Research among refugee communities can be problematic. Power imbalances, differing levels of education and literacy, the need to develop trust and sensitivities relating to particular topics, are just some of the issues researchers must navigate. Conversely, communities sometimes feel research fatigue, particularly when they believe the research brings them little, or no direct benefit.

DR EILEEN PITTAWAY and LINDA BARTOLOMEI from the Centre for Refugee Research at the University of NSW describe their own methodology.
Reciprocal Research is an action-research methodology, involving community training and consultations, which grew from our work examining the incidence and impact of systematic rape and sexual abuse on refugee women and girls in camps and refugee sites in Thailand, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and subsequently, in Australia.

This methodology had much success in both eliciting information and giving something back to communities.

The process gives participants a space to share information which they previously have withheld. For example, there is a conventional wisdom that ‘women do not talk about sexual abuse,’ for a number of reasons including shame and culture. However, in camps and urban settings in six countries, and with resettled populations in Australia, we have found that women are desperate to tell their stories. The key is establishing trust with these women in a safe space, and providing the opportunity for them to share their experience. The most common response that we get in all settings is “This is the first time I have been ALLOWED to tell my story – this is the first time anyone has LISTENED to me.

HOW RECIPROCAL RESEARCH WAS DEVELOPED

We developed this particular “Participatory Action Research” methodology for use with community groups, with significant input from refugee women in community-based organisations on the Thai-Burma border.

They discussed the fact that they were tired of constant requests to participate in research projects by academics, post-graduate students, international non-government organisations and human rights groups, for which they perceived little or no direct benefit for themselves and others who gave up their time. In some cases communities were put at risk by the researchers. The women asked that human rights and gender training be provided as part of the research process, and that they be taught how to undertake their own research projects.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

The focus of Reciprocal Research is on collecting information from often vulnerable populations in a way that is empowering, not harmful, not exploitative and which has the potential to bring about social change. It is ideal for use with marginalised and disadvantaged groups who have valid reasons for distrusting people in authority, such as researchers, academics and representatives of Government and other institutions.

People who have experienced discrimination on the basis of class, race, gender, disability or refugee status are just some of the groups for whom Reciprocal Research could be a useful tool.

The method transforms many of the accepted relationships and principles which have underscored research and consultation in this area. Where people were seen as subjects of research, they are now participants in research. Where ethical practice meant minimising harm, it now means providing benefit to both researchers and the researched. And where researchers once directed projects and outcomes, participants and communities now take on that role.

ESTABLISHING TRUST

The key to success is establishing trust between the researcher and the group with whom she, or he, is working. Researchers are often time and resource poor, which makes it difficult to establish these relationships. One method that helps to quickly establish a trusting relationship and a willingness to participate is to use of a DVD of previous consultations. We have found that once groups have been shown a video of the method being used with other groups they quickly agree to participate in the process. This remains true even for those initially displaying obvious reluctance to engage with researchers. In all cases to date that initial trust has quickly grown because of the process itself, enabling the sharing of in-depth testimonies and evidence.

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The consultations, which are the key part of the Reciprocal Research, involve four stages. These are 1. Training in Human Rights, 2. “Story Circles”, 3. Story Boarding, 4. Planning Future Actions.

The training includes an introduction to human rights and gender issues, to provide a context to guide participants as they examine and articulate their communities’ critical issues. Strict confidentiality agreements are negotiated at the beginning of each session, and all participants sign a group agreement.

Next, using Story Circles, participants are invited to share stories of particular issues positioned within the human rights framework. These can be their own stories or stories of a friend, family or community member.

This gives participants a degree of safety, allowing them to share information without necessarily identifying the issue as their own. The stories yield a large amount of rich data on the type of problems being
Women reported that at night villagers, police and guards in plain clothes would go to the sheds to target young beautiful women. They said the men would rape the girls and threaten their fathers and brothers with beatings and false allegations if the rapes were reported. Some women said influential villagers forced girls to have sex on the false promise that their male relatives would be released. One older woman reported that some girls were having unsafe abortions and some had died.

Bangladesh Camp 2006
problems in her mind are many. She thinks about her health, enough food, and to participate in some training in order to know the life of other women.

Young girl, raped during the war in her country. She is alone without any family member, so, she experienced and the impact of these on individuals, families and communities.

The next step is to analyse what is happening in response to the problem at a local level, what needs to be done and who might be involved in the solution. This involves a technique called “Storyboarding”, during which participants use a series of drawings to conduct situational analyses, including proposals for action, response and interventions.

Working in small groups they are invited to focus on one of the key issues of concern which has arisen from the stories, and to prepare a series of six posters which analyse the issues. The posters can be drawings, a mix of text and drawing, or collages of magazine pictures. The focus is not on artistic ability, but on presenting a clear message to be presented to the larger groups.

The posters illustrate six key areas, which are:

1. The nature of the problem,
2. The impact of the problem on communities,
3. What is and isn’t available to assist communities,
4. Potential solutions, (If you were in charge of providing help for this issue, what would you do?)
5. Individuals or groups who might be able to assist, and
6. The hoped-for outcome of the action.

The questions which inform each of the stories can be altered to suit the needs of particular groups and projects.

The Story Board technique allows participants to name problems and issues within their communities in a positive and empowering context. It recognises the skills, knowledge and experience of participants and provides a human rights framework which acknowledges their rights to a secure life and social support. Storyboarding was first introduced to our work on the Thai-Burma border by Carole Shaw.

PLANNING FUTURE ACTIONS

This method works best when the researched community is given the opportunity to present the outcomes of the consultations to service providers, non-government organisations and other people in power. The Story Boards are an excellent vehicle and the researchers/consultation-facilitators can assist the groups to prepare their presentations. Often this is the first time that the researched group will have been invited to interact with those who have power over their lives as equals in a dialogue.

Key to the success of the methodology is verbatim documentation by researchers of the issues identified in the human rights training, from the stories and of the commentary given by participants when describing their drawings. The feedback and clarification undertaken by the facilitator and the discussion by the larger group of each presentation is also recorded.

Interviews can be undertaken to further explore themes which emerge from the analysis of the documentation. When combined with the data from individual interviews, it provides the framework for recommendations and future action.

The underlying premise is that everyone is capable of identifying and addressing community problems if the resources are available to support them. This method can be used with people of all levels of education, including people who are pre-literate and it has proved to be effective around the world.

For further information contact the Centre for Refugee Research at www.crr.unsw.edu.au