

Guidelines to Conflict Sensitive Research



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Guidelines to Conflict Sensitive Research

Ursina Bentele

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Part I – why these guidelines?

More than 20 years after the KFPE created the guidelines on transboundary research partnership (the 11 Principles)¹, we are publishing guidelines dealing with the sensitivities of research conducted in and on conflict-affected contexts. Is this yet another set of rules to burden the already loaded plate of researchers? Indeed, there is a wealth of guidelines, manuals and checklists on security issues, research ethics, and fair and equitable research partnerships. Few, however, specifically target how research – in all disciplines – is to be conducted in conflict-affected contexts² even though there is a body of academic literature on implications of doing fieldwork in dangerous areas.

These guidelines are designed for researchers at all levels – from research student to professor – who conduct research in a conflict-affected context and for persons who support or fund such research.

Conflict sensitivity, initiated in the fields of development and humanitarian policy as a methodology, describes the ability to understand the context in which one operates, the interaction between an intervention and the context and **the ability to act upon the understanding of this interaction** in order to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.³ ‘Conflict-affected contexts’ are understood not only in the sense of armed or post-conflict situations, but more broadly as settings affected by serious political tensions, including authoritarian political regimes.

Applying conflict sensitivity to research highlights that, regardless of subject matter and methodology, research is always part of the context in which it takes place. Conflict-affected contexts have particular implications for researchers and their activities. Adopting a conflict sensitive approach to research⁴ facilitates analysis of the impact research and researchers have on a conflict context and vice versa, and helps to understand the interaction of research with multiple layers of overt or latent conflicts. The interaction of research and conflict context affects **what** is being researched, **how** research is carried out, and the **knowledge** that is thus produced.

Research does not take place in a vacuum: the political, economic and social conditions in a research setting affect researchers’ choices of partnerships, research

designs, activities, methodologies and results. Research in conflict settings also affects researchers on an emotional level, thus shaping knowledge production. At the same time, researchers shape the context. The sheer presence of researchers, the (non-)communication about research activities or the publication of sensitive research results interact with the political, economic or social situation. In stable contexts, this may be less problematic or at least more predictable and manageable. In conflict contexts, however, where tensions are high, power dynamics are extreme and the security situation is opaque, the presence of international researchers and the ‘extraction’ of information can be very sensitive.

How can conflicts affect research?

- Conflict affects the choice of methodology and samples. Due to restricted movement, you cannot meet people, you cannot stay for longer periods to observe, and you may instead have to rely on interviews in safe locations.
- In a highly politicised context, partisan universities may monopolize international funds and prevent discussion of alternative political, social or economic narratives.
- The choice of research topic may be driven based on political interests and not correspond to the actual needs of the communities lending themselves to research.

... and how can research affect conflicts?

Examples of **positive impacts** of conflict sensitive research include:

- strengthening spaces for dialogue for communities across conflict lines,
- building trust in national research institutions and research ownership,
- generating research results that help to address drivers of conflict or
- giving a voice to victims and highlighting different narratives.

Examples of **negative impacts** include:

- facilitating resource flows that institutionalise corrupt systems,
- putting research participants in danger (e.g. by identifying and quoting minority representatives); national security forces, rebel groups, private security actors and organized crime may misuse their power position to access sensitive data collected by researchers about persecuted minority groups,
- re-traumatising victims,
- raising awareness of conflict issues, thus implicitly raising expectations of tangible change as a result of research processes without properly identifying the means to address them,
- pursuing ‘extractive’ research that undermines participants’ livelihoods or local capacities for peace, and exacerbating existing patterns of exclusion.

1: www.11principles.org

2: Goetschel (2018) The Interaction of Peace Research and Local Context; Roll, Kate, and Geoffrey Swenson. “Fieldwork after Conflict: Contextualising the Challenges of Access and Data Quality.” *Disasters* 43, Nr. 2 (2019): 240–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12321>, p. 252.

3: APFO, CECORE, CHA, FEWER, International Alert, Saferworld (2004). Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding: Resource pack. London.

4: Goetschel, Laurent; Gabriel, Sidonia (2017) A Conflict Sensitive Approach to Field Research. Doing any Better?, Swiss academies of arts and sciences, Vol 12, N°5.

These are just a few examples of unintended harm research activities can cause to the societies (in which) they seek to study. In order to avoid this, it is recommended to make adjustments specifically to conflict contexts. Such **self-reflection is equally appropriate for researchers from all disciplines** who are active in conflict-affected contexts.

“Be conscious about yourself in the context you work in, not just the work or activity you are performing.”⁵

A conflict sensitive approach throughout the entire research cycle:

- **reduces the risk of termination** of the research endeavour,
- provides **scenarios** in case the security situation changes,
- helps to create a **flexible research design and conduct**, e.g. by adapting methodology, changing research partners or case studies, and
- helps to identify and manage **implicit messages** research partnerships may carry, particularly if funds are directed towards one single institution, geographic area or ethnic group in a conflict-affected context.

These guidelines lead researchers and research institutions through the process of ‘a’ research cycle: 1) from the perspective of research **funders**, 2) to a careful **research design** and 3) **choice of partners**, 4) taking into account the position, nationality, gender and other identity markers of researcher and reflecting on your **assumptions**. These may influence the **perception** of the research team, facilitate or hamper access and relations and thus have an impact on 5) the **choice of research methodology**. The guidelines include 6) **monitoring and reflection** of the research activity, 7) a careful set-up of **security measures**, 8) a thoughtful way of **communication** about your research and 9) a participative approach to **publication** and use of research results. All these steps will shape the interaction of the researcher with the context in one way or another.

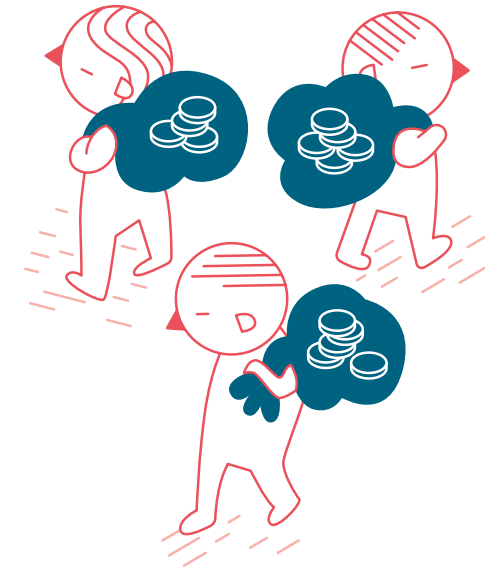
The research methods used to formulate these guidelines include interviews with over a dozen researchers and research funding institutions from the Global North and South. The interviews focused on their understanding of conflict sensitivity in the field of research as well as on their experiences in conducting research in conflict-affected contexts. They were complemented by a literature review of existing guidelines on conflict sensitivity,⁶ on field research in conflict contexts and on research ethics, as well as by a consultation round with the interviewees and peacebuilding professionals.

5: Rural development researcher, Interview 2019.

6: Such as the Sida tool for conflict perspective in research cooperation (forthcoming). See “Resources and literature” for an extensive list.

Part II – guidelines

1. Considerations for research funding institutions



You are about to **fund** a research endeavour set in a conflict-affected context and you are assessing the research design. As a funder, you may specifically support the conduct of conflict sensitive research. This would go beyond the capacity of an individual researcher. It requires institutional support and management decisions regarding resources, priorities and risk management.

The following **questions** will help you to identify whether the research institution responsible for the research is fit for conflict sensitive research and how you can support them in their task.

Institutional preparedness for conflict sensitivity:

- Does the institution and/or researcher have an adequate understanding of the conflict context (through a conflict analysis, a network of partners, etc.), or are steps foreseen to gain such an understanding before starting the research?
- Do the researchers show awareness of potential risks for the context, themselves and the research they plan to conduct?
- Is there a clear commitment from the research institution’s management on conflict sensitivity in their strategy, guidelines and organisational

set-up? How do they implement a conflict sensitive approach to research activities, monitor risks and opportunities and (re)act accordingly?

- Are there institutional structures for debrief and support mechanisms (for acute security issues, trauma counselling, etc.) during and after the research?

Purpose and assumptions:

- In whose interest is the research and what is its purpose? Consider content/topic, research partners, implementation of research (incl. time and place), research results and communication concerning the sensitivities of the respective context.
- When looking at the assumptions (access to a context, role of partners, potential results, etc.) the research is based on: Are there sensitivities tied to these assumptions? Consider assumptions on power, access, availability of research respondents, etc.
- How is the research positioned – state/non-state, local/international, academic/policy-oriented? What are the implications on the perception of research by local partners, donors and authorities?

Network and partnerships:

- How do researchers intend to interact with the local context they work in and what implications does this have for their role in conflicts?
- How balanced is the representation of different stakeholders in the research project and how do they engage in knowledge production?
- Who takes the ultimate decision with regard to research focus (jointly or clear lead)?
- Which biases could the research partners have in a conflict setting?

Funding:

- How is the attribution of funding linked to power structures in a research relationship (e.g. if money is only granted to one partner, but the main task to produce data lies with the other partner)?
- What resources can and will be bound/conveyed through this research (money, HR, infrastructure)? Consider sensitivity of the use of scarce or controversial resources and embargo to import.
- How does the conflict context affect payments (e.g. through delayed payment processes, sudden changes of institutional structures impeding allocation of payments to the beneficiaries or corruption)?
- What controlling mechanisms (financial and others) are in place in a local partner organization and how do they deal with corruption, for instance?

Recommendations for funding institutions:

- Require research partners to jointly set the agenda and allow for fair and equitable partnerships.
- Support (financially and through coaching) the creation of accompanying measures and structures for conflict sensitivity if the need arises.
- Allow for flexible funding in case the situation changes (e.g. change of methodology or case studies, no-cost extensions).
- Check funding procedures as they may vary depending on the partners and their anti-corruption regulations.

“Following the standard (Global North) requirements of what a competitive researcher’s CV should look like tends to favour the (over-)recruitment of the same ‘big names’ over and over again for research partnerships, leaving little room for young aspiring researchers to enter the field and establish themselves.”⁷

“I conducted research in headquarters of military camps. The methodology of observing was seen as suspicious. I’d fallen in the trope of being seen as a spy. The fact that funding was from Switzerland (with the image of neutrality) helped.”⁸

“Conflict sensitivity might give researchers some humility. Managing expectations, be more honest about what you’re researching, be critical on the position of yourself.”⁹

“In West Africa, we were working in the domain of public health, trying to reduce the risk of diarrhoea with proper laboratory equipment. At the same time, another European university was implementing high-tech laboratories for the analysis of haemorrhagic fevers, such as Ebola. We know that Ebola can be dangerous also for ‘us’ in Europe; however, diarrhoea would have actually been the much bigger risk for children there. The funding was earmarked for vaccinations and could not be used to improve simple laboratories for the detection of diarrhoeas.”¹⁰

7: International relations researcher, Interview 2019.

8: Urban studies researcher, Interview 2019.

9: International relations researcher, Interview 2019.

10: Biologist, Interview 2019.

2. Assess the assumptions and political sensitivities of your research design



You are about to **engage** in or **initiate** a research cooperation, conduct your PhD research or launch a research project in a conflict-affected context. Such an endeavour often includes some form of **resource transfer** (money, infrastructure, skills, etc.) and it conveys **implicit ethical messages** (e.g. engaging with certain minorities whom you consider trustworthy, your choice of security infrastructure, etc.)¹¹. You will want to be aware of the impact that resource transfer and implicit ethical messages have on the context and your research. Research partners in fragile circumstances may only have limited availability or priority for research cooperation.

“The freedom of stopping any research activities in favor of acute response measures should be assured to any humanitarian partner. Research activities should never compete with the acute humanitarian response under all circumstances, be this human resources, funding or logistics.”¹²

Start by asking these questions:

- What are the political implications of a local context on the **choice of topic** and vice versa (for whom is this relevant, who benefits)?
- What are the political sensitivities on the **choice of context** (implications for access, security and data quality)?

- With whom do you collaborate (state / non-state actors, interpreters, translators, etc.) and how are these **partners** perceived within the context?
- What is the role of ‘local’ researchers involved in your project?
- Is the research **methodology** adapted to the conflict context, in terms of data management and security? (see step 5)
- When planning field trips, what measures can you take to ensure flexibility to adapt to a volatile context?
- Does the **donor** have a political agenda – and how is the donor perceived? Is donor dialogue needed to align with the host government’s research priorities and to avoid duplication of research?
- Considering that **language** is power – in which language does the research take place? What terminology and what discourses are used (who is familiar with them, what assumptions do they convey)?

“With any interaction in a context, researchers become actors and must be aware of potential negative effects that disclosure of information and opinions can have in a conflict-affected context.”¹³

Recommendations:

- When choosing a research topic and setting, avoid fieldwork in a conflict setting just because it is a ‘trendy’ topic, because of ‘exoticism’ or for sensationalistic purposes.
- Get to know your context: start with a simple, low-cost conflict analysis; talk to other researchers and stakeholders who work on the same context about their perception of cultural, political, economic and social specificities. Conduct a more extensive conflict analysis together with local partners. That may be a good way of understanding how different members of the research team interpret the situation. Thus, (hidden) conflicts as well as biases can be better identified and understood jointly.
- Verify whether there are other ongoing projects (research and beyond) in the same context that could have implications on your research.
- Be aware of ‘local’ research capacities. Collaborate with other researchers and research institutions in the context and jointly set the research agenda. Depending on the research field and conflict zone, your partner may also be an (I)NGO, from private sector or local authority, particularly if local research partners are not available.¹⁴

“The attention a researcher pays to a topic can be considered appreciation. Others have come to help; I have come to live with them.”¹⁵

11: See “A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data”, OHCHR 2018 (www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/HRIndicators/GuidanceNoteonApproachtoData.pdf).

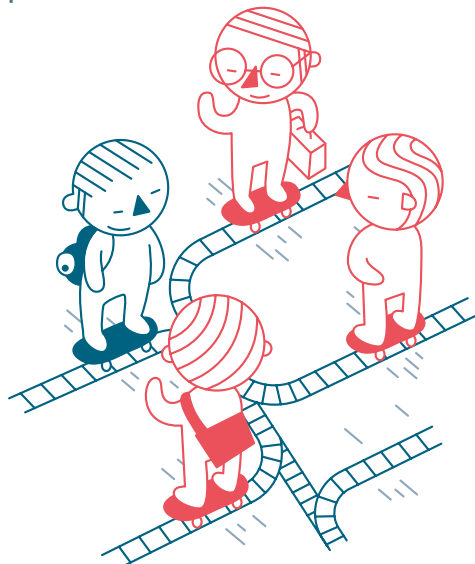
12: Environmental engineering scientist, feedback in consultation round, 2019.

13: Rural development researcher, Interview 2019.

14: Carbonnier, Gilles, and Tiina Kontinen (2014). “North-South Research Partnership.” Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, <https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/294955>.

15: Social anthropologist, Interview 2019.

3. Partners are crucial: create and maintain your research network and relationships



The **11 principles and 7 questions** (see footnote 1) for transboundary and intercultural research in partnership indicate how to build and maintain supportive and **fair partnerships**. This step thus focuses specifically on the choice of research partners within a conflict-affected context. Negotiating the research cooperation can lead to tensions – these can be uncomfortable, but they have the potential to create a better mutual understanding, clarify assumptions and expectations, and build trust. These aspects may gain particular importance within fragile or conflict settings.

Questions:

- With whom do you maintain what kind of relations in complex networks of power and authority? How do these networks relate to (potential) conflict issues?
- How is the attribution of funding and other resources linked with the power structure of a research relationship?
- Who holds the intellectual property for written outcomes, and for data collected? How is this managed after the end of the research project?

“The worry is sometimes that the partner wants to control everything, in a patriarchal manner. However, I would prefer a real partnership, not a top-down logic.”¹⁶

16: Political and social science researcher, Interview 2019.

“Research partnerships are crucial. In the contexts we work in, we have long-standing partnerships, incl. a local office, good ties with ministries. However, we are working with very hierarchical systems that pose challenges to us and our research partners. University employees need to be members of the single political party, which requires increased caution on what could be critical or sensitive.”¹⁷

Recommendations:

- Clarify roles and responsibilities to establish a mutually beneficial partnership and specify it in writing.
- Allow extra time to build partnerships and other relationships in conflict-affected areas. People will most likely need time to build trust with a researcher before opening up to them.
- View partnerships in a sense of accompaniment, critical friendship, built on trust and a long-term commitment; try to reduce ‘administrative bulk’ wherever possible. Connect with NGOs to share context knowledge, research design, implementation and use of results.¹⁸
- Recognise what different interests the entities and individuals you work with have towards research outcomes (donor-driven NGOs, universities loyal to the state, international think tanks) and take proactive steps to mitigate conflicts.¹⁹
- Prevent conflict parties or actors in power from instrumentalizing your research, e.g. by diversifying your network, by transparent communication and seeking research participants without links to powerful actors.
- Become a RFI Reporting Organisation – the Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) promotes continuous quality improvement in research collaborations, – making many of the issues that can cause disputes and conflicts transparent so that they can be addressed before things escalate. <http://rfi.cohred.org>.

17: Geographer, Interview 2019.

18: See for instance case study 3 on South Sudan in Development Studies Association working paper (2012) Academic-NGO Collaboration in International Development Research: A reflection on the issues, p. 28.

19: Roll and Swenson (2019), p. 253.

4. Understand your perception and positioning within the context



Research partners and staff occupy a certain political and social position in the research context and in relation to the research participants. In a context where one ethnic group holds power, for instance, choosing to work with a research institution that is led by members of the same group may produce research results that are less critical towards the government or state institutions. Consequently, research results and the research process as such **could fuel drivers of conflict** as they may benefit exclusively the group in power, and the research may be considered biased. However, in some settings, working with another (or several) side(s) of the conflict might be difficult or impossible due to security risks (e.g. the risk of kidnapping of your partners' staff).

"In the context I worked in, researchers are considered a threat, people are suspicious. Out of previous experiences that did not go well, practitioners and academics do not always have a good relationship."²⁰

"Your own position influences your research [interviewee: a German working in Afghanistan], it may facilitate or hinder access. Research can be seen as intelligence, esp. when used by military. Gender stereotypes allow for easier access, in a context where women are not perceived as threatening or taken seriously."²¹

20: International relations researcher, Interview 2019.

21: Sociologist, Interview 2019.

Questions to ask about your position and perception:

- How is the research topic perceived? Is it politically, socially or economically sensitive to discuss it publicly? If yes: can you create safe spaces (see 'methodology' section)? How is your research positioned – state/non-state, local/international, academic/policy-oriented? How is that perceived by local partners, donors, authorities and local communities?
- How are you and your research partners perceived by different actors? Is research positively or negatively connoted? How will interpreters and research assistants be perceived after the research has ended – will they be in danger?
- How is the behaviour of the research team perceived, e.g. where you stay, how you travel, what level of security you maintain?
- Are you associated with NGOs, state officials or security forces? How does this affect research relations?
- What values or beliefs may be carried through a research project?

"NGOs and IOs have power over the narrative and can play gatekeepers. They suggest informants who are part of their network and tell their narrative. It's important to cross-reference with people who could tell a different story."²²

"Researchers were perceived as NGO, ergo as an enemy. Only through close local contacts with a good reputation (an elderly person) were we granted access. Our perception depended a lot on with whom we came to the village and on the fact that we were there not just once, but several times."²³

Recommendations:

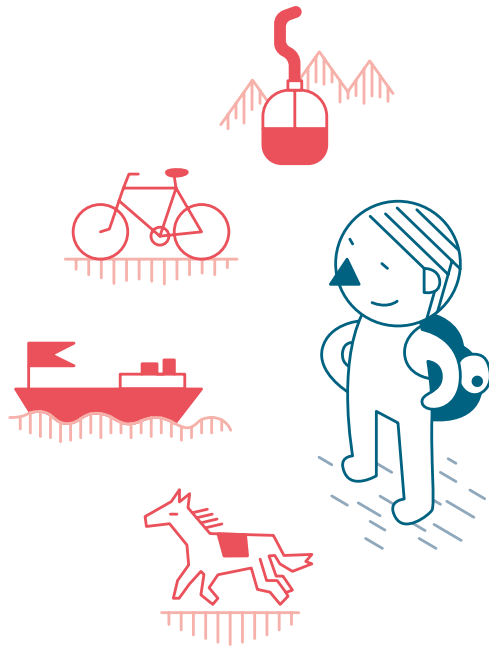
- Make your assumptions and intentions of research explicit to avoid misunderstandings; consider this when framing survey and interview questions.
- Find out about the different perceptions of your research team in terms of gender, age, nationality, education, parenthood, social situation and further identity markers.²⁴ Their personal or institutional affiliations or identities might affect the research.
- Aim for a **balanced representation**; consider research partners that are able to reach out to different social groups and neglected minority groups – this could also create or strengthen ties across conflict lines. All partners need to be informed early on of who else is involved.
- Conduct a critical assessment of the implicit ethical messages sent by financial contributions or cooperation and by associations with certain (conflict) actors.

22: International relations researcher, Interview 2019.

23: Geographer, Interview 2019.

24: Yacob-Haliso, Olajumoke. "Intersectionality and Access in Fieldwork in Postconflict Liberia: Motherland, Motherhood and Minefields". *African Affairs* 118 (18 October 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ady046>.

5. Define an appropriate research methodology



Research methodology – or how research is conducted – can equally lead to positive or negative impacts, which need to be taken into consideration. The choice of methodology may be informed by the research questions, but it is equally necessary to take into account the sensitivity of the context. Depending on questions of security, trust or cultural aspects of a context, focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews, ethnographic or semi-structured interviews, or surveys may be more or less suitable. In areas difficult to reach, access may be possible through partnering with NGOs, development or military institutions. However, such relations and dependencies entail trade-offs.²⁵ In whatever way data collection takes place, the fragility of a context will impact data quality (and quantity).

Questions to ask:

- Is field research necessary? In (post-)conflict contexts you may share resources with humanitarian and development actors. In case of worsening of a conflict, could you rely on alternative research data from other researchers, NGOs or state authorities, for instance?
- What is the appropriate length of field research: is a quick ‘in and out’ justifiable (for security reasons or because you have been there before)?

- In what context and with whom can you speak about sensitive issues? How might this fuel tension or revive traumata? Research participants may want to remain anonymous if the research topic touches upon conflict issues or taboo topics (e.g. political and religious sensitivities or sexual violence).
- Are concessions required? What aspects of your research could you adapt without jeopardizing it? Where is the difference between adaptations and (self-)censorship and how do you communicate it?
- Who takes responsibility for concessions or trade-offs?
- Does the budget allow for flexibility (e.g. changing case studies, using different infrastructure or methodology)?
- What are the expectations of research participants of what they ‘get’ from you (gifts, benefit from research results, etc.)?

“How can you deal with ‘gate keepers’ effectively? These ‘informants’ are essential to navigate difficult locations (e.g. gang neighbourhoods or refugee camps), but you know there is a political economy around their role: researchers may always be set up with certain respondents rather than others, either for personal gain, status, or indeed political interests.”²⁶

Recommendations:

- Discuss with donors and research partners the limitations for research due to security or political reasons. Anticipate what trade-offs might be demanded of you.
- In case of sensitive research themes, plan for appropriate support for your interviewees. For example, plan for psychological support in contexts/topics involving trauma, public health, etc. Ensure that you manage expectations of what impact your research may or may not have.
- Allow for a flexible schedule for the research activities, taking the points above into consideration.

“The difficulty of accessing respondents made attaining a robust sample size difficult, reducing the utility and representativeness of the sample. This raises the basic question: in what circumstances are **such quantitative methods simply inappropriate**, at least in the absence of considerable institutional support? Problems with access in post-conflict environments create significant roadblocks, literal and figurative, to robust survey research.”²⁷

25: Roll and Swenson (2019), p. 249, and van der Haar, Heijmans, and Hilhorst (2013).

26: International relations researcher, Interview 2019.

27: Roll and Swenson (2019), p. 248.

6. Monitoring and reflection during the research activity – adapt to the risk landscape



Implementing research in a fragile and conflict-affected context requires **constant reflection** of the researchers and their partners. It is crucial you monitor positive and negative impacts of the research activities, in order to act upon them appropriately. Particularly in violent conflicts (civil war, high risk of security threats) and with highly authoritarian regimes, staff and local partners face risks for being involved in research. If research participants have negative experiences with interviews or if the research leads to criticism of persons/institutions in power, this can **negatively affect long-term research relationships**. A positive experience could lead to rapprochement of various groups and **reduced tensions**.

“Travelling to the research context for several times allowed us also to include the local community, explain our research interest and methodology (such as the functioning of a GPS device) and conduct participatory mappings.”²⁸

Questions to discuss:

- Do you have an appropriate mechanism to monitor and regularly update your context analysis on emerging conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities?

- What strategies and channels are in place to identify and counter negative impacts and to propose adaptations of your research project? Are there funds set aside in the budget for such activities?
- How can you provide adequate training for everyone involved in the research process, including researchers, interpreters, project managers and security advisors, on how to conduct research in a specific conflict context?
- Do you document lessons you have learned from integrating a conflict perspective? How are such changes that are made due to conflict dynamics reflected in the final reporting and assessment?

“Is it ethical to do research in a conflict context? Resources for humanitarian aid should not be taken away for research (hotel rooms, drivers, translators, etc.). In conflict-affected contexts, the priority should be on practice-oriented research that provides an added value for local partners. A purely ‘academic benefit’ is not justified in such circumstances.”²⁹

Recommendations:

- Take measures to assess and **minimise these risks**: up-to-date context information, scenario planning and security training as well as psychological support.
- Build periodic, multi-perspective **context analyses** into the research cycle. Have an outsider or advisory group check on this, or use a similar arrangement. Decide how researchers interact with religious leaders, local economy actors or minority groups.
- While conducting research, **proactively communicate** research objectives, manage expectations and consult with stakeholders, especially those who could be negatively affected or may feel neglected.
- Exchange views with other researchers, monitor your surroundings, take care of your well-being (write a field research journal) and do not isolate yourself in the role of the ‘independent observer’ (‘lone wolf’).
- Identify linkages with other policies, such as child safeguarding policy; gender-based violence and abuse; anti-corruption policy; and data quality and integrity.

“Instead of asking for unrealistic certainties and securities regarding the feasibility of the research, researchers should be flexible for changes and should ask for contingency planning in case of unexpected developments which might occur in the local context.”³⁰

28: Geographer, Interview 2019.

29: Rural development researcher, Interview 2019.

30: Goetschel (2018) The Interaction of Peace Research and Local Context, p.14.

7. Take adequate security measures



A conflict sensitive approach is relevant for both the impact of the research on the context and the security of the persons involved in research. Particularly when research is securitized (by demand of stakeholders, following protocols that were intended for other contexts/other institutions), it is relevant to assess how this affects implementation and results.

Questions to ask:

- What are adequate personal safety and data security measures (for researchers and participants, both local and international)?
- What security protocols exist? What social control exists?
- Are any vulnerable populations or individuals proposed for involvement? If yes, what are safeguards to avoid harm?
- Are security measures budgeted and feasible in the respective context (i.e. telephone and internet connections, access to security and digital infrastructure)?
- Which (local/international) institutions have the capacity to deliver security support?
- How could research participants potentially be harmed if the data collected ends up in the wrong hands?

“Different needs as to availability of information and publication of results may lead to conflicts between team and donor.”³¹

“Pushing for access to get information is problematic. In some contexts, people might feel uncomfortable to say no to a well-educated researcher instead of prioritising safety of interviewers (e.g. Asia). If researchers would conduct joint analyses, this would reduce risks. But nobody would want to share data, because that information builds careers.”³²

Recommendations:

- Conduct a risk assessment with everyone concerned, taking into account the questions above and the points below.
- Maintain a large network to regularly access local and international sources of information on safety and security.
- Link and adhere to the security protocols of your partner organisation, particularly if your research institution is not familiar with the local situation or unable to take any measures in case of security incidents (mobile phone network may not be reliable, emergency medical aid may not be available).
- Institutions may offer safety and security training for their researchers.
- Make a well-informed choice between a ‘securitized’ (police escorts, high visibility, armed protection, etc.) and a low profile (no armed protection, low visibility, ‘local’ appearance) approach. Both have their advantages and disadvantages.
- Refrain from personal relationships with actors in conflict contexts.
- Organize conferences in secure places that both local and international researchers can access.
- Ensure sensitive data management and anonymization of sources. Design measures to take (with your research partners and funding institution) in case research data ends up in the wrong hands.
- Be aware that expensive research equipment could be a security liability in a context that is prone to theft. Communication tools (e.g. satellite phones) could be perceived as security or intelligence service and expose you to harassment.

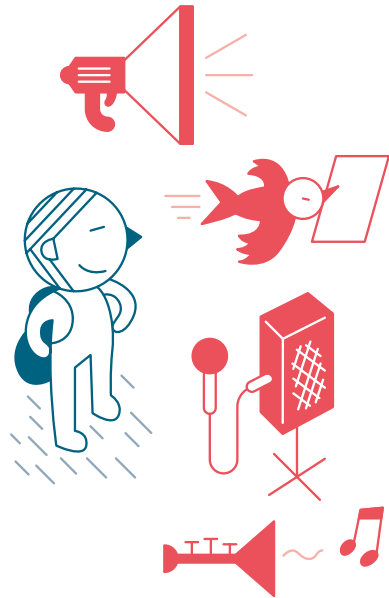
“Many of the researchers we work with are nationals who don’t live there anymore. So, they know the context well. However, as we are dealing with authoritarian regimes, there is a lot of control over research, and it’s crucial not to jeopardize researchers’ safety.”³³

31: Rural development researcher, Interview 2019.

32: Conflict advisor, Interview 2019.

33: Research director, Interview 2019.

8. Communicate your research – before, during and after



“Researchers need to take an increased responsibility for the impact of the disclosure of opinions.”³⁴

Communicating **research design or data** may have an **impact** on the research context. The question is how to factor this potential effect into your communication strategy. Conflict sensitive communication considers managing expectations and contributing to a sustainable network (important for future research), data security and anonymization, ownership of research results and open access regulations. These aspects are common issues in research but may become particularly pertinent in conflict contexts. For example, leaking sensitive data could lead to the escalation of a conflict or the perception of ‘extractive’ research³⁵ could reinforce ‘colonial’ structures in a conflict-prone area. These issues should be clarified early on, taking all research participants into account.

Questions:

- Who should be informed about your research? Who are potential spoilers, who could try to constrain or control your research?

34: Rural development researcher, Interview 2019.

35: On ‘extractive’ research or ‘parachute researchers’, see e.g. Campbell, Anne. “‘Extractive’ Research and Its Prevention.” Higher Education + International Development (blog), 16 June 2013. <https://anneccampbell.wordpress.com/2013/06/15/extractive-research-and-its-prevention/> and Bastida, EM, Tseng, T., McKeever, C., and Jack, L. (2010). Ethics and Community-Based Participatory Research: Perspectives From the Field. *Health Promotion Practice*, 11(1): 16–20.

- When do you communicate your (sensitive) research? On which occasions do you keep it confidential?
- Is shrinking space for **academic freedom** and civil society an issue in the research context? If yes, how do researchers and research programmes deal with it when it comes to communication?

“We try to convey results as good as it gets, without putting yourself at danger. Trying to target the audience you want to reach. But the constraints are real, requiring us to frame messages differently.”³⁶

Recommendations:

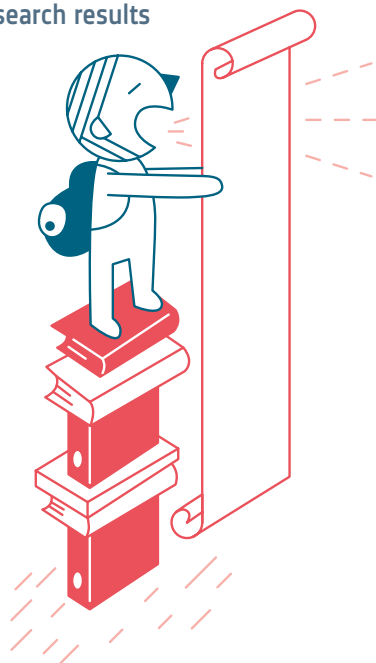
- Split the processes of the research itself and of what happens with it afterwards.
- Discuss and define appropriate channels to communicate about your research endeavour, among the research team, to policy makers and to the broader public.
- While collecting data, communicate what happens with the data to participants and partners.
- Define the level of detail on which you communicate about your research (e.g. choice of case studies) to ensure both the transparency needed and the safety required. Adapt the framing of your research to the target audience.
- The communication and outreach strategy can seek to create safe spaces for academic exchange or invest in exchange platforms in neighbouring countries.
- Communicate not only positive but also negative experiences. Failed research projects can be a lesson learned for others.

“The researcher is a social actor; his ‘social actor’ side does need to be put forward in certain cases; you communicate differently at a presentation to the minister of defence, for instance. These are military professionals; they don’t speak a university language.”³⁷

36: Research director, Interview 2019.

37: Political and social science researcher, Interview 2019.

9. Share and publish research results



Not only ‘what’, but also ‘how’ research results are communicated has an effect on **how these results are perceived**. Research results may have more impact on policy and practice, from the national level to the household level, if communicated quickly, often and through numerous channels.³⁸ When it comes to publication of research results, there are very practical aspects of (power) asymmetries to be considered. Sharing research results shows appreciation to research partners, but it can also put them at risk, depending on where the results are published.

Questions to discuss:

- Who gets credit for research: the main researcher(s), research assistants, research brokers?
- In which language do you publish? Are results translated into (a) local language(s) and published in an accessible way?
- How are results published: only in scientific journals? Or are they adapted to policy level or to other beneficiaries (in policy briefs, blog posts, newspapers)?
- Do you have a budget for such targeted publication?

38: Woodward, Aniek, Kate Sheahan, Tim Martineau, and Egbert Sondorp. "Health systems research in fragile and conflict affected states: A qualitative study of associated challenges." *Health Research Policy and Systems* 15, No. 1 (7 June 2017): 44. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-017-0204-x>.

“Research always has an extractive aspect. Try to publish open source to ensure a ‘give back’ component. I see my publications as empirical and theoretical contributions to the academic discourse, potentially also available to students.”³⁹

Recommendations:

- Research results may have negative/positive impacts for some – involve these actors in the communication process. Create a feedback loop with respondents on what and how you publish findings.
- In some contexts, conducting validation workshops with representatives of the research participants can serve to discuss risks arising in the dissemination process.
- Carefully choose the level of detail on which you publish results in order to meet academic standards and prevent disclosure of sensitive data. Consult with local researchers. In case of doubt, personal safety and prevention of (re-)escalation of conflict should be prioritized over publication and academic credits.
- Develop a dissemination strategy, but remain flexible to involve new stakeholders and to adapt it if the context changes.
- Translate results into format and languages that are appropriate to different target audiences.
- Targeted publication can help to close the research–practice divide: publish not only in scientific journals and in academic jargon, but also in blogs or well-known journals in an accessible language, so that research results can be taken up by policy makers or professionals in development, peacebuilding, infrastructure, etc.

“One of the most important outputs my PhD students produce are maps on forest and land use. However, publishing them with all details would allow tracing back to individuals who have engaged in deforestation. This could lead to punitive actions by nature conservation organisations.”⁴⁰

“What I say in Juba, I cannot say in my home town. I need to adapt the results and conflict sensitivity helps me to do so. This is not censorship.”⁴¹

39: Conflict studies researcher, Interview 2019.

40: Geographer, Interview 2019.

41: Social and political science researcher, Interview 2019.

Resources and literature

Further resources ...

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- The Silent Voices Blog, www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog.

... on conflict sensitivity (and research):

- <https://advancingconflictresearch.com/resources-1>
- The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, South Sudan, CSRF www.csrf-southsudan.org.
- Conflict Sensitivity online course, developed collaboratively by CARITAS Switzerland, HEKS, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and swisspeace/KOFF.
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