

Heidi Larson

Associate Research Professor of International Development and Social Change



FROM WORKING WITH DISABLED children in Mexico to overcoming distrust of polio vaccine in Nigeria, Heidi Larson has made global health a centerpiece of her career. For the last 25 years she has served the United Nations and international agencies, addressing the socio-cultural and political dimensions of public health.

“I started my career from a medical perspective. At first, I wanted to be a doctor, but I discovered that health and the implications of health on world populations went well beyond the medical field.”

Larson first tackled the problem of health and social justice through an innovative approach that applied her skills gained from a B.A. in visual and environmental studies from Harvard and a M.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. As the director of Visual Anthropology Productions from 1989 to 1992, she used photography and video technology in collecting, assessing and communicating qualitative data to support policy and programs within international agencies.

“I had a research fellowship after graduating from Harvard to use photography to look at the cross-cultural issues facing children. My B.A. thesis looked at marginal-

ized children with disabilities and my Ph.D. research focused on Pakistani immigrant children. The vulnerability of marginalized kids has always been a thread in my research.”

The use of photography and video as research tools has been key to her methodology to better understand the contextual issues around health.

“Photography, as social description, gets to a different level than the written word is able to reach. There are sensitive issues that are easier to discuss when you are sitting with someone in front of a photo. You can ask someone to talk about the people in a photograph in a way that doesn’t influence their answers or their perception of what you want to hear. When you say, “Tell me about this photo,” the person tells you about what is important to them about the person or the situation and you learn many things that you wouldn’t have otherwise anticipated.”

Her assignments brought her to Israel and the Gaza Strip for Save the Children; to an Afghan refugee camp for the International Rescue Commission and to longer assignments in Nepal and the South Pacific for UNICEF. In marginalized communities, she witnessed firsthand the negative impact of fear-fed misconceptions around public health programs, and was often tasked to understand and resolve local refusals of externally imposed health initiatives.

From 1998 to 2000, Larson worked as a senior communications advisor to the World Health Organization (WHO) for the “Stop TB Initiative.” She concentrated on global partnership building and social and political strategies to broaden the international action to combat TB. During this time, Larson co-authored a special report, *TB and Human Rights* and served as editor of a series of papers including *TB and Economic Development*.

Immunization has long been a key factor in combating international pandemics, and it was here that Larson next focused her energies. From 2001 to 2005, she served as a senior adviser to UNICEF and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI). In this role she

advised on policy and advocacy strategies to support countries in increasing their immunization coverage and introducing new vaccines.

“As an anthropologist, I was asked by UNICEF to understand the nature of the questions around the safety of vaccines and investigate why some communities were refusing them. Often their concerns were not about the vaccine itself, but about distrust of the providers—their own government, Western donors, and particularly the United States. Distrust was often due to socio-cultural and political factors. At the beginning of the Iraq War, there was a highly political boycott of the polio vaccine by Nigeria based on the rumor that the vaccinations were a Western plot to sterilize Nigerian children.”

Larson’s current research at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies looks at the social and political determinants of health, including the role of religion. She is presently writing a book that examines the role of rumors in affecting people’s behaviors.

Larson is also on the Board of the Consortium for Communication for Social Change. The international Consortium works to build local capacity of people living in poor and marginalized communities to use communication to better their lives. This communication is based on dialogue and debate rather than top-down messages.

Larson has lectured internationally on risk and vulnerability assessment as well as qualitative research methodologies. She has delivered lectures on global health crises and communication at IDCE and in 2006 joined the IDCE faculty as an associate research professor.

“I love working at IDCE—particularly the openness to link theory and analysis with practice in the field. It’s great to work at a place where students have the opportunity to hear from practitioners.”

Larson currently teaches the graduate International Development Project Management seminar and a directed reading on AIDS research methods. She is also coordinating a new research initiative, in which Clark is collaborating with UNAIDS on the future of AIDS.