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Ever wondered why practitioners treat researchers like a nuisance? The challenges of accessing expert knowledge, from two perspectives

The difficulty to reach practitioners and experts is one of the main challenges faced especially by young researchers and can overshadow fieldwork experiences and attempts to produce new knowledge. While researchers might get an impression that they are ignored or treated like a nuisance by experts, the latter often have a different view at researchers' attempt to reach them. We look at nuances and blind spots of the interaction between researchers and practitioners through two pairs of eyes, and suggest a way forward, towards a more dialogical, collaborative approach, write ***Philipp Lottholz*** *and* ***Karolina Kluczewska****.*

One aspect that came to the fore on recent exchanges about research on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International Organisations (IOs) in Central Asia was the difficulty of gaining insight into their activities and knowledge when doing field research. Many if not all researchers are finding it hard to collect rich empirical material during their field trips. The struggles and dilemmas they are confronted with can relate to research ethics, safety of research participants, interlocutors or researchers themselves, and the emotional baggage accumulated from these and other fieldwork aspects. Yet, accounts of these struggles, the search for solutions and acknowledgement of failures tend not to make it beyond informal conversations and some reflective formats on academic conferences and blogs. In this contribution we unpack the particular difficulty researchers encounter when trying to reach practitioners and experts in specific areas. We look at the issue – that researchers are treated like a nuisance in more or less obvious ways – from the perspective both of a researcher critically reflecting on fieldwork in retrospective and that of a former practitioner. While we use the general term NGOs we understand this to include both national and international NGOs. By IOs we mean organisations with bilateral (e.g. DFID, GIZ) or intergovernmental mandates (such as the UN system or OSCE).

Doing field research with/on NGOs: A researcher's perspective (Philipp)

Everyone who has done fieldwork in developing and peripheral countries will share this impression to some extent: It can be a greatly satisfying activity but is also marked by a lot of precarious – even if just emotionally – moments. The fact that researchers usually depend entirely on the readiness of national and international organisations, institutions or individuals to participate in their research usually subjects them to a painful initial 'trial and error' period. However, even once they get the trick, researchers are usually confined to a 'scattered and shadowy presence in the field'. As Loyle and Simoni note in their article on researcher trauma, especially graduate students and junior researchers may feel stressed to succumb to rigid timelines and carry out research despite limitations and risks incurred by their research framings and techniques. However, even if academics encounter a lot of access barriers and may sometimes openly be treated as a nuisance, it is worth reflecting on why this is so and how we as researchers might be complicit in the production of such tense and uncooperative situations.

In my own field research on peace-building and community security practices in the Kyrgyz Republic, I encountered both indirect and direct resistance and non-cooperation from NGOs during my MSc research in 2012 and doctoral fieldwork in 2015. The first challenge stems from the fact that web pages of major actors are often scarce, and indicate only general areas of activity or dated lists of realised projects. This often made it impossible to prepare questions and interview requests based on information about ongoing activities. Although perhaps partly due to negligence, lack of capacity and human resources, this non-transparency reflects attempts to limit public exposure so as to prevent interference or criticism from a population that had proven unsympathetic to the involvement of international actors in Kyrgyzstan who, like in Russia, were about to be classified as 'foreign agents' in a 2014 draft law.

When I had the chance to meet NGO representatives, the depth and duration of these encounters depended greatly on my ability to demonstrate the usefulness of my research and my interview partners' (real or alleged) work schedules. My unsuccessful attempts could lead to anything from interviewees correcting my questions and views, to cutting short meetings, to maintaining that no more information could be given about the organisation's activity in a specific area. Another common reaction to my requests was that interviews with researchers were simply not possible, with reasons being neither explained nor obvious. Networking contacts and the demonstration of knowledge about and support of a given organisation's projects and activities clearly played a role in making interviewees cooperate. More generally, though, it became clear to me that these experts and practitioners were facing constraints within their organisations: they often gave interviews on top of their official working schedule and provided information from their personal rather than professional point of view.

Given these more systemic limitations on the incorporation of research into the everyday schedule of NGO workers, I tried to develop a research approach aimed at cooperation and collaborative knowledge production *together with* actors in the field, rather than doing research *on* or *about* them. Although I managed to successfully establish some co-operations during my second stay in Kyrgyzstan in 2015, I encountered further barriers. One way of avoiding cooperation or serious consideration thereof was for NGOs' decision makers to delegate meetings and dialogue to lower level staff, thereby prolonging communication channels and discouraging discussion. In one organisation I was asked if I possessed or could obtain a researcher licence from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It later turned out that such licenses are only issued to accredit foreign journalists; but this case showed that there were some concerns that my presence in the organisation's project implementation sites could raise issues of integrity and legal compliance. On the other hand, there were also instances when my presence was not desired in the networks, initiatives and organisations I was officially collaborating with; but this was communicated in the indirect and most cumbersome ways.

Figure 1: One of ten light boxes, in which International Organisations present their contributions to peace and development in Kyrgyzstan, Lenin Square, Osh (Photographed by Philipp Lottholz in July 2017)

All of these barriers and challenges are real, even though not always obvious, as selectively or unanswered emails, constantly postponed meetings or legal-bureaucratic explanations appear to suggest in the everyday interaction with interlocutors. However, they also have effects on the behaviour of researchers which warrant critical reflections. As Loyle and Simoni suggest, our emotional and psychological wellbeing can 'impact our research through our ability to concentrate and interact with others'. This means that our decisions and behaviour when dealing with pressure to perform during fieldwork may not be as appropriate as on other occasions. The conciseness requests and wary glances of practitioners often made me feel like I had to assert the usefulness and authority of my analysis, rather than admit having to do more work or not having considered certain aspects. With time, I also realised how I would resign more quickly than usually from attempts to arrange a particular participatory observation, collaborative research or interview; how I would not follow up research in communities whose affectedness by inter-ethnic violence would make participation in and conducting my research potentially risky; and how I tended to be more content with lesser amounts of interviews/data than I could have gone for. While walking this line of least resistance helped me to avoid confrontation and weary negotiation, it created further dilemmas for the writing up and presentation of research that need addressing.

How Researchers behave like a Nuisance: A Practitioner's View (Karolina)

Prior to committing to my PhD studies on development aid in Tajikistan and experiencing many of difficulties described above, I spent two years working for NGOs and an IO in this country in 2013-2015. Looking back at these experiences helped me to understand the origin of several misunderstandings between researchers and staff of NGOs/IOs, and how interactions between the two are embedded in broader structures which are not visible at the first sight. While managing a project providing legal help to families of labour migrants in the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Mission in Tajikistan, I came across more than 10 young researchers from Tajikistan and abroad. In the country found to be the most remittance-dependent state in the world, a label attributed to Tajikistan by the World Bank, mass labour emigration was a topic of keen interest among universities, think tanks and research institutes. Researchers who turned to IOM were looking for 'expert knowledge' on some specific aspects related to migration – remittances, pensions or families left behind. Some of them were conducting field research for their PhD, others were collecting information for Master's dissertations or for commissioned pieces of research. Over time my initial enthusiasm to meet with researchers slowly evaporated, for the following reasons.

In the first place, it is not always clear what researchers are talking about. In my experience, they tended to ask questions in a way that sounded over-theorised for a practitioner. Their language used to be too theoretical and academic, and thus inaccessible, which did not allow the conversation to flow. An interview is not only an exchange of information, it is a human interaction in the first place. It requires building of confidence and mutual understanding. As a result, inaccessible language can make practitioners feel confused as to what researchers are asking about, and unsure what to say, which leads to long pauses and sometimes awkward silence. Similarly, it is not always clear what researchers want to hear. During several conversations, rather than trying to understand my answer to their questions, they seemed to already have some preconceived ideas in mind. In other cases, I had the impression that they had a slightly superior and judgmental aura, as if they were strongly trying to act smartly and prove that they already knew everything that I or my colleagues were saying, if not more. For practitioners, such questioning of a first-hand experience can be irritating.

The second reason why practitioners tend to be hesitant to meet with researchers is the extractive nature of such engagement. Most of the time my impression was that researchers did not want to hear about the work of the organisation or exchange ideas about some particular aspects related to migration. Rather, they were interested in extracting some sensitive or 'spicy' information which would make their analysis more interesting. For example, in one interview about organised recruitment of Tajik labour migrants, the researcher kept returning to the issue of failures of the programme, rather than trying to understand the way it worked in the first place. Such behaviour can make practitioners feel uncomfortable and creates a confusion between investigative journalism and academic research. There is also another way of instrumental treatment of practitioners. Researchers take time of practitioners to receive some information which they need, and after that you never hear back from them. They neither share drafts of their chapters or dissertations, nor send links to articles which they published. Sharing findings is not only a matter of correctness, it could also be beneficial for future programming in NGOs/IOs. When I myself followed up with researchers asking them to share their work, I received a reply and concrete material in only in one out of ten cases.

Figure 2: IOM office in Dushanbe, view from the yard at the entrance gate. International Organisations, with tall fences, gates and security checks can seem very inaccessible to who passes by, Dushanbe (Photographed by Karolina Kluczewska in May 2015)

There are other factors which matter in the exchange between researchers and practitioners. They are external to the exchange itself, but influence it. NGOs and IOs are often operating in politically sensitive contexts. This does not allow practitioners to speak freely to researchers, because they fear that there might be repercussions for the future of the organisation. This is why they cannot and do not share insights that go beyond general information. In addition, a strong top-down organisation culture in IOs, but more and more frequently also in NGOs, does not allow employees to speak to media and researchers without the approval of high level managers or head of mission. Finally, the workload and constantly increasing bureaucratisation of the aid system does not leave practitioners time to schedule meetings which are not strictly work-related.

In the final period of my work at IOM in Tajikistan I used to filter requests for interviews: meet with researchers who demonstrated some knowledge of the organisation in their emails, who were recommended by friends and with whom I or my colleagues had some shared acquaintances. Exchange between researchers and practitioners does not occur in a vacuum. Previous interactions and impressions from earlier visiting researchers set the ground for new interactions. This explains challenges that researchers encounter while interacting with practitioners, as well as adds an additional duty on them not to destroy bridges for next researchers to come.

Coda

These reflections foreground a discussion on possible ways forward for researchers and their attempts to engage with NGOs and IOs. The most straightforward suggestion would be to acknowledge the reasons of misunderstandings and try to approach employees of NGO/IOs by offering them a clearly outlined collaboration which would be valuable for both sides, and, if it is of interest, a long-term cooperation. It is necessary to realise the actual value of such cooperation. Most of the times it is likely to be the mere exchange of views and an opportunity for self-reflection for both NGO/IO worker and a researcher, but not the transfer of knowledge and critical thinking that is often implied by researchers (and NGOs/IO staff alike). Another possibility could be engaging in collaborative projects between NGOs/IOs and researchers, if organisations require additional external feedback and evaluation of their work. Such collaboration could also be facilitated with scholarships (as opposed to offering unpaid internships) that enable young researchers to spend some time in an NGO/IO and design and conduct research – which they can use e.g. in their Master's thesis or PhD research.

At the same time, it is necessary to start a more fundamental debate on transparency and accountability of NGOs/IOs, especially those financed from member states' contributions and thus ultimately taxpayers' money. Being more open and transparent about their work – e.g. by publicly displaying information about activities and regularly updating information on past and ongoing projects – is the first (basic) step towards discharging of NGOs'/IOs' duties. Transparency of their work would also enable researchers to better formulate interview requests and prepare relevant questions. A constructive dialogue between researchers and practitioners would provide a further avenue to achieve these goals, a lesson taken from a recent exchange between these two actors.

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