



Tropentag, September 18-21, 2016, Vienna, Austria

“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

Challenges and Lessons Learned in Interdisciplinary and Participatory (citizen science) Ethnobotanical Research on Community Conserved Areas in Indigenous Communities in Brazil, Bolivia and Mexico

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Abstract

Practice, knowledge, social organisation, language and world view related to plants allows us better understanding the reality of local people. For a holistic understanding of people's livelihoods and their local knowledge, ethnobiological factors affecting the domains under investigation have to be taken into account. Understanding these factors call for interdisciplinary research. Local people's needs may be included through participatory research approaches such as co-inquiry processes.

We set out to test co-inquiry processes in the EC FP7 COMBIOSERVE project on community-based management of environmental challenges in indigenous communities in Brazil, Bolivia and Mexico. The project involved local Civil Society Organisations and intended to create results for their benefit and the communities involved. The research agenda was developed mainly by local people and included ethnobotanical, ethnobiological and ethnoecological research questions. The themes selected were studied by groups of interested people from the communities together with professional researchers. Research protocols were designed for each group of community researchers and indicated when, how, where and with which tools each investigation was conducted. The community researchers received training in data collection, data processing and applying research tools.

We found that co-inquiry processes are time consuming and may face difficulties of intercultural communication when involving various disciplines and stakeholders. Conflicting interests, short project durations, bureaucratic procedures for documenting project progress and expenses, differing time dynamics, differing distribution of funds and remuneration and differing reliability, commitment and motivation are challenging. In addition the dynamics of professional scientists and their need for publishing in scientific journals causes different needs than those of local stakeholders who expect answering their questions or resolving their needs. Flexibility for the research process is fundamental since each community has particular conditions. The co-design of interdisciplinary and participatory projects and the clear set up of expectations before the start are critical for the success of the project. Enough resources have to be reserved for joint data analysis and report writing. Interdisciplinary and participatory research in ethnobotany may provide many benefits through a holistic understanding of people's livelihoods and through responding to local people's needs but project design and implementation need considerable caution, time and resources.

Keywords: Citizen science, co-inquiry, participatory research, transdisciplinary research