MEETING THE CHALLENGES
Interdisciplinary research for global development

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

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Research Ethics in Contexts of post-Conflict and Displacement

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Summary Report, Sarah C. White, 19 March 2019

Research in contexts of post-conflict and displacement heightens ethical challenges. These were the focus of the second of the DSA-ESRC workshops on the global challenges, co-sponsored by the Universities of Reading and Bath.

The great value of the day was the opportunity to discuss across south/north and academic/policy and practice divides. In addition to *inter*disciplinary research, there was thus a strong *trans*disciplinary dimension, of research collaborations between academics and practitioners. Of the twenty six participants, six were from the global South. Independent consultants and staff from the United Nations, national and international NGOs shared experience with academics from anthropology, political science, law, sociology, geography, archaeology and architecture.

Discussion centred on key ethical issues participants identified in contexts of post-conflict and displacement. These included: navigating highly politicised contexts; who to work – and not work – with; payment, impact and the purpose of research; the personal and political vulnerabilities of participants; formal and local ethics; complaint mechanisms and accountability; and the politics of north/south and transdisciplinary partnership.

A surprising finding was that differing understandings of key terms such as research, post-conflict, the purpose of research, and what makes an issue ethical, cut across differences in work experience, national and disciplinary backgrounds. However, there were also clear areas of difference between academic and practitioner, and between those located in the north and south. The intention of this report is to highlight both areas of agreement and the points at which perspectives differed.

1. What is research *for*?

The purpose of research was raised in our first session by Yassin Brunger, and emerged as a recurrent theme throughout the day. Most people – academics and practitioners - felt that research should make a practical contribution, and that this was what motivated their own work. For some this was quite general, for example:

'Reading the past in order to inform the present and future.'

Questioning the status quo or enabling marginalised voices to be heard was the most common purpose that people identified. Academics who saw their aim as finding solutions to specific problems saw trans-disciplinary research with practitioners as particularly important. Some practitioners were very specific about their objectives.

As one person put it, the starting point should be: Does this NEED fieldwork, and do YOU need to do it? Is there no existing research that you could draw on instead? A similar approach should apply in the field: Do you really need to ask this question – will you use the data?

The pressure to do fieldwork applies at masters and even undergraduate level, and can lead to serious burdens for organisations which act as 'hosts' in 'the field'. A more responsible approach may be to focus on challenging and using existing data.

Sometimes, it was suggested, the most radical thing is *not* to do (primary) research.

2. What are the particular challenges of contexts of post-conflict and displacement for ethical inter-disciplinary research and action?

Defining post-conflict

Post-conflict denotes that there has been a peace settlement, not that all conflict is resolved. Contexts labelled post-conflict are likely to be part conflict, part post-conflict, part peaceful. This may vary by geographical location, within a nation-state. Post-conflict also signals a highly political space – what future is being built, for whom, according to whose vision?

'Post-conflict' is also a development category, legitimating certain forms of intervention. It is used to legitimate the return of population – even though it may still not be safe. The sense of urgency, scale of funding available, and often fragmented local/national state and societal structures make such contexts ripe for unethical, unregulated practice. This sometimes compounds a pre-existing context of weak ethical practice.

One participant reflected that 'post-conflict' sounded like a feeding frenzy, with a whole range of agencies swooping down on broken or fragmented structures and vulnerable populations. Another talked of a 'stampede' of outsiders trampling over traumatised populations in search of a unique 'story'. This is particularly acute when it relates to those who have suffered sexual violence or human rights violations, but it concerns vulnerable people more broadly. Both development agencies and researchers are implicated in this.

Footprint

The label 'post-conflict' brings a sense of urgency to intervene. But it doesn't mean victims and survivors are ready to talk about what they have been through. The fear of being left out may make them talk anyway, despite not being ready.

It is important not to re-traumatise people by demanding repeated re-tellings of their stories. Not to expose them to shame or stigma.

Methodology must also be appropriate:

> 'There was a research project about Syrian women. They were calling women on mobile phones and asking about sexual abuse and their journey out of Syria.'

The lack of co-ordination between agencies came up repeatedly. There was a strong sense that everyone – practitioners and researchers – wanted their 'own' information, not to rely on that gathered by others. This is even the case between different agencies within the UN.

Research of local or national civil society organisations can also be ignored. A 'research gap' is not necessarily a 'knowledge gap' – that knowledge may be held by local actors, who are discounted by outsiders, except when they want to show 'engagement' with policy and practice.

A politicised context

It is important not to romanticise the 'local' – it is not necessarily benign. Everyone is politicised, including the researchers and development agencies, who carry their own baggage.

In post-conflict situations, the politics inherent in any context are heightened. Even the terms you use to describe territory (Israel/Palestine) are political, and you may be identified as aligned to one side simply by the terms you use. Ethical clearance may need to come from different places/institutions/protocols. It may be a problem if you wish to work with opposing groups. People can see it as a betrayal if you listen to 'the other side'.

If states – or other territorial powers – wish to keep control, researchers may have to work through gate-keepers. How then can you get the non-official story? There is no solution but duplicity, trade-offs. How can you say if you have been effective or not?

What are the implications for those you talk to if you don't have official consent?

Researchers find themselves reliant on NGOs and UN staff in post-conflict situations. This is not necessarily bad, but it is important to ask who the informant is. Through those organizations, certain terminologies are reproduced in research, and reinforced. There are also gatekeepers in the community. Different relationships change the parameters of what you can do.

> 'You need to partner with a particular organisation in order to get the required information. And sometimes that means working with an organisation you know is mired in corruption. You have to acknowledge that they have to survive and you are just one part of the web of relationships they have to manage.'

The vulnerability of participants

The vulnerability of participants as people who have been traumatised is discussed above. A second form of vulnerability is as political actors, with views that people in power wish to suppress. This was an area of discussion where there were some clear differences between those who worked for multilateral agencies and those in national or local NGOs.

From a multilateral perspective, meeting with UN representatives was seen to be useful for nationals to raise issues to a higher level than they could do alone. The attraction of

getting their voice heard may mean local people are not very careful of their own safety. Local office staff are experienced in organising consultations safely.

People working in a national NGO had a different view:

> Training is needed at all levels. Local UN staff may know the local context but need to be sensitive to the need to meet in safe spaces and not be seen coming to the UN. If UN representatives are coming with the protection of the military then they need to inform the people whom they are going to meet of this. Also who their translators are, what media will be present, etc.

This was echoed for research more generally. Participants need to decide where and when they feel comfortable - researchers should not assume they know what will feel safe. Anonymity may need to go beyond the individual's name e.g. to age and village. There is also a question of time. Participants may be secure now if you publish what they have said, but what about in the future – e.g. when refugees return home?

A different kind of vulnerability is associated with hope. People may consent to interviews because they have hope for things that the research cannot in fact deliver.

3. Should you pay people to participate in your research?

The issue of paying research participants was one that raised strong opinions, but there didn't seem to be any clear pattern as to who thought what. All agreed it was important to decide who you should *not* pay, e.g. members of armed groups? military? state officials? The question of who says what you may pay to whom is also important.

Don't pay

A researcher based in the global South described how reimbursement of expenses became a bargaining issue. They skewed the incentive to participate and affected how people answered. This was echoed by a researcher based in the North, who thought payment incentivised people to tell their stories, which otherwise they would not have done. For her, there was a difference between offering payment to people who can choose to work for someone else (which is ok) and to participants who don't have an alternative option (which is not ok).

Pay

For others a payment meant appropriate recognition that participants were not able to work that day. Not providing payment could mean that the most vulnerable people are the only ones not receiving any material benefit for their part in the research.

A Northern based practitioner described how African street children were paid $5 per session every 6 weeks for 3 years. This recognised the value of their time/labour and raised their commitment to participation in the research. The important thing is to be absolutely clear and show how any payment connects to the purpose of the research.

A Northern researcher described meetings in which local partners said no food should be provided. People coming from the forest should be empowering themselves to build into human rights activists, rather than coming for what they can get. This made her uncomfortable.

A practitioner from the South advocated discussing with communities what kind of compensation would be appropriate, in the context of on-going relationships.

4. What kinds of processes support ethical research?

Formal Ethics Approval

The way research ethics are understood varies by discipline – e.g. lawyers don't have formal procedures and law journals don't ask about ethics. Medics are very concerned with formal procedures, less so with process. Engineers may regard ethics as best left to the social scientist on the team. For qualitative social scientists it is important that ethics are grounded, responding to particular situations. It should not simply be informal, but also needs to go beyond the formal, involving a personal compass and cultivating personal integrity, reflexivity, and ethical conduct in interpersonal relationships.

It also differs by country. Researchers in southern institutions may not be required to get formal ethics clearance. This can be a problem when they try to publish in journals which require formal ethics approval.

A process approach

People spoke of building ethical questioning into the research process.

A practitioner based in the global North described how decision logs are used in child safeguarding/child protection: these are my decisions, these are my values/principles. This gives you something to help you think through how you make critical decisions and a record if these are later challenged.

A southern practitioner responded that decision logs can suggest you are on your own. In her organisation they would have a supervisory conversation about what might happen.

We also agreed the need to understand local perceptions of ethics. Formal ethical guidelines may not be in place, but there are always notions of ethics.

Particularly tricky issues included: Should you still respect confidentiality if your participant has been involved in killing or rape or trafficking? What is your responsibility when you know that even if you do report a particular case it will not necessarily lead to resolution?

UK university ethics processes

There was general agreement that UK universities are not set up well to support research in the global south. One student from the South who had been arrested during his fieldwork said that the incident report he had to fill out on his return was designed for reporting a laboratory accident!

Where research is political and may not be welcomed by the national government it should be part of standard operating procedures to have a plan for what to do if things go wrong, not just be left up to the individual student and supervisor.

Could universities build up knowledge of how to navigate different contexts and produce a data repository online? Or is each context too specific?

There was extensive discussion of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office colour codes which are used to classify the danger of countries. Universities will not allow research in countries coded red, as even UN troops can't enter. But these maps are often out of date because situations are constantly changing. And being coded red can affect an entire economy. It is all ultimately to do with insurance. If you are in a red zone and something happens to you then the consulate won't come to help you. This implies that you won't be at risk in any area that isn't zoned - which isn't necessarily true.

Some academics choose not to inform their universities when they are going to do research in contexts that would be deemed high-risk.

5. What are the challenges of managing data in conflict and post-conflict environments?

There were two key challenges related to the management of data: the protection of the identities of respondents; and the preservation of records for future recovery.

Protecting sensitive data

A southern practitioner talked of the hazard of travelling with data on mobile phones and laptops – they can easily be picked up. The government, she said, are not interested in people any more, just your technology. As a result they have reverted to writing by hand and in ways not easily understood, only typing up when they get to a safe place. But even then your home can be raided. They used to keep files with them on livelihoods etc. which would cause no harm if they had to be surrendered.

Northern researchers said they did not take names so people could not be traced, and for fear of Freedom of Information requests. Of course this also has implications for research accountability.

Preserving data for when the conflict ends

A southern practitioner described how since the war ended they have realised that there were many human rights organisations and all of them were witnesses including researchers. But once they have left the information is lost. She argued that we need to think in terms of lifetimes to improve accountability. We need a global way of storing information as an archive. People on the ground need to record what they're seeing with daily entries in diaries etc. and then this needs to be kept in a digital repository, so it can be used when there is need later.

This seems to reflect the particularity of the perspective of those who belong to a place, for whom the specificities of *who* went missing, when and how, is of lasting importance.

We discussed the danger of naivety amongst people working for international organisations, and the need for them to be very careful who they talked to and be aware that the government may/will be watching them.

Also, with increased reliance on digital data, and governments or organisations that might be interested in scraping data from computers, the need for a safe, global storage system for sensitive data has never been greater.

6. What does accountability mean?

While everyone recognised the importance of being accountable to those amongst whom they worked, the ability to achieve this depended on the kind of relationships that they had established.

A Northern lawyer spoke of the difficulty of being accountable directly to the people. They tend to rely on the NGOs who carry others' voices. But they don't always represent their people – they represent their stakeholders.

An anthropologist responded that it can be very simple to give feedback to communities.

'I just held an event, and told people: This is what I will be telling the policymakers.'

A southern researcher took this further:

' "There" is not just where you go and do your research. "There" must also be where you go and talk about your research findings. You need to take translation seriously. Go and test out your idea, tweak it, change it.'

A southern practitioner described her experience in international research on child sexual abuse. For her and her colleagues, accountability was to each child they spoke to, not just at the general level or to refer on to other support. This was particularly important if there was on-going research or a possible risk. They would take consent from the child and ask who she trusts them to inform. Then they would inform that person and ensure there was some follow up, not just make a referral:

'If the child says you shouldn't inform anyone then at least you give your own phone number. The accountability is personal – to each child – and to ensure that what needs to happen happens.'

Regarding sexual violence and accountability, we tend to think of legal procedures. But we need to go beyond this, to think what it means to have your dignity restored. To be able to speak or choose not to speak.

She emphasised the need to have regular conversations with people not always to talk about the trauma, but just general stuff. Some say they have had enough now they just want to die in peace. Others may be in shock. *How* you talk is the issue.

A lawyer based in the north agreed, explaining that in her project they were going to have coffee and tea with women as a way to learn what they would like and understand the rhythm of conversations locally and how these may lead to change.

Holding institutions accountable

We discussed the recent exposure of safeguarding issues in NGOs, the lack of checks, and assumption that aid workers are 'the good guys'. Institutions must be accountable for the behaviour of the people they send, regardless of the country or context.

There need to be transparent and safe complaints mechanisms to institutions and donors. Many organisations lack institutional mechanisms to handle sexual abuse. You cannot deal with abuse in research partnerships etc. if you are not dealing with them internally in your own organisation.

Once the project is concluded there should be an ethical evaluation: a post-mortem on what has been done and what could have been done differently.

Representation

Representation is not often talked about in the context of ethics, but it should be. We discussed images of 'trophy respondents' with strongly colonial overtones.

There needs to be more rigorous reporting of the precise location of research, rather than leaving the impression that it refers to a whole country.

Do ethics demand that findings are presented in ways that highlight survivor-centred experience? Or is there a place for the purely quantitative?

Impact

A southern practitioner also emphasised time in her approach to impact. The need to show impact demands a success story so you can account for funds spent. But today it may be a success and tomorrow it may not. You need a longer time to achieve a greater success.

A northern researcher emphasised that the impact agenda can also distort the purpose of research – e.g. getting more people into clinics becomes the measure of success.

The impact agenda can also narrow possibilities by pushing you to work with already established partners. It's hard to take risks with new smaller partners because you cannot be sure that you can rely on them.

A policy focus can also mean you end up ignoring local needs. Impact generally means the policies and priorities of Northern funders.

7. The politics of partnership

The politics of partnership was a recurring topic of discussion, reflecting on the ways that research collaborations often reproduce or even exacerbate inequalities, and what scope there is to change this.

Northern researchers can also feel under pressure from within their universities to supply contacts – 'global partners' have become a kind of currency for exchange. The aim should be to contextualise research rather than finding partners to work on (Northern directed) projects.

Concepts/theories

The pattern is repeated again and again, that theory travels from north to south and data travels from south to north. With projects spanning several countries in particular, the intellectual model may be developed without any regard to local conditions. Data then has to be shoehorned in to fit, or a battle over the theorisation follows.

The language is already saturated in inequality. E.g. what is a global challenge? Are issues of concern within a particular local context not 'global challenges' – and therefore

unimportant? Is it ethical to employ academic terms that may have a pejorative connotation locally? Is it useful to think in terms of tension between research categorizations and 'folk concepts', or rather be open to *theoretical* understandings from the people you are speaking with?

Authorship

Many issues arose about authorship and the production of knowledge. These included Northern researchers appropriating 'local knowledge'; and how expertise is understood.

A southern researcher gave the example of a paper written entirely by herself and southern colleagues, which a northern (development studies) research partner insisted her name be on as first author.

University research contracts frequently award intellectual ownership to the northern institution.

Academic/practitioner

Meaningful local partnerships were seen as vital if research is to have practical impact. However, the terms on which these partnerships took place were often exploitative.

There were strong similarities between the experience of research partnerships between southern researchers and practitioners, in north and south. A northern practitioner stated:

> 'I want to be asked what our research agenda is. Our Theory of Change. We are just used as a conduit to get to communities. I don't have a team to support me. When I work with universities, it's a faff. We need open, honest discussions about the work involved. We also become a conduit for communicating research. We need more acknowledgement, and more understanding of our logistical difficulties.'

> 'For a small partner, universities are money-eating machines. We are presented with something that can involve us losing money.'

Local costs were underestimated. Discussions always happened in English, putting non native speakers at a disadvantage. People found themselves rendered 'case studies' and had their knowledge expropriated. While the academics built their reputation.

There were also felt to be differences of timing between researchers and practitioners, with NGOs being able to spend more time with people, building up more sustained relationships, while the pressures of academic funding accelerate. This is interestingly the opposite to what is usually said, that researchers are too slow, that practitioners want a faster pace.

Funding

As in other workshops, it was pointed out how many of the funding structures and practices serve to reproduce inequalities, and undermine attempts to reverse them. Short deadlines mean there simply isn't time for extensive consultation. Competitive processes mean that you go for the tried and tested, rather than experimental.

People often cut fieldwork time to make research more fundable.

A northern anthropologist explained:

> 'The frustration I have felt with GCRF calls and similar funding schemes which on the surface encourage partnerships with institutions on the Global South. I have felt that despite the encouragement of partnership, the structure of funding leaves a lot of the power with institutions in the 'North" and what often ends up happening, especially given time constraints, is that you have to very quickly find a partner and essentially just get them to support a proposal that has already been written. The bureaucratic burdens for showing 'credibility' of a partner are also sometimes unrealistic if I want to work for example with rural NGOs that simply do not have the kind of due diligence paperwork that is required (often with the research support office pushing for the paperwork to be sent in within days— I have had partners writing up codes of conducts at the speed of light). The turnaround times means that there is very little scope for co-production and there is little funding for exploring partnerships, starting conversations, taking risks and really designing research projects together as well as supporting partners to develop the infrastructure necessary to manage projects. So I think what I was trying to say was that I have felt in [the country of her research] that it has strained my relationships with partners because they are not very invested in the project proposals, and they end up being partners mostly on paper until or unless you get the funding.'

Changing things

The importance of working together from research design through to the communication of findings was repeatedly mentioned. Ideally this would be in long-term relationships that extended beyond the period of funded research. The importance of budgeting together was especially emphasised, and of ensuring that budgets for southern or NGO partners were realistic, and involved time for writing and reflection, not just fieldwork. It was important to be open and talk through all expectations from the start.

Place was also seen as important, that the design of projects and discussions of framework should happen in the south, with researchers from the north travelling to be there, rather than vice versa, as typically happens at present.

A southern researcher shared an example from the Barefoot Economist. Women had been meeting once a month. Because they had been meeting regularly, it had become a space for mobilisation. Researchers come to them to find out what local people are doing.

A lawyer said: 'What do we do with research? When drafting law, we know to keep a law as vague as possible so you can make as much space as possible. Proposal language should be as broad as possible in the same way.'