

Participatory research in rural communities in transition: A case study of the Malaspina-Ucluelet Research Alliance

Shawn Morford¹, Dave Robinson², Felice Mazzoni³, Cleo Corbett⁴, and Heidi Schaiberger⁵

Abstract

This paper provides perspectives on the value of participatory research in empowering rural communities in transition. It highlights one collaborative community-university research alliance in coastal British Columbia and illustrates the benefits and challenges of close linkages between social scientists and communities. It discusses how participatory research can build capacity for successful community economic and social transitions in rural British Columbia, and how challenges and key considerations of community-researcher partnerships are addressed.

KEYWORDS: *participatory research, rural communities, research alliance, community-researcher partnerships, coastal British Columbia.*

Contact Information

- 1 Socio-Economic Extension Specialist, FORREX–Forest Research Extension Partnership, 506 West Burnside Road, Victoria, BC V8Z 1M5. E-mail: shawn.morford@forrex.org
- 2 Professor, Department of Tourism Management, Malaspina University-College, 900 Fifth Street, Nanaimo, BC V9R 5S5. E-mail: robinson@mala.bc.ca
- 4 Director of Planning Services, District of Ucluelet, PO Box 999, 200 Main Street, Ucluelet, BC V0R 3A0. E-mail: fmazzoni@dist.ucluelet.bc.ca
- 4 Student, Department of Tourism Management, Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC V9R 5S5.
- 5 Student, Department of Tourism Management, Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC V9R 5S5.

Background

Participatory community-based research has been emerging as a widely accepted research approach around the globe since the early 1970s. Sometimes referred to as “community-based participatory research” (CBPR) (Metzler *et al.* 2003), “empowerment research” (Page and Czuba 1999), “participatory action research” (PAR) (Bartunek 1993; Morris 2002), it refers to a method that involves participants as full partners in the research process (Metzler *et al.* 2003). William Foote Whyte is known for developing the term “participatory action research” (Bartunek 1993). Although each of these approaches has a slightly different emphasis, they all involve shared decision making, power, responsibility, and benefits. In these research approaches, conducting the research is considered transformative for participants. The aim is to have participants benefit immediately from their participation.

As much a philosophy as a method, the aim of participatory research is not only to collect and analyze data to solve problems and generate knowledge, but to increase research capacity, empower participants in other aspects of their lives, and enhance community cohesion. The research process strives to increase participants’ capacity to solve their own problems through interventions and data collection for which they feel ownership. For example, PAR focuses is on research that results in positive social change (Morris 2002).

The methodology used in participatory research varies significantly from conventional research, in which the delineation between researchers and their subjects is more clear. Whereas conventional researchers typically determine the research questions, select data collection methods, and conduct the analysis, those tasks are shared among community members and scientists throughout all stages in participatory research. Privileges and responsibilities are shared among participants and researchers.

Participatory research often blurs the lines between community, social development, and research. Researchers must balance their requirements for scientific rigour and a community’s need to address real-life, time-bound problems.

This paper highlights one case study of emerging participatory research in a natural resource and tourism-based community and discusses its potential for other communities in British Columbia.

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The Malaspina-Ucluelet Research Alliance

A community-research partnership in coastal British Columbia between Malaspina University-College (Malaspina) and the District of Ucluelet (Ucluelet), a resource-dependent municipality on the west coast of Vancouver Island, offers one model of emerging participatory research in British Columbia. In the community of 1600 people, the viability of the historically important industries of fishing and forestry now seems uncertain. Like many British Columbia communities, Ucluelet has been undergoing significant social and economic transitions. Dave Robinson, tourism faculty member at Malaspina in Nanaimo, and Felice Mazzoni, director of planning in Ucluelet, met “on a fluke” in 1999 when Robinson led a field trip to rural communities with his policy and planning students. The chance meeting was the start of a mutually beneficial alliance.

The researcher/planner team formalized the alliance in 2001. Their vision includes a multi-year, multi-method project to assess community values and visions, examine economic opportunities in non-forestry and non-fishing sectors, and develop criteria and indicators of community health. The results would help ensure that the community’s scheduled Official Community Plan (OCP) revision reflects community values and serves as a realistic guide for planning. The OCP is designed to guide the municipal council and staff in planning and decision making based on a long-range community vision for Ucluelet. Although the local economy has endured recent setbacks, it is now in transition and includes ecotourism and service industries. Since 2001, Malaspina and Ucluelet have identified and developed policy and planning strategies for the municipality’s sustainable growth and development, and have created

knowledge-sharing opportunities for the students and faculty of Malaspina and the citizens of Ucluelet.

The funding sought jointly by the two organizations allowed them to hire two Malaspina summer students who lived and worked in the community while designing and implementing a public-input process for the OCP review. Malaspina and Ucluelet were equally involved in decisions related to the hiring process. Although one student was employed by the district and the other by the university, the two worked as a team. The students reviewed the literature on public participation processes, and designed methods to collect community members' opinions on topics related to a community vision ("What do you want your community to look like in 10 years?"). To gather input, they hosted informal coffee gatherings, conducted visioning sessions, hosted public meetings and community picnics, and attended meetings with various committees and clubs. The students carefully documented their processes for collecting data so that they can be applied during the next OCP review.

Although appreciated overall, the students believe that most community members associated them with the municipal government. Being housed at the municipal hall helped the students understand the political processes and circumstances that could affect their ability to conduct research. Community members were sometimes reluctant to speak openly to researchers perceived to have close ties with municipal government.

There was definitely a buzz about us being there. We played a facilitator role, always listening. People in the community were surprised and happy when someone came out and asked them for their input.

— Cleo Corbett

Making the Community-Research Partnership Succeed

The challenges and benefits illustrated by the Malaspina-Ucluelet Research Alliance reflect the experiences of other CBPR projects around the globe. Much can be learned from the international development (Case 1990), public health (Metzler *et al.* 2003), and program evaluation (Whitmore 1991) fields, where the history of CBPR is longer. Several authors have compiled and published principles for successful CBPR. For example, researchers working in inner-city health programs in the United States have shared the key ingredients of successful research partnership development, many of which are illustrated in the Malaspina-Ucluelet alliance (Metzler *et al.* 2003).

According to Metzler *et al.* (2003), both researchers and community participants must be willing to share decision making on topics such as structure and governance of the research team, budget and spending, grant applications, project selection, and procedures for hiring and supervising staff. The willingness to share the power must be genuine on both sides.

In the Malaspina-Ucluelet alliance, both Mazzoni and Robinson share responsibility for developing grant proposals and supervising research staff. Principles of the collaboration, such as research goals, communication protocols, decision-making processes, procedures for disseminating results and gaining permission for human subjects research, were carefully identified at the outset.

Research partnerships require time, will, skills, and ongoing attention on both sides. Robinson and Mazzoni agree that lack of time is one of the most significant barriers to maintaining an effective partnership.

Even if you start a project together, if you don't have time to see it through, it ends up just being the researcher doing the work and then it's no longer a joint effort. We [communities] can easily get left out of the loop. Researchers have their deadlines.

— Felice Mazzoni

Although academic standards (grants, publications, and scientific rigour) and community standards (bringing new resources to the community and incorporating local knowledge into the research) must be balanced, they are not always compatible. For example, some researchers conduct community research that does not directly benefit the community.

Researchers need to have specialized knowledge about working with communities, and community members must learn about working with researchers. Short-term research grants often do not consider the long set-up time. In the case of interracial relationships, significant time is especially needed to overcome historic breaches of trust and power discrepancies.

Researchers need to be clear about whether they are viewing community members as advisors or consultants, or whether they see them as full partners in all phases of the research. In the Malaspina-Ucluelet partnership,

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issues of power sharing and distribution of resources, such as time and money, were addressed early in the relationship. A challenge for the alliance is finding funding organizations that understand the long-term nature of research relationships. Many funding organizations focus on short-term results and are more willing to work with partnerships after they are well established. Funding for start-up and organizational maintenance costs for the partnership are harder to find.

Benefits of the Partnership

As a result of their alliance with Malaspina, Mazzoni, his staff, and community volunteers in Ucluelet have better access to research-based information and to outside research help through summer students and university faculty. They also have increased linkages to non-research resources outside the community, and to other communities facing similar problems. As a result of the Malaspina-Ucluelet alliance, Mazzoni wants to attract other research institutions to work with him. One of his dreams is to create a nationally focused “rural communities-in-transition research institute” in Ucluelet to conduct policy research and facilitation.

The alliance allows Mazzoni to collect planning data, a task that would otherwise not get done. As a planner in a small community, he doesn’t have a large staff to help him collect data for planning.

The benefits of the alliance to Malaspina are also numerous. Mazzoni teaches workshops in the Department of Tourism and was a keynote speaker at the annual tourism conference. Robinson has reviewed and assessed new planning approaches to guide the OCP review. The alliance also provides opportunities for student employment and field experience, and a source of locations for class field tours.

One goal of the alliance is to disseminate policy and planning knowledge to other resource-dependent communities. As a result of its work, the alliance has showcased Ucluelet as a resource community in transition at several province-wide venues including conferences and in the news media. The team is drafting two manuscripts for national journals and tourism planning texts.

The Global CBPR Experience

The challenges of CBPR are well documented. In addition to taking more time than traditional research, participatory research—with its goal of community empowerment—sometimes does not match the mandate of many academic institutions, which often do not

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reward researchers for this kind of research. Furthermore, decisions concerning how benefits of the research will be distributed within the community are often challenging for communities involved in research (Metzler *et al.* 2003). For example, who makes the decisions about hiring criteria and about which persons in the community will receive the data collection jobs. Greenwood *et al.* (1993) stress that participation cannot be imposed on a research process; the degree of participation depends on the unique circumstances in the community (e.g., the aims and capacity of the researchers and community members, and the character of the problem).

Conflicts can arise between researchers and participants about who owns the research results and who can decide whether the results should be shared publicly. Participants may not have the confidence or research background to be meaningfully involved. Some communities feel “over-studied,” while others don’t trust the intent of researchers. Others feel that they don’t have time to participate. Others have participated in research that didn’t lead to any action (Morris 2002).

Conclusion

The transitions occurring in rural, resource-based, and First Nations communities in British Columbia provide an important impetus to create more academic-community research partnerships like the Malaspina-Ucluelet Research Alliance. A solid understanding of the benefits and challenges by all parties of this research method is critical. Systems that encourage and reward college and university faculty and staff to nurture research partnerships with municipalities and First Nations governments are essential ingredients.

Is the conventional social science research community able to expand its approach? Do research organizations

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have the capacity to add CBPR to their mandate? Can research organizations adjust the ways that researchers are rewarded—adding flexibility for time lines and publishing expectations—to accommodate the goals of participatory research? Do communities have the capacity and knowledge to work on research projects? Are funding organizations able to allow for the extra time required for research partnerships?

While conventional expert-led social science still plays an important role in addressing the transitions in resource-dependent communities in British Columbia, it is important to promote participatory research as a viable option. We believe that the time is right for a greater role for community-based participatory research as it relates to resource-based communities.

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