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Climbing Down from the Ivory Tower

Nava Ashraf explains why it makes sense for field researchers to co-produce knowledge with the people they study and serve.

In 2010 Ashraf was part of a research team that helped the Zambian government with a nascent national program to recruit, train, and employ community health workers throughout the country, which was suffering from a severe lack of health care providers. The goal was to employ 5,000 new community health workers by 2015. The challenge was figuring out how to recruit a talented, dedicated cadre of people who wanted to serve their local communities.

Often, academic field researchers design an experiment among themselves, only going to the field when they're ready to conduct the experiment on members of the community. In this case, though, the academics designed an experiment with the head of policy development for the Zambia Ministry of Health, along with several other local officials. The academics came armed with knowledge of prior research. The local officials had practical knowledge of the community.

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