Analyzing Social Change Practice in the Peruvian Amazon through a Feminist Reading of Participatory Communication Research

by

Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty
St. Louis College of Pharmacy

and

Arvind Singhal
University of Texas, El Paso

Please direct all correspondence to the first author:
Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty
(From Fall, 2008) Assistant Professor of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
St. Louis College of Pharmacy
St. Louis, MO 63110
Phone: (740) 391-2848; E-mail: er192099@ohio.edu

Arvind Singhal, Ph.D.
Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Endowed Professor
Department of Communication,
University of Texas, El Paso
El Paso, TX 79968-5666
Phone: 915-747-6286; E-mail: asinghal@utep.edu

Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the St. Louis College of Pharmacy (starting in Fall, 2008). Her work focuses on issues of social justice and health communication, specifically involving women in Latin America and the Middle East.

Arvind Singhal, Ph.D., is the Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Professor and Senior Research Fellow, Sam Donaldson Center for Communication Studies, University of Texas, El Paso. He is author/editor of eight books including Organizing for Social Change (2006); Combating AIDS: Communication Strategies in Action (2003); and Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change (1999).
Abstract

This article analyzes the social change practices of Minga Perú, a non-governmental organization in the Peruvian Amazon that promotes gender equality and reproductive health through radio broadcasts and community-based interventions. This analysis, grounded in participatory research methods, reveals a feminist and gender-equitable approach, allowing our participants to take the role of leader rather than of passive research subject. Further, such participatory research methods helped empower both individuals and their communities in the Peruvian Amazon, encouraging the development of more productive group dynamics and leadership.

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In March, 2005, several women from Amazonian riverine communities gathered in the town of Nauta, a small community located in the Peruvian rainforest. These women were invited to Nauta by Minga Perú, a non-governmental organization that promotes gender equality and reproductive health in the region. Minga Perú’s outreach activities include the thrice-weekly broadcast of a radio program, Bienvenida Salud! (Welcome Health), and several community-based interventions facilitated by the on-the-ground promotoras, local women leaders who act as sparkplugs for change.

On the opening day, sheets of plain paper and colored markers were handed out to the two dozen promotoras. The question was posed “How has your life changed because of listening to Bienvenida Salud and participating in community-based activities of Minga Perú?” The answers were requested in two sketches: one sketch to portray their life five years ago (i.e. antes), the other to portray their life today (i.e. ahora).

Emira, a 21-year old promotora, drew two sketches of herself and in an emotive tone noted:

![Antes](image1) ![Ahora](image2)
“This is my early life. I was unworthy; I was ashamed, I was sad. Now my life has changed, I feel capable of exerting a public function; I don’t feel ashamed, I don’t have fear. I am proud of my body – my femininity. Before, I didn’t want to cut my hair…Now I’ve cut them… Now I feel capable to wear trousers; previously I wore loose clothes. The same holds for my shoes, now I wear high heels.”

Emira’s sketch and the public expression of her emotions sparked an animated discussion among the *promotoras*. They talked about the role of the radio program *Bienvenida Salud!* and Minga’s other interventions, in stripping them of shame and guilt, and raising their self-esteem. Many of Emira’s colleagues felt compelled to share their own poignant stories. The group dynamics that followed Emira’s narrative embodied not just a community of radio listeners, but also a community of marginalized individuals, who seemed to find a collective voice in dialogue and interactions. Later, Emira noted how she gained in self-confidence by publicly presenting her sketch, and how the discussion that ensued in the group allowed her to critically view her situation from multiple perspectives.

A few weeks later, when the authors of the present article regrouped in the United States, we noted how the insights gained from this participatory exercise were incredibly aligned with a set of feminist sensibilities. For instance, Emira’s *emotional* public rendering of her sketch evoked highly emotional discussions and responses; the dialogue generated through these emotional interactions helped *connect* participants, fostering a palpable sense of community; and, further, the public nature of deliberations allowed participants to view their experiences from multiple perspectives, reflecting both *self and collective development.*
Through our participants’ analysis of Minga Peru’s social change practices in the Peruvian Amazon, the present article reveals the feminist orientation of participatory research approaches. By giving voice to marginalized and silenced discourses, this article examines how a participatory approach to research affects the way participants view themselves and the implications such strategies have for a broader understanding of social change movements.

**Applying Feminist Research Approaches to Social Change Practice**

While traditional social scientific research methods have provided insights on how individuals relate and communicate, such approaches harbor important limitations. Such research is guided by the motivations of the research “expert” and participants are required only to provide the information solicited in the form of interview queries or structured survey questions. During this information extraction phase, the participants, at best, may be briefed about the objectives and consequences of the study. Rarely are they provided the opportunity to discuss the implications of the research exercise with the researcher or other participants.

In contrast, feminist scholars have argued that neutrality and objectivity are neither possible nor desirable in research (Ghorashi, 2005; Jackson, 2006). They critique the hierarchal power distance that exists between researcher and participant, a lack of attention to indigenous knowledge, and the absence of any interaction or dialogue among participants (Fraser, 1989). Feminist scholars contend that traditional social scientific research methods reinforce the status quo, reifying masculine ways of knowing and being and suppressing the feminine (hooks, 1994).
One important conceptual linkage between feminism and communication is the importance of giving voice to those who are traditionally marginalized, silenced, and ignored. When engaging in participatory sketching or photography, participants express themselves in more than words (Singhal & Devi, 2003; Singhal, Harter, Chitnis, & Sharma, 2007; Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Further, by narrating and performing these images in public, voices emerge that might not have otherwise surfaced. As Freire (1970) argued, self-discovery and the opportunity to express a view that resists societal norms are essential to create critical consciousness and liberate oneself from oppressive bonds.

Feminist methods support social and political change, lending themselves to the reframing of ideas through discussion and debate (Ghorashi, 2005). Feminist traditions recognize the inherent power differentials that characterize relationships and advocate reducing such differentials in the production of knowledge (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Feminist approaches emphasize that the “political” orientation of the researcher undoubtedly influences the research practices, and should be recognized as a powerful force (Ghorashi, 2005). Further, feminist perspectives of communication view the role of dialogue as being central to building community and promoting social change (Wang, 1999). Such an approach demands that we problematize issues such as ethnicity and gender, issues that are closely intertwined with human rights (Scott, Thurston, & Crow, 2002).

The feminist viewpoint also illuminates the therapeutic value of drawing and storytelling – that is, encouraging forms of self-expression that are rejected in traditional research practices, where the means of producing knowledge are codified in print, and
controlled by the researcher (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). Western regimes of knowledge production privilege the verbal and the written word (Conquergood, 2002). In Belize, the Garifuna people use the word gapencillitin (literally “people with pencil”) to refer to the educated, literate, and powerful individuals, and the term mapencillitin (literally “people without pencil) to refer to the uneducated, rural and working class. Here, the pencil, as an instrument of literacy, draws the line between the haves and have-nots (Conquergood, 2002). The feminist viewpoint questions the hegemony of knowledge that is printed, arguing for the recognition of other forms of expression. By providing participants the tools of producing knowledge, such as markers and cameras, and by providing opportunities for public performance of their narratives, feminist approaches enhance individual agency and solidarity (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Wang, 1999).

**Valuing Emotionality**

A discussion of the feminist orientation must address the role of emotionality in our lives. While a traditional survey questionnaire taps into the conscious, analytic elements of experience and understanding, feminist approaches go beyond. Standard social scientific methodologies tend to view emotion as an unscientific. While emotion has been traditionally viewed as a state of “lack of control”, and most strongly associated with the female sex, participatory methods insist that emotions play an important role in understanding individuals and cultures. As such, participatory methods directly support the notion that emotion clarifies rather than clouds understanding and judgment. By handing over the means of production to the participants, participatory methods not only
valorize freedom of voice but also create a space for expression that goes beyond the rational, allowing for the emotive to surface and be valued.

In participatory research activities, participants engage on an individual level by creating a sketch or snapping a photograph. However, this individual activity is brought into the larger community – that is, publicly performed – in a variety of ways, including the discussion that precedes picture taking, narration of the photo in front of others, or community discussions that occur afterwards. The public performance of emotions including anger, fear, shame, joy, and hope creates trust among group members, illuminating the importance of different points of view (Dullea, 2006; Ghorashi, 2005). Participatory activities can cause some initial discomfort, especially when participants are unaccustomed to expressing their opinions, believing they have nothing of value to share. However, these initial negative self-judgments are usually overcome as supportive interactions ensue (Page & Scott, 2001). Because the expression of emotions allows an intimate connection not only between the self and the subject, but also among participants, emotional relations lead to stronger group cohesion. Studies of cancer patients attending group support sessions show that being able to relate to those who are experiencing similar lived realities effectively allows for improved social and emotional function.

**Community through Connections**

The feminist tradition values the need to create a sense of community, particularly among women, by emphasizing connection rather than a more dominant, individualistic perspective (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Wang, 1999). Participants must feel empowered to express their views without fear of retribution or shame spurring group
dialogue on difficult issues (Dullea, 2006; Ghorashi, 2005; Mann, 2002; Sherman, 2005).

Participatory photography, while performed individually often involves the participation of many other members of the community who allow themselves to be photographed. Bringing a camera into a community where many may not have seen a camera leads to curiosity and wonderment. Community members may want to know how it works, and if they may look through the viewfinder. The camera, by itself, becomes a means for discussion before the photographs are taken, developed, and subsequently narrated. Once the photographs are available, they are publicly displayed and/or performed, becoming fodder for comment and debate. The experience is one of emerging discussions, interactions, and encounters.

Self and Collective Development through Participation

A feminist methodological orientation stresses the importance of continued self- and collective development as central to any research approach. By becoming a participant, one allows oneself to become an integral part of an interactional process (Dullea, 2006). By actively engaging with others, participants are likely to learn things about themselves and gain new insights on life around them. For example, when placed in a group setting a participant might acknowledge her initial fear in participating but add that after being with others, she has a new-found confidence and would like to engage in the activity again. Participants are likely to become more critically consciousness about the world around them, listening to different perspectives put forth by other group members. Participants may also develop practical skills such as group facilitation and public speaking, as well as technical skills such as how to use a camera (Side, 2005). By acquiring such skills, and becoming an active participant within a group setting, an
individual gains in self-esteem and pride (Side, 2005). She feels agency to do things she may not have tried before through her individual efforts, or collectively in consort with others.

From our discussion above it is clear that participatory research methods speak to, and embody, feminist orientations of emotionality, connections and community, and holistic development of the self and the collective. Accordingly, we pose three research questions to reveal the feminist orientation of participatory methods, drawing upon our participants’ view of social change practices in the Peruvian Amazon.

Research Question #1: *How does a participatory reading of Minga Peru’s social change practices speak to, and embody, the feminist value of expressing emotionality among participants?*

Research Question #2: *How does a participatory reading of Minga Peru’s social change practices speak to, and embody, the feminist imperative of creating connections and a sense of community among participants?*

Research Question #3: *How does a participatory reading of Minga Peru’s social change practices speak to, and embody, the feminist emphasis on engaging participants to foster holistic development of the self and the collective?*

**Research Setting and Data Collection**

**The Setting**

Within the Peruvian Amazon, rich with natural beauty and infused with diverse indigenous cultures, there remain serious social and health concerns (Elías, 2002). One of the most serious is the lack of access to health care due to the topography of the region. With no developed roads, the Amazon River remains the only viable means of
transportation. Reaching a medical outpost can require several days of travel via self-paddled canoe, motorized boats, or passenger ferries. When pregnancy complications arise, such a journey is hazardous. In certain riverine communities, especially those inhabited by the Huambisa, Aguajun, and Shipibo-Conibo ethnic groups, women may bear on average 10 children (three times the national average), lose one or two children to disease, perhaps contract a sexually transmitted infection, and die before reaching the age of 50 (22 years less than the national average) (Bustamente, 2004).

Another area of concern is gender inequity. The patriarchal social system calls for women to be subservient to men, have little if any education, and have little say on issues that affect their welfare (for instance, the number of children they bear). They are frequent victims of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and teen pregnancy.

To address the health and gender issues, Minga Peru, a non-governmental organization, works in the Region of Loreto, a territory comprising one-fourth of Peru's geographic area, including 146,000 square miles of the Amazon rainforest. About one million people, comprising 65 ethno-linguistic groups make up the Loreto region. By promoting reproductive health, gender equality, and income generating activities in a region plagued by geographical isolation, poverty, disease, and patriarchal traditions, Minga offers dignity and hope to Loreto’s people (Elías, 2002).

**Participatory Data-Collection**

The present participatory research was conducted by the two authors at two points in time. The first data collection activity, which included a participatory photography exercise, was conducted in September 2003. The second data-set which included a participatory sketching exercise was conducted during March 2005. Both research
activities were largely carried out at the Tambo, Minga’s training center in Nauta. Women come together at the Tambo to share experiences and to learn new skills such as sewing and crocheting.

Disposable cameras were handed out to seven of Minga’s community promotoras, encouraging these women to capture -- in photographs -- the reality of Amazonian life, including their perceptions of Minga’s influence on their communities. As opposed to asking the promotoras questions, and thereby constraining the nature and scope of their word responses, they were asked to capture Minga’s influence on their community through images. None of the seven promotoras had previously handled a camera. They were given two weeks to take pictures. Our “shoot back” invitation to the seven promotoras, who hailed from four different riverine communities, yielded a total of 107 photographs. After developing these pictures, the first author took the pictures back to each of the seven promotoras, asking them to narrate the meaning of the pictures. These narratives, often performed in front of others, were audiotaped, and subsequently translated and transcribed from Spanish to English.

The 23 women participants (all promotoras) in the March 2005 participatory sketching activity were provided colored pencils, markers, and plain paper, and were instructed to answer several broad based questions, once again, not in words but with sketches. The questions posed included, What has been the significance of the radio program Bienvenida Salud! in your personal and family life? How was your community before you became a Minga promotora and how is it nowadays? This activity yielded about 75 sketches, after which each participant publicly narrated what their sketch was about, what it meant to them, and how it answered the posed question. These narratives, captured by a translator were later transcribed.
Results

Here we provide answers to our three posed research questions, drawing upon the 107 photographs, 75 sketches, and their accompanying narratives about Minga Peru’s social change practices in the Peruvian Amazon.

*Expressing Emotionality*

Research Question #1 asked: *How does a participatory reading of Minga Peru’s social change practices speak to, and embody, the feminist value of expressing emotionality among participants?*

When engaging in participatory activities, Minga’s *promotoras* frequently discussed how feelings of sadness, shame, or lack of self-esteem had been part of their past identity. Mari, a woman in her thirties, noted: “Before knowing Minga (Peru) we were violent, we would quarrel and the kids would hear us and grow up just like us, with psychological violence. Here we are now dialoguing with our neighbors, with our children.” Adela, also a woman in her thirties, revealed her emotional past by noting:

Now I don’t become enraged anymore, I no longer mistreat my children. Before I was shy. I felt embarrassed because I didn’t have any schooling but then I came to realize that we are all the same. I don’t feel ashamed any more. I am not embarrassed about where I come from.

These moments would likely not have emerged in a traditional survey interview. Coping with doubt, anger, and embarrassment is clearly a difficult proposition for women who, for most of their lives, have been denied freedom of expression. In a less interactive and connected environment, admitting to child abuse or to feeling ashamed could be devastating to the individual and their family. However, in the presence of other women
who share equally powerful emotions and convictions, it is possible to create a powerful sense of unity and belonging. This emotional connection is at the heart of a feminist approach to research. By expressing themselves honestly and openly, these women are better able to connect to one another and share the trials and triumphs that are part of their lived realities.

While a multitude of emotions both positive and negative are clearly expressed during discussions about sketches and photos, the issue of self-esteem came up repeatedly. As stated by Mercedita, a young mother,

Before I was very thin and confined to the home. I was all ashamed. I wore a skirt. Now it has changed. Coming to the workshops I have learned that women are not worthy only for the house, they can take part in meetings. I am not angry anymore and now I have gained weight. The program has helped us with every type of violence. Now we are eating and drinking with our children and that is happiness, this why we gain weight.

Another participant, Evarina, drew a sketch of herself and described the changes in her life equally emotional terms. “Now I don’t care about my clothes or if I am ugly. What I care about is my way of being a person. I’ve thrown off my shame and fears.”

While a more conventional methodological orientation might interpret such statements as merely individual opinions, such statements go beyond the realm of mere opinion. The creative nature of photography and sketching allow for more personal input and decision making on the part of the participant. By determining what will and will not be displayed, the women participants make choices about how to express themselves, including how much personal detail to include in both their artwork and their narratives.
As such, they are able to effectively use emotions to both identify with others and better understand themselves.

**Creating Community**

Research Question #2 asked: *How does a participatory reading of Minga Peru’s social change practices speak to, and embody, the feminist imperative of creating connections and a sense of community among participants?*

Feminist approaches attach importance to community building, especially among the marginalized. The feminist orientation emphasizes that while an individual can alter his or her attitude or behavior about a practice or belief, it is in groups that movements for social change gain power. As discussed earlier, photography and sketching are intrinsically communicative practices that engender discussion and debate. In such debate lies the potential for community building and reconstruction. This is particularly relevant in the Peruvian Amazon where women are shy to engage in public forums due to a lack of education or low self-esteem. Participatory approaches to research can help reverse these power relations as Emira described:

> In earlier times my community was disorganized and only men attended the meetings. Some women listened to what took place in the meetings but secretly because their husbands would argue with them if they found out. (In this sketch) We can see some women listening outside the meeting. There was too much chauvinism and men thought that (as women) representing ourselves meant that we were too forward. Nowadays, women are organized; they participate and invite women and men (to meetings). They share housework (with their husbands).
While the narratives of our participants were wide-ranging, a dominant theme was domestic violence. While a taboo topic, women were not just discussing it, but making collective decisions about how to eliminate it from their homes. Zarela described her colorful sketch: “Here I am with my husband. We have had a fight and he has beaten me. (Now) Here we are both together. Before we didn’t hold hands but since the program began, we don’t fight anymore.” Adela added an example of her own experience, confiding that:

There are children and adolescents (washing dishes along side the river) and there I am. We’re talking about what violence is, trying to discuss it since sometimes one of the mothers is a victim of abuse. And that’s what I’m telling them, reminding them that in this (modern) time we do not need to endure abuse; also we need to eliminate violence quickly….While we wash, we talk.

Allowing community members, especially the health promotoras, to view the positive social changes they have helped initiate validates their role as engaged members of their village and the power of this talk should not be discounted. As Juana pointed out, “it is empowering to see the potential that exists within even a small group of people.”

**Individually and Collectively Developing through Participation**

Research Question #3 asked: *How does a participatory reading of Minga Peru’s social change practices speak to, and embody, the feminist emphasis on engaging participants to foster holistic development of the self and the collective?*

While the feminist orientation emphasizes the value of creating community, such a position also places a premium upon the development of self through critical consciousness. In conjunction with this sentiment, a participatory research approach
requires individuals to evaluate their experiences and make connections that might not surface during a structured survey interview. Participants reflect on their drawings and photos to gain in-depth insights and then share their experiences in public. Further, by listening to, and engaging with, the narrations provided by other group members, the women learn more about themselves and their community. Lourdes, a woman in her early thirties describes her experience with photography:

It was very interesting, largely because it helped us just like drawing pictures helps us. It helped us see our community, it helped us see just how much we are learning from Minga Peru and how we are different. I think it worked very well, this work we did.

What Lourdes is emphasizing is that the participatory photography exercise allowed her and her fellow health promoters to collectively appreciate the many improvements that they have helped implement in their communities in conjunction with their friends and neighbors. While these changes may have likely occurred even if the participatory research exercise was not undertaken, it is unlikely that the women would have had the opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments with such collective pride and in such a tangible manner.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The present research in the Peruvian Amazon suggests that participant-centered research approaches can produce valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals and communities. By empowering marginalized individuals and communities, participant-oriented approaches allow for multiple perspectives, critical reflection, and personal and community growth.
Further, while it is clear that participatory research processes are closely-aligned with feminist sensibilities and provide alternative worldviews than what traditional survey-based social science research methodologies can offer, their greatest potential lies in their purposive use in social change movements. In contrast to large-scale, campaign-style approaches to changing individual attitudes and behaviors, participatory methods -- such as sketching and photography -- allow individuals and communities to own both their social problems and the solutions they hope to construct. Participatory research methods can offer opportunities for raising critical consciousness among individuals and communities about societal realities, as another Peruvian example from a previous decade illustrates.

In 1973 in a barrio of Lima, Peru, the noted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his team asked people questions in Spanish, but requested the answers in photographs. When the question "What is exploitation?" was asked, some people took photos of a landlord, grocer, or a policeman (Boal, 1979, p. 123). One child took a photo of a nail on a wall. It made no sense to adults, but other children were in strong agreement. The ensuing discussions showed that many young boys of that neighbourhood worked in the shoe-shine business. Their clients were mainly in the city, not in the barrio where they lived. As their shoe-shine boxes were too heavy for them to carry, these boys, rented a nail on a wall (usually in a shop), where they could hang their boxes for the night. To them, that nail on the wall represented "exploitation." The “nail on the wall” photograph spurred widespread discussions in the Peruvian barrio about other forms of institutionalized exploitation, including ways to overcome those (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006).
From the perspective of social change practice, participatory photography techniques (referred to as “photo voice” or “visual voices”) provide an opportunity to bring to the fore alternative discourses, realities, and worldviews that were previously rejected, silenced, or overlooked. The narrative accompanying the visual becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, spurring community members to further reflect, discuss, and analyze the issues that confront them (Lykes, 1997; Wang, 1999; Wang, 2003). Such participatory approaches, have been utilized in varied settings with diverse populations, including the hungry and homeless in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Wang, 2003); poor, young, and homeless women in Detroit (Killion & Wang, 2000); slum troubled youth in Nairobi, Kenya; and with Maya Ixil Women in Guatemala’s highlands who survived the civil war. Participatory photography allowed Mayan Ixil women to collectively develop a public record of their lives, reflect upon the debilitating effects of three-decade long internal war in Guatemala, and rebuild community (Lykes, 1997).

In our study in the Peruvian Amazon, we also discovered the emancipatory and reflective dimensions of participatory photography and sketching. For instance, Mercedita, a Minga promotora, pointed out how taking photographs of her village helped her see the progress that can be attributed to Minga’s activities. Juana, another Minga promotora, noted:

It was wonderful to see the people of the community in the pictures, meeting together, listening to the radio program, coming to learn more about a social topic, asking us “what is that?”…. The camera let us see for ourselves the kind of work we’re doing in the community, and what else needs to be done.
However, one should note that participatory research methods are not free of risks. For instance, the feminist value on emotionality can potentially lead to heightened anger, shame, and resentment on the part of marginalized individuals (Mann, 2002). However, our research seems to suggest that when groups are able to create a comfortable and “safe” interactional space, emotions become a positive means of interaction.

One should also acknowledge that participatory research methods require an extensive amount of time and energy on the part of both researcher and participant. Developing relationships and gaining trust may require additional time in the field. The process also requires the researcher to resist taking on the role of expert, and instead accept the role of co-learner, a power-reversal that is unsavory. However, while participatory strategies retain certain limitations, our research seems to suggest that they merit the effort. As Chambers (1997) noted about participatory research approaches:

Conditions are not always right. But when they are, local people, and especially the poorer, enjoy the creative learning that comes from presenting their knowledge and their reality. They gain confidence, finding that they can do things they did not know they could, showing and analyzing their complex realities. Things are then seen together and differently. It is not just that local people share knowledge with outsiders. They themselves learn more of what they know, and together present and build up more than anyone knew alone. It is not the reality of the outsider which is transferred and imposed, but theirs which is expressed, build up, and shared, and their confidence and capabilities which are strengthened. In a practical way, it is the reality of local people that come to count (p. 156).
References


Endnotes

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2 Minga Perú started its work in the Peruvian Amazon in collaboration with the Amazonian Peoples Resources Initiative (APRI) of the University of Kansas. Currently, Minga works independently of APRI. Minga’s work is supported by the Ford Foundation, The American Jewish World Service, AVINA Foundation, Empower, Moriah Fund, and Match International.

3 Community health promoters are selected by their community based on their level of leadership, commitment to others, and desire to learn. As a result, the position is regarded as one with a high level of responsibility. While women in this patriarchal society have traditionally been denied access to positions of power, the establishment of community health promoters who are women has served to alter the balance of power.

4 Minga’s present work in the Peruvian Amazon is focused in the Marañon and El Tigre river basins, both major tributaries of the Amazon River and accessible from Iquitos City, where Minga is headquartered.