Project:
Gender Equality and Community Participation on Chira Island, Costa Rica

Key terms:
grassroots organizations, gender equality, participatory development, rural community tourism

ICADS general description

The Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS) has been working for 30 years in Central America to increase understanding of the region within a historical perspective; to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of root causes, forms and dimensions of underdevelopment and injustice; to stimulate critical evaluation of current development strategies, analyzing their effects on women, children, the poor, and the environment; and to search for alternative methods, policies, and strategies.

The mission of ICADS is two-fold:

- To educate participants about Central America by teaching Spanish and by offering academic programs that utilize a theoretically critical perspective as well as hands-on experience to help students deepen insights into current social, political and economic realities and their effects on the environment and society, especially the poor and marginalized.
- To provide support to organizations and communities throughout the countries where we work; especially to groups that have demonstrated a commitment to learning and/or are dedicated to social justice work in areas such as education, healthcare, human rights, anti-hunger issues, and environmental issues.

ICADS regular programs include internship opportunities with community organizations, and field research to help students explore topics related to social and environmental well-being. A strong staff of people from both Central and North America accompany students as they learn about themselves and the world.

Community-Partner description, Country, City

Isla de Chira / Asociación Ecoturística Damas de Chira

Located in the Gulf of Nicoya, Isla de Chira is a small island that belongs to the province of Puntarenas, Costa Rica. According to the last national census of the year 2011, it has a population of 1,576 inhabitants. Isla de Chira’s main economic activity is fishing and, on a smaller scale, cattle ranching. The majority of the population does not have property titles for their houses since they have been built inside the restricted area prohibited by the Costa Rican maritime law, which states that no developments can be built within 200 meters from the ocean’s littoral zone. Due to lack of law enforcement, people have continued to build and sell land despite this law.
The island has been declared of tourism potential by the state, but there have been disputes on whether tourism should be done on a large scale rather than encouraging the presently operating small-scale, rural community ecotourism.

In order to create more economic opportunities for the people of the community, and with the aid of both governmental and non-governmental organizations, different local organizations have been created on the island during the past two decades. Two of the most important ones are ASOPECUPACHI and Asociación Ecoturística Damas de Chira. ASOPECUPACHI is an association of fisher men and women that, in order to bring back the depleted fish populations, have created a protected fishing zone where they only use the traditional hook and line fishing technique, and ensure that no one fishes during the closed season. Asociación Ecoturística Damas de Chira, also known as “La Amistad” in reference to the name of the cabins where they host visitors, is an ecotourism organization of women that came together to provide job opportunities for the women of the community who have historically been confined to their traditional gender role as housewives but wanted to become more independent and to bring additional income to their families as fishing has progressively become less profitable.

For the Northwestern CBR research, students will work with La Amistad, which also has strong bonds with ASOPECUPACHI and other organizations of the community.

Social issue description

There are a series of key actors in the community that have been trying to create development alternatives for the community, which are somethings focused on specific groups such as women. However, there have been different obstacles; for example, lack of citizen participation and negative reactions of men towards projects led by women.

During the past decades, efforts have been made in Chira Island to improve the situation of the women of the island. Different institutions such as governmental and international agencies, public universities and NGO’s have provided women with capacity building skills, women’s rights and self-esteem workshops, entrepreneurial training, and grants to finance different projects. Although this started as a very positive experience for the women, it has had undesired consequences as the sudden independence of groups of women, and the deeply ingrained patriarchal culture of the community, have triggered feelings of resentment, jealousy, and threat among the men of the community. As result, there has been a surge of family tensions that have become detrimental to the progress of the community as a whole and put families and women under different kinds of risks such as disintegration and violence.

This issue also ties with another important necessity of the community of Chira: to encourage citizen participation and initiative in communal projects. One of the obstacles that local community projects have had is the lack of involvement from members of the community. Many times, even though there are different organizations and local actors that promote organizational projects, the participation of the citizens is minimal, which could be partly related to these family and community tensions.

Research project description
There are two possible projects that would be beneficial for the community. The first one is the study of different strategies to promote gender equality education for men and women, and to make gender equality and women's independence not a threat to men. This would involve work both with women and men, and it’s something that has been suggested by the same women’s groups who have seen how the lack of trust and support from men has become an obstacle to their own projects. The second possible project is the research for strategies to increase citizen participation in the community. The researchers can focus on either of these two areas, or try to work on both if time and resources permit it.

The research will aim to identify the causes of these barriers and different paths to overcome them. Researchers will live within the community for a number of weeks and will have an active role in determining how the objectives can be obtained. At the same time, they will seek collaboration from locals as it is indispensable that the community be part of the research project.

The students will live with a host local family from Isla de Chira and will learn about the community's culture, history and socioeconomic present both during their time in San José and in the island.

Students can research the structure of the community, its history and cultural dynamics, the different kinds of social capital the different groups of island possess, and the opportunities for organization and self-management that Chira Island has in order to create a diagnosis/program for citizen participation

**Community Partner participation in the project**

The community partner is the Asociación Ecoturística Damas de Chira. They will be providing information about the island's history and present, as well as connections with the main associations, leaders and key informants. Most importantly, this is a group of women who have fought the *machismo* culture themselves and have been part of different community projects, so their experiences and potential insights will be of great value for any research project in the island.

**Impact of this project on the community**

By addressing one or both these issues, Chira Island's citizens would be able to better identify ways to strengthen bonds between its inhabitants and different associations. This is something needed so that the community can find alternative economic activities, become more autonomous and less dependent to external players.

In the case of gender issues, the community would be benefited both at the family unit level and the social level as one of the areas that are key for gender equality is that men understand what it means and do not see it as threatening process.

**Research Mentor and mentorship structure**

ICADS Research Mentors are Gabriel Vargas, Licenciatura in Sociology, and Kat Peters, M.Ed. with Master's in Rural Development in Progress. The ICADS mentors will be the primary academic mentors during the project, and will help to develop objectives and provide feedback on the review
of the literature. The ICADS mentors are based in San Jose and will be in contact with students via phone, email, and visits during the data collection phase of the project.

The community mentors, in this case the leaders of the Association and members of the community of Chira Island, will provide on-the-ground support during the data collection phase, providing feedback on objectives and methodology, as well as logistical and cultural support during the time in the field.

Methodology

The nature of this project makes qualitative research methods the most recommended to achieve its objectives; however, students will be allowed to provide input on the methodology, and different research approaches will be considered. Following are some possible research methods that can be applied by students.¹

- In-depth Interviews with key informants and representatives of the community’s different organizations (Damas de Chira, ASOPECUPACHI, Local Development Associations, ProDus) in order to understand their work, how it impacts the community, and how it relates to each other.
- Systematic interviews with members of the community to gather their perspectives on the ongoing community projects, their own ideas about projects and needs for the community
- Implementation of workshops with citizens of Chira Island and/or representatives of local organizations to develop strategies to encourage citizen participation
- Implementation of workshops on gender equality – what it means and what it implies – with men and women (the students along with the mentor will determine whether these should be done with both groups together or separately)
- Reading and analysis of the Regulatory Plan for Isla de Chira Proposal made by ProDus²

Student profile and skills, including language requirements

The student carrying out this type of research must be proactive and open minded. He/she must have an interest in Latin American studies and culture.

A background in Social Sciences is highly recommended, as well as knowledge in cultural studies, gender studies, local community development, community autonomy and self-management, rural community development and ecotourism.

Intermediate/advanced Spanish needed.

Dates of Research Commitment

¹ All of these are tentative and can be discussed and modified depending on the final objectives of the project
² A regulatory plan is a local planning instrument that defines the development policy and plans for the distribution of population, land use, roads, utilities, community facilities, housing developments, construction, maintenance and rehabilitation of urban areas
June 18, 2017 - August 19, 2017