Forum Survey Summary

Introduction

Between April 2 and June 20, 2015, sixty-five respondents initiated UCS's "Community Connections Survey: Bringing Together Scientists and Local Voices." A full list of questions included in the survey is included at the end of this summary. Of those, just under half completed the entire survey and 24 provided contact information and expressed an interest in following up.

Geographically, respondents were quite diverse, representing 26 states and 4 foreign countries. All regions of the U.S. were represented (Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, South, Southwest, and West), with the largest number (15) coming from Western states. The roles respondents played in their scientist/community partnerships included scientist/researcher (23), administrator/manager (23), and practitioner (10). Although we did not ask respondents to identify their gender, first names suggest that a large majority were women (39 likely female names, 17 likely male names, 9 unclear, no name, or skipped question).

Organizations, Collaborations, and Participant Roles

Organizations represented by respondents included grassroots, community, local and regional nonprofits, larger NGOs, universities and other academic institutions, scientific societies, or a combination. The largest number of respondents, respectively 23 and 16, came from grassroots community groups and academic institutions.

Collaborators similarly came from a mix of organizations. Respondents reported that they collaborated mostly with larger NGOs (21) and smaller grassroots or community groups (20). However, academic institutions (15), government entities (14) and coalitions (11) also made up significant segments of the partner groups.

The survey asked about the length of an organization's presence in the community to gauge the history of engagement. A majority (36) of the responding organizations (56) had a presence of 10 or more years in their communities. In fact as many as 11 had an established presence of 50 or more years, reflecting long established ties with the members of their community. The remaining 20 organizations and individuals reported being relatively new in the community, in the 1-9 year range.

Collaborations were initiated in a variety of ways: outreach, networking, and community-related experiences driven by a need for scientific or technical expertise. One respondent wrote, for example, "Silent Spring Institute was founded by breast cancer activists who wanted to create 'a lab of their own' to address scientific questions about environmental chemical risks that were not being addressed by major cancer funders like NIH, NCI, and ACS." Another cited equity issues: The collaboration "was created to find a way to provide technical capacity building and support for underserved communities with a minimal need for financial resources." One respondent specifically mentioned social media as an effective mechanism for initiating the collaboration.

In terms of their roles, scientific and technical experts were overwhelmingly asked to contribute analysis, interpretation, and assessment (15) to the partnerships, while the largest number of

community experts (14) contributed outreach, communications, and publicity. Both technical and community experts contributed to data gathering and information collection in similar numbers, respectively 7 and 9.

Project Implementation

Goals of the collaboration: Most respondents described goals for the community-scientist collaborations as either related to science-informed policy (17) or purely scientific (15). Many had goals in both categories, and some were also combined with education, communication, and outreach goals. For example, one respondent explained that the project aimed: "To raise the level of awareness among individuals about their biomonitoring results and implications for the health of participants and their communities, and use the results of the project to support policy change on toxic chemicals at the state level." Building teamwork and leadership were also identified as goals.

Mutually shared guidelines and expectations: When asked whether explicit guidelines or expectations were set for how their collaboration would take place, the responses centered, though not exclusively, on the scientific process—e.g. monitoring, data gathering, data reporting, training, certification, following consent protocols, and following data collection and analysis protocols. Anticipated benefits focused on publicity and policy—e.g. media attention, information sharing, water resource management, using wastewater responsibly, holding companies accountable, improving worker conditions, and reducing production costs. Most respondents said participants mutually agreed to guidelines, expectations, and benefits but sometimes were unclear which they were referring to.

Timelines: Project timelines ranged from a few months to many years. At least 12 projects were still ongoing or incomplete at the time of the survey. Among those who reported their projects were complete, 4 said the estimated timeline had been accurate, 2 said the project took less time than expected, and 6 said it took more.

Tracking progress: Respondents listed a variety of methods such as surveys, reports, assessments, and metrics to monitor progress. Many others (10) said they used meetings or conversations with their partners to track progress.

Impacts and Benefits of the Collaboration: Most respondents reported multiple benefits stemming from the collaborations (see Table 1). They described these as cultural (e.g. collaboration, participation, understanding, empowerment), educational (increased information and/or knowledge for participants and/or community), and organizational (e.g. professional development of staff, increased capacity). Collaborations for some also resulted in direct policy reforms, public awareness including media attention their issues, and positive impacts on their local environment.

TABLE 1. Survey question: What were the actual impacts and benefits of the collaboration, for both involved parties?	
Response categories	Response Count*
Cultural (e.g. collaboration, participation, understanding, empowerment)	15
Educational (increased information and/or knowledge for participants and/or community)	15
Policy changes	10
Environmental	6
Public awareness (media attention and/or other public attention to issues)	5
OTHER or doesn't answer question	4
organizational (e.g. professional development of staff, increased capacity)	2
TOTAL RESPONSES: 31	*Responses that included more than one type of impact/benefit were counted multiple times

Challenges, Successes and Lessons Learned

Many respondents discussed communication challenges as primary barriers for their collaborations. These had to do with cultural differences between communities and scientists but also the difficulty of explaining community needs and the value of the partnership to academic institutions. One respondent said, "Reconciling conflicting worldviews and perspectives ... it is something that we are still trying to overcome." Another explained: "Sometimes it is hard for the community-members to feel they really understand the science. Sometimes it is hard for scientists to understand the sense of urgency felt by the community members." Other key barriers reported were lack of time, financial support, and institutional (mostly academic) support. On institutional buy-in, one respondent said: "Getting colleges and universities to agree to provide technical assistance to small, underserved communities with no financial support was not easy, but once they have understood the impact of the nonmonetary benefits, we have been able to expand the program."

Notwithstanding the challenges, respondents almost unanimously reported their projects as being successful and most recommended this type of collaboration to others. In talking about their successes, respondents emphasized collaborative elements. One wrote, "[the] only way to be innovative and have buy-in is to engage all the players at the table." Another respondent spoke of collaborative gains, "Everyone was able to get something from it. Boat captains learned about low cost aerial mapping and got valuable images of the place they work. Community members were able to learn about the back waters of the Louisiana marshes and how they have changed over time. Students were able to hone their map analysis skills and parties who were interested in getting the information and the word out had access to everything we gathered in the project." Another explained: "Yes [the project was successful]. Because we believe that science should not be indifferent from the needs of the community. It should respond to the needs of the people."

Echoing the positive assessment of their collaboration, a majority of respondents said they wouldn't do anything differently in their approach to connecting technical experts with communities. Others cited better communication and relationship building (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Survey question: How have you or do you plan to change your approach to connecting technical experts with communities based on what you've learned so far?		
Type of Change	**Response Count ***	**Selected Comments**
N/A	12	"Our approach connecting scientists and engineers with policy makers is succeeding quite well." "Our method works."
Relationship building	7	"Encourage moments to build relationships - share in food or tasks before or during formal meetings." "The main thing here is having the time to reach out to technical experts in a way that has meaning for them, and doesn't waste their time."
Communication	6	"Continuous communication is the key." "Dialogue is the base for understanding."
Inclusion and engagement	4	"As an organization, we continue to work to make sure all participant contribute to a project in a meaningful way."
Expand participation	2	"Our plan is now to increase our volunteer base as well as our partner organizations in order to expand our name recognition and outreach efforts."
Work with non-university experts	1	"Practicing academics are very difficult to work with…. We connect communities with locally-based technical experts who are volunteers, especially retired STEM pros and emeritus faculty. we also focus on secondary school educators."
TOTAL RESPONSES: 28	***Responses that included more than one type of change counted multiple times**	

Additional considerations

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked for any additional comments on issues that had not been covered. While only 18 respondents answered the question, some common themes emerged:

- Importance of assessing community needs and relevance of projects to them
- Difficult process of changing policies and regulations
- Value in empowering experts to do science that directly benefits communities
- Challenging but vital to find volunteers with passion for your cause
- Essential to trust others and understand and respect diverse perspectives
- Necessary to invest time at the beginning of the project
- Essential to collaborate with other groups working in the same space

One respondent summed up the experience: "The process involved in doing a good job requires time, mutual respect, and translation of the different ways different communities tell their stories and define what's important and what's useful." Another concluded: "Trust is essential to the give and take and presupposes the willingness to learn from each other as equals.

Community Connections Survey:
Bringing Together Scientists and Local Voices

Our democracy depends on people being able to access scientific information to make informed decisions. When community members and scientists collaborate, they bring unique strengths that can help address issues and inform decision making at the local level. As a community member or scientist, your input on the assets and barriers to this type of collaboration can provide important insight into expanding opportunities to other communities. At the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, we are working with an Advisory Committee, community leaders, and scientific experts to learn more about these partnerships to highlight best practices and identify ways to overcome obstacles in connecting communities with scientific experts. Your responses to the survey below will help us get started.

Please fill out this survey by **June 20th.** The results of the survey will be shared with community leaders, scientific experts, and the public at a town hall meeting in Houston, TX in September. As a survey participant, you are welcome to attend in person or via webcast to ask questions and find out more ways that communities and scientific experts can partner together. Thank you for your time and input.

1. Name, role, and location of person filling out this survey
2. Your organization and type of organization (community, scientific, etc)
3. How many years has this organization had a presence in this community?
4. Who did you collaborate with on this project? (Name and role of individual, or organization) You may fill out this survey for multiple projects and collaborations.
5. How was this collaboration initiated?
6. What was asked of the technical expert who contributed on this project?
7. What were the goals for this collaboration or project?
8. Were there explicit guidelines or expectations set for how this collaboration would take place? Were they mutually agreed to?
9. How long did you estimate the project would take, and how long did it actually take?
10. How did you monitor progress?
11. Can you share a specific example or story that you feel describes this collaboration? It could be a turning point in the project, a success or failure that was a learning experience for one or both of you, a meaningful interaction you had, etc.
12. What were the impacts of the collaboration? (Policy, cultural, organizational?)
13. What barriers did you encounter in collaborating with the organization and/or the technical expert(s), and how did you overcome them?
14. How have you or do you plan to change your approach to connecting technical experts with communities based on what you've learned so far?
15. Would you describe the collaboration as successful? Would you recommend this type of collaboration to others?
16. Do you have any other comments about how this collaboration worked (or did not work)?
17. Are you interested in attending and/or presenting your experiences at our public town hall event? If so, please leave your contact information.