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A Conflict Sensitive Approach to Field Research
Doing Any Better?

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Key Messages

Conflict sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity is both about what we do and how we do it. For researchers this means it is both about the content of research and about the way research is being conceived and implemented (theory and methodology).

Research and local context

The researcher and his / her research are always part of the local context, regardless of subject and methodology of the research.

Security

A conflict sensitive approach is relevant both for the impact of the research on the context and for the security of the persons involved in the research.

Communication of results

The perception of research results as "critical" is not only dependent on their content but mainly on the way these results are being communicated and on their addressees.

Flexibility

A conflict sensitive approach draws heavily on the capacity of researchers to adapt their behaviour, their activities and their communication about what they are doing to changing research environments.

Political sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity makes researchers aware of their political position within the context of their research. This context includes both the "North" and the "South".

Trade-offs

Being aware of and adapting to a particular (conflict) context entails contingencies and limitations for research. Researchers must decide what kinds of concessions or trade-offs they want to make.

Schlüsselbotschaften

Konfliktsensitivität
Konfliktsensitivität betrifft sowohl das, was wir tun, als auch wie wir es tun. Für Forschende bedeutet das, dass sich dieser Grundsatz sowohl auf den Forschungsinhalt als auch auf die Konzeption sowie die Umsetzung der Forschung erstreckt (Theorie und Methodik).

Forschung und lokaler Kontext
Forschende und ihre Forschung sind immer Teil des lokalen Kontexts, ungeachtet des Themas und der Methodik.

Sicherheit
Ein konfliktsensitiver Ansatz spielt sowohl für die Auswirkungen, welche die Forschung auf das Umfeld hat, als auch für die Sicherheit der an der Forschung beteiligten Personen eine Rolle.

Kommunikation der Resultate
Ob Forschungsergebnisse als «heikel» eingestuft werden, hängt nicht nur von deren Inhalt ab, sondern vor allem von der Art der Kommunikation und vom Zielpublikum.

Flexibilität
Ein konfliktsensitiver Ansatz basiert stark auf den Fähigkeiten der Forschenden, ihr Verhalten, ihre Aktivitäten und ihre Kommunikation darüber, was genau sie tun, an sich wandelnde Forschungsumgebungen anzupassen.

Politische Sensitivität
Durch Konfliktsensitivität werden Forschende auf ihre politische Stellung innerhalb ihres Forschungskontextes sensibilisiert. Dieser betrifft sowohl die involvierten Länder des Nordens als auch diejenigen des Südens.

Kompromisse
Bewusstsein für und Anpassung an einen bestimmten (Konflikt-)Kontext bringt unvorhergesehene Situationen mit sich und schränkt die Forschung ein. Forschende müssen sich entscheiden, zu welchen Zugeständnissen oder Kompromissen sie bereit sind.

Messages clés

Sensibilité aux conflits
Sensibilité aux conflits concerne aussi bien ce que l'on fait que la manière dont on le fait. Pour les chercheurs, cela vise le contenu de la recherche autant que la façon dont la recherche est conçue et réalisée (théorie et méthodologie).

Recherche et contexte local
Le chercheur et ses recherches s'inscrivent toujours dans un contexte local, quel que soit le sujet de recherche ou la méthodologie utilisée.

Sécurité
Une approche sensible aux conflits concerne aussi bien l'impact de la recherche sur le contexte que la sécurité des personnes impliquées dans la recherche.

Communication des résultats
L'importance que revêtent les résultats de la recherche dépend non seulement de leur contenu, mais aussi et surtout de la manière dont ils sont communiqués et du public cible.

Flexibilité
Une approche sensible aux conflits dépend fortement de la capacité des chercheurs à adapter leur comportement, leurs activités et leur communication à propos de leurs travaux aux évolutions des environnements de recherche.

Sensibilité politique
La sensibilité aux conflits fait prendre conscience aux chercheurs de leur position politique dans le contexte de leur recherche. Ce contexte inclut les pays du Nord comme ceux du Sud.

Compromis
Avoir conscience d'un contexte (de conflit) particulier et s'y adapter implique de devoir faire face à des événements imprévus et restreint les recherches. Les chercheurs doivent réfléchir aux concessions ou compromis qu'ils sont prêts à faire.

Introduction

Conflict Sensitivity and Field Research
Sidonia Gabriel and Laurent Goetschel

Researchers from outside the field of peace research provided the impetus for the 2015 KFPE annual conference to be organized around the topic of "Doing research in conflict areas: Being sensitive to conflict and managing risks". They emphasized the need to reflect on the particular conditions faced by all types of researchers in conflict-affected areas. The conference presentations demonstrated the crucial need for a conflict sensitive approach to research. Nevertheless, such an approach has not been systematically applied or actively debated. The discussions during the conference highlighted the need for a critical debate about what constitutes conflict sensitivity, how it can contribute to research as well as its limitations in this endeavor, how conflict sensitive research can impact local contexts, and finally how researchers can be better prepared for working in conflict situations.

> We apply a conflict sensitive approach to research at the conceptual level, while also introducing some examples at the practical level.

With this publication, we apply a conflict sensitive approach to research at the conceptual level, while also introducing some examples at the practical level. At the same time, we are providing the conference participants with an opportunity to share their experiences and increase the topic's visibility. The conflict sensitivity approach will support researchers in their work and we hope this will spur a critical debate about its application, its added value and the dilemmas it brings to research. This should both sensitize researchers to the topic and set the stage for an extended and in-depth debate among scientists and between scientists and practitioners.

The publication is split into three sections. The first addresses the "theoretical application of conflict sensitivity to field research" by providing an analytical framework for applying conflict sensitivity to field research. In her article, Sidonia Gabriel defines conflict sensitivity and highlights some ways in which this approach could influence field research. Doing research in conflict-affected areas also has consequences for the evaluation of research results, and Laurent Goetschel takes a special look at research partnerships to highlight some of the challenges associated with evaluating field research in conflict-affected areas.

The second section introduces practical examples to illustrate how field research influences local contexts. Tobias Hagmann's article focuses on Ethiopia and how to deal with power and foster effective communication. How far can researchers go in speaking the truth? The second article within this section is by Guy Elchenroth, and relates to the topic of conflict-related memories and conflict sensitivity as an ethical requirement, heuristic tool and pragmatic approach.

The third section provides examples of how context impacts field research, with a particular focus on questions of risk management in Nepal and South Sudan. Sarah Byrne describes how she did (or did not) prepare for risks while conducting field research in Nepal. Martina Santschi explains what she normally does in order to prevent risks translating into negative impacts on her research. This article contains very practical hints for researchers looking to prepare for fieldwork. This section, which deals more with sensitization, also aims to raise critical questions for research institutions that are sending researchers into conflict contexts.

The publication concludes with reflections on how to open up the prospects of a "critical" conflict sensitivity approach for researchers, showing how recent developments in the North might also call for a "re-casting" of research projects by researchers in their home countries. Consideration is also given to how funding and research promotion agencies in the US and in Europe should take up these challenges in order to improve the overall results of research in conflict-affected areas.

Part 1:
Theoretical Application of Conflict Sensitivity to Field Research

1.1   Conflict Sensitivity and Field Research – an Imperfect Match?
Sidonia Gabriel

A social scientist undertakes a research project in a post-conflict setting. Upon arriving in the so-called "field" – the area where data collection will occur – he is overwhelmed with new impressions, perspectives and ways of thinking. On a personal level, he is simultaneously fascinated and disgusted by the cruel things that happened to the civilian population during the civil war. This fascination creates an even stronger desire to understand.

The scientist's research question leads him to talk to various civil society groups, and he discovers a group of war veterans from one particular warring faction, which had been part of the official army. Since the end of the war, the army has gone through a thorough vetting process which actually made it impossible for this group of war veterans to regain positions in the new structure. They are currently unemployed with no income and are very critical about the current government and the overall political situation.

Over time, the researcher is able to build up trust with this group of veterans, resulting in him gaining access to their daily lives, their stories and their reality. He decides to make them the central focus of his field research. A few months later, the local newspaper publishes an article about the research project and accuses the institute with which the researcher is affiliated of being biased towards the group and of seeking to use its external support to overthrow the current government. As a result, the researcher has to immediately leave the country and becomes a persona non grata, the local research institute is closed for a period of time, and the leaders of the institute are arrested and interrogated before being released.

(Example adapted from a real case)

This case shows the unintended impact a research project can have on a local context and how the research project had to be stopped even after a trusting relationship had been established with the group of interviewees. We argue that the strict application of a conflict sensitive approach would have caused this story to have a different ending. A more balanced approach could probably also have resulted in the research project being viewed in a different way within the local community. In this case, this would have meant talking with different groups of war veterans at the same time, even if the research objective did not seem to require such a dialogue.

This approach raises two separate issues, namely: a) whether it affects scientific independence, and b) whether, or to what extent, research projects in conflict zones need to adapt to local realities. This would entail greater flexibility with regard to ensuring that research values and approaches are in line with expectations of field research in conflict or post-war contexts. Some would argue that a conflict sensitive approach virtually entails a betrayal of the core values of scientific research. Yet, others might argue that this at least enables research activities to contin-ue and promotes engagement with different local groups and authorities that may improve long-term access to specific groups and geographic zones, ultimately resulting in enhanced knowledge generation.

But before we enter into this debate, let us consider some aspects of conflict sensitivity and the potential application of this concept to field research.

> Some would argue that a conflict sensitive approach virtually entails a betrayal of the core values of scientific research.

What Is Conflict Sensitivity?

At first glance, conflict sensitivity does not seem to concern field researchers. It is a concept that was developed more than 20 years ago in the field of humanitarian work. Over the years, the scope of its application has expanded to the development and peacebuilding fields, and, more generally, to international cooperation.

In the 1990s for instance, Somali refugees who were housed in refugee camps and provided with aid items became a target for rebel groups looking for food. Instead of being protected, the refugees once again became victims of violence, this time as an unintended consequence of the engagement of the international community. The food and necessities intended for the refugees were then sold in the local markets, and the money was used to support the armed combat. Humanitarian aid potentially even resulted in a prolongation of the violent conflict.

The first Do No Harm approach (Mary Anderson 1992) aimed to prevent unintended negative impacts of well-meaning activities in war zones. Over time, the approach was further developed and given different names. Organizations increasingly emphasized not only avoidance of unintended negative impacts, but also the positive influence that their engagement could directly or indirectly have on peace and social cohesion. The term conflict sensitivity subsumes the range of different approaches and models of this concept. On a general level, it is important to note that a conflict sensitive approach touches upon two aspects of an intervention: *what* is being done, and *how* things are being done.

Furthermore, it is based on the recognition that every activity in a local context becomes part of this context and cannot be understood as an off-the-ground act. Even well-meaning activities can have harmful impacts.

The concept was developed in particular for war zones and contexts marked by conflict. Some organizations have recently also included contexts of fragility. Conflict sensitivity does not mean avoiding conflicts. It means being aware of the cleavages, different interests and conflicts in the local context, and how the activity interrelates with these. Decision-making is then geared towards the needs of the context, while recognizing the role of the practitioner or, in more academic terms, the "positionality" of the researcher in the same context.

The basic understanding of conflict sensitivity requires:

1. Understanding the context in which one operates;
2. Understanding the interaction between the planned intervention and the context;
3. Acting upon this understanding of the interaction in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.

It requires of organizations that they establish their activities not on the basis of what they are good at, but based on what the context needs. Conflict sensitivity has become a standard in the discourse of international organizations. The concept is mentioned in intervention strategies and at the project level. Nevertheless, the priorities, expectations and motivations that shape decisions about the allocation of financial resources are still very different from local priorities. The paradigm shift towards the needs of local contexts is still a challenge and raises questions with regard to the core values and principles of international cooperation. While no one would contest that the concept is relevant and meaningful for practitioners, its implementation remains a challenge.

Firstly, it is important to note that the reason for discussing the link between conflict sensitivity and field research is to find meaningful pathways to engagement, and not to impose a new approach on field research. Conflict sensitivity seems to be similarly relevant to field researchers and practitioners. A fundamental aspect of a conflict sensitive approach to field research is that the research should always be part of the local context, regardless of the research subject or methodology.

A conflict sensitive approach touches up on two aspects of an intervention: *what* is being done, and *how* things are being done.

## The Rationale for Applying a Conflict Sensitive Approach to Field Research

Subsequently, every individual has the potential to influence this context in a manner that could be judged as positive or negative by local actors. Following this logic, a conflict sensitive approach is crucial not only for the environment where research is being undertaken, but also for the security of the researcher. In many contexts that are lapsing into conflict, it can be tricky or outright dangerous for both the researcher and the respondents if sensitive questions are asked and research results are openly discussed. A conflict sensitive approach would not change this fact, but potential options could be discussed and developed with like-minded researchers, local authorities or groups. A conflict sensitive approach helps increase awareness about these contextual challenges and informs decision-making about the design and planning of the research. Additionally, it supports the management of expectations with regard to research results. In some contexts, results may not be collected within a given period of time due to the sensitivity of the research question, or simply because the researcher is not granted research permission.

The conflict analysis itself is to be understood as a working instrument, a sort of guiding map within the conflict context. Over time, the conflict analysis will change and take on different elements. Indirectly, it also shows where our focus lies and how our own positionality changes as we gather additional data for our research. Therefore, it is useful to consider whether the conflict analysis could serve as a methodological tool for research as well as for observing one's position within the local context.

It is obvious that a lot of field researchers use a conflict sensitive approach without being aware of the concept as such. It could be argued that they apply it in an unsystematic and more intuitive way. Some research methodologies also include specific aspects of conflict sensitivity. For instance, reflecting on one's own positionality in the local context is a characteristic of field research in the social sciences. There are other overlaps between conflict sensitivity and research methodologies that would be interesting to explore in more detail and to compare with the understanding of conflict sensitive practices.

Another issue relates to the conflict and interaction analysis that has to be undertaken within the framework of a conflict sensitive approach. While the conflict analysis certainly reduces the complexity of the local context realities, it still reflects the most important elements of these, or it reflects the elements that are afforded the highest priority by the research. The conflict analysis is done with a broad focus on the context rather than a narrowly defined focus on just the needs of the research project. It encompasses contextual elements that extend beyond the scope of those directly related to the research question, and which touch on other fields of research as well. In this sense, conflict sensitivity might also serve to identify entry points for other research disciplines and to stimulate joint ideas for transdisciplinary research.
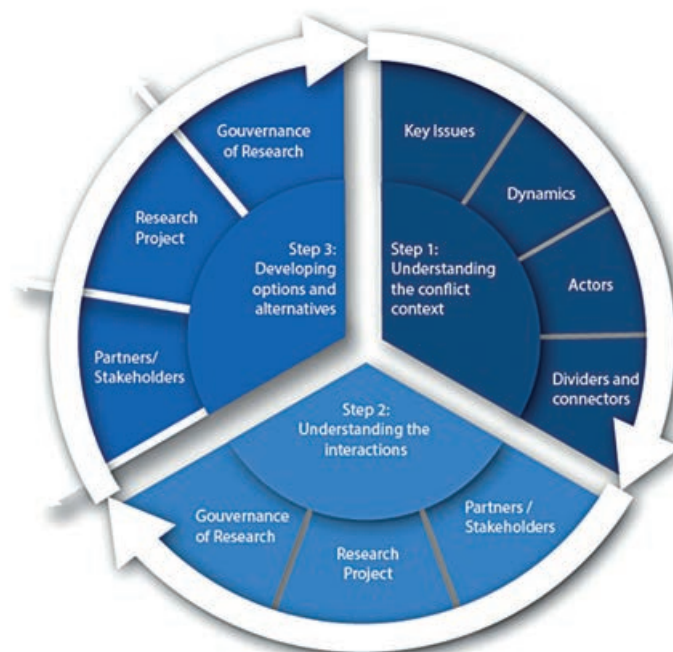
How Could a Conflict Sensitive Approach to Field Research Look?

Practitioners use a three-step approach to conflict sensitivity, which is in line with the steps described above. Although this is clearly a simplification, I suggest "translating" the steps that are used in practice to field research, and to start the debate on this basis. It may become evident that these steps are not adequate for field research or that there is a need for different questions and steps, but this is just an exercise to stimulate discussion and generate a conceptual basis.

Steps in Understanding the Conflict Context

The first analytical step looks at the conflict context and asks:

Which conflicts exist in the geographical area where the research is to be conducted? At which levels are these conflicts occurring? At the local, national, transnational or regional level? What is the scope of the analysis? Which of these conflicts could be of relevance to the research project and therefore require further analysis?

Key conflict issues:
What is the source of these selected conflicts? For example, are they about access to land, or about generational conflicts? Is the conflict issue related to natural resource management or to the exclusion of or discrimination against an ethnic or political minority?

Dynamics:
What are conflict dynamics? Can we see patterns of recurrence over time?

Actors:
Who are the key actors in the conflict? Who has an interest in perpetuating the conflict, who does not? What other interests motivate the conflict parties? What is the role of state and non-state actors? An actors' map might be a useful tool for this assessment. If such a map is made, it is important to also include the research project.

What elements in society are dividing or connecting people? Cultural events, music, common traditions or shared history may all constitute connecting or dividing elements.

These are just a few very basic questions for Step 1. It is important to get as many different perspectives as possible on these questions from a range of relevant actors and groups. This diversifies the analysis and increases awareness about things that might otherwise be missed. Such an analysis should not be too long, or necessarily even in written form (it can also be a simple mind map), but it needs to be updated throughout the research process.

Understanding Interactions

Step 2 focuses on the interactions between the conflict context and the research project. A few sample questions are listed below. It is important to systematically link the answers to the analysis conducted in Step 1:

What is the role / position of research partners and local authorities with regard to the conflict? Do the selection criteria for research partners take their background and position in the context into consideration?

How are local stakeholders involved in the design of the research agenda?

Is the research question linked to conflict issues? Is the research question politically relevant or sensitive in the local context?

Are the interview partners involved in or affected by the conflict? What is their role and position in the conflict? Could the selection of respondents be perceived as politically, culturally or socially biased?

What are the criteria for selecting geographical areas? Is "conflict" a criterion in this selection? If so, why? And if not, why?

Research methodology:
Is the selected methodology culturally or politically sensitive in this particular context?

Rules / administrative procedures:
Do these stipulate conflict sensitivity? Could procedures increase tensions within the context?

Flexibility:
How flexible are the research plans? Is it possible to adapt research plans to a change in context? For example, if a research area is no longer accessible due to armed violence, can other research areas be selected on an ad hoc basis?

Communication:
How is the purpose of the research communicated? To whom? How are expectations managed? How is feedback collected about the results? "Translation" of research results? Confidentiality?

Staffing:
Recruitment criteria for research assistants?

Funding:
Specific funding for a conflict sensitive approach?

Coordination with other research projects / sectors:
Have they previously worked with the respondents? Experiences? Overlap?

Security of the researcher and respondents? Who is responsible?

Adaptation

Step 3 involves modifying and adapting the research plan and research approach. Not all necessary adaptations can be made at the same time, and it is always a challenge to balance context needs and research needs. There is no blueprint for how to adapt a research plan, and there are no "right" or "wrong" solutions. The important issue in this case is to reflect and to remain flexible because the context can always change very quickly. In addition to the balance between context and research needs, opportunities as well as limitations concerning the sphere of influence of the researcher as well as any funding constraints should also be considered.

Simultaneously, dialogue should be initiated on another level with research institutions regarding how flexible the research plans can be in terms of adapting to local contexts which are highly volatile.

Conclusion

A conflict sensitive approach to research may make it possible to gain new insights into context realities and to identify other ways to adapt or design research projects. Such adaptations might lead to more accurate research results and particularly to more adequate expectations with regard to the research results in conflict contexts. As conflict sensitivity also requires a high degree of self-reflection, it could even become a methodological approach to doing research. Determining how and in which cases this would make sense would require debate and, if possible, assessment by comparing research projects that are conflict sensitive with those that are not.

The consideration of how conflict sensitivity relates to field research naturally leads to a consideration of how research is linked with practice, as conflict sensitivity is a concept that stems from practice. This debate could stimulate a reflection on the similarities and differences in core values, methodological approaches and the core mandate that research and practice have in local contexts. Particularly in cases where local context realities change rapidly and demand a constructive way of handling complexity, this debate could be meaningful for both researchers and practitioners.

> As conflict sensitivity also requires a high degree of self-reflection, it could even become a methodological approach to doing research.

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1.2   Evaluation of Research in Conflict-Affected Areas
Laurent Goetschel and Sidonia Gabriel

Discussions about research evaluation have become a regular feature of academic discourse (SAGW 2016). Such discussions typically focus on methodological concerns or the different ways in which science may contribute to solving societal problems. In development research, specific criteria have been developed over the past twenty years in order to improve the quality of research by means of research partnerships with academics from the Global South. However, conflict-affected areas have not yet featured prominently. In some cases, technical security precautions have been requested due to concerns over insurance and liability. The Swiss National Science Foundation, for example, has started to ask researchers operating in politically fragile environments to provide letters from Swiss diplomats in the region, who are able to confirm that their research is feasible. There is no doubt about the good intentions driving the establishment of such requirements by research funding agencies, yet this example is problematic for three reasons. First, it is often impossible to make multi-year forecasts about the accessibility of conflict prone regions for field research. Second, such assumptions reduce the role of researchers to passive "takers" of whatever situation in which they are allowed to carry out research. This neglects the fact that through their research design and preparations, researchers may have an influence on both their own security and that of their local partners. Third, it ignores the fact that researchers may actually have an impact on their research environment in a variety of different ways.

This contribution deals with evaluations of research in geographical areas affected by political tensions or even political conflicts. It is not limited to research on peace and conflict because not all research done in such contexts is focused on such topics. Likewise, not all peace and conflict research is carried out in these contexts.

Research Partnerships in Conflict-Affected Areas

We start from the assumption that research carried out in conflict-affected areas faces particular challenges that must first be taken into account when evaluating the respective research designs and results. First, prerequisites that are generally associated with current standards of scientific excellence may be more difficult to achieve when conducting research in such environments. Second, additional due diligence may be needed in order to comply with research ethics. Third, in the case of transdisciplinary research, the particular sensitivity of such contexts requires a high degree of conflict sensitivity.

This allows for the multiple interactions between researchers and society to develop, and increases the quality of the research as well as its impact within the society.

Among the existing research formats, research partnerships have come closest to meeting the three criteria mentioned above. Research partnerships can be defined as innovation-based relationships that involve significant efforts in research and development (Hagedoorn et al. 2000: 567). They may include private or public partners as well as a mixture of both. A specific subset is research partnerships with developing countries. As an instrument designed to promote research in developing countries, they include projects in which groups of scientists from two or more partner countries carry out long-term, transdisciplinary collaborative research on problems that are important to all the partners (KFPE 1998). In order to achieve their objectives, they build on the following criteria which entail a combination of results-oriented research activities and capacity-building components at individual and institutional levels, or both: research in partnerships should develop in four stages: 1) One or more partners are found who share an interest in doing research on some aspect of the problem; 2) The partners work together to clarify the theme and make concrete plans for carrying out the work, including details of organization and financing; 3) The partners work together on the research, sharing the responsibility for leadership and preparing reports and publications together; 4) Finally, the collaborative effort must be brought to a conclusion. The partners may go their separate ways, or they may continue to work together on new tasks (ibid: 5). At a later stage, the guidelines of KFPE were updated to include the following 11 principles: 1) Set agenda together; 2) Interact with stakeholders; 3) Clarify responsibilities; 4) Account to beneficiaries; 5) Promote mutual learning; 6) Enhance capacities; 7) Share data and networks; 8) Disseminate results; 9) Pool profits and merits; 10) Apply results; 11) Secure outcomes (Stöckli et al. 2012).

Research partnerships should enable exchange and mutual learning on the basis of complementary skills and knowledge, and therefore lead to higher quality research while also building research capacity in the South and the North (KFPE 2001: 37–38). In addition, research partnerships in many ways encapsulate a pragmatic approach that prioritizes contextually embedded and produced knowledge as well as exchange between different partners. With regard to conflict-affected areas, research partnerships provide a very promising framework with the potential to include both local knowledge and contextual sensitivity.

However, researchers engaged in research partnerships face two other types of challenges: first, research partnerships have a structural impact on the environment in which they operate. From the very outset of the research, the choice of partners will empower the involved academic institutions. As the Northern partner typically contributes a larger portion of the financial resources to the partnership, researchers have an impact on the structural conditions of their partners in the Global South. In politically sensitive contexts, external researchers may not even have a real choice of partners in the local context. A variety of partners may not exist, or securing research permits may be dependent on cooperation with certain scientific institutions.

Second, several of the research partnership criteria listed above require particular attention within conflict-affected areas. For instance, the definition of the research interest should be sensitive to the context (criterion 1). This is also relevant with regard to accounting to beneficiaries (criterion 4), disseminating results (criterion 8), and using these results (criterion 11). These criteria may require special care depending on the topic of the research. Transdisciplinary research aims for the research results to have an impact on the operational context. However, there may be divergent expectations: while research may "just" contribute to policy effectiveness as measured against agreed upon objectives, research results may also question more fundamental concepts of policy practice. Although such knowledge might also contribute to policy effectiveness and legitimacy over the long term, policy actors dealing with a variety of immediate concerns may not perceive this contribution over the short term.

While research may "just" contribute to policy effectiveness as measured against agreed upon objectives, research results may also question more fundamental concepts of policy practice.

Different Knowledge Categories and Their Impact

Another way to portray these divergent perceptions and expectations is to view them through the lens of the knowledge categories typical of transdisciplinary and development research. Generated knowledge is classified into three categories: systems knowledge, actors knowledge and action or transformation knowledge (Hirsch Hadorn et al. 2008). Systems knowledge provides insights into general causalities and interactions. It addresses why and how processes occur and therefore looks at structures and underlying societal practices. Target or actors knowledge concentrates on the roles, interests, options and strategies of individual players. It incorporates best practice and stakeholder actions. Finally, transformation or action knowledge focuses on the type of information useful for the implementation of policies with the objective of short-term change at the program or project level. The aim is to provide insights into how to best achieve the transition from an observed to a desired situation. The first category contains the most general and least immediately applicable type of knowledge, the third contains the most concrete and policy-oriented knowledge.

When operating in politically delicate areas, researchers tend to claim to focus on the third category (i.e. transformation knowledge), from which they promise added value with regard to the optimization of specific policies. In conflict-affected areas, however, perceptions of knowledge categories may differ. What external researchers see as action-oriented transformation knowledge may well be seen as fundamental actors knowledge or even systems knowledge by local stakeholders. Taking the example of decentralization and federalism, recommendations on how to "improve" the decentralization process may be seen as a technical issue by Northern development actors, while their Southern political partners may see them as fundamentally affecting state identity (Goetschel 2013). Such tendencies are reinforced by a general focus on evidence and results. Research and programs placing emphasis on measurable outcomes tend to predominate activities that produce immeasurable outcomes. Discourses on objectivity and evidence have replaced ideology to justify and legitimize policy actions (Eyben 2013: 10, 18).

Thus, even when operating within the framework of "state of the art" partnerships, researchers working in conflict-affected areas have to pay adequate attention to both structural and substantial impacts from the manner in which they operate. However, even if they comply with the conditions and challenges listed, the application of

Except in highly consensual political cultures, the only decisions that were primarily made on the basis of research findings were those considered politically unimportant.

results (criterion 11) may face particular hurdles. This hints at some fundamental issues related to translating knowledge from the world of research into a policy sphere. Patterns of interaction have been identified, and concepts and tools have been designed to help analyze this type of interaction. Coleman (1991) came to the conclusion that, except in highly consensual political cultures, the only decisions that were primarily made on the basis of research findings were those considered politically unimportant.

When considering the role of policy research, Coleman therefore felt it was essential to keep the primacy of politics firmly in mind. Court and Young (2003) evaluated fifty case studies of research transfers in the Global North and South. One key insight was that the context in which ideas were being circulated was the essential variable determining the quality of their transfer into policy. Court and Young concluded that the degree of receptiveness of the political system and the probability of policy change were a function of political demand and contestation. Of key relevance were prevailing narratives and discourses among policy makers and the degree of demand for new ideas.

According to Legro (2000), the conditions for transformation of policy ideas are not the same everywhere. Collective adoption of policy ideas by a group of actors depends on existing ideas, their perceived consequences and available alternatives. At the same time, this sets clear boundaries on the possibilities of research to impact policy in politically contested settings. Success will depend on extreme prudence and highly developed context skills that account for existing context-specific collective ideas about the issues concerned.

In some cases, the respective governments may not be receptive to fundamental changes, because they might prefer eliminating external support for a complete reformulation of national policies, which might carry consequences for their own power and influence. The feared effects of new ideas might far exceed the perceived negative outcome of maintaining traditional ideas – even if this means losing external support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even research with the best intentions will face additional challenges in conflict-affected areas. While the principles of research partnerships are all the more relevant in terms of access and information related to the political context, the same partnerships may likely contribute to tensions in the local context. In that sense, evaluating research in such contexts entails a somewhat paradoxical exercise. While the principles of cooperation should be assessed extremely carefully, the impact of partnerships themselves should be evaluated not only in terms of their contribution to research quality, but also with regard to their potential influence on the research system itself (in terms of doing no harm) and the type of research results expected. While a focus on transformation knowledge may be the only feasible way of doing research in conflict-affected areas, the potential of translating the generated results into policy ideas, and therefore into the policy sphere, should not be ignored. It may ultimately be the only way to achieve any tangible outcome. Even in highly technocratic research fields, this calls for a thorough understanding of the researcher's role in the political context and an adequate design of the research process and the corresponding partnerships.

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Part 2:
How Field Research Influences Local Context

2.1 Speaking Truth to African Power
Tobias Hagmann

In this article I reflect on the ethics of using scholarly work to critique dominant power. I use my own experience as an analyst of Ethiopian politics to highlight some of the intricacies characterizing the encounter between researchers and highly contested politics. Anthropologists tend to refer to these challenges in terms of a researcher's positionality and recommend reflexivity on the part of scholars. While many scholars reflect on their role in the research process, I find that there is much that has been left unsaid about the formulation of social science based critique. I explore some of these unexplored issues in the relationship between a (foreign) scholar and dominant political power (here: the Ethiopian government) with reference to my authorship of a report on Ethiopia published by the International Crisis Group (ICG) (see Bliesemann de Guevara 2014).

Publishing the ICG Report

In September 2009 the ICG, an international watchdog that specializes in conflict analysis, published its first country report on Ethiopia. It was entitled "Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents" (ICG 2009). Within some 30 pages it summarized some of the key features of domestic Ethiopian politics, namely the dominant role of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in political decision-making at all levels, the functioning of a particular type of top-down federalism, a stalled democratization process and a select number of violent conflicts in the country. The ICG launched the report with a press communiqué, warning that ethnic conflict might flare up in Ethiopia in the context of the 2010 federal and regional elections. This prognosis proved to be wrong. But anti-government protests and a violent government crackdown against protesters in the Oromiya and Amhara regions erupted around the end of 2005 and claimed some 600 to 1000 casualties by fall 2016 (HRW 2016), leading the Ethiopian government to declare a state of emergency.

The Ethiopian government was not pleased with the publication of the International Crisis Group report. The president of the House of Federation, one of Ethiopia's two legislative chambers, denounced the report on Ethiopian Television. In a press conference then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who was asked to comment on the ICG report, responded: "Some people have too many billions of dollars to spend and they feel that dictating how developing countries manage their affairs is their God-

given right", and: "We have only contempt for the ICG."[1] Of course, such a reaction was to be expected. It was expected to the degree that those involved in producing this report – senior staff and analysts working for the ICG – had taken precautions to protect my identity both during my fieldwork and after the publication of the report. What led me to write this report for the ICG? I had been aware of the risk that such a report would displease Ethiopian authorities who attempted to identify me, its author. But in the context of the ongoing counter-insurgency in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State and political oppression in many parts of Ethiopia, I thought it was important to publicize what I saw as the "real politics" of Ethiopia. Furthermore, I had admired many of the authors who wrote past ICG reports on the Horn of Africa and was proud to be given the opportunity to join the exclusive club of analysts writing for the ICG.

Over time my experience with the ICG report and, more broadly, with conducting fieldwork on and publishing analysis of current Ethiopian politics, including in the country's Somali Regional State, led me to consider the following questions. These questions all point to the ethics of personal scholarly engagement, but also to the conditions under which critique emerges.

What is the relationship between political power (in this case, the Ethiopian government) and scholars (in this case, researchers writing about Ethiopian politics)?

What are the recurrent "tactics and strategies" (de Certeau 1984) that both the government and its academic critics use in this process?

When do scholars decide – to use the famous phrase by Wildavsky (1979) – to "speak truth to power" and when do they decide to keep quiet and/or to censure themselves?

When does a text – a scholarly publication – become critique and what does it reveal about the interplay between author and audience, between what can be said when and where, and what cannot be said?

> I thought it was important to publicize what I saw as the "real politics" of Ethiopia.

1   Reuters, 17 September 2009, "Ethiopia: We have only contempt for the ICG."

How can we formulate critique without reproducing stereotypical, maybe colonial, situations in which Western experts critique African power?

In my interactions with the Ethiopian government and fellow Ethiopianists who study and write about Ethiopian political life, society and culture, the issue of what can be said (or written) about contemporary Ethiopian politics and what is off limits was constantly present. Ethiopianists are acutely aware that some of their publications offend the government, bearing the risk of losing access to Ethiopia as the government can withhold research permits or visas. There is a consensus among scholars working in and on Ethiopia that certain research questions pertaining to state-society relations which have the potential of revealing the government's authoritarian policies including human rights violations, the targeting of opposition supporters, but also oppressive policies in rural areas more broadly, are best avoided. Nonetheless, Ethiopianists continue to research and publish on some of these topics (Hagmann 2016). But they usually avoid the government's anger by publishing in specialized academic outlets such as academic books or journals that have very limited circulation outside of specialized circles. The government thus draws an invisible line regarding not only what can be said or published, but also in which forum things can be said. Occasionally, as with the case of the ICG report described above, scholarly critique of the government reaches a broader audience.

Dynamics of Relationships between Scholar and Political Power

Critique, self-censure and the subtle norms that govern scholars' depictions of Ethiopian politics under the EPRDF government – including the occasional violation of these norms – highlight two key dynamics of the relationship between author and dominant power.

First, the particular language used by scholars to describe dominant political power – a government, a ruling elite, a militia or other – as well as the particular forum or arena used for this – whether it is a peer-reviewed journal article, an informal conversation with colleagues, a public talk or an open editorial in a newspaper – are as much an expression of what we perceive as "facts" on the ground and a reflection of our own research findings, as they are the outcome of our personal calculations, namely the question of the degree to which we are ready to risk losing access to a particular place, people and country. To put it bluntly, we idolize the idea of the independent and truth-speaking intellectual who "speaks up", who "accuses", who dares to say uncomfortable "truths", whose scholarship is marked by integrity. Yet what we see in reality is a much murkier picture. What I observed are very careful, some would say opportunistic tactics by Ethiopianists – those who study Ethiopia, who often aim to safeguard access to the country by either toning down their critique or by "diversifying" their critique to match their intended audience.

Second, critique of a given political situation has to be understood primarily as a relationship between author and audience rather than as the property of a particular text. In other words: whether or not something we say or write, whether text is "critical" or not, is not primarily determined by "what we say", but rather by "how we say it", "who says it" and, more importantly, "to whom we say it". This was clearly also the case with the ICG Ethiopia country report. The bulk of the report was nothing more than a sophisticated summary of academic and policy publications on Ethiopian politics after 1991. When writing the report, I worked hard to include as many academic references that had some kind of relevance for post-1991 Ethiopian politics as possible. The report was much more informed by this elaborate literature review than by my own fieldwork. Had the same analysis been published in an academic journal, it would not have created any stir, as few academics would have disagreed with my analysis. But the fact that the ICG, the predominant conflict analysis watchdog which is often seen to be close to the US government, published this analysis, meant all the difference to the Ethiopian government. Real critique thus only emerges in a field of tension that features an audience that is not identical with our academic peers. If we take this argument to its logical conclusion, then text by itself cannot effectuate critique, but critique emerges in the relationship with a particular audience or readership.

Academics tend to perceive themselves as more critical or independent in their choices and wording than politicians, diplomats or development actors. In reality, scholars harbor very similar considerations when deciding when, how and if to write about dominant politics. This raises important questions of research ethics and person-

al engagement that are often neglected in both scholarly debates and broader discussions about the role of social science research in policy and conflict analysis. These questions include: When is it opportune and when is there a moral imperative to openly criticize dominant political power? What are the long-term costs and benefits, both for the researcher and for the society in question, of either speaking up or keeping silent about violent, oppressive or unjust political processes? In which situations should researchers look out for themselves – protecting their physical security, their access to a particular field site or country as well as their long-term academic career – and when should we risk all of these things? Finally, how can we formulate critique without reproducing stereotypical, maybe colonial, situations in which Western experts critique African power?

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2.2   Scientific Ideals and Conflict Sensitivity: a Marriage of Reason?
Guy Elcheroth

There is no such thing as a single, consistent and universally accepted set of quality standards in the social sciences. Scientific paradigms progress through argument, and social scientists argue among themselves not only about the relevance of their theories or the interpretations of their findings, but also about core normative questions pertaining to what constitutes good research. Still, certain values are fundamental enough that they tend to be taken for granted even in these paradigmatic debates; they are part of the language through which the debates can take place, rather than their content. Who would seriously defend that academic research should accept censorship and interference rather than claim independence, be opaque rather than transparent, strive for isolation rather than for cooperation among peers, or evolve opportunistically rather than by rational design? What I will argue within this opinion paper, however, is that one of the reasons why doing research in conflict-ridden societies is always a potentially unsettling experience, especially for academic researchers, is that it tends to confront them with situations where even these most fundamental and seemingly obvious values of their profession tend to become problematic.

As soon as one stops being blind to conflict, it does not take long until the need to balance scientific ideals against other weighty demands becomes salient. Reflecting on how the implementation of a research project interacts with tensions in the research environment and how it might feed into either destructive or constructive conflict dynamics complicates the scientific decision-making process: it brings in new criteria, which are neither redundant nor seamlessly compatible with the objective of advancing knowledge (academic research's core business). A realistic discussion of the role of conflict sensitivity in research can therefore hardly work around acknowledging that being sensitive to conflicts does not come without a cost. It demands that researchers walk a thin line, where any errant step runs the risk of compromising values that matter to how they and their peers see their professional integrity – values such as independence, transparency, cooperation and rationality, which are at the heart of academic research and what it has to offer society. It is only after having recognized these inbuilt tensions between the respective requirements of conflict sensitivity and good research that it is possible to look beyond, and wonder how a conflict sensitive approach can become more than a threat or a limitation for research – how, in the most optimistic perspective, it might even function as a creative impetus for research. Let me therefore try to tackle both facets of the problem: to first explain why conflict sensitive research practices make the realization of scientific ideals even more challenging, and then to discuss how such practices might also create new opportunities to work toward the ideals.

Conflict Sensitivity as a Challenge

Academic research is expected to produce knowledge as a universal public good, rather than knowledge that is only instrumental to certain groups of people. Choosing to leave out specific research topics because you do not want your work to be perceived as a nuisance by people in positions of authority would not be seen as a sign of high intellectual integrity within the scientific community; deciding to withhold or reframe your research findings because of the particular interests you think they should support or oppose comes close to scientific fraud. There is hence a noble meaning to the notion of independence in academic research, which refers to the ideal that, just as physicians should not ask whom they are curing and judges should not ask to whom they apply the law, scientists should not ask whom their findings will benefit. In fact, independence is even more crucial to the professional legitimacy of social scientists than to that of other scientists. This is because there will always be a myriad of different actors who produce knowledge about society, some of whom will probably have more resources to produce and circulate their knowledge than academics. A common weakness shared by all other actors, however, is that they have an instrumental agenda – for example to win an election, sell a product or propagate a faith.

So far so good, but difficulties arise at the latest when researchers engaged in fieldwork in conflict areas attempt to conflate "independence" with "not choosing sides". Doing so quickly turns out to be unfeasible for practical as well as ethical reasons. Try to do some fieldwork in the West Bank and tell your Palestinian research participants that you do not want to "choose sides" between them and the Israeli settlers living next neighborhood, and you will soon find out. In all likelihood, you will eventually end up with no one left willing to work with you, help with your fieldwork or answer your questions – that is your practical problem. In all likelihood, your interlocutors will furthermore have raised ethical points that you can hardly eschew. They will have explained to you that they are not involved in a conflict being played out on a level playing field and that anyone who refuses to choose sides in such an asymmetric setting is in effect siding with the more powerful party and acting within the context of how they define the situation. The other core values are closely connected to the ideal of scientific independence. Good

research needs to be more transparent about its methods of observation and inference than other accounts of social reality. The main point about the scientific publication process is precisely that it presents specific observations, and the way in which more general conclusions are drawn from them, for the critical scrutiny of a sample of peers prior to publication and subsequently of any interested scholar, student or stakeholder. Through the publication, critical revision and cross-referencing process, academic research in a particular field of inquiry is organized within open networks of collaboration. At the level of individual projects, the overall orientation towards transparency and peer scrutiny feeds into an expectation that fieldwork will be purposively designed and implemented as a well-planned sequence of activities, where a rational explanation links each step and component to the research objectives. This is, in a nutshell, how we like to think about our research, and there are excellent reasons to cherish the scientific ideals of transparency, open collaboration and rational design. Entirely stripped of these values, social scientists might well be little more than weak copies of investigative reporters, advocacy activists, think tankers or public relations advisors.

> The relationship between conflict sensitivity and academic values more closely resembles a marriage of reason than a marriage of love. It is not spontaneous affinity that binds them, but lucidity.

However, doing research in conflict-ridden societies exposes these scientific values to a harsh trial. Pursued in an uncompromising way, they can turn into unrealistic standards, or even dangerous devices. When research is being conducted in an environment that contains potential spoilers, open collaborative networks exponentially increase the risk that spoilers can directly impact the research process and undermine the functioning of a research team. When the research topic is controversial, too much communication can put local researchers or research participants at risk. The more details circulate about the specifics of a study, the higher the risk that

their accidental or purposeful combination creates a connection between identifiable individuals and sensitive activities. When circumstances change rapidly in an unpredictable way – as they typically do in conflict zones – planning ahead can have perverse effects when it creates unintended incentives to stick to a research design that may have been initially rational, but no longer matches the new context. For these different reasons, the relationship between conflict sensitivity and academic values more closely resembles a marriage of reason than a marriage of love. It is not spontaneous affinity that binds them, but lucidity: their uneasy coalition rests on the understanding that in certain circumstances one cannot go far without the other and that a good-enough arrangement between conflicting requirements needs to be found.

Conflict Sensitivity as an Opportunity

So what are the ingredients of a viable co-existence between conflict sensitivity and classic academic values? First of all, a clear understanding is needed that the partnership is not always equal and that sometimes there is a necessary hierarchy of requirements. For example, in the researcher's decision tree, the first question is always: "Can we reasonably exclude that activity X will result in direct harm done to research participants or collaborators?" Only if the answer is "yes" will the next question be posed, namely whether activity X is likely to result in new insights (which likewise precedes the question of whether these insights are likely to feed into conflict dynamics in a constructive way). It is self-evident from an ethical point of view but frustrating from a purely heuristic point of view that human risk and epistemic gain are incommensurable qualities in research planning: huge expected knowledge gains cannot outbalance moderate risks. In this sense, conflict sensitivity – taking into account the social realities of conflict and the specific risks that they generate for the different actors involved in a research process – functions as a containing framework for scientific activity. It requires ruling out certain options because there are values more urgent to consider than good research. In a first approach, it hence constitutes essentially a limiting tool to researchers, telling them what not to do. But can it be more than that?

There might be at least one way in which conflict sensitivity can also function as an enabling tool for researchers, helping them broaden rather than narrow their options. The magic trick has to do with the reflexive process that is set in motion when researchers analyze their own role and potential impact in conflict settings. This process can

function as a remarkable heuristic tool, which not only facilitates adequate contextualization of research findings, but also feeds back into broader theory-building. Let me illustrate this point by two personal examples. A few years ago, I participated in a research trip to Palestine with the hope of initiating new collaborative research on personal memories of conflict-related events. To be honest, at that point my understanding of the local context was still mostly limited to what one can learn through Western media sources and the writings of a few critical Israeli scholars. The reading of their analysis of the military occupation of the West Bank had left me with an expectation that I retrospectively recognize as naïve: that the articulation of critical voices from both sides of the concrete wall that Israelis call the Security fence and Palestinians call the Apartheid wall might add a relevant new dimension to the analysis. I subsequently learned a few lessons the hard way, and others through tough intellectual debates. Several Palestinian researchers whom my Swiss colleagues and I met during our first trip took their time to explain to us the historical background of the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (ACBI) campaign, the disillusionments left from a generation of research projects on the expected benefits of Israeli–Palestinian interactions conducted in the wake of the 1993 Oslo peace process, and why the notion of "normalization" of Israeli–Palestinian relationships had over time become deeply linked with a perception of accepting as normal the military order established by the occupation, more than with the prospect of establishing progressive alliances that would allow it to be overcome. These dialogues on the meaning of certain types of research collaborations and research designs, how they are embedded in the political context and how they feed back into it then became a creative point of departure. Today, the resulting Swiss–Palestinian research partnership is part of a broader international research consortium. One of the cross-cutting objectives of this consortium is to unpack the role of policy assumptions about "normalization" in transitional processes in different places in the world.

More recently, a peculiar situation arose when another research partnership within the same consortium was affected by the outbreak of a new violent political crisis in Burundi in the spring of 2015. It was not only that the risk analysis for planned fieldwork needed to be updated as new events took place, but also that this task became considerably more complicated due to the fact that local sources were necessarily affected by the government's efforts to uphold an official line that "there is no crisis in Burundi". In this new context, the simple act of naming the crisis or discussing its impact on the population had become imbued with risks. The resulting uncertainty led

us to suspend fieldwork activities in line with a precautionary approach. At the same time, becoming immersed in an environment where signs suddenly became harder to decipher and taking meaningful action became a more complex undertaking, taught us an important lesson about the impact of disrupted communication channels in times of crisis. It therefore gave us a new impetus to look (even) more closely at the dynamics of epistemic isolation – becoming unable to learn from relevant others' understandings of a critical situation – and its role in escalation, mobilization and demobilization processes.

But there is yet another level at which a conflict sensitive approach might have a beneficial impact on the quality of a research process. Doing research in conflict-laden environments confronts researchers with a broad range of requirements, alike striving to preserve the independence of the research team and resisting political inference while developing a realistic understanding of how research activities might interact with conflict dynamics and affect those living with these dynamics. An interesting side effect of repeated exposure to such requirements is that it tends to instill a healthy dose of skepticism toward unrealistic standards and to provide fertile grounds for a more pragmatic, yet systematic, approach to the research process. Such a research approach draws heavily on the capacity of a research team to adapt its activities to changing research environments. The only way a research program can navigate dilemmas such as those described here, while remaining mostly intact, is by maintaining a clear distinction between essential research objectives and a flexible set of means to achieve these objectives. If carrying out fieldwork in a specific manner at a certain place and time is perceived as irreplaceable for a research project, then a changing matrix of risks can have devastating consequences. But if it has always been clear that specific fieldwork activities represent one option from a range of possibilities for gaining greater understanding of a relevant social phenomenon, the project design is much more resilient. In this sense, a conflict sensitive approach might be helpful for inoculating social scientists against too much "methodolatry", which is the tendency to treat your preferred research method as if it was an end in itself, a frequent syndrome in our milieu. It might also mitigate the risk of becoming so immersed in your case study that in the process you forget what it was meant to exemplify and which broader theoretical contribution you hoped it would generate.

Such a research
approach draws heavily
on the capacity of a
research team to adapt
its activities to changing
research environments.

Conclusion

In summary, if I were to give any advice to fellow researchers who are also struggling with the requirements of a conflict sensitive approach, three things may be helpful: first, to develop a clear sense of your research priorities from the outset and cultivate these throughout the research process; second, to preserve your freedom not to work in settings that are incompatible with critical goals for your research; and third, to be prepared to make difficult choices and to reconsider your choices whenever the research environment changes. My sole assertion would be that by pursuing a conflict sensitive approach along these lines, we may increase the chances of enjoying some secondary benefits, like boosting our theoretical creativity or learning to differentiate between what is essential and what is incidental to our research.

Part 3:
How Context Impacts Field Research

3.1 Conducting Research in Conflict-Affected Contexts: Reflections on South Sudan
Martina Santschi

Research in conflict-affected contexts is important not only because it contributes to understanding the nature of war, violent conflict and conflict dynamics. It also deepens understanding of other important issues such as power dynamics, everyday practices of governance, legitimacy, political economy of armed conflict, international engagement and impact on communities. In addition, it provides an opportunity to collect the narratives of victims of conflicts. At the same time, field research in contexts affected by violent conflict is characterized by a variety of challenges and risks (see, for example, Gasser 2006, Nordstrom and Robben 1995, Wood 2006). The following paragraphs discuss risks and important considerations for conducting research in conflict-torn South Sudan, ways to mitigate these risks, and research guidelines and principles of research ethics that help address risks.

Despite the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, which brought relative peace and stability to South Sudan, armed conflict, insecurity and political tensions continue to affect some areas. This includes, for instance, inter- and intra-communal violence that is often related to cattle raiding, and revenge attacks in Lakes, Warrap, Unity and Jonglei States. Along the contested border with (Northern) Sudan, the armed forces of (Northern) Sudan and South Sudan have sporadically clashed. In 2010, the general elections caused political tension, and dissatisfied candidates took up arms against the government of South Sudan, including in Jonglei.

In mid-December 2013 – only two and a half years after South Sudan gained independence from Sudan – armed violence broke out among security forces in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. The fighting was preceded by severe political tension among senior members of the dominating political party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Fighting, insecurity and atrocities against civilians rapidly spread to the Greater Upper Nile region and have now also engulfed parts of Equatoria and Bahr el-Ghazal. The armed conflict has also had a devastating impact on the national economy and has resulted in a large-scale humanitarian crisis and the displacement of many South Sudanese civilians. In addition, it is leading to political polarization, deep social divisions and ethnic tension. Room for public criticism has become very limited. Researchers in South Sudan are faced with challenges due to this context of ongoing armed conflict, political polarization and insecurity.

Preparations, Security Assessments and Contingency Planning

Conducting research in conflict-affected contexts requires thorough preparation that includes acquiring a precise understanding of the context, conflict dynamics, potential risks (including logistical challenges) and responses to these risks. South Sudanese researchers, partners, authorities and community members are key sources of information, including about possible challenges that will be faced by the researcher and respondents, as well as sensitive topics. International contacts (including professional contacts, embassies, the NGO Forum, United Nations Department of Safety and Security) located in South Sudan constitute another important source of information. While conducting research, scholars are advised to continuously analyze security and conflict dynamics.

Contingency plans for emergency situations are a vital aspect of preparing for field research in conflict-affected contexts (Hilhorst et al. 2016). Researchers are ideally in regular contact with partners and headquarter offices that could provide support in case of an emergency. This requires access to the necessary means of communication, including satellite phones. In South Sudan, a further challenge is the limited infrastructure (e.g. lack of all-weather roads) and the lack of services (e.g. health services, safe accommodation, access to markets for fuel, food and clean water, and access to foreign currency). These constraints need to be taken into account when making the preparations for research visits.

Informed Consent

A tenet of ethical research is the securing of informed consent from respondents. Prior to conducting interviews, researchers are therefore supposed to inform interviewees about the aims and outputs of a study (Flick 2007). This is also important in order to manage the expectations of interviewees. In contexts affected by humanitarian crises and food insecurity, as is currently the case in many areas of South Sudan, there is a risk that respondents will associate research with humanitarian assessments and expect aid delivery as an outcome of interviews. This can add a corresponding bias to the interview statements. Therefore, it is important to clarify at the beginning of interviews that the aim is not to collect data for a needs assessment. One element of securing informed consent is that researchers explain to interviewees that they are free to decide whether or not to participate, and rejecting an interview will carry no negative consequences.

Protection of Respondents and Researchers

Providing protection and security for informants and research assistants is a key aspect of research in conflict-affected contexts. It is of vital importance to prevent respondents and researchers from facing negative consequences due to research. Therefore, it is important to be aware of sensitive topics that could potentially endanger respondents or researchers. Another issue is questions that could possibly re-traumatize interviewees, and which therefore need to be handled with great sensitivity.[1] By reviewing interview guides with South Sudanese researchers, assistants and translators, these can be adapted to the context, and sensitive topics as well as problematic questions or terms can be identified and modified. Research ethics necessitate that respondents be granted anonymity and confidentiality if they wish it. Accordingly, it is important to work with trustworthy translators who have been clearly briefed about issues of confidentiality, and to conduct interviews in a confidential atmosphere. It should be noted, however, that in the context of South Sudan, confidentiality does not necessarily mean conducting individual interviews, because people often join conversations and discuss in groups. Isolating individuals for an interview might cause suspicion. On a case-by-case basis, researchers therefore need to find a sensible balance between conducting individual interviews and including people who also want to contribute to interviews. Moreover, data needs to be rendered anonymous and stored safely.

Isolating individuals for an interview might cause suspicion.

In contexts with high levels of political polarization, divided communities and strained relations between international actors and government agencies, authorities might be wary of research. In order to address suspicion from authorities, it is important to inform state and local authorities, including chiefs and security agencies, about research plans and objectives in a timely manner, and to acquire their approval and permission for conducting the research. Authorities are also an important source of information. Research outcomes should be shared with the respective authorities. South Sudanese research institutions and research partners constitute important gatekeepers and intermediaries linking researchers with local authorities and respondents. At the same time, it is important to ensure the confidentiality of interviews by ensuring that authorities are not present when interviews are conducted. Criticism of authorities – which was often aired in the public in South Sudan – or the discussion of sensitive issues might put respondents and interviewers in danger.

Due to the ongoing armed conflict, South Sudan is divided into areas held by government forces and areas controlled by other armed groups. Some areas of Equatoria and Greater Upper Nile are contested and embattled, particularly during the dry season. Movement between the different zones of control is restricted and road travel in contested areas is limited due to insecurity and ambushes. It is particularly risky for South Sudanese researchers to move across the front lines as they are likely to be suspected of being supporters of military opponents. Political tensions further deepen social and ethnic divides. International researchers and research projects need to consider the impact of the personal background of South Sudanese researchers on their safety and on research results.

Concluding Thoughts

Reflections on research in areas affected by violent conflict in South Sudan point to a number of key issues:

Context matters: the context, including political and conflict dynamics, differs from area to area. Accordingly, research contexts are characterized by specific risks and challenges. It is therefore of vital importance to acquire knowledge and understanding of the respective research areas and to adapt risk management for each research endeavor. These preparations are time intensive.

The example of South Sudan points at the volatility of contexts affected by armed conflict. At the end of November 2013, the high levels of political tension within the political leadership were well known and discussed in public. Nevertheless, South Sudanese

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[1]   Many South Sudanese went through traumatizing experiences during the past civil war and more recently during the ongoing armed conflict. One approach to preventing re-traumatization is to formulate questions about experiences during armed conflicts in an exploratory and open way. This provides respondents with the space to touch on issues they are willing to talk about. Asking respondents directly about personal experiences of violence might re-traumatize them.

and international experts were surprised by the level of violence and the rapidity with which fighting spread in South Sudan. Political and conflict dynamics are often highly volatile in areas that are affected by armed conflict. Accordingly, researchers need to be well prepared to conduct research in fragile contexts, and should continuously follow and analyze conflict and political dynamics.

Conflict-affected societies are – as the case of South Sudan illustrates – often politically polarized and deeply divided. This poses particular challenges for conducting research. Therefore, principles of research ethics and the protection of respondents and researchers are even more important and indispensable. Moreover, researchers ought to be – based on careful preparation – conscious of different types of divides and should endeavour not to further exacerbate these divides or to foster conflicts.

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3.2   Being Prepared for the Worst:
On Perceptions of Risk in Development Research
Sarah Byrne

I never packed a go-bag.

I had known, of course, that a major earthquake was expected in Nepal. Indeed, seismologists had suggested that an earthquake was overdue. Different agencies published dire predictions of the scale of the disaster that would unfold. Needless to say, this impending event and what could be done about it was a subject of much discussion, and featured prominently in the security briefings provided to visiting and resident development workers and researchers. We were all advised to pack a so-called "go-bag", a backpack full of emergency provisions, and to keep it with us at all times. It would have been cumbersome, of course, but manageable.

And yet, for all the months I lived in Nepal (first as a development worker, then as a researcher), I did not take any serious measures to address this huge risk. This is somewhat puzzling when you consider that I thought a lot about risks otherwise. Working in an uncertain post-war context with multiple natural and political hazards certainly presented many opportunities for risk management in my research. I carefully analyzed other risks and developed a series of hedges and mitigation measures.

What I ignored, refused to acknowledge, intentionally disregarded was the threat of a major natural disaster that we all faced – my research participants, research assistants and myself. Thus, although I was in Switzerland at the time, like many people I would have been completely unprepared when disaster struck on April 25th, 2015. Unlike many, I did not suffer from a lack of information or resources to prepare. So what explains this puzzling blind spot on my part? In this article I would like to both share some thoughts about this puzzle and also make some more general comments about other kinds of risks inherent in conducting research in areas marked by political instability and risk of natural disasters. I would like to focus on how we distinguish implicitly, if not explicitly, between the risks we acknowledge or not, and different ways of responding once a risk is acknowledged and assessed. Why did I not take this serious risk seriously? Why did I not take the simple step of preparing a go-bag?

Why did I not take the simple step of preparing a go-bag?

Categorization of Risks

Risks can be assessed and characterized in different ways, which is a first step in choosing to acknowledge a risk and developing a response strategy. Important considerations include probability, impact and the ambient or situational nature of the risk. Characterizing risks as being of low or high probability and of low or high consequence is a standard part of risk assessment. It is important to do such an analysis not only from the point of view of oneself as researcher, but also taking into account risks and consequences for research assistants and research participants. Another important distinction was drawn by Raymond Lee in his monograph "Dangerous Fieldwork" (1995) between "ambient" and "situational" dangers. Ambient dangers are those that are present in the setting for researchers and researched alike, such as tropical diseases. Situational dangers, on the other hand, are those which the presence of the researcher in the setting may call forth, for example threats of violence towards researchers or research participants who explore politically sensitive topics. With these elements it is possible to develop a fairly elaborate risk matrix taking into account probability and impact of risks, risks of an ambient and situational nature, and risks that differently affect oneself and the other people somehow involved in the research.

In this matrix, the most difficult risks to address in a satisfactory way are ambient risks at the interface of low probability and high consequence. Such risks, Anthony Giddens suggested (1990), are somewhat unreal because we could only have a clear demonstration of them if events occurred that are too terrible to contemplate. These are not risks that anyone particularly chooses to run and there are both practical and psychological reasons for trying to ignore them. Invocations of fate and fatalism play a role in our response, much more so than with other kinds of risks. The greater the danger, writes Giddens, "measured not in terms of probability of occurrence but in terms of its generalized threat to human life" (1990: 134), the more difficult to deal with. Indeed "Unprepared for the Worst" is the title of a very interesting article on risk management in qualitative research (Bloor et al. 2010).

Risks are never assessed in a wholly objective manner, but are always to some degree a product of choices and decisions on the part of those producing assessments of risk. These decisions are influenced by a number of factors, including emotions, beliefs and values. The whole process of risk assessment can never provide a neutral reading of "actual risk", as this is both value-laden and differently distributed socially, spatially and temporally.

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Classifying risks as high or low probability and high or low consequence implies an often implicit assessment both of the knowledge that went into defining the probability and of the tolerance for different consequences. This is especially difficult for researchers who are new to a particular context as it can be challenging to both access and "read" different kinds of knowledge and estimate situational risks, not to mention ambient ones. Even having done this analysis, one may in the end act according to intuition or gut feeling, rather than what an ostensibly rational analysis of probabilities and consequences would have suggested.

In his book "The Consequences of Modernity" (1990), Anthony Giddens describes four different adaptive reactions to the risks of modernity and in particular those assessed as ambient, low probability and high impact risks. I think these adaptive reactions are also useful for thinking through risk management in research. The first adaptive reaction Giddens describes is pragmatic acceptance. This is a concentration on "surviving", on the everyday and its problems and tasks. It is an acceptance that many things in the outside world are beyond one's control, so limited outcomes are all that can be expected. Pragmatic acceptance has a certain psychological cost as it implies numbing or hiding anxieties about the risk and its eventualities. Giddens cites an example of a typical response: "The only honest answer I can give you as to how I can manage to live with the possibility of it is that I don't think about it, because to do so is frightening" (1990: 135). Focusing on the day-to-day issues of doing research and trying not to think about earthquakes is an example of pragmatic acceptance.

Though I have not asked them about it, I suppose that pragmatic acceptance was the main response of my research respondents as well. This is summed up in the first phrase most people learn when they learn to speak Nepalese: "ke garne?" This means "what to do?" and is used when

the answer is obvious or there is no answer. Pragmatism and indeed necessity would have directed focus to everyday issues of livelihood security. As Warner et al. note: "While many in Nepal were aware of the risks of an earthquake, many felt disempowered and placed little confidence in the government's ability to respond or protect its citizens. Indeed, the concerns of the everyday overwhelmed many people's ability to prepare for a potential disaster" (2015).

The second adaptive reaction suggested by Giddens is sustained optimism, underscored by faith in science and in the finding of social and technological solutions to global problems. I cannot find much evidence of this adaptive reaction in my response to the earthquake risk. While social and technological solutions, or at least measures, for earthquakes certainly exist – for example in Japan – they were few and far between in the pre-earthquake days in Nepal. And despite efforts and exhortations to "build back better", it is unclear that Nepal will be much better prepared when the next earthquake hits, particularly if (as predicted) the next epicenter is further west.

The third set of reactions suggested by Giddens is cynical pessimism. These reactions do not ignore or hide the anxieties provoked by the presence of risk but rather engage with them. Giddens writes that cynicism "dampens the emotional impact of anxieties through either a humorous or a world-weary response to them". Cynicism is expressed, for example, in parody or "black humor" (1990: 136). I can observe a number of instances of cynical pessimism in my own response to the earthquake risk. Interestingly, black humor has also been identified as one of the coping mechanisms used during the civil war in Nepal to deal with fear about the risk of physical violence. As Pettigrew and Adhikari write, "through the parodying of fear, villagers challenged the notion that fear was the dominant – and only – emotional experience in their lives. The parody, in contrast, suggests that there is actually more to life" (2009: 417).

Radical engagement is the fourth adaptive reaction identified by Giddens. He defines this as taking an attitude of practical contestation towards perceived sources of danger. Giddens suggests that those taking an attitude of radical engagement believe that although we face major problems, we can and should mobilize either to reduce their impact or to transcend them. With regard to my own risk management, this was definitely not the case with the unimaginable low-probability, high-impact risk of a major earthquake. Interestingly, as a major earthquake has become more imaginable now that one has happened,

there is a resurgence of radical engagement in Nepal. In re-action to the risk of another and more serious earthquake at some point in the future, people are organizing, for example, to "build back better". Many researchers work-ing in Nepal have become engaged in such initiatives.

Assessing My Handling of Risks in Nepal

The aforementioned four strategies are helpful in thinking through how people cope with or react to risks that are perceived to be of low probability but with very high im-pact and serious consequences for lives and livelihoods. In the case of post-war Nepal, which is the context in which my research is situated, the main such risk was a major earthquake. In different contexts there are other am-bient and situational risks that fall into this category, in-cluding personal safety risks such as kidnapping or sexual violence, the outbreak or re-emergence of major conflict, other natural disasters, etc.

Lest this whole article focus only on my risk manage-ment blind spot, I would like to also share some reflec-tions on the risks I actually did prepare for. When I did my risk assessment, my main concern was twofold: risks my research participants might face and risks that my re-search assistant and I might face. To simplify, I can say that the post-war temporal context most influenced how I assessed risks to my research participants, and the re-mote-rural spatial context most influenced how I assessed risks to my research assistant and myself.

In the former category, my focus was on political risks my respondents could face by being part of my research. Talking about issues of violence, corruption, etc. can have consequences for local political dynamics, even long after the research is finished. Here I followed common practic-es such as developing trust, anonymization, talking to lots of different people, etc. I was also very concerned about the risk that evoking wartime experiences, "opening old wounds", would have a negative effect on the wellbeing of my research participants. I even changed the main fo-cus of my research from wartime to post-war, partly in an attempt to respond to this risk.

I also developed strategies to reduce exposure and man-age potential negative outcomes for my research assistant and myself: illness, injury, personal safety, homesick-ness, loneliness, boredom, interpersonal conflict, etc. My research assistant and I followed fairly standard advice: don't drive at night, take a first aid course, dress in a local-ly "appropriate" way, etc. I also spent some time discuss-

ing risks with my research assistant, and in one case with her family as well, ensuring that we had a common under-standing of how we would like to respond to different sce-narios. I had worked in Nepal before starting my PhD, and at that time had received a fairly comprehensive security briefing. In most contexts, embassies and development agencies have good and updated information about risks, and it may be useful to tap into this. In conflict contexts there are particular considerations for researchers whose country has taken a position in the conflict, which was the case, for example, for American researchers in Nepal. Researchers doing research in their "own" country or a country where they have (or are perceived to have) family connections have a whole host of other / different security considerations.

In any case, having trusted colleagues in the country be-fore even starting the research is a huge advantage that is not replicable in every case, but from which I greatly ben-efitted. If this is not the case, then it is very important to establish networks at the start of the research. These may be different than the networks you would use for gather-ing information on your research topic. For example, it can be useful to know a relatively trustworthy pharmacist or medical practitioner in the closest town. The advisabil-ity of reaching out to local police and security officials depends on the context, although in many cases this will not be optional.

The researcher should also consider the implicit mes-sages they convey to those around them through the im-plementation of different risk adaptation and mitigation measures. For example, road transportation being rather dangerous in Nepal, I tried where possible to travel in a private car. This implies arriving and leaving places in different circumstances than on the bus like most people. Some of the measures a researcher may take to respond to different risks may serve to emphasize difference and in-equalities between them and local people, which may not be conducive to trust-building. However, other respons-es, those we may categorize as "radical engagement", can contribute significantly to trust-building and solidarity among researchers and local people when appropriate to the local context. It is a fine balance, and thus it is impor-tant to integrate conflict sensitivity into risk response.

In this article I have outlined some of the measures I took to address risks at different points in the probability / im-pact, ambient / situational matrix. Personally, I focused on a lot of the socio-political aspects of the post-war setting and on safety and physical / psychological health risks. This risk mapping will look different from researcher to

researcher, depending on the context of their research and on their own positionality. However, while doing my fieldwork I chose to ignore the low probability but high impact risk of an earthquake: I accepted it, but did not plan any particular response. While I escaped the consequences of this, communities that I worked with were not so lucky and saw major destruction and loss of lives and livelihoods. Like many researchers and communities, after the earthquake I have shifted more seriously into a mode of radical engagement. Even simply packing a go-bag would have been a form of engagement (though not a particularly radical one). In some situations, there is truly nothing you can do, but in other situations, being just a little bit prepared can make a massive difference. Let's not be unprepared for the worst.

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Conclusions

Broadening the Space for Field Research through Conflict Sensitivity
Sidonia Gabriel and Laurent Goetschel

Local decision-makers tend to divide research in conflict-affected areas into two categories: technical research and political research. While they are likely to consider research in the first category to be unproblematic or even useful, research in the second category is seen as political interference that needs to be controlled or prevented. External research agencies are aware of these political dangers. However, the scope of their concerns is limited to security issues, and they seem unwilling or incapable of delving more deeply into this issue (Hilhorst et al. 2016). Researchers themselves often adopt a pragmatic approach to try to make the best out of a given situation in order to achieve their research objectives. Simply adding up these three perspectives does not necessarily contribute to the best possible results. This is true for the results and impacts on both security and research efforts. Summing up the contributions of this working paper and taking account of the most recent international political developments, we argue that a deeper concern for conflict sensitivity that also extends into the realm of research would help achieve better scores across all three of the dimensions mentioned here. In the following, we briefly spell out this argument, starting with a look at the notion of "shrinking space".

"Shrinking Spaces" and "Alternative Facts"

"Shrinking space" has been used to describe the diminishing possibilities for NGOs to act in countries governed by authoritarian regimes, affected by political conflict, or both (swisspeace 2016). For more than twenty years, NGOs have formally enjoyed a rather broad range of action even in such environments. It is just within the past five years that certain states such as Egypt, Ethiopia and Russia have started to publicly enact political measures and legislative programs that have seriously limited the activities of traditional NGOs, or rendered them entirely impossible. While this is not the place to discuss these measures, it is worth noting that similar dynamics have started to shape the research field as well. While researchers always had to ask for permission and access to implement their work, discussions about the legitimacy and quality of research in areas marked by political tensions have become more difficult and – perhaps more relevantly – restrictions on research have become more accepted.

This is a clear regression compared with previous developments. Over the past decades, scientists have regularly influenced policy decisions through policy briefs, consultancy mandates and other forms of science-policy transfer (Young and Mendizabal 2009). Scientific knowledge production focused on establishing validated knowledge according to standardized criteria of qualitative and quantitative research. This type of knowledge was attributed a high degree of legitimacy because its quality standards were deemed to ensure the objectivity, integrity and comprehensibility of the research results.

Still, these developments did not take place without discussion. Academics became increasingly self-critical for not being free of interests and values, particularly in cases where the research was funded by private companies or where researchers became part of so-called epistemic communities. Haas (1992: 3) defines epistemic communities as "networks of professionals and experts with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge, who share a set of normative beliefs, causal models, notions of empirical validity, and a common policy enterprise. […] By our definition, what bonds members of an epistemic community is their shared belief or faith in the verity and the applicability of particular forms of knowledge or specific truths." Epistemic communities and other mechanisms ensure the stability and durability of institutionalized ideas. Such communities also tend to defend institutions and their decisions, leading them to generate their own constituencies. Researchers often become part of these communities as experts, and thereby risk losing their objectivity. This has the potential to distort the research process and its results by situating research activities within the service of these institutions. This is a process that often goes unnoticed.

While debates about the core values of science have always been part of epistemology and somehow belong to the rituals of scientific conferences, they have never questioned the role or position of science in society. On the contrary, they are part of an intra-research-community reflection that continuously justifies the validity and credibility / legitimacy of scientific research. These debates are actually an indicator that the space for scientific research is being maintained or expanded – a kind of self-sustaining mechanism.

Occurring almost in parallel to the previously mentioned political restrictions on research, this self-questioning of science is neither the origin nor the consequence of the most recent events in world politics, and how these events may shape perceptions of science or the overall role of science in policy-making and thus society. These events culminated in the debate around so-called "alternative facts" (Jaffe 2017) in social media. Referring to the electoral victory of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the USA, several observers described how evidence-based facts no longer play a decisive role in being elected, or for

While debates about the core values of science have always been part of epistemology and somehow belong to the rituals of scientific conferences, they have never questioned the role or position of science in society.

making policy decisions. Instead, facts matter because a politically influential person considers them as "truth". While the production of knowledge and evidence about reality follows clear criteria for detaching the results of the findings from the individual researcher by establishing standardized research procedures, alternative facts are based on the truth legitimized through an individual in a position of power. In this case, the issue is no longer knowledge production, but rather "truth production". An administration (or just a president) that claims to have the truth does not depend on knowledge production and may even disdain it because it might function subversively by questioning this "truth".

This has two consequences. First, it limits the space and the standing of scientific research as political regulations and cuts in funding will probably occur. Second, it transforms scientific research as such into a political statement or even a political act. This is not new in the history of science. It brings to mind Galileo Galilei, who was put under house arrest by the Roman Catholic Church because he researched the heliocentric system, that ran counter to the "truth" of the Roman Catholic Church. However, it represents a considerable paradigm shift for scientific research compared to its development over the past years and decades.

The texts within this publication (particularly the contributions by Tobias Hagmann and Guy Elchenroth) have shown how research results are perceived as being biased by local constituencies or political actors such as states and political parties which claim that researchers produce pseudo-scientific results in order to overthrow a political system or opinion. This is where conflict sensitivity enters the scene. It comes in both at the level of self-reflection of academics and with regard to their interactions in the local context.

From "Conflict Sensitivity" to "Political Sensitivity"

Conflict sensitivity entails political analysis of the context where the research takes place. It therefore supports researchers in their communication with local authorities and political powers. It also helps them cope with security risks, as well as the risk of not being able to conduct their research as originally planned. Conflict sensitivity makes researchers aware of their political position within the context of their research.

While social scientists must be transparent about their position within this context, particularly when applying interpretative research methodologies (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), this is not necessarily the case for other research disciplines. Reflecting on their positionality allows researchers to draw some conclusions about why they chose a specific research focus and methodology, and why they ask their research questions in a particular way. The political analysis underlying a conflict sensitive approach also entails a positionality check of the research at the socio-political level. This makes it possible for researchers and the research institutions hosting or funding them to become more aware of the position of the research project within a given political context. This means that researchers and research institutions fully realize their roles within the respective societies.

Depending on the context and the research topic, this role should be seen as politically relevant for the local society. The degree to which scientific research is aware of its "political positionality" becomes even more relevant when it is linked to the phenomenon of "alternative facts". In this case, evidence-based facts become politically sensitive not only in the local context in the Global South but also in the so-called "free world" (Europe, USA, etc.), which has funded the majority of research in conflict-affected areas. Conflict sensitivity therefore gains even greater relevance in terms of promoting space for scientific research in both the "South" and the "North". It could therefore be renamed as "political sensitivity" or "socio-political positionality assessment". In this sense, conflict sensitivity could complement interpretative research methodologies by adding a lens that focuses on the socio-political level at which the research is designed, funded and implemented. At the meta-level, this would provide an additional filter for analysis that would respond not only to conflict contexts, but also to the entire research environment from North to South. The filter would help formulate research questions, implement research and interpret research results. At the same time, it could also generate information

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A conflict sensitive approach touches upon two aspects of an intervention: *what* is being done, and *how* things are being done.