IDS WORKING PAPER
Volume 2020 No 534

Governance Diaries: An Approach to Governance Research from the Ground Up

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February 2020

Produced as part of:
A4EA Action for empowerment and accountability research programme
IESE Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos
OXFAM
IDS Institute of Development Studies

Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) is an international research programme which explores how social and political action can contribute to empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict, and violent settings.

Led by the Institute of Development Studies, A4EA is being implemented by a consortium which includes: the Accountability Research Center, the Collective for Social Science Research, the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, Itad, Oxfam GB, and the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research. It is funded with UK aid from the UK Government. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official policies of our funder.

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IDS Working Paper 534

ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-78118-616-9
A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Available from:
Communications and Engagement Unit, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
Tel: +44 (0) 1273 915637
Web: www.ids.ac.uk/publications

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Summary

Research on empowerment and accountability tends to focus on collective action and its potential for empowering citizens undertaking the action and on achieving state accountability. In fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings (FCVAS) collective action is rare and risky. So how do citizens, particularly the chronically poor and most marginalised, interact and make claims on the different public authorities that exist in these settings, and how do these interactions contribute to citizens' sense of empowerment and accountability? Given the current agenda of 'leave no one behind', an understanding of how such populations interact with public authorities to meet their governance needs can help identify the constraints to achieving development for all in these challenging settings. We developed 'governance diaries,' a cross between a panel survey and multi-sited ethnographies, as an iterative approach to capture their experiences around governance issues over time. We explain here how this approach works, and the challenges and opportunities it offers for research.

Keywords: governance; accountability; empowerment; conflict; research methodologies; leave no one behind.

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank first and foremost all the households across the three countries who agreed to participate in this study, opening their homes and lives to us. We want to thank the three in-country research teams, for the amazing conversational communities created, without which this research could not have been possible. We also want to thank Duncan Green and Jane Lonsdale whose contributions were critical to thinking through the Governance Diaries methodology. Finally, we want to thank the anonymous reviewers, whose comments have greatly improved this paper, as well as Jenny Edwards and the overall support of the A4EA programme.

1 Introduction

Research on empowerment and accountability has tended to focus on collective action and its potential for empowering citizens undertaking the action and on achieving state institution accountability. In fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings (FCVAS) collective action is rare, risky and has uncertain outcomes. In these contexts, the more relevant question is: under what conditions are citizens even likely to undertake collective action to make claims on public institutions? If they don't undertake collective action, what do they do instead? For the chronically poor and most marginalised, this question is critical. How do they navigate the terrain from the margins: engage with forms of authority prevailing in their contexts, gain access to critical public goods, while ensuring that the process does not make them even more vulnerable than they already are? Given the current international development agenda of 'leave no one behind,' an understanding of how such populations access public services that are meant to target them, how they navigate between state and non-state systems, and how they perceive these interactions – whether empowering or disempowering – can help identify the constraints to achieving development for all in these most challenging settings.

Gaining a deep understanding of the lived experiences of marginalised groups is a daunting task in itself, let alone in unstable settings. As several scholars note, research on hidden and hard-to-reach populations pose a number of challenges, particularly in FCVAS contexts (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Clark 2006; Cohen and Arieli 2011; Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Khan Mohmand *et al*. 2017). The key issues that appear in the literature are:

- high levels of insecurity leading to an atmosphere of fear and distrust, restricting the open or easy flow of information between researchers and households;
- cultural, social, and economic constraints, from language barriers to never having engaged with research, to relative position in local hierarchies and status;
- ideological, religious, and political affiliation related barriers, particularly when belonging to minority or powerless groups; as well as
- technical, administrative, and legal obstacles, such as mobility limitations and state regulatory frameworks.

Overcoming these challenges to get at the questions we are interested in requires a long period in the field, for building trust and establishing rapport. Some of the challenges also make it more difficult to operationalise concepts and compare indicators across contexts with varying levels and combinations of fragility, violence and conflict (Khan Mohmand *et al.* 2017).

Conventionally, there have been two main approaches to such research: ethnographies of households and villages over a longer period of time, where researchers are embedded in local communities and offer deep insights and thick descriptions that are valuable, and large-n surveys. Ethnographic work is better placed to explore more sensitive aspects of everyday life, as time allows researchers not only to build a relationship of trust with the respondents, but also to spend longer periods in the field and observe as much as possible of respondents' everyday life. However, while ethnographic studies provide rich, descriptive information and insights about the target populations, their small sample sizes and purposive sampling limits generalisability (Lyberg *et al.* 2014). This is particularly problematic if one of the aims of the research is to compare cases across different locations: the attributes of the different settings, as well as the differences in the nature and prevalence of hard-to-reach populations, lead to variation of the main problems that make these populations hard to survey (Smith 2014). Thus, while ethnographies can be useful in concept building, they are harder to use in theory testing.

By contrast, surveys tend to be one-off snapshots that can present generalisable, comparative pictures across a broader population. Comparative studies help eliminate competing hypotheses and isolate the factors that might account for what is being observed, most often by having a control group (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). Yet, while large-n surveys are more effective in allowing for theory testing as well as comparisons across contexts, they are not sufficiently dynamic to trace the processes behind change. Surveys do not allow for building those trust relations – nor permit sufficient time for researchers to observe 'the field'.

To overcome the limitations of the two conventional approaches outlined above, our 'governance diaries' started as a new approach to capture the experiences of chronically poor and marginalised households in FCVAS around governance issues over time. The inspiration came from the 'Portfolios of the Poor', a fly-on-the-wall account of how poor people manage money (Collins *et al.* 2009). In that study, researchers set up 'financial diaries' with 250 households in selected communities in three countries (Bangladesh, India and South Africa). For a year, researchers visited every fortnight and recorded people's financial affairs. The resultant book then assimilated the findings and interspersed them with real-life examples from among the 250 households. Sitting between large-n surveys and deep ethnographies, it uses a small 'n' sample across locations to gather qualitative information longitudinally.

Following the strategy of the 'Portfolios of the Poor,' the idea of the governance diaries was to choose locations which feature different types of conflict and fragility, identify a smaller sample of households representing different facets of poverty and marginalisation, and capture ongoing narratives of their governance challenges and interactions with the state over a period of time. Due to considerations of both illiteracy and security, the households did not literally keep written diaries; rather they recounted relevant experiences in interviews with local researchers. We took an iterative approach; the same researchers were sent back to the same set of households every month over the period of a year, thus allowing research teams to revisit the data, follow-up on previous information, and undertake real-time monitoring. By hiring and training local research assistants who acted simultaneously as researchers and gatekeepers, we quickly gained the trust of local actors, particularly important in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The approach also allowed us to experiment with a series of methodologies: from more qualitative ones such as interviews, life histories, narrative analysis, and thick description; to more participatory ones such as institutional maps, diagrams, and matrices; to more comparative ones, such as anchoring vignettes, and thematic protocols. The result, what we call 'governance diaries', is a cross between a panel survey and ethnographies of marginal households living under conditions of fragility, conflict and violence, which attempts to understand how these households interact with public authorities (whether state or non-state) to meet their governance needs.

We piloted the governance diaries in three countries in the South – Sombodia, Bultan and Makondo[1] – which had large parts of their terrain affected by conflict of various types, including armed conflict. Our initial plan was to conduct monthly or bi-monthly visits to the selected households over a period of 6–12 months. The core objective for the pilot was to obtain monthly entries of around 40 households in each country. We chose two or three locations in each country (a total of seven locations), representing intra-country variation (rural vs urban, conflict vs non-conflict setting, government-controlled vs non-government-controlled areas, and differences in the nature of conflict). In each location, we selected around 15 to 36 poor and marginalised households based on a mix of purposive and snowball sampling. As the research progressed, due to delays in the field as well as opportunities to expand the research, we managed to conduct seven visits in Makondo and

1 Due to the sensitivity of the research, the actual countries have been anonymised.

nine to 11 in both Bultan and Sombodia over a period of a year and a half – from May 2017 until November 2018. At the end of the pilot phase we had 1,217 ‘diary’ entries along with researcher observations, contextual analysis and desk review of relevant literature.

We started our exploration trying to identify under which conditions households in these settings undertake collective action to make claims on public institutions. Through reflexive iteration – examining the data and connecting it with emerging insights (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009) – we gradually refined the focus of our research, ending with a more encompassing overall research question, namely:

> How do poor and marginalised households in fragile and conflict-affected settings interact and make claims on the different existing public authorities, and how do these interactions contribute to their sense of empowerment and progress on accountability?

In this paper we set out to explain how the governance diaries approach works, and the challenges and opportunities it offers for researching empowerment and accountability in the lived experiences of chronically poor and marginalised households living in FCVAS. In the following section, we set up the need for such an approach while conducting research in these settings. In section 3, we explain the rationale behind our strategy to operationalise the concepts used as well as the analytical choices we took while defining, identifying, and categorising households, public authorities, and public goods. In section 4 we explain how we engaged with the households, along with the challenges we faced in accessing them as well as in building trust. In section 5 we describe which methodological tools we used throughout the pilot study, how the need for them arose, and how we adapted them to our settings. Section 6 deals with what we found about the approach through the process of doing the diaries. Finally, we conclude with a brief summary of what insights the governance diaries approach, with its advantages and challenges, offered us in understanding the lives of people in FCVAS.

2 Listening to the chronically poor and marginalised in FCVAS

We have limited understandings of what empowerment and accountability mean to chronically poor and marginalised people in developing countries. In fact, in FCVAS – especially in areas affected by violent conflict – we have very little knowledge of how ordinary people interact with formal or informal public institutions. In situations of low trust, fear and violence, how do people navigate through relevant systems to meet their governance needs? Do people find these encounters empowering or disempowering? What are the micro sources of social and political action? How are these experiences shaped by history as well as the current socio-political context?

Most of our current understanding of processes through which poor and marginalised groups get empowered and make successful accountability claims comes from places with relatively stable and effective states. In such states, historically, accountability and responsiveness to marginalised groups have emerged often through grass-roots struggles – for example the civil rights movement in the US or the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. More recently, the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), seen as the rising powers in the South have also witnessed broad based campaigns for socioeconomic rights such as the Right to Food Movement in India or the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa. The lessons gained from these – the need for activist organisations to work in multi-level and multi-pronged ways in order to make progress – continue to have relevance to our FCVAS countries. Yet FCVAS face challenges that are more fundamental.

Foremost, in FCVAS, internalisation of fear and repression make collective action and claim making rare, as people learn to self-censor and accept their ‘fate’. Further, such contexts are precisely those where state institutions are weak, fragmented and lack legitimacy, while other non-state actors control territory, claim to represent the population and often provide services. This makes claim making complex, as it is not clear who precisely is seen to be accountable for what in a practical sense. At the same time, both state and non-state actors restrict civic space for claim-making, as such actions are viewed as a threat. Finally, given the uncertainty and flux that people find themselves in, informal channels and networks dominate, and have greater credibility when people are attempting to solve their governance needs.

How do these challenges shape social and political action by marginalised groups? In order to understand the lived experiences of these groups, we were looking for an inductive approach that allowed us to interpret people’s perspectives, actions, inactions and rationalisation in an open manner. By starting from the ‘bottom up’ we hoped to gain a different perspective on how people view the multiple institutions that govern their lives, provide security, ensure basic public goods, and in return raise revenues to fund these activities. We ask which are the institutions (if any) that help people solve their everyday problems and what do they mean? Do people find the encounters helpful, even empowering? What does empowerment even mean in these contexts? Given the multiplicity of institutions and the fragmentation of authority, what determines the institutions that are evoked in specific situations? Are any of these institutions responsive and what makes them so? Through which processes do empowerment and accountability seem to be enhanced – do they work together in tandem, or are there situations where one works against the other?

The governance diaries seemed to be a suitable approach for researching behaviour that changes over time and that is complex. It is particularly good for exploring issues that require trust, that is, issues that people are not comfortable talking about to outsiders, as is common in a survey. The diaries also allowed for follow-up: the strength of a diary approach is that, over time, it can break down much of the reticence and confusion. The more entries, the more trust and understanding. In Sombodia for instance, the themes of discussion changed over time as trust was built, from less sensitive issues such as health-related ones in the first few visits, to conflict-related stories in subsequent ones. Besides building trust, capturing people’s experiences over time provides us with new insights into the extent to which state or informal institutions are relevant, legitimate and trusted in core state functions (e.g. delivering services), and how and why these perceptions change over time. The optimal result we hope for is a series of diary projects that allow comparisons and mutual learning across settings and countries.

3 Operationalising concepts and analytical choices

Our research question, as outlined earlier, was to understand how these marginalised households engaged with public authority around the governance of public goods and whether these interactions led to gains in accountability or empowerment. To begin with, we needed to define and operationalise key concepts and identify our unit of analysis. In this section we highlight the choices we were faced with, the rationale for our decisions and how these changed along the way, rendering visible the iterative nature of the process. The key choices we faced related to the operationalisation of (a) unit of analysis – the poor and marginalised households, (b) public authorities, and (c) relevant public goods.[2]

3.1 Households: who are they?

We decided from the beginning to use the household as the unit of research, which we collectively defined across the three countries and seven regions as a group of people living together and sharing meals. We chose not to focus on the individual as we felt the information would be too atomised and incomplete. Nor did we choose the family as focus of our research, as not only does 'family' relate mostly to kinship while 'household' is related to proximity (Yanagisako 1979), but also its borders are much more fluid and ambiguous (Das 1973; Loureiro 2013). Although there are several criteria we could have used to identify a household – including economic cooperation, mutual finances, joint property ownership – we felt that using as basic key identifiers co-residence and a common hearth allowed us to control the variation across all regions and countries.

Within these households, we further zoomed into those that could be classified as chronically poor and marginalised. For identifying the chronically poor, we used the 'Portfolios of the Poor' (Collins *et al.* 2009: 190,195) definition of poor household,

> households that display evidence of deprivation of basic human needs that had existed over a long period of time (many months and often years) – chronic poverty. Examples include going hungry during the 'bad season', poor-quality housing, unemployment, lack of access to basic health services, children not attending school, and being socially outcast. Almost always such households have low and irregular incomes and few assets or negative assets because of indebtedness. The assessments of local key informants will help confirm that such households are poor or 'at the bottom end'.

Within the locations selected in all three countries representing intra-country variation rural/urban and controlling for conflict, we purposely chose locations in which most of the households were chronically poor. To get to the most vulnerable, we selected a sample of households that were considered marginalised within their communities, either because of ascriptive identities, religion, or household characteristics. Being aware of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), as there is often an interdependency of the characteristics that make hard-to-reach households more difficult to research (Lyberg *et al.* 2014), this selection process was done in three stages. First, we held extensive discussions between the principal investigators of the three countries in which we proposed an initial typology based on our previous experience and knowledge of poverty and marginalisation in each country. In a second step, this categorisation was discussed and validated with the field researchers in each country. Finally, researchers validated the categorisation with local communities in order to accurately identify the most marginalised. Across all three stages, while identifying chronically poor and marginalised households, discussions centred on how to make sure we took into consideration both the conditions and processes that prevent households from actively participating in social, economic, and political life. There is a multiplicity of factors that can make people marginalised – some of which can act both as cause and consequence, like poverty – which quite often intersect and increase people's vulnerabilities. In addition, marginalisation needs to be contextualised locally, as the same factors can have a different impact on people's lives depending on time and place. Therefore, we looked for characteristics that made chronically poor households further marginalised within their community.

[2] We have working definitions of empowerment and accountability in the larger programme of which this research was a part (Green 2017). In this research, we chose to work inductively, letting people define what these terms might mean for them in their own lives.

So, as a first step, across the three countries – we agreed on a generic list of household characteristics for marginalisation, focusing on: (a) household composition (age, offspring, household head gender, disability); (b) social status (minority status – ethnic, language, religious – as well as rank within local social stratification system – caste, tribe, class); (c) assets and occupation (land ownership, level of economic activity, education); and (d) dwelling attributes (tenure, type, quality). In the second stage we refined the list at the country level. In household composition we looked at physical attributes of household members that would make them more vulnerable in their locations, such as being female headed, composed only of old and childless individuals, with members suffering from disabilities, addictions, and general ill-health. In the case of social status, and in relation to minority and/or social stratification, in Makondo and Sombodia ethnicity was a key factor, particularly when associated with conflict-related resettled communities. While in Bultan ethnicity did not play a role in household marginalisation in any of the three sites, but being a religious minority did, as did belonging to lower-ranked tribes. In some cases, within all three countries displacement and not being autochthonous also played a role in further marginalising households. Not owning land was an important marker in most of Bultan while not so much in Makondo or Sombodia, as in these countries land arrangements revolve around user rights rather than ownership (land is property of the state, but occupants have – albeit limited – right to use and benefit from the land). Another marker we used was if the household had the potential of being qualified as a beneficiary for a state or non-state cash transfer programme.[3] Within the level of economic activity we targeted households with a single earning member, accessing only menial jobs, casual labour, or chronically unemployed. We also looked for households with very low levels of formal education. Lastly, we aimed to reach households living in temporary, rented (over owned), non-cemented houses.

Researchers then visited for the first time the different locations with the revised list of household characteristics and tested for robustness in the field. Making use of local authorities' knowledge of the status of different households within each location to accurately identify the most marginalised, as well as researchers' own knowledge – in the locations where they resided and acted as gatekeepers – the research teams purposely selected about ten households in each location. Our initial aim was to follow about ten households in each location in order to have a reasonable size sample for comparisons across sites as well as across countries. After the first visit we noticed that a small number of the selected households did not entirely match the list (mostly because they could not be classified as chronically poor). Anticipating that some households were likely to drop out,[4] we added a few additional households in each location during the second and third visits through snowball sampling, so that participating households would not fall below ten in each location. Overall, the overwhelming majority of selected households could be considered poor and marginalised, by not just one but a number of ways. For instance, there were chronically poor and indebted female-headed, ethnically-minority households, living in a rented non-cemented house illegally built on state land; or poor-widower male-headed and single earner daily labourers living in a makeshift tent.

3.2 Public authority: what constitutes it?

In asking the question about who marginalised people should address their claims to, we deliberately used the term 'public authority' as noted earlier, in FCVAS, formal state institutions are not the only actors on the ground; a variety of non-state actors (formal and informal) exercise authority over community life and regulate and manage the provision of public goods. By public authorities we mean formal and informal institutions which 'can undertake core governance functions: protection from external threats, and managing

[3] And there were cases where household qualified but were not beneficiaries, furthering their marginalisation.
[4] By the end of the pilot, the attrition rate was about 25 per cent.

external relations; peaceful resolution of internal conflicts; and providing or facilitating the provision of a range of collective goods and services' (Unsworth 2010: 9). Using this definition of public authority allowed us then to focus on functions rather than on form, while being more neutral about the processes and actors involved – inside or outside the formal state, and across the public–private divide.

Although we started with this broad definition, we soon had to refine it when faced with examples from the field. How were we to assess the health-care claims that a woman heading a household made to a relative who seemed to have authority over her actions, as he was both a respected member of the community and a relative? After much discussion we agreed to exclude familial sources of authority unless they were accepted as responsible for public goods more broadly and only happened to be related to our households under study. Operationally then, public authority was defined as those people, organisations or institutions that households thought were responsible for the provision of particular public goods or services delivered by a wider range of people within the community – e.g. traditional local governance institutions, armed groups, local state institutions, religious leaders – who had the legitimacy and capacity to carry out their functions. We did not hold a priori assumptions about the role that any of these played; and they appeared to play different functions across the three countries in our diaries.

3.3 Public goods: what did we follow?

Poor and marginalised households need to engage with public authority around a range of issues, mainly pertaining to the governance of what might be called public goods. To choose which public goods to follow, we started our discussion across the three countries on what are relevant basic core state functions that, at a minimum, people might expect authorities to provide. There is quite a comprehensive literature on what the core functions of the state are, from the minimum – provision of security; the administration of justice; and the provision of public health (World Bank 1997, in Fritz and Menocal 2007) – to the more common – a monopoly over the legitimate use of force; revenue generation; safety, security and justice; basic service delivery; and economic governance (Mcloughlin with Idris 2016) – to the more comprehensive (Ghani, Lockhart and Carnahan 2005). During this 'negotiation', we decided to take into consideration the expectations of people in the fragile settings where we would be conducting our research. We therefore based our choice of state functions on Stewart and Brown's (2009) operational concept of state fragility involving three dimensions, namely: authority failures (lacking the authority to protect its citizens from violence of various kinds); service failures (failing to ensure that all citizens have access to basic services); and legitimacy failures (lacking legitimacy, enjoys only limited support among the people). We then chose a core state function from each dimension, respectively: security; health provision; and revenue collection. While security was a relatively non-controversial choice, we could have chosen from among a range of public goods, e.g. water, education, energy. We agreed on health provision because it was a service potentially demanded by all household members, and therefore more ubiquitous than the others. Finally, we chose revenue collection not as a public good, but as a proxy for understanding the legitimacy and representativeness of relevant public authority and the extent to which people experienced it not as coercion, but as an implicit fiscal social contract; as one element of state building (see Moore 2007; Dom 2018).

The regular reflection and iteration that we see as central to the diaries approach pushed us to constantly revisit the data, connect it to emerging insights, and refine our field strategies. This allowed us not only to refine the research question as previously mentioned, but it also led us to add and/or reframe the list of public goods that we would track. Of the original three global themes, or thematic networks[5] – security, health, and taxation/revenue collection – we

[5] See Attride-Stirling (2001).

kept two as they were, namely ‘health’ and ‘taxation/revenue collection’. We reframed the third, security, into ‘security, justice, and conflict resolution’, as we could see an interconnection in the households’ stories of accessing security and accessing justice and the existing conflict resolution mechanisms availed by them. Finally, there were several other themes that emerged regularly as important in the lives and stories of several households across locations and we decided to add them as additional themes. These were ‘social protection, employment, and poverty’, ‘accessing resources and (other) services’, and ‘documentation’.[6] In total, we ended with six thematic networks.

4 How did we engage? The challenges of access and trust

One of the big challenges of doing research with the most marginalised is one of access and trust. Distrust of outsiders asking questions is usual in poor and marginalised communities, but is heightened by the challenges of fragility, violence, and conflict – being found to be speaking to the wrong people can lead to violence against these households by those who hold power, whether the local armed groups or powerful political interests. We took the strategic decision of choosing field researchers that were as closely linked as possible to the field sites, in an effort to reduce distrust as well as to ensure that the interviews could be conducted in the local language (rather than the national language of the country). Speaking the local language and being of the same ethnicity was also an element that facilitated access and interaction with the households, as they got the sense they were dealing with people from the area.[7] In practice this was achieved through different routes in each country. In two of our countries, it was not possible for country leads to actually visit the sites of conflict, and we had to rely on intense discussions between field researchers and country leads in order to reflect on the emerging themes. In one country, researchers were graduate students of a national university, who returned to their home locations for the interviews. In another, we recruited junior faculty from regional universities to carry out the research. In the third country, we had a different approach as the challenge was to get local researchers when the households were of different ethnicities within a location. Historic domination by one ethnic group and ongoing active conflicts between the dominant and other ethnic groups (and in some case between the various ethnic groups) meant that we required someone locally from the same ethnic background and language group in order to build up the trust which was required. In the end we chose a combination of local researchers from local civil society organisations (CSOs) that were the same religion, ethnicity and language group as the respondents to visit every month, in combination with more experienced senior researchers from the capital who would go once every three months, accompanied by the CSO researchers (as the relationship holder, and often the translator). Thus, by hiring and training local researchers, we gained the trust of local actors faster, particularly important in these settings.

Working with and through local field researchers was also key to avoid our activities being considered suspicious by different actors and therefore to minimise risk. Research in FCVAS can pose potential risks not only to respondents, but also to researchers (Campbell 2017); and while there are no general objective criteria for judging the risks of conducting research in these settings, Mazurana and Gale (2013) propose researchers adapt and adopt the tools and approaches aid agencies have developed for staff security, such as risk assessments. Simultaneously, it is crucial in these settings to be mindful of cultural, social and political sensitivities and power relations, being aware of whom to ask what, as well as how to ask;

[6] Land registration titles, registration on household lists, ID cards, etc.
[7] In fact, in some cases respondents and field researchers did know each other.

in other words, it is crucial to be experienced and familiar with these settings (Goodhand 2000). Conducting this research through a partnership of research institutes, an international NGO, and local field researchers allowed us to have in place some of the tools and approaches mentioned by Mazurana and Gale (2013) as well as the familiarity and experience of the settings which Goodhand (2000) refers to. In FCVAS research ethics are both more difficult and more important than in other settings. It is therefore particularly important to uphold informed consent and follow the 'do no harm' principle at all times. Throughout the diaries pilot we maintained informed consent by regularly reminding all households of their power to decline to answer any question, withdraw at any time throughout the research with no negative repercussions, and maintaining confidentiality. Particularly during the first visit, we explained to each household: the purpose of the research; what was expected of them as research participants, including the amount of time; the expected risks and benefits, including social and psychological; and how we would protect their confidentiality.

5 Methodological tools

Part and parcel of the governance diaries approach was the use of a varied spread of methodological tools out of an array of methods suitable for research on social and political action in FCVAS.[8] Qualitative methodological tools are key to field research, serving the dual purpose of collecting data, as well as giving researchers an enriched understanding of the case study and its context through the process of engagement, which can later facilitate the analysis of the data (Höglund 2011). Among them three in particular were key for our research: ethnographic tools, institutional mapping, and anchoring vignettes.

5.1 Ethnographic tools

Within the ethnographic tools, we focussed on four: participant observation; in-depth interviews (and within, life histories and conversations); focus groups; and thick description. Participant observation allows for a holistic awareness of events as they unfold and as such a more comprehensive understanding of what really matters to respondents. Central to this reliance on observation is the need to keep an 'anthropological eye', that is, a sensibility to local culture and intuitive empathy. In the case of our research teams, as most of them belonged to the locations we were studying, positionality was an issue, as many of the research assistants could easily take everyday life in these regions for granted and not record observations. As such, a significant element of our preparation and training focused on getting the teams to become detached observers. To build their anthropological eye we focused on helping them to see the world as Martians: pretend that they have landed in this location from planet Mars and everything is new to them; and therefore worth recording and questioning. With research teams coming and going to the field every month or so, the level of participation was moderate, allowing us to maintain a good combination of involvement (as insiders) and necessary detachment (as outsiders) to remain objective. Being both insiders and outsiders helped us develop trust with the households relatively speedily taking into consideration the sensitivity of both settings and themes of discussion, while simultaneously being able to ask questions, remarks, and observations that usually local inhabitants would not think of asking. Having an anthropological eye was particularly useful not only when observing special events – to see how people react to these – but also ordinary ones. For instance, in the third visit of one of the households, during a moment of silence when the household already hinted there was nothing new since the last visit, one of the researchers noticed there was a cow outside the house. When asked if the cow was theirs, the household head replied that it was not, but she was in charge of it. Probing deeper, we uncovered a

8 For an overview of this array, see Khan Mohmand *et al*. (2017).

local informal social protection arrangement through which non-poor households give their livestock to poorer households to rear in exchange for a cut when the cattle is sold.

Interviews too posed challenges. The general atmosphere of suspicion in FCVAS has a strong influence in the interviewing process, shaping not only the kind of questions we can ask, but also the strategies we must adopt in asking these questions (Goldstein 2014). The multitude of unpredictable parameters which can restrain the interviewing process in fragile and conflict-affected areas (particularly when there is still an active conflict) forced us to adopt a reflective approach to fieldwork (Barakat and Ellis 1997). Interviewing in such contexts require patience, subtlety, and above all flexibility (Kovats-Bernat 2002). In these situations, structured or rigid questionnaires can appear threatening and inappropriate (Barakat and Ellis 1997), and so it is best to let the respondent lead the discussion/interview, as the more comfortable s/he feels, the more likely s/he will be put at ease resulting in a more detailed interview (Goldstein 2014). A particular kind of interviewing style we used and preferred for these settings was conversations. The aim was not to simply interview different households and observe their everyday activities,[9] but to engage in long, relaxed conversations.

Within these conversations we used other tools such as unstructured and semi-structured interviews, life event analysis, and family histories. Unstructured interviews through conversations allowed our respondents the freedom to talk about what mattered to them (as well as what they felt we were interested in listening to, at least in the first visits), while semi-structured interviews were useful when we had particular themes we wanted to discuss, without the constraint of having a structured questionnaire in front of us. The iterative nature of the diaries meant that incomplete or unexpected observations shared and discussed amongst us regarding the previous visit, became follow-up questions to probe in the next visit. These, along with other issues discussed across the three countries became the semi-structured thematic mental prompt lists for the research teams. Another advantage of having a semi-structured thematic prompt list in our minds was that it allowed the research teams to slowly bring respondents back to the main issue of discussion when they moved away from the theme.[10] Quite a few of these unstructured and semi-structured interviews became focus groups, as other respondents within the households joined the conversation with their views, opinions, and stories.

Life history interviews and life event analysis allow for individuals to discuss not only themselves and their lives, but also the social, economic, and political spaces that they inhabit. In doing so, life histories can be useful tools for capturing processes of change. At times, life event analysis also turned out to be a good exercise to kickstart conversations, simply by asking respondents ‘what are the key turning points in your life?’. When we used it with family histories, it allowed us to document not only individual’s key moments in life, but also when they shared these moments with others, how the moments were perceived by different household members, why some were more important than others, and so on. We adapted life histories to our needs, and in particular life event analysis, by focusing not on the life of the respondent – be it the household head or the entire household – but on the life of the events themselves. By the third visit (see Annexe 1), we started focusing on particular stories within each household, which were interesting from the point of view of our research themes, and representative of recurring problems and issues these households faced. From then on in each subsequent visit, the research teams followed these chosen stories.

Conversations are particularly valuable while working in FCVAS such as these, as they allowed us to build a certain level of trust and informality between the research teams and households; it allowed us (researchers and respondents) to ‘be at ease’. Part and parcel of

[9] Where often we are more concerned in making sure we are ‘getting it all’.
[10] This was particularly useful when we started tracking specific stories within each household.

the success of conversations as a key mode of enquiry is the need for more than one researcher, in order to create a ‘conversational community’ (Gudeman and Rivera 1990), the reason why the researchers in the field worked in pairs. Working in pairs, with alternating roles between interviewers and note-takers, allowed them to engage in discussions regarding the daily conversations they had at the different field sites, on what they had heard and observed and to help with translations if need be. Yet, As Gudeman and Rivera (1990: 6) explain while conducting research on rural Colombia,

> translation was only one of several tasks we undertook within our conversational community. More often than we would like to admit, each of us had missed something the other had heard, or heard the ‘same thing’ differently. This was disorienting and humiliating, because it meant that ‘facts’ were not external pillars of knowledge but partly constructed through our success in persuading one another, and our ability to listen too… so our continuous ‘review’ in the car and elsewhere had for us an ‘interpretive’ as well as a ‘verification’ function, in some sense of those terms.

Throughout our research, we created three kinds of conversational communities: a local one, where two local researchers were paired together taking turns in either being the interviewer (asking) or the note-taker (listening and observing), as well as discussing and sharing descriptive and reflective notes as a unit; a national one, where all research teams within each country would reflect and discuss their monthly observations with each other and the principal investigators, as well as plan the following activities and subsequent visits; and an international one, where all principal investigators shared their observations and challenges and tried to keep a comparative element to the whole process. As well as using conversations to improve data quality, a(nother) key activity of the conversational community centred on not only gathering and interpreting households’ stories, but also on unpacking the words and expressions they used to tell these stories and the meanings behind them. Similar to the iterative manner we used to select the different households – first through cross-country discussions between principal investigators, then discussion and validation with in-country research teams, and finally validating the choices with local communities – we followed the same procedure to make sure we were questioning and measuring the same concepts across the locations. Keeping true to the intended meanings of our concepts entailed seeking agreement within the different possible interpretations, by validating translations across a series of actors in-country inside and outside our conversational communities, namely the households and communities, the research teams, academics, think-tanks and research institutes, activists, and development actors.

In Sombodia we further used hypothetical vignettes – based on stories that had actually come out of the governance diaries – in order to create a conversation around how people would act if the hypothetical situation were to happen in their village. This enabled a slightly broader triangulation of what respondents had said in the household interviews, while also allowing for a ‘reality check’ of the proposed actions of others from within their community, in a way to try to counter potential response bias. We selected as respondents for each focus group discussion people over the age of 18, who had lived in the village for more than a year, with varied educational levels and types of job. Using a hypothetical situation allowed the groups to have conversations about why they would or would not take certain actions, and their levels of trust in community roles. These discussions were specifically used to gain a deeper understanding about the role of trust. The vignettes allowed us to ask questions about trust in various governance actors indirectly and understand people’s attitudes and behaviour in situations in which authorities were potentially involved. Asking directly whether participants trust certain authorities would have been too sensitive, making participants uncomfortable about speaking openly; this way, the groups were able to have these conversations whilst allowing them to save face and not be speaking about specific individuals. In other words, the hypothetical scenarios were grounded in contextual realities without requiring people to speak about individuals, instead speaking about roles within these hypothetical scenarios.

A key constraint of conducting research in these settings, particularly when dealing with politically-sensitive topics such as social and political action – and when respondents suffer from respondent fatigue – is the difficulty of writing down accurate field-notes while observing and participating in daily life and trying to make respondents more ‘at ease’ and relaxed.[11] It was important for us to create an atmosphere of trust by carrying the least number of gadgets to record the conversations, especially during the first visits. Here too, having two researchers always listening and observing was useful to ensure that the research teams had fully captured households’ stories.

The ethnographic method, and within it the conversation, was ideal to ask probing questions. Simultaneously, the local researchers relied on observation while having an open approach to questioning, focusing on asking ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. Following from this last point, the third key ethnographic tool or technique we used was thick description (Geertz 1973), where we not only explain the behaviour of individuals and groups within a society, but also its context, as understanding the local context is crucial to fill in certain blanks.[12] Thick description is composed not only of facts but also of commentary and interpretation: what we find out as researchers is inherently connected with how we find it out (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). As such, it was critical that the research teams documented their own activities, circumstances, and emotional responses to fieldwork, as these shaped the process of observing and recording others’ lives (*ibid.*). Carrying out thick description as much as possible also allowed us to engage with narrative analysis as an analytical method, to interpret social meaning in households’ everyday lives and interactions with different public authorities by analysing their stories.

5.2 Institutional mapping

As the research unfolded, we felt we needed to bring in other tools not only to probe deeper into the nature of the relationships between households and the different public authorities but also to counteract a certain survey fatigue that started appearing within some households. We therefore decided to introduce a participatory tool that could simultaneously deal with these two issues, namely institutional maps.[13] These maps allowed us to see the perceived importance, accessibility, and impact of different public authorities to different households, as well as the key institutions existing in their communities, and how they related both to each other and to external agencies involved in service delivery and the administration of programmes. In each country we first selected which households’ respective stories were most noteworthy and/or thought-provoking, stories which could help us gain a deeper knowledge of people’s perceptions of their local institutions – including the different kinds of formal and informal public authorities – and their access (or lack of) to them. The main objective was to see which actors helped households in solving problems and which ones existed that could help but did not. The problems fell under one of our six thematic networks: (a) health; (b) security, justice, and conflict resolution; (c) revenue collection/taxation; (d) social protection, employment, and poverty; (e) accessing services and resources; and (f) documentation. The teams started by helping households identify key actors and their relative power to help them solve their problems (the more powerful the

[11] Having a notepad or a tape recorder in our hands, especially when interviewing households in FCVAS for the first few times, does not exude a sense of relaxation.

[12] There are excellent examples of thick descriptive ethnographies in FCVAS such as Daniel’s (1996) work in Sri Lanka, Nordstrom and Robben’s (1995) collection of essays by anthropologists who have experienced political violence first-hand, Smyth and Robinson’s (2001) edited volume on ethical and methodological issues while researching in violently divided societies, and Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale’s (2013) edited volume of lessons and reflections by a group of academics, journalists, and filmmakers on their own role within FCVAS.

[13] A participatory visual method to identify and represent people’s perceptions of key institutions and individuals, their relationships, and importance.

actor, the bigger the circle representing it), while simultaneously noting the basis that households used for determining power. Then the research teams asked how accessible these actors were to the households, using distance from the centre – household – as a measure of accessibility. Part of the exercise was to interview the map, that is, to probe how and why households chose to identify those actors in particular, the criteria they used to determine power, and the level of relationship between different actors. There were several aspects around the nature of the relationships shown on the maps that allowed the research teams to probe deeper into the stories followed, namely kinds of power and influence, flows of money and information, and social and cultural bonds and constraints.

5.3 Anchoring vignettes

As we approached the final stages of fieldwork, we felt we needed to bring in the comparative element somewhat more strongly into our research. Unless very carefully selected, studies based on small samples and in-depth interviews rarely allow for conducting longitudinal or geographic comparisons, that is, across time and space (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). Reflecting on our research question – and thinking about how to measure across locations' empowering and disempowering situations when holding public authorities accountable – we decided to use anchoring vignettes. These, we felt, would allow for cross-location and cross-national analysis of people's perceptions of empowering or disempowering circumstances. Measuring empowerment and disempowerment is difficult not only technically, but also conceptually (Masset 2015). As such, we developed a set of three brief descriptions of hypothetical situations and fictitious characters against which we could calibrate respondents' self-assessment (King *et al.* 2004). Each vignette described a situation related to an empowering/disempowering moment of a different fictitious character who manifested it to a lesser or greater extent. We chose a health-related event as this was the theme brought out by the overwhelming majority of households. Each respondent first rated each character's experience (from very disempowered to very empowered) and then rated his/her own experience *vis-à-vis* the character on the same scale. By describing levels of empowerment that are fixed across respondents, vignettes provided scale anchors that allowed us to compare across groups, that is, it allowed for interpersonal comparisons (King *et al.* 2004, Masset 2015). After each vignette the research teams then probed the rationale for the respondents' answers. Following on from this reflection, the research teams further used the exercise to inquire about respondents' claim-making abilities with existing public authorities.[14]

6 Reflections on the research process

Not surprisingly, the research process encountered several challenges. The key challenges related to definitions of key concepts and their meaning across languages, respondent fatigue, the iterative analysis, and the amount of time needed for training and accompanying the research teams due to the iterative nature of the approach and the need to carry out analysis as one went along.

A key challenge revolved around definitions and agreeing concepts. Although at the start of the project we had agreed definitions of the key concepts of 'empowerment' and 'accountability' that flowed from the larger research programme, we needed to agree on a few additional concepts as well as operationalise them appropriately in several languages and country contexts. Earlier in this paper, we mentioned how we arrived and agreed on definitions of poor and marginalised households as well as public authority. Here we discuss the challenges of operationalising these definitions in several languages. Across the project,

[14] As mentioned before, in Sombodia we did not use anchoring vignettes; however, we still used similar vignettes within focus group discussions held to unpack the role of trust.

there were 12 different languages to consider, each of them having words for key concepts that either had additional implications, or several words with slightly different nuances that covered the terrain that our concept was trying to cover. In Sombodia, for example, the term 'authority' often relates to 'legitimacy' while in Makondo people use the term to refer to the police. The challenge for the research was that some concepts we were working with may or may not have a direct link to the language. Again, in Sombodia, the literal word 'trust' in local languages has more spiritual meanings, and so we needed to find other ways to get at the concept without using the word. Also, the definition for who could be considered public authority was tricky – in Sombodia, we were asked multiple times why God was not on our list of governance actors!

After the novelty of the first few visits wore off, some households, began to feel tired with the line of questioning (and at times, the research teams did as well). From the households' perspective this was because they had the impression that we were asking the same things that they had already answered in the previous visit, while from the research teams' perspective it was because they felt they were getting the same answers. In several households, even if the questions were clear, repetition was sometimes unavoidable. Part of the problem had to do with the way questions were formulated, as well as not having sufficient time in between visits to carefully process and reflect on what we were learning. This was particularly visible in Bultan by the fifth visit and in Makondo by the fourth visit. Bringing in new methodological tools as described earlier, allowed researchers to retain household motivation and their continue engagement.

The iterative nature of the governance diaries allowed us to come back from the field, reflect on the households' stories, and think of other ways of enquiry: sometimes because we had reached a methodological impasse and wanted to probe deeper; other times to look at issues from a different angle or epistemological framework; or to reformulate an abstract query into something more concrete to allow households to reflect on their actions. Yet this iteration also posed challenges. We decided to use the end of the year to complete the work of the previous months (data entry, cleaning, and coding). Simultaneously, in order to identify the lessons out of the process, it was imperative that we stopped to redefine the strategies. In December 2017, we organised a small seminar in Makondo with researchers from Makondo and Bultan to revisit the original research question, share initial observations, and reframe some of the more abstract concepts we were engaging with. Along with this reflection, we added more visual tools and data collection methods, such as institutional maps, and re-trained the research teams. In Sombodia, senior researchers accompanied the local researchers every three months, to ask more probing questions and engage in different activities e.g. more questions on 'trust' in one visit, or running focus group discussions and mapping out relationships in another depending upon what was coming out of the stories. This exercise was very useful for both research teams and households, as the researchers became enthusiastic with the new tools and showed greater motivation during the following visits, while the households became accustomed to (and somewhat bemused by) these new forms of enquiry. Another key difference between the countries was the use of data analysis software: in Sombodia we used SenseMaker both as a journaling system and for data analysis, but in Makondo and Bultan we used NVivo 11. Despite agreeing and using the same coding protocol, with the same thematic and organising codes across the three countries and allowing for basic codes to differ across countries (Attride-Stirling 2001), two issues became obvious: first, it is problematic to run cross-analysis if we do not use the same data analysis software; second, while the amount of data initially seems small (only a few households per site) not stopping every few months to code and analyse makes data analysis at the end of the pilot extremely time-consuming.

Every three months (every cycle) the Sombodian team would also bring together field researchers and principal investigators to reflect on and undertake a preliminary analysis of trends that were coming out. However, similar to Makondo and Bultan, they found that due to skill set, methodological issues, and confusion of roles, these were spent more on troubleshooting methodology rather than analysis. We soon realised that whatever time we planned for in terms of training, it was never enough. We expected that the quality of notetaking would be inadequate initially, as despite training research assistants, this was a new kind of research for all of them. We had chosen them based on the need for local expertise (as they worked both as research assistants and gatekeepers), but as the visits were monthly, we did not employ them full time on the projects – and naturally, they had other commitments. In the initial stages there were occasions where the quality of the notes was very incomplete. In addition, as this was a pilot project, we did not have a template for notetaking for the diary entries in Bultan and Makondo (Sombodia used SenseMaker). We left each team to organise and send in whatever format they thought fit. The result of all this was interesting: some things worked, others did not. One of the things that worked was letting the research participants shape what is a priority as this helped to better capture people's views and voices. Yet the notes had to be continuously interrogated and occasionally, additional visits to some households were needed to get around the paucity of information recorded. So, training and reflection soon formed a continuous part of the research and some of this training was done remotely, using platforms like Skype. In Sombodia, the research team used Facebook to interact on an ongoing basis. The local researchers were all very keen on the research and really wanted to learn; however, it was a gradual process to develop their confidence and create ownership of the research.

Another challenge we faced relates to the time allocated for fieldwork. It soon became apparent that the two days assigned to each visit were often insufficient to gather all the information needed, especially if we wanted to probe deeper, include more observations, have more conversations with local authorities, among other things. The conversations with selected households alone ended up occupying the two days and at times even these were hard to finish. By adding extra households (to counterbalance for potential losses of respondents) we were stretching the limit of how many interviews our research assistants could handle in a day.

At the end of piloting this approach in these three countries for over a year, there are three key process-related lessons that stand out: first, it is very important to collectively develop and agree definitions, concepts and meanings, units of study, and targets right from the beginning if possible. Second, there will always be a need for more training and more accompaniment than planned, due to the unpredictability of these fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings and to the fact that often we are doing remote research and are dependent on having to work through gatekeepers and intermediaries who may not have the same level of understandings of the research process. This requires adequate monitoring (e.g. on notetaking quality) to try and get as close to people's real inputs as possible, while simultaneously translating notes into the language of the analysis as the research progressed. Third, while it is important to have an initial plan/design, it is imperative to keep the whole process flexible both in terms of tools and methodologies used and critical reflection in and between countries – and be ready to embrace change (theirs and ours).

In addition to the challenges we faced, we had started the research with one important reservation. While the aim of our research was to gain a deeper understanding on how chronically poor and marginalised households living in FCVAS, hold those in power positions accountable, we were concerned about how our research would be perceived by the households, worried that it would be perceived as extractive, and people would opt out. Many of these households have had long experience of subjugation by different configurations of the state (colonial, post-colonial repressive, authoritarian, neoliberal…), in which local public authorities (formal and informal) have played a key role. All participating households were aware that they would not receive any payment for participating in the research, that we were not promising any immediate benefits, and that they had the power to withdraw at any point during the research (and we would not use any of the information collected so far if they so requested). Yet, the process of research threw up a surprise. Throughout a year and a half, most households (about three quarters) kept talking to us – why? We suspect three key factors played a role namely: the fact that there was someone there to listen to them – both as catharsis as well as the feeling that someone cared about them; the fact that we could potentially help with their lives; and the fact that we relieved the monotonous repetitiveness of the research by using different methods of enquiry over time to minimise respondent fatigue – a point we alluded to earlier. The cathartic element started appearing from the third visit onwards, just as trust was increasing between households and research teams. When we skipped his household during a visit, one of the respondents from rural Bultan revealed that they had missed us and were wondering when we would return so they could continue their story. Another example also from Bultan comes from the reflective notes a researcher made after the third visit,

> We have started feeling that people are becoming more comfortable in talking to us as time passes. They discuss their issues more openly now. We felt this in the case of Mr X, as he talked about his father's murder in great length. He told us all the events that happened before, during and after the murder. He even shared the responses of the womenfolk in his family after the murder. Men in this region usually don't share the stories of their women and the events that happen within the family, except to the closest of their friends. So, in a way, we are becoming his friends – that's why he is opening more and more about himself and his family. By the third visit, we felt he was waiting for our arrival and was desperate to share the story. Governance diaries, the interviews, have become a source of catharsis for him.
>
> We have also observed this cathartic attitude in our female interviewees. In the first two visits, they kept their answers very short; but now they have started opening up about their issues. One of the major problems with interviewing women in this region is that generally they don't speak to males except those within the family. Although these women are more or less our acquaintances, they still hesitated while talking to us. Women here are often kept aside from publicly social and political life: since their childhood they are taught to respect and obey their male members, starting with their brothers and fathers. At every point in their lives they are told to recognise their inferior status in local society as compared to their male counterparts. Women have internalised this idea of biological and consequently social and political inferiority. For example, one of our interviewees kept repeating that women are weak as compared to men and that naturally women understand less than their male counterparts about the world and the events that happen in it.

In Makondo, the idea of communicating with people who come from the capital and from provincial capitals, places that are not easily accessible for most households, particularly those living in the most remote districts, served as a stimulus for them to keep on speaking with the research teams. The fact that these researchers, highly educated and who work in universities and 'big' NGOs, came to their homes to hear about their lives made many feel important.[15] Just the fact that we made recurring visits showed that we were worried about their situation, they said; even those who were initially reluctant to give details about their daily lives, after the second, and especially third, visits became more receptive and communicative. Some would even initiate the conversations themselves, as they already knew the nature of the research, advancing and speaking openly about their issues.

For some respondents the diaries were a way of expressing their frustrations, with the expectation that the researchers could be mediators to channel them to the leaders located at provincial and national levels. Not surprisingly, it was particularly in rural areas that the households were more welcoming, available and more willing to talk to researchers. In rural

15 This was not true for Sombodia, where ethnic tensions made local populations extremely suspicious of outsiders.

Makondo sometimes some even stopped what they were doing, including in the farms and in the markets, as soon as they knew of the arrival of the research teams. Many also hoped that we could give them direct support, for example, with groceries, or medicines and transport to the hospital in cases when someone was sick. Despite our repeated claim that we were not there to help, for quite a few of our respondents the fact that we could speak the language of the state – we could read government documents, hospital prescriptions, access government websites – helped them considerably at times. Lastly, us being there was a possible connection to public authorities – even if a tenuous one – which, for the majority of our households with very little connections was an opportunity not to waste.

7 Conclusion

The governance diaries approach outlined here uses a basket of methods that sits between a medium 'n' survey which gathers information in a single snapshot, and a detailed ethnography in several locations simultaneously over an extended period of time. We argue that this hybridity offers several advantages. Repeated interactions with the same households, together with the use of different methods – for both data collection and data analysis – allows for a relatively open-ended agenda in these conflict affected settings and slowly 'tightening the net': by focusing on particular stories/events and being able to adapt and use different methods for different needs. Thus, the different methods enable deeper probes into households' access to different public authorities while limiting respondent fatigue. In the process, households can also visualise and reflect on their position *vis-à-vis* different public authorities.

We share here a flavour of some of the insights regarding empowerment and accountability we gained from using the governance diaries approach, which would not have been accessible to us through other methods.[16] The traditional understanding of change from below is that marginalised groups: (a) empower themselves to express voice on a given issue or grievance; (b) mobilise (usually in a public way) to hold appropriate authorities to account; and (c) authorities will then respond to grievances and aim to correct them, even if it involves struggles and 'naming and shaming' – attributes of a democratic society. But our research challenged these assumptions on a number of counts.

First, histories of violence and fear mean that it is hard to change internalised norms and deep emotions (fear, powerlessness) that affect the possibility of voice. The overwhelming majority of the households felt disempowered all the time. There were, however, interesting ways of coping with this marginalisation – of rationalising their situation and relative impotence in being able to solve governance issues. In one of our locations, when crimes were committed and criminals were known, people would resign themselves by saying about the criminals, 'What to do? They are being resourceful; they are also getting by.' When people had no access to health care, they chose deliberate ignorance, choosing not to find out about their illnesses as they could not afford the treatments and it would make them feel more helpless. Fate was often invoked as an explanation, and in one setting we were also asked why 'God' was not among our list of potential public authorities.

Second, we found that when people did take action, marginalised people rarely reach state or non-state institutions directly but work through intermediaries/brokers who mediate their claims. People rely on these intermediaries for various reasons – they seem to be close to the authority responsible, they have performed well in the past, they are the only people known to have higher level connections to the household, etc. In one of our countries, some intermediaries who had been historically part of the state were still considered by households

[16] The findings will be reported in other research papers currently in process.

as part of the government, even though their official role had long since been removed, a finding that came as a surprise to many researchers in the national capital who had designed programmes without taking them into account.

Third, unsurprisingly, we found that in these settings characterised by fragility, conflict and violence, rapidly closing civil society space, and a history of authoritarian regimes – collective action is rare and risky with uncertain outcomes. Because the settings are fragile, violent and conflict-affected means that forms of marginalisation are diverse, and that it is hard for marginalised people to physically collectivise or even find a common identity. As one respondent from Bultan said, '[If] we get united, we can even make America accountable. But we are so fragmented. How can we [ever] be united?' In our hundred odd households across the three locations we found only two clear instances of collective action to either substitute public authorities or hold them accountable. Understanding these instances of positive outliers seems to offer a promising start to unlocking constraints to accountability action from below.

While we explored this approach to understand governance issues in FCVAS, it could also be explored for other questions in different settings where researchers are interested in a ground up view of how particular services, institutions or discourses are experienced and perceived. The approach seems to be particularly valuable in places where: (a) there is likely to be limited trust between populations of interest and outsiders, particularly around research; (b) where the environment is rapidly changing requiring shifting responses from people; or (c) where the subject matter is particularly sensitive and one shot approaches are unlikely to generate accurate data for the questions being asked. One could imagine using the approach with other hard-to-reach populations, such as internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees in camps, those living with stigmatised illnesses, unemployed youth in industrialised countries, or even with frontline workers or mid-level administrators in highly hierarchical bureaucracies. Of course, the scale of the diaries and the tools used would need to be tailored to the questions of interest. Finally, analysis of the diaries gave us pause to think about how people at the margins imagine the state and public authority. In all of our countries people thought of state and public authority in ways different from how we had conceptualised them, variously invoking the state as an absent father who should be providing but has forgotten us, or as an arm of repression who people want to be left alone by. Alternative forms of public authority also were perceived to have different degrees of legitimacy and credibility in terms of delivering on public goods.

In sum, governance diaries offers a powerful approach for both academics and practitioners. It fits well within applied research, particularly low trust, rapidly changing settings where it is difficult to go as outside researchers, allowing for a more economical ethnographic study which is simultaneously a qualitative longitudinal one, as well as potentially comparative in its nature. At the same time, it can easily be customised for practitioners as a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) tool, as it allows for real-time data collection and analysis, potentially making the implementation of projects and programmes more adaptive by creating feedback loops, as well as testing underlying assumptions.

Annexe 1 Timeline of visits

Below is a timeline of events based on the first seven visits by the Makondan and Bultani teams, as well as the continuing visits by some of the Sombodian teams.

Visit 1: Household selection, introductions, setting the rules of the game, and gaining consent
During the first visit, each research team started by identifying potential households – classified by their community and by us as chronically poor and marginalised – by using a mixture of purposive sampling through gatekeepers and snowballing. Following that, they introduced themselves, explained the research objectives, and gained consent from each household to visit them monthly. As part of the first visit, we started compiling a roster of who inhabits each household, which we updated and completed over the next visits.

Visit 2: How do you solve your problems?
In our second visit, we started investigating how these households dealt with problems and challenges and how they satisfied their everyday needs. As agreed across the three countries, we focused initially on issues related to health, security, and taxation. Households told us their main issues, as well as average monthly sources of income and expenditures. We continued gathering data to improve the household rosters.

Visit 3: Choosing stories to follow
For the third visit, we started to choose which stories to follow for each household, focusing on one up to a maximum of three per household. The aim was to identify suitable stories representative of recurring problems and issues these households discussed with the research teams, both the ones connected to the original three themes (health, security, taxation), as well as problems and issues they themselves brought forward as crucial in their everyday lives.

Visits 4 and 5: Thematic networks
Before the fourth visit, all in-country research teams and principal investigators went through all the stories for each household together and redid the thematic networks, consolidating and adapting the original three themes – (a) health; (b) security, justice, and conflict resolution; (c) taxation – and bringing new ones – (d) social protection, employment and poverty; and (e) access to other services and resources. Each research team then proceeded to gather further information around these themes using households' stories in visits four and five.

Visit 6: Probing public authorities through institutional mapping
During the sixth visit, we developed a series of institutional maps for a selected number of households per team. The aim of this exercise was to identify who were the main actors that existed in their communities regarding a particular issue (connected to one of the five themes), their power to solve problems, and how households accessed (or not) these actors. Part of the exercise was to interview the diagram, namely to probe how and why households chose to identify actors, which criteria they use to determine power, and the level of relationship between different actors. The final aim of this exercise was to see who different households identified as (formal and informal) public authorities and intermediaries.

Visits 7 and 8: Empowerment and accountability matrix
During the seventh and eighth visit, and for each story, we followed up the institutional maps posing a series of questions to identify accountability opportunities when households deal with the different public authorities, as well as how empowering or disempowering such moments were to them. We set these series of questions to cover each of the thematic networks. The aim was to develop an empowerment and accountability matrix.

Visit 9: Anchoring vignettes on empowerment and accountability

For the ninth and final visit, we designed a set of three anchoring vignettes to measure empowerment across all the different settings and countries. We designed the vignettes using health-related stories of empowering/disempowering circumstances, using them as examples to explore how people thought about (perceptions) and acted upon empowerment. For each vignette, we asked the respondents how empowered/disempowered they felt the character in each story was when dealing with that particular public authority, as well as how would they compare themselves and their experiences to each character. As a follow-up question, we probed how each respondent made claims on the different existing authorities on issues discussed in their stories over the past nine visits.

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