

In Profile: IDRC Awardee Allison Goebel

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Allison Goebel is an excellent example of a Young Canadian Researcher who has taken cultural sensitivity to heart in conducting field research in a developing country.

To shed new light on woodland management and deforestation in Zimbabwe's Resettlement Areas, Allison is conducting PhD research on the impacts of development policies on local power relations (including gender) and land politics. In researching the sensitive issues embedded in this topic, "treading carefully" was essential, as were exceptional personal qualities.

Allison employed participatory methods in her research, which enable members of the community being studied to actively engage in the research process, providing their own perspectives on the issues at hand, on where solutions lie, and on which directions both the research and action should take. Participatory approaches are being increasingly recognized as an effective way of conducting research that is more representative, relevant and useful in the local context.

However, to engage with a community in participatory research requires obtaining trust, cooperation, and confidence. This is not an easy task for a Canadian in Zimbabwe; especially one that is probing into such sensitive areas as land ownership, local politics, and gender relations. Dealing with suspicions and "negotiating cultural differences, power relations, and expectations in host villages" were major tasks in her field research.

Allison has brought exceptional personal qualities to this situation. A visitor to the site noted: "it is very rare to see someone in this situation relate so well to the people... the way she talks with them, it's almost as if she'd spent her whole life there." Allison can think of several things she has done "right" to establish good relationships in her study villages:

"First was taking the time to learn some basic Shona, so that I could greet people properly and address village meetings.... Second was going through the right channels... I asked permission to carry out the research from all levels of local government... and also held village meetings to explain who I was and what I wanted to do. This approach helped people to accept my work and allowed them early opportunities to question me. Third, was employing local assistants... [which] directly connected me to some local families. If people were feeling suspicious about my motivations (was I a government spy? etc.) I would get this information from my assistants and be able to clear up misunderstandings. Fourth was my genuine interest in the people, in their lives, troubles and customs, and my willingness to share experiences with them. You'd be surprised how many foreign researchers have never tasted goat meat or sadza, or know how to ask to enter someone's house! Fifth, I have tried to be open-handed and generous. People have showered me with gifts from their fields, offers of tea, etc. and I have tried to respond in kind by offering people small tokens for their help, such as a packet of seeds, by buying a cold drink, bread, or the occasional pot of beer. Sixth I have made some close friends in the area... [who] made me feel at home in the place, helping me to be open and relaxed, and this of course makes people more willing to talk to me."

Allison's research is producing a thesis that will make an important and original contribution to African studies in several respects. She comments enthusiastically that "no in-depth study has yet been done in a Resettlement Area in Zimbabwe on issues of tree and woodland tenure and management. My strong focus on social issues and relations will point to the complexity of rural communities... and help articulate how gender relates to land tenure, division of labour, and income patterns." Moreover, Allison's work will continue to contribute to the practice of participatory research. She has already presented a paper at the recent Learned Societies Conference in Brock on the topic.

When Allison finishes her PhD thesis, she will continue on her path towards an academic career in development or African studies at a Canadian university. She believes that in-depth field research and personal contact with southern Africa has been a crucial portion of this journey. "The support of the Young Canadian Researcher Award has allowed me to do a much more complete study than otherwise would have been possible. This will enable me to feel confident to teach about development in southern Africa and advise about undertaking research in the region."

In Zimbabwe, Allison has nurtured valuable professional and personal contacts which will endure across cultures, oceans and years. In this case, IDRC support has combined with the insight and cultural sensitivity of a good researcher to produce something truly remarkable: a thorough and insightful investigation which will be instrumental in initiating Allison's academic and teaching career, for which she will pass her experience on to young Canadians in the future.

* Sadza is a staple food in Zimbabwe, made from ground maize meal cooked into a thick porridge.
Source: [IDRC Training and Awards Unit](#)