

Integrating knowledge

Environmental social scientist Lindsay C. Stringer worked with ecologists, soil and climate scientists, economists, and livelihood and policy experts to examine carbon storage, livelihoods and ecosystem services in subSaharan Africa's drylands.

■ What was the impetus for this project? What was the main objective of the work at the beginning of the project?

We successfully applied for Project Partnership and Development funding under the Ecosystem Services and Poverty Alleviation call to hold a workshop in Namibia in October 2010. We aimed to identify what was known about the relationships between carbon storage, livelihoods and ecosystem services in subSaharan Africa's drylands, and what the most pressing research questions were at the interface of different disciplines, sectors and stakeholders. Our goal was to identify and tackle some of the big scientific questions on dryland carbon storage and, at the same time, advance policy and practice in delivering poverty reduction and ecosystem services benefits in subSaharan Africa by outlining an interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder way forward.

■ How did you go about finding suitable collaborators?

We initially relied on personal networks and Internet searching. We contacted people who then recommended other people, often from other countries and other disciplines. We also wanted to include people from different sectors already involved in work

in the region, such as non-governmental organizations working with local communities, environmental consultants with direct and practical experience in the area, and government officials. The workshop participants were a really eclectic mix of experts spanning a range of disciplines and sectors. During the workshop we identified other people and stakeholders who could assist in disseminating the work too. It has been a very flexible process and we can bring in new people as we move towards the next research stage.

■ Did you encounter any difficulties in working with a team of experts with different research backgrounds and perspectives and if so, how did you overcome these?

With everyone looking at the same question from different angles, we were sometimes using different terminology to mean the same thing, so communication was challenging at first. We identified that, and before the workshop a core group of team members from environmental science and environmental social science disciplines prepared briefing notes that both introduced the workshop focus and included explanations of specialist terms. These were distributed before the workshop. In doing this preparation, it was very useful to have team members with a broad interdisciplinary background.

■ What was the highlight of working with an interdisciplinary team?

It was a risk bringing together such a broad range of experts from scientists, to policymakers and consultants, but the process and debate in reaching agreement on a way forward was really interesting and rewarding. Also, the whole process was an opportunity to meet new and interesting people and set up new collaborations, and the workshop itself was an exciting networking activity.

■ Any surprises?

I was surprised and reassured by the enthusiasm and commitment of everyone involved. We all took an active role in discussions as well as in the team-building activities, including in a volleyball match that we built into the workshop design. The match was fun and helped a lot to build the dialogue between different stakeholders

and disciplines when we returned to the workshop discussions.

■ Did you learn any lessons about interdisciplinary collaboration from this project that would benefit others trying to do similar work?

It is necessary to be interdisciplinary from the outset and to accommodate the needs of different experts. We succeeded at that by using the briefing papers and explaining the process and operation of the group in advance. It is also important to find ways to ensure the systematic representation of all expertise throughout the research development process, not just the disciplines but also the different methodological and sectoral experiences. Clear communication is fundamental in terms of both the answers to the research question and during the research process. Before the workshop we circulated a questionnaire that asked what each participant wanted to cover and to get a sense of their expectations. Also, it was important to provide time during the workshop to reflect on the process and for participants to give their feedback. Finally, we organized a site visit, as we realized the importance of meeting the communities who were the ultimate end-users and beneficiaries we were targeting in our research.

■ Any final thoughts?

The value of interdisciplinary research and the opportunity for it to have a real impact hinges on not just involving different disciplines but also different stakeholder groups. Finding ways to learn and share experiences across these boundaries is vital in tackling climate change.

INTERVIEW BY MONICA CONTESTABILE

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Correction

In the Beyond Boundaries 'Mapping vulnerabilities' (*Nature Clim. Change* 2, 58; 2012), in the PDF and print versions the reference should have read: *Glob. Environ. Change* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.09.018> (2011). Corrected after print, 25 May 2012.

