

Reflections on Excellence in Academic-Civil Society Research Collaboration on Indigenous Self-Governance in Bolivia

A Reflection Paper for the 2013 IDRC Canadian Learning Forum

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Research Project Title	"Building Research Capacity for Indigenous Self-Governance in Bolivia"
Location of research	Bolivia
Dates research conducted	August 2012 – ongoing.
Partner(s)	Fundación TIERRA (Bolivian NGO)
Funder(s)	IDRC, SSHRC
Types of research methods used	Observation, Participant Observation, Focus Groups, Document Review, Semi-formal Interviews, Collaborative writing, informal conversation
E-Links	See Interim Technical Report to IDRC See also: John Cameron. 2013. "Bolivia's Contentious Politics of 'Normas y Procedimientos Propios'" <i>Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies</i> 8, 2: 179-201.
Did or will your research project lead to a second phase?	Not yet.

Introduction

This paper reflects on ‘research excellence’ in academic-civil society research collaboration in an ongoing IDRC-supported research project titled “*Building Research Capacity for Indigenous Self-Governance in Bolivia*.” The IDRC funding complemented resources from the *Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)*.

I use the term ‘research excellence’ here with caution because although the project has generated many valuable insights and outputs, the longer-term impacts are more difficult to assess and numerous challenges have emerged that remain to be addressed. My central argument is that the most important outputs and impacts of the project have been informal, unplanned and process-oriented. The more formal academic research outputs like peer-reviewed journal articles have been less important, although in some cases, these outputs did some spark important practical community-based initiatives.

About the Research Project

This research project was designed in response to a series of constitutional and legal changes in Bolivia in 2009-10 that recognized the rights of Indigenous peoples to create systems of self-governance or autonomy according to their own local norms of decision-making.ⁱ Those legal reforms have enabled 11 of Bolivia’s 339 municipalities to initiate conversion into autonomous, indigenous self-governments, or *Autonomías Indígena Originaria Campesinas* (Indigenous First Peoples Peasant Autonomies) known as AIOCs or Indigenous Autonomies, for short.

In the context of the new opportunities to create Indigenous Autonomies, my colleagues at *Fundación TIERRA* and I identified four problems that we hoped to address in a research-action project:ⁱⁱ

1. The *Fundación TIERRA* staff who worked most closely with indigenous communities on these issues were generally not involved in research activities. Indeed, there was a fairly sharp divide between research and ‘technical’ field staff. As a result, past research initiatives had not sufficiently incorporated the knowledge, contacts, language skills and the trust of indigenous communities that these staff members possessed – with the result that valuable knowledge, insights and contacts were not incorporated into the research process.
2. *Fundación TIERRA*, other NGOs and the Bolivian government prioritized Indigenous autonomy as an important public policy issue; however, there was very little evidence-based research to support policy development at any level of politics, and very little

documentation of the political process of implementing the right to Indigenous autonomy.

3. Because of its novelty, there was very little academic research on the Indigenous autonomy process in terms of national government policies and practices, or with respect to implementation at the community level.
4. It was also very clear that the central actors in the process, Indigenous communities, were not documenting the autonomy process. This was not simply an academic concern; it was also a practical one. With only minimal written documentation of formal community meetings on the design of future institutions of Indigenous autonomy, the records of meeting decisions became vulnerable to manipulation by government technocrats and self-interested, local leaders. Moreover, the voices of local-level indigenous community leaders were subsequently excluded from the emerging body of publications on Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia.

We aimed to address these four problems by identifying four corresponding goals for the project (implemented over the course of 2012-14):

1. To strengthen the research capacity of staff in *Fundación TIERRA*, particularly field staff who were not generally considered as researchers but who worked closely with Indigenous communities to provide technical and legal support. A closely related goal was to reflect and build on this experience to develop a viable methodology for academic-NGO collaboration in future projects;
2. To produce policy-relevant, evidence-based outputs (e.g. reports, newspaper articles, oral presentations) directed towards indigenous communities and organizations, central government agencies, *Fundación TIERRA* other NGOs – with the goal of promoting the implementation of Indigenous rights to self-governance .
3. To produce academic outputs, including peer reviewed journal articles and conference papers, in English and Spanish.
4. To strengthen the capacity within indigenous communities for documentation, research, written analysis and reflection about indigenous autonomy .

Criteria for research excellence

The four goals also formed the core criteria for research excellence in this project. In sum:

1. Strengthening the local research capacities within the partner NGO;
2. Producing research outputs relevant to policy formation at a variety of levels (communities, NGOs, central government) and promoting the implementation of indigenous rights to self-governance;
3. Producing empirically and theoretically insightful academic research;
4. Engaging indigenous communities in the research and strengthening their research capacity.

In principle, all four criteria are mutually-reinforcing. However, in practice, significant but hopefully surmountable tensions between these four criteria emerged due to competing time-demands for the researchers, diverging expectations from funders and employers, and the lower priority of research-related activities for some of the participants.

Some of the goals are more ambitious in how they break away from traditional academic criteria for research excellence. For example, it was a more straightforward to produce academic journal articles than to strengthen the research capacity of rural indigenous community leaders or the research culture of an NGO. Because the project is still ongoing, some of the key outputs have not yet been completed; however, 18 months into the project, some key lessons have become clear. Perhaps most importantly, some of the most significant impacts within NGOs and indigenous communities were relatively small shifts in policy and practice that followed informal conversations about the research rather than from the more formal research outputs.

Four examples of such changes are pertinent here:

1. One of the problems for Indigenous communities designing new governance institutions was that technical staff from the central government and NGOs did all the note-taking, and often in ways that were often not transparent – and resulted in changes being made to the drafts of governance documents without the knowledge or consent of the Indigenous communities. This problem was addressed by encouraging technical staff to use the “track changes” function when editing documents, and by appointing one representative from each Indigenous municipality to keep track of the multiple versions of different documents. This strategy created a higher degree of transparency and trust among Indigenous community leaders and technical staff because the latter could no longer easily change the text of documents without consent from the communities.

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2. One of the central elements of the research methodology was the systematic involvement of research and technical staff in periodic research retreats and joint trips by researchers and field staff to field sites. Other units and projects within *Fundación Tierra* (e.g. a research project on Food Security) then adopted this practice.
 3. The project drew attention to the excessive intervention of government and NGO technical staff in the deliberations within Indigenous communities on the design of self-governance institutions. It also highlighted how workshops on Indigenous autonomy tended to restrict the possibilities for imagining new institutional alternatives. Government and NGO staff typically began workshops on Indigenous autonomy with presentations of what the legal framework did and did not allow, rather than encourage open-ended discussion of what Indigenous communities hoped to gain through Indigenous autonomy. Few of the technical staff had deliberately intended to act in a paternalistic or controlling manner, and when the problem of excessive and inappropriate interventions was identified and diplomatically discussed, at least some of the technical staff began to change their behaviour.
 4. A conference paper by Cameron, Plata and Tockman (2012) argued that the '*Statutes of Autonomy*' that were designed by Indigenous communities as the legal basis for self-governance made very few or no references to specific Indigenous rights recognized in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* or in the *International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 169* on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, both of which had been ratified by the government of Bolivia.

After systematically emphasizing this point, *Bolivia's Human Rights Ombudsperson (Defensoria del Pueblo)* along with a regional Indigenous organization, the ILO, Fundación TIERRA and another NGO, all agreed to work together to promote awareness of the specific rights to indigenous autonomy recognized in ILO Convention 169. To date, more than 120 regional and local indigenous leaders have taken part in four regional workshops on this issue, conducted in September – November 2013.

The key lesson here is that it was not the conference paper itself that generated this activity. Rather, it was our persistent emphasis of the paper's central arguments through informal and oral channels that attracted the attention. Nonetheless, the careful research and analysis that underlay the paper were crucial to the subsequent initiatives.

As a result of these and other specific interventions that followed reflection on research findings, the project thus not only documented deliberations within Indigenous community meetings on

Indigenous autonomy, but also influenced the ways in which those meetings operated. In this sense, the project departed from some of the core principles of anthropological research which posit that researchers should not interfere with the processes they are studying.

We hope that our interventions have been positive, but all interventions involve risks. One important result from the research process is that technical staff at Fundación TIERRA have gained a new awareness of how the many unintended ways in which they influence community meetings and decision-making – and that the dynamics of NGO-community relations are an important topic of both academic and policy-oriented analysis.

Pathways toward research excellence (Meeting the criteria)

1. *Strengthening research capacities within the partner NGO:*

We developed two strategies to build capacity within the partner NGO.

First, we established a research team that included designated research and technical staff within Fundación TIERRA and myself. As a team, we met for two-day retreats approximately every four months to analyse and reflect upon the research observations and the ongoing process of supporting Indigenous autonomy. This approach was simple, but novel: research and technical staff had never previously collaborated so closely on a project that involved both practical and research-oriented goals. Involving technical staff not only provided new insights, but also created important opportunities to disseminate research findings through informal conversations as well as more formal meetings with local Indigenous leaders. In the end, these avenues proved to be much more effective mechanisms for dissemination than published reports.

Second, to increase the roles of technical staff in the research process, we gradually adopted two methods:

- a) **Research and technical staff collectively re-designed the report templates** that technical staff completed following field site visits. The old forms were limited to purely logistical issues (i.e. destination, distance, costs incurred, etc.). But the new forms also asked technical staff to note the issues discussed and the questions raised during community meetings and in discussions with community leaders.

Some technical staff initially responded well to the new forms, but they fairly quickly perceived them as simply another demand on their time and quietly abandoned them. Eventually, the research-oriented staff concluded that it was more effective to regularly

debrief with technical staff through in-person, Skype and telephone conversations.

- b) **Using an online platform for sharing documents:** All of the research-project members in the NGO were encouraged to share documents with each other on the online, file-sharing platform *Dropbox*. Some did this enthusiastically, but others did not; and thus, information sharing within the team remained a challenge.

Eventually we decided that one person needed to be responsible for managing the documents, and one member of the team was designated to regularly request members upload relevant documents to *Dropbox*, where other members of the team did use them. Document sharing software like *Dropbox* is not new or especially innovative, but fostering a work culture in which the numerous members of a research-action project actually use it can still be a significant challenge.

2. *Producing policy-relevant research outputs:*

We designed research outputs for a *variety of different audiences* (e.g. indigenous communities, NGOs, government agencies, general public) and disseminated these outputs through a *variety of different mechanisms*, including a broadsheet newspaper published by Fundación Tierra, a weekly radio program, oral presentations at community meetings, discussions with community leaders, short on-line editorial articles, and formal reports on particular research findings.

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

Meeting this criteria required little innovation beyond the traditional academic practices of presenting conference papers and publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals. However, research methods that informed our academic outputs were novel.

4. *Strengthening research capacities within indigenous communities:*

This criteria was the most challenging to meet from the outset. The project adopted two specific strategies to try to achieve this goal.

First, we persistently encouraged indigenous communities to keep written records of their deliberations about Indigenous autonomy. Communities with members who were already inclined to document the proceedings were much more successful at this than others.

Second, we have engaged indigenous leaders to produce testimonial-style accounts of indigenous autonomy in their communities. This project is less oriented towards strengthening research capacities and more towards co-producing knowledge with

indigenous leaders. However, the way that we engaged indigenous leaders in this project has become a viable model for other indigenous leaders, especially elders who are not literate at a post-secondary level, to be involved in writing the histories of their communities.

This part of the project is ongoing, so the lessons learned are not yet clear. However, for a group of researchers and practitioners accustomed to more traditional approaches to research, 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.

Challenges in achieving research excellence

The primary challenges encountered in meeting the four criteria for research excellence are related to the competing demands and pressures on the time of the research team, and the lower priority that different members of the team subsequently accorded to certain research-related tasks. Four challenges were particularly significant:

First, the expectation that the project would produce academic outputs (e.g. conference papers and articles in peer-reviewed journals) meant that a significant portion of my research time was dedicated to academic analysis and writing, which is time-consuming and relatively slow to produce final outputs. The decision to invest time and energy in producing academic outputs is one that academics cannot afford to ignore. Academic publication is the core requirement for accessing research funding from agencies such as SSHRC; any decision to prioritize non-academic activities and outputs would jeopardize access to future research funding.

In contrast, it was clear from the start of the project that academic publications were the least valuable outputs for all other actors involved with the research and that smaller, shorter publications, along with formal and informal oral communication, were far more useful means of disseminating policy-relevant research.

Second, the pressure on field staff to perform ‘technical’ work (e.g. organize workshops, provide legal advice) meant that research activities became an additional task on top of their already-heavy workloads. They were enthusiastic about doing research in principle, but when faced with competing demands on their time, technical staff generally reverted to their traditional roles – except when they were specifically instructed to participate in the project’s research retreats. The lesson learned here is that there are no shortcuts or easy ways to access the knowledge and ideas of field staff. In the end, regular debriefing by the lead researchers involved in the project proved to be the most effective method.

Third, successfully involving indigenous communities and amplifying their voices in the written debates on indigenous autonomy required the core research team to learn new testimonial research skills. The project organized a day-long meeting in early 2013 with a former member of Bolivia's *Andean Oral History Workshop* (*Taller de Historia Oral Andina – THOA*) in which it became clear that we knew even less than we thought! The testimonial component of the project is now proceeding on an experimental basis – but it remains clear that we have much to learn.

Finally, strengthening 'research capacity' in indigenous communities assumes that communities have both the interest and the capacity to act on that interest, which was not always the case. For example, despite encouraging the leaders of the 'Autonomy Assemblies' to document their meetings and offering to loan them laptop computers, few actually produced effective written records. In the end, it was members of the research team who generally produced written records of the meetings and shared them with the communities. While there is a serious danger for 'capacity building' to become a colonial imposition of western research standards on indigenous communities, it is not entirely clear if this danger is greater or lesser if outsiders simply do the research and documentation themselves and then share it with the communities involved.

Research excellence criteria that deserve greater recognition

This project has confirmed the value of systematic academic data collection, analysis, reflection and writing for policy debates at multiple levels of decision-making, from local communities to national governments to multilateral organizations. However, the project has also suggested that traditional academic outputs are not necessarily the most effective mechanisms for influencing policy and practice. Far more important in this case were the formal and informal oral exchanges, delivered diplomatically and persistently, with key policy-making actors.

In this sense, the project blurred the boundaries between 'research capacity building' and 'capacity building for the implementation of indigenous rights.' The broader goal of 'research capacity building' in this project is to influence policy and practice related to Indigenous autonomy with evidence-based research. The 'theory' behind this project is that putting indigenous rights into practice in Bolivia requires stronger capacities for research and documentation. 'Research capacity' involves not only the strengthening of capacities to conduct research, but also a heightened awareness of what research needs to be conducted – and of observation and reflection as important parts of the research process – as well as the capacity

to disseminate research in ways that actually influence policy and practice. Selecting appropriate forms of dissemination is thus crucial to the success of any policy-oriented research project.

This should not be surprising; however, the benchmarks of academic success continue to be publishing peer-reviewed articles and books and how often these are cited in other peer reviewed publications. If producing research with real-world relevance is an actual goal of funding agencies, they must also look beyond peer-reviewed publications in deciding how to allocate research funding. Moreover, informal conversations with policy-makers are difficult to quantify as outputs in research reports so are often overlooked as important components of research projects that aim to impact policy and practice.

Epilogue

Some of the key themes and challenges that emerged in this project were also apparent in the experiences of other participants at the IDRC / Coady Learning Forum where we explored three inter-related clusters of criteria that should all be present in all development research projects: 1) academic rigour, 2) participation of relevant communities in the research, 3) the influence or impact of the research on bringing about change.

Two particularly challenging questions that emerged from our discussion of these criteria were:

- *Who decides the research question and how?* Genuine community participation requires that the communities involved in research projects must be involved in deciding the research questions in the first place, not simply participating in research projects that have already been designed by academics.
- *How do we train graduate students and future researchers in a model of research that involves academic rigour, meaningful community participation and influence?* If the three criteria of research excellence are challenging for established university-based researchers, they are even more daunting to graduate students. While most graduate programs in development studies emphasize the importance of academic rigour, they tend to view community participation as optional and practical influence only as an afterthought. Clearly, if our approaches to research are to change, how we train future researchers in graduate programs needs to change as well, and this will require re-thinking how graduate students are taught to design research projects, to engage with the communities they study and to use their research to influence change.

Adding to these challenges is the expectation from funding agencies, scholarly journals and peers that academic research be theoretically innovative - not simply useful to communities and influential in policy terms. Finding ways to balance all three criteria in ways that satisfies the many different sets of actors involved remains a major challenge for the future.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For more on the construction of indigenous self-governments in Bolivia, see: Cameron 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, *Forthcoming* (2014); Cameron, Plata and Tockman 2012, *Forthcoming* (2014); Colque and Cameron 2010; Mynen 2012; Tockman and Cameron *Forthcoming* (2014).

ⁱⁱ As a researcher, I had been working in collaboration with Fundación TIERRA since 2004. For more on Fundación TIERRA, see: www.ftierra.org