INSTITUTE FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
Proposed Student Research: Northwestern University Community-Based Research, 2017

Project: Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment on Chira Island, Costa Rica
Key terms: Grassroots organizations, gender equality, human rights, 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

_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 are built within the restricted area prohibited by the Costa Rican maritime law, which states that no developments can be made 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 fishermen 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,” 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.*

* Note that these are community organizations that can help students with orientation, logistics, connection, and as primary sources of information. For specific research guidance, students will be mentored by Northwestern and/or ICADS faculty.
Social Issue Description

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 was as a very positive experience for the women, some of the women from La Amistad state that it also had undesired consequences as the sudden independence of groups of women and the deeply ingrained patriarchal culture of the community triggered feelings of resentment, jealousy, and threat among the men of the community. As a result, there was a surge in family tensions with detrimental effects to the progress of the community as a whole.

Research Project Description

There have been two potential research projects suggested by local women of the community:

The first one is aimed at determining concrete manifestations of women’s empowerment and detecting areas where work has to continue to achieve gender equality. One key aspect to the study is if women’s perspectives and practices in child bearing have changed through generations. A lot of emphasis has been made on education and creating opportunities so that local women have greater autonomy and are better able to decide if they want to have children, at what ages would they want to have them, and how many children they want to have. Not long ago, it was common that most women would start having children at young ages and would have five or more children on average. According to the women from La Amistad, it would very beneficial if more information were gathered about the current situation of women’s autonomy in family planning and gender equilibrium in the family, and whether or not there are differences between women who are actively members of local organizations and those who are not.

The second potential project is to collect information that can contribute to strategies that promote gender equality. A sub-objective would be to identify what areas of gender equality are perceived as challenging by the community. This would involve work with both women and men, and is a topic 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. Because of the tensions mentioned before, attention should be paid on how this research is carried out. Refining the objective with feedback from community organizations and both ICADS and Northwestern faculty would be valuable in order to not make the research another issue of tension. Students should consider studying attitudes of men and women towards gender equality without a specific political outcome in mind but rather with the goal of finding areas where collaborative work between different interest groups is culturally and realistically possible.
Community Partner Participation

The community partner is the Asociación Ecoturística Damas de Chira (La Amistad). They will be providing information about the island’s history and present, as well as connections with local 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 the Project on the Community

Women’s empowerment and gender equality are considered essential elements for communities to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Women’s autonomy over their bodies, specifically, is important in Isla de Chira given that the island’s main economic activity, fishing, has decreased severely during the past decades due to resource depletion. This situation becomes more problematic if the populations keep growing rapidly and without taking into consideration the human rights of women. Equally important, it is known that having greater autonomy is linked to greater access to education, better health outcomes and diversifying the economic potential of communities as a whole.

Research Mentor and Mentorship Structure

ICADS Research Mentors are Gabriel Vargas (Lic. in Sociology) and Matthew Dearstyne (ICADS Assistant Director). 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 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.

- In-depth Interviews with key informants and representatives of the community's different organizations (Damas de Chira, ASOPECUPACHI, local development associations, health care providers).
- Structured or semi-structured interviews with members of the community.
- 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)
- Ethnographic participant and non-participant observation

Student Profile and Skills

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.