

When science emancipates people

How can we give a voice to people living in areas coveted by economic powers for resource extraction, urbanisation or tourism? This issue is crucial, particularly for local populations, and requires the creation of specific arguments and data acquisition.



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A fishing family processing their mussel catch in Recife, Brazil.

Living in an area does not necessarily mean having a say in how it is run. To influence decisions, you not only have to be invited to express your views, but you also need to be able to argue and defend your opinions against well-organised economic and political lobbies – hence the need for data co-constructed by scientists and members of civil society. Work along these lines has begun in north-east Brazil, with two fishing communities that share the same issues around asserting their rights in coastal territories, as well as systems of organisation in which women play a central role.

... Through studies in north-east Brazil, research teams are helping fishing communities make their views heard ...

The first community is located in an urban area, on a small island in the heart of the megalopolis of Recife, surrounded by shopping centres and factories in a highly polluted environment. Shellfish are harvested from the mud, mainly by men, while women handle all the stages of processing. Shared between fishermen and major economic groups, this area is the site of conflicts over use, risks to fishermen's health and discrimination. While women represent the community's voice, they are unable to assert the importance of their socioeconomic role, which is therefore invisibilised.

The second community is located two hours from Recife, in Rio Formoso, in a rural area that attracts many tourists whose motorised boats disrupt the local subsistence fishing industry. Men use small boats to catch fish in the estuary, while women harvest shellfish



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Fishing village of Rio Formoso, Brazil.

and crustaceans in the mangroves. This division of labour is, to some extent, maintained by public policies that favour men in the allocation of boats and access to navigation training. Once again, the community's voice, mainly represented by women, struggles to make its demands heard.

Not only do scientific studies carried out in these areas map environmental vulnerability, analyse pollution risks and assess the state of biodiversity, but they also help develop a participative management approach and back up the two communities' arguments, supporting them in making their voices heard and influencing decisions.

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Children fishing on a reef flat in Reao, French Polynesia. © IRD/S. Andréfouët

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