Community-Based Mapping:
A Research Tool for Justice System Research

Mapping research is a form of collaborative needs assessment or environmental scan that recognizes, includes and values local knowledge as essential to understanding communities.

The creation of various kinds of "maps" as part of a research process is a well-established practice in action research approaches to international development. Any kind of available local materials are used to create the maps which usually record geographical dispersement, resource allocation, services, physical barriers and social networks and relations. Encouraging community members to create a map of their community helps to overcome conceptual and cultural barriers, ensure the inclusion of important information that outside researchers might overlook, and generate community ownership of findings indicating a need for social change.

Research currently referred to as "mapping" may or may not include an actual map as a product but the metaphor of the map remains important. As an image, a map presents information without necessarily evoking a hierarchical relationship of knowledge creation and there is a sense that a map is dynamic and can be continually added to and adjusted. The approach is a fundamental recognition that local people possess valuable knowledge and are capable research collaborators. Unlike traditional needs assessment research, mapping is committed to a collaborative, community-generated process of knowledge creation which recognizes that all communities involve relations between more and less powerful citizens and institutions, which must be mediated. Mapping is also flexible in scope and specific methodology according to available resources.

Community-based mapping strives to ensure:

- Recognition of the importance of inclusive, empowering and transparent research *process* and *product*.

- Continuous and *diverse community involvement* from a representative range of community members and other stakeholders.

- *Community ownership* of and access to the project knowledge.

- The inclusion of *multiple forms of evidence* to create as complete a picture of local conditions as is possible.

- An '*appreciative inquiry*' process that is not a judgement but a statement of conditions that maximizes existing community strengths while also revealing

points of tension and gaps in resources and services. This community-generated critical appraisal points to the paths of action needed for constructive change.

- A clear *collaborative agreement* among stakeholders (written and/or oral as is appropriate to the community).

Challenges for mapping within the justice community

The delivery of justice and legal services is very complex and difficult to understand. Mapping research aimed at understanding access to justice and legal services must, therefore, confront some challenging issues.

The processes and services intended to provide citizens with access to justice are typically delivered by a variety of organizations and agencies with differing mandates, structures and funding sources. Mapping research has the potential to handle this demanding complexity, but there are some challenges specific to conducting mapping research within the justice community that confront some of the usual assumptions about collaborative research. Important considerations are:

- *A local map is only part of the access to justice picture.* Local knowledge about legal services is clearly an essential part of understanding community based access to justice issues. However, many key services are delivered at provincial and national levels and may not be physically present in a community. This fragmented and complex service delivery results in a lack of information and understanding concerning even those services that are locally available. A complete mapping of access to justice issues will require that large organizations (justice ministries, court services, legal aid organizations) also engage in the mapping process.

- *Legal culture is hierarchical, adversarial and competitive.* Western legal systems are founded on a tradition of oppositional debate in which one side 'wins' the argument and the other 'loses' it. Also, organizations often perceive that they are in competition for funding dollars and fear evaluation or assessment research that might conclude duplication of services. Collaborative research for change is founded on a belief in a knowledge exchange dialogue that identifies common ground and joint action to benefit all. Justice community engagement in mapping research therefore demands a profound shift in cultural tradition that is neither easy nor comfortable.

- *Untangling organizational critique from individual dedication.* Creating an inclusive map means working with all stakeholders. At the same time, it is essential that organizational critique is heard. Many individuals working within government and other large organizations dedicate their lives to working for just outcomes. These are the people who will hear the critique and work to address it. A mapping collaborative must be respectful and informed about each others' organizational mandates, cultures, potentials and restrictions.

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- *Service users should be at the centre of the map; but how do we get them there?* It is difficult to identify and engage people who are using legal services. Successful mapping will need service providers to invite clients to take part, but at the same time maintain researcher autonomy and confidentiality procedures that protect all participants and promote client trust and participation.

Key Factors in Successful Justice Community Mapping

- *An access to justice vision.* Mapping research is merely a tool to be applied; a vision of constructive change is the vital foundation

- *A belief in the value of the proposed research.* In association with the vision there must be strong conviction that the mapping research will provide information that is valuable to the stakeholders involved.

- *A commitment to collaboration.* A clear and shared understanding among the collaborators of what is expected is essential to successful mapping research. This entails taking time for collaborative processes.

- *A commitment to being honest and realistic.* Being honest about all aspects of a collaborative project is possibly the most important factor in the overall success. This includes honest assessment of what can realistically be achieved within the time and resources available to the project.

- *Researcher Autonomy.* It is critically important that researchers have sufficient autonomy to insure the confidentiality of participants and the integrity of reporting findings, whether or not these support the hoped for goals and outcomes of the overall project.

- *Dissemination and follow-up action plan.* Mapping research is only useful if it is applied to action for change. Projects must include plans to share research findings and follow-up with needed action. An agreement that reports first be reviewed by participants for accuracy and then made publicly available is essential.

This overview is drawn from a more detailed paper, *Reaching Out With Research: Creating Community and Legal Services Maps*, which includes mapping examples and a bibliography of supporting sources. Both this overview and the full paper are online at http://cfcj-fcjc.org/publications/ .

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