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Challenges of Field Research in a Conflict/Post-Conflict Setting – Lessons Learned in Afghanistan (Part 1)

Social research in both conflict and post-conflict environments is crucial for understanding the complexity of setting, identifying needs and addressing social problems. Research provides not only evidence from the ground, but leads to effective and contextualized solutions. However, the implementation process in the field can be very challenging both methodologically and ethically. This is mostly due to ongoing conflict, fragility of political institutions and cultural sensitivities. Drawing on my experiences of extensive research work in post-conflict Afghanistan, I here discuss some of the practical challenges I have personally encountered in the field, as well as those I have discovered through my interactions with the research community. The discussed issues at stake disrupt common fundamentals that each research framework essentially aspires: to provide high quality and accurate data and assure no violation of ethics and rights of participants.

The context

Afghanistan has been in a state of violent conflict since 1978. In this period, there was little opportunity for research. However, a surge of interest has been devoted to “social research” within the country, especially after the overthrow of Taliban regime in 2001, and as a result of the increased presence of donors, international aid organizations, and the development of academic institutions. This rise in social research particularly centered around policy research and connected many different interested parties, including researchers, funders, policymakers, civil society, practitioners, academia, and of course, ordinary people. Research, as a tool in this context, is expected to lead to the initiation of reconstruction, conflict resolution and development issues, as well as dealing with the current challenges in society. This is the first part of a blog article in which I present main challenges that I consider hinder the research process, particularly when working in the field.

Security

The tenuous security situation caused by violent groups like the Taliban continues to be a key challenge for conducting scientific research in Afghanistan. This insecurity, first and foremost, has affected the selection of, and accessibility to, research sites

and limited the geography of research to the major cities and rural areas where the risks are lower and the government has a respective control. But even in urban regions like Kabul, there may be a higher risk of facing violent attacks, such as suicide bombings. Accordingly, the fragile security situation makes it vital to have continual risk assessments from the beginning – when brainstorming for research starts – to the completion phase. This means that in a conflict zone, it is always vital to prioritize the “no harm” principle in terms of ensuring the safety of the participants, the community of the study, the researchers, and the team.



Picture 1 – The intertwining of daily life and insecurity in Kabul. The smoke rises from an attack in Kabul city. © private, 2018

Also, the on-going violence can impact data quality as it is difficult to stay in the sites of study for a longer time or re-access the area for triangulation and validation. In this case, such a need should be indicated in the research plan beforehand and addressed by proposing effective strategies and mechanisms for the specific area of research. One way is to take account of different sources of data and techniques for gathering information, like involving more subjects or respondents with different backgrounds than relying on one source. For example, when applying a qualitative approach, the interview can be implemented in different forms, such as in-depth, key informant, and focus group discussions, to reach out more variance. Moreover, different techniques like observation can add value, and unfold different angles of the phenomenon.

Building trust and rapport with research subjects

While the issue of trust is vital to social research in general, it becomes more significant when the study lies in a post-conflict setting. There are several reasons behind this: firstly, the potential to enter a community and conduct a study depends on the degree of acceptance and trust created by the researcher or team with the local people; secondly, gaining the participants’ consent is not possible unless a sense of

trust and understanding is developed; thirdly, the lack of trust from the community or individuals in the field can create bias and greatly impact the quality of data. Therefore, building trust is a must-overcome challenge that needs to be addressed during the research procedure.



Picture 2 – A rural community in the central highlands of Afghanistan. © Sayed Mahdi Mosawi, 2016

In the context that I worked, there have been misconceptions about research that makes trust-building more complicated and challenging:

Unfamiliarity with the research concept

Protracted war and conflict devastated the country's infrastructure so severely that it is still suffering from poverty and illiteracy today. Accordingly, most of the local people who are uneducated and living in small cities or villages are not familiar with the concept and function of "research." And while more people are likely to participate in, or hear about, research, the concept is still mostly reduced to the "surveys," "questionnaires," and, in some cases, imprecise polls reflected in the media.

Research or Criminal Investigation?

The first misconception associated with the nature of research is formed by language similarities. One particular example I experienced is the misunderstanding caused in some areas by a local translation of the term "research". In Afghanistan, "research" is most often locally translated as *Tahqiq*, which is correct. However, since the term was appropriated by the police's criminal investigation unit, applying the word can lead to misunderstanding and bias. As I observed, often people think that researchers come from a police investigation unit, and so they either refuse to cooperate or think they have no option other than answering the questions because of a perceived fear of consequence.

"Research" or an NGO Aid Project?

There is also another misconception surrounding the function of research and the status of the researcher. In a post-conflict context like Afghanistan, most areas have poor resources and depend largely on the aid of reconstruction projects. Since local people regularly deal with the employees of aid-related NGOs, and their activities, they may see a research project as a “development” or aid project and the researcher as an aid worker. Additionally, the general attitude of locals towards research and researchers can become negative as a result of unprofessional conduct (whether unintentional or not) when carrying out research. On one particular occasion while doing field research, I noticed that the community leaders were not willing to let the research take place in their community. When I asked the reason, I found that a research team who had worked there before, had made empty promises to the local people to encourage them to attend their study. An elder man stated:

“You know, nobody cares about our situation in this village. It was last year that some young people came to our village holding papers. They said that the facilitation will be improved if we answer their questions and we did. They left after finishing their work but nobody has seen anything since then. So, it would be just time wasting to sit down and talk about our needs.”

[to be continued ...]

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