacity to conduct research and co-produce knowledge.

Conclusion

In terms of findings, this research drew attention to the excessive intervention of government and NGO technical staff in the design of self-governance institutions in indigenous communities. There were few opportunities for indigenous communities to imagine new institutional alternatives through open-ended discussion because government and NGOs were laying down the parameters within which such discussion could take place. It also drew attention to the importance of providing training to indigenous leaders in the rights to indigenous autonomy recognized in ILO Convention 169, so that they could take on the responsibilities of constructing autonomous indigenous institutions more effectively. In this sense, the research was able to have significant influence on how FT designed its strategies for ensuring indigenous leaders had the space to influence decisions about their institutions. The research team also concluded that in this context, informal mechanisms of generating, analyzing and disseminating information are more effective in influencing policy decisions than academic papers, and that knowledge co-production often occurs in unexpected ways.

Questions for discussion

1. Who was this research for? Whose interests were served by this research, and how?

2. What lessons does this research have for collaboration between academic institutions and Civil Society organizations?

3. How important do you think it is to "build research capacity" in local communities? What do you think should be the key capacities built?

Reference

Cameron, J. (2013). Reflections on excellence in academic-civil society research collaboration on Indigenous self-governance in Bolivia. Presented at *Research for change: What is "research excellence" for civil society organizations and their academic partners?* IDRC / Coady Canadian Learning Forum November 12-13, 2013, Coady International Institute, Antigonish, NS. Retrieved January 16, 2015 from http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/52706/1/IDL-52706.pdf

Further Reading

Cameron, J. (2013). Bolivia's contentious politics of 'Normas y Procedimientos Propios.' *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 8, 2: 179-201. Available from:
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