Who Can Change the World?
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Young people who grow up in an individualistic society but care about the collective good are told that they can create lasting positive change by having original ideas and turning passion into action through hard work. It took me a very long time to recognize that as long as my goals were focused on what I could "fix," just based on my own limited perception of big issues, I wasn't really doing good. I needed to consider the boundaries of my knowledge and de-center myself from work that was supposed to be for the public good. My thesis research project was born from the process of learning, thinking I knew everything, recognizing I knew very little and then setting off to learn more.

When I started college at the University of Denver, I organized my course load, extracurricular involvement, and social life around social good. I joined the Black Student Alliance, Diversity Committee, a youth mentorship program, and other organizations to learn to organize, motivate, and educate the people around me to act on equity. In these roles, I was speaking from my own perspective about the social issues that were important to me. However, I was also learning about intention versus impact. One of the most difficult truths to confront was that my identity as a white-passing person of color made it important for me to know when to step back and yield my platform to the voice of others. Just because I knew about something did not mean I was the best person to speak about it. Further, caring about a problem did not automatically give me the tools to solve it. I took these lessons forward with me into the rest of my college career and allowed them to structure my research.

During my junior year of college, I studied in Thailand at the International Sustainable Development Studies Institute (ISDSI). Thailand has experienced rapid, widespread development. As a result, the country's natural resources need to be managed carefully. Otherwise, growing infrastructure and elevated standards of living could endanger the function of rich ecosystems such as montane, subtropical, and mangrove forests, river biomes, and coral reefs (Hirsch, 1990; Agrawal et. al, 1999; Pariona, 2017). ISDSI helps students understand the different pathways to balancing conservation and growth. The program emphasizes experiential learning, and students live and learn in communities throughout Thailand. My cohort quickly came to understand that ownership was a pressing issue in conversations about resource management, and that localized decision-making power and agency allowed traditional knowledge to shape sustainable practices. This concept points to the value of community-based resource management, which can help to resolve conflicts between local people and the government and lead to sustainable development (Bennett, Dearden, 2014; Johnson, Forsyth, 2002).

We studied community-based natural resource management in the most depth while living and learning in a farming community in the North of Thailand and a fishing community in the South. In these places, local people had developed strategies to advance both the health of their adjacent ecosystems and their own economic needs. Collective action, mutual accountability, and a commitment to continual learning allowed people to empower themselves

and advance the objectives of sustainable resource use. Every person had a voice and was able to express not only what they needed, but also what they hoped for future generations, including the hope for flourishing lands and oceans. The collective support for the expression of these desires fueled conservation and restoration.

The framework of community-based resource management, which operates at the intersection of social and environmental justice, was immediately compelling to me based on what I was personally interested in. Therefore, as soon as I learned about this solution, I wanted to prove that it could solve all the world's problems. I started to consider how I might be able to copy and paste the efforts of the community members who taught us in Thailand into other contexts and tell people facing resource-management issues of all kinds, "look at what they're doing! It works! You should do this too!"

Luckily, I had professors and mentors who challenged me to think critically about this inclination. After all, the imposition of development "solutions," which are not locally appropriate and perpetuate a lack of community agency was something I claimed to oppose vehemently. The idea that people could come up with their own ways of interacting with their livelihood resources, based on local knowledge and priorities, was what had drawn me to community-based resource management in the first place. Why would I possibly know what works best for all people, everywhere? Of course, there is no one-size fits all solution to the massive questions raised in conversations of development and resource management. I decided at this point to re-focus my efforts on understanding how community-based resource management had worked in one specific instance, so that this framework could be better understood as an option for people to consider while they exercised their right to choose a course of action that best suited their own needs.

My first step in planning out my research project was to recall how much I did not yet know and to remember that my identity should be a key consideration in my planning. I knew what I wanted to study, but I was unsure of what questions to ask, and to whom. I remembered the lesson that, because of my position the way I am perceived by others, I could unintentionally drown out the voices of people who are often ignored in conversations about equity, even if my goal was to help them be heard. Therefore, I wanted to remove my voice, biases, and assumptions from the research as much as possible. Further, I aimed to use the project as a platform to amplify both the voices of people working on sustainable resource management and the people who depend on the wellbeing of those resources for survival, especially where these two groups overlap. Therefore, my first step was to connect with a community and established research bodies to create a locally appropriate project outline.

I first decided to revisit the fishing community Mod Tah Noi in Southern Thailand to learn more about their success. I wanted to understand why they were so effective in organizing, communicating, adapting to new rules, and holding each other accountable for following these. My first instinct was to put this community's strategy on a pedestal based on what I understood of their work. However, I reminded myself to seek objectivity. After all, when I first visited, we focused mostly on the fact community practices had changed to restore the marine ecosystems to health. I still lacked information about the process of changing these practices, and what challenges had persisted after changes were made. Most importantly, I did not know the underlying motivation that had caused individuals to make resource-use changes in their day-to-day lives. Was it community ties? Was it economic pressure? Social pressure? Or had the way people thought about their responsibility to the ocean and its inhabitants changed?

While I was reviewing literature and doing background research about Mod Tah Noi, it was brought to my attention that an NGO working in Gazi, Kenya, had established a project called Mikoko Pamoja. The mission of this initiative was to enable development within the community by preserving the local mangrove forests and selling carbon credits. The organization had produced impressive results, like changing how people interacted with the mangroves and facilitating the construction of a new school (with books also purchased by carbon credits) and a water distribution system.

In Mod Tah Noi, a local NGO called the Save Andaman Network Foundation had also intervened with ideas about combining community development and conservation. The organization had acted as a catalyst for change and a bridge between local actors and the provincial and national governments. After new community practices were established, the NGO stepped back from the day-to-day proceedings within Mod Tah Noi. I was fascinated by the similarities in these strategies and their proximity to what I was interested in studying, and I discovered that Mod Tah Noi and Gazi are similar in many ways beyond NGO involvement. Their population sizes are comparable, as are their levels of development (relative to the rest of their country's) and economic activities. They are both economically and culturally tied to their low-output artisanal fisheries on the Indian Ocean, which are adjacent to and sustained by seagrass beds, mangrove forests, and coral reefs. Additionally, both Mod Tah Noi and Gazi are relatively geographically isolated, and the local people are mostly Muslim in predominantly non-Muslim nations.

I had the same questions about Mikoko Pamoja and conservation efforts within the community of Gazi as I did about the community-led conservation efforts in Mod Tah Noi. Why were practices changing and ecosystem conditions improving? Was it because rules were changing, or because mindsets were changing? I decided to make this the central question of my research, and I set out to answer it.

When I arrived in Gazi, I was immediately grateful for the partnerships I had established with Mikoko Pamoja and the Kenya Marine Research and Fisheries Institute. Local affiliates of these organizations introduced me to community members and helped me to understand local customs. They also guided the development of my survey instruments and practices so that I could ask the right questions and make participants feel comfortable in the process. When I explained my intentions for my research, it was revealed to me that how the people of Gazi and the people of Mod Tah Noi interacted with the groups working on conservation was very different.

In Mod Tah Noi, people who lived in the community were leading resource use campaigns and all community members were voting on all resource-use rules. Mod Tah Noi was treating regulation and resources as a single system with many interrelated parts to consider.

In Gazi, Mikoko Pamoja's work with the mangroves was relatively isolated. Local people voted on rules about mangrove use and how to spend the money earned from carbon credits, but there was no additional regulation about seagrass use, coral interaction, or any other marine practices. I was very interested in this difference and the presence versus absence of systems-level thinking, so I narrowed down the scope of my research. I decided to investigate whether the work of the Save Andaman Network Foundation and Mikoko Pamoja created a sustainability ethic that extended to fisheries or not. This seemed an important question because fishing is such a central part of life in both communities, and the fisheries in both localities are under intense ecological stress from changing climate conditions and overfishing. The answer to this question

would tell me whether changing practices around resource use were based on obligation or ideology, and why.

I had thought a lot about how to conduct this project in the most ethical way possible, but I was still conscious of how I brought my own identity into every conversation. I once had a professor tell me that extracting knowledge from communities overseas is just a modern form of colonialism. My first strategy for doing more equitable research was to ensure that the learnings from this project would be given to the community to use as they saw fit. Second, I wanted to advocate for the priorities and wellbeing of the people I was interviewing, while knowing that one conversation with an individual would not provide me with enough insight to speak to their needs. Instead, I asked questions that prompted people to speak for themselves about their present opportunities and challenges.

My community partners helped me to design a survey instrument that allowed me to collect objective data about fishers' attitudes. Based on the responses to a set number of questions, I created a sustainability attitudes scale and used a multivariate regression model to assess the effect of the project site (a proxy for the structure and methods of conservation efforts) to measure the sustainability ethic of each fisher. The results were highly statistically significant and showed that fishers in Mod Tah Noi considered sustainability in their fishing practices more than Gazi fishers did.

At times, I was extremely uncomfortable with my inability to communicate the intentions of my project in the local language. I wanted to clarify that there were no right or wrong answers and that my goal was not to make people feel 'studied.' I wanted to learn from them, based on what they chose to share with me, not about them. I interviewed only fishermen to learn about their priorities and practices in their craft, and most of my questions were technical rather than personal. I relied heavily on the community organizations and leaders I had partnered with to help me communicate my intentions and build trust.

When I compiled my results, I ended up with a similar feeling of discomfort. Because of the way Americans talk about sustainability and value natural systems, it seems like my conclusion is a value-based judgment which says that one community and NGO were "successful" while the other was not. This is not at all what I believe, nor does it reflect the complexity of both situations. Mikoko Pamoja's objective was not to change the practices of fishermen, and fishers in Gazi are not unconcerned with the health of the fisheries. They are aware that their practices have an impact on the local ecosystems. In fact, many expressed knowledge of how all the components of their adjacent fisheries, mangroves, and seagrass beds work together and depend on each other. There were many reasons why fishers felt they could not comply with any existing rules designed to promote the health of the fisheries, and why they had mostly not adopted or employed a sustainability ethic in their work.

An additional challenge arose from the fact that many of the people I interviewed would have no use for a final report written in English, so my plans to share my findings with them had to be more innovative than emailing a copy of my paper. Here, again, I had to lean into partnerships to ensure that my work could be meaningful in amplifying the voices of community members and allowing them to share amongst each other their knowledge that I had compiled in this project.

I was able to communicate my findings to thought leaders at both Mikoko Pamoja and the Save Andaman Network Foundation and to use direct quotes from community members to make recommendations. For example, it became apparent to me in my research that in Mod Tah Noi, having community members lead the charge towards a healthier community and a healthier

ocean was empowering. Most working people in both communities are fishers. Therefore, when conservation work makes space for everyone to participate in a meaningful way (as it does in Mod Tah Noi), the people working in the fisheries are automatically invited to declare their needs and to advocate for reasonable and effective fishing rules. By presenting this knowledge to be disseminated in both communities, my work is making a case for active inclusion based on what participants shared with me, not based on my own ideals. By sharing my research with the organizations, I worked with, I was also able to answer questions they had about their solutions. I also sought to provide a critical lens through which they could see their impact so that their programs can be more effective in moving forward.

This project allowed me to work for the public good not by having a new idea, but by using the resources I've been provided through higher education to initiate conversations between knowledgeable actors and advocate for making room in these conversations for those who are often silenced. As I look to the future, I will remember that while there may be good intentions in trying to solve problems that affect people all over the world, I will never have a complete picture on my own. Most importantly, I will never know more than another person about their own situation. I can, however, play a role in bringing about positive change by asking questions, keeping an open mind, and using my positioning to amplify the voices of people with something to say so that we can create inclusive and sustainable solutions.

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