

**‘Door knocking’ – A Useful Entry Tool in a Post-conflict Environment: A  
Critical Appraisal based on Empirical Research in Sierra Leone<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

*There is a considerable amount of literature on research methods in post-conflict environments, especially Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These methods are often used in rural areas where illiteracy poses a major problem when trying to obtain the required information through structured questionnaires. Whilst the use of these methods continues to grow, there is the need to question whether they (as stand-alone methods) provide the required information to obtain research validity in post-conflict environments, where lack of trust is a major issue of concern. While considering the question above, other methodological and ethical challenges cannot be overlooked. These critical insights emerged from a technique, that was used in Sierra Leone, known as ‘door knocking’ to gain the trust and confidence of the community, before and during the research process. This paper argues that ‘door knocking’ facilitates the building of trust and addresses some methodological and ethical challenges in post-conflict environments. This paper is an appraisal of the author’s empirical work in Sierra Leone for the study of how a community-based approach to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) can facilitate more effective peace-building.*

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## **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, a growing awareness of the methodological inadequacies of the conventional research approaches<sup>3</sup> in post-conflict environments has stimulated the development of a variety of alternatives (Preece, 2006; Chambers and Mayoux, 2005; Slocum and Thomas-Slayter, 1995; Cornwall, et al, 1993). These conventional research methods are considered to be a top-down approach with little or no participation at all from local communities. For instance, the design of the research is, along with other information gathering tools, considered to be that of the researcher without the involvement of the researched community (Preece, 2006:206), and this approach has been criticized by some communities, owing to the lack of opportunities for participation in research programmes that affect them. Also, many conventional research programmes have failed to identify issues of gender, age and status due to the lack of community involvement, and sometimes lack of familiarization on the part of the researcher to enable the identification of the issues relating to diversity. Even in recent times, lack of community participation in research programmes, that affect communities, has become an ethical issue, and critics are calling for active participation of communities in such an information gathering process (Chambers and Mayoux, 2005). It can, therefore, be argued that the conventional research approaches have failed to involve the researched community actively.

Considering the fact that the aim of conventional research is to gain information or knowledge, this paper questions whose knowledge it is, and what the knowledge is for. Notably, any knowledge gained is from the researched community and any development resulting from the research is geared towards that community. This

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<sup>3</sup> Conventional research approaches are methods which do not involve the researched through active participation.

means that the researcher's role is to facilitate the research process but not to take over the investigations from the researched (Chambers, 1997). Chambers elaborated on this point by stating that 'we encourage and allow "them" to take the lead, to determine much of the agenda, to gather, express and analyse information and to plan' (Chambers, 1997:131). The expressions of 'we' and 'them', by Chambers, referred to researchers and communities, respectively. Whilst this could be true in PRA action research, it is debatable in academic research. Normally, in academic research, researchers take control of what they are investigating. However, we should not forget that the active participation of the researched community is very important for research projects, thus many alternatives to the conventional research approaches have shifted towards participatory methods.

### **Participation in Research**

The concept of community participation in research aims at community ownership of research programmes. It is assumed that research programmes, which involve communities, often contribute to a 'more effective and sustainable impact' than those with less participation (Cornwall et al, 1993:13). According to Botterill and Fisher (2002:5), community participation models offer alternatives to 'bottom up' solutions to problems within communities. Participation has gained immense popularity because it empowers communities and offers local ownership. Slocum and Thomas-Slayter (1995) argue that by involving local people in the problem definition, data collection, decision making and implementation processes, the success of research projects can be facilitated.

Participation also increases the voice of the poor and vulnerable, and those who otherwise may lack opportunities to be heard. It has been realised that vulnerable groups such as women, children and the disabled are often neglected in research programmes. Bar-On and Prinsen (1999:286) cited Botswana as a place where ‘women, young people, members of ethnic minorities and the poor were under-represented’ in programmes, which affected them. Participation offers opportunities for minorities to contribute towards the decision making processes.

In addition, participation facilitates the triangulation process in research. In participatory research projects all social and demographic groups are represented and, given the fact that these groups of people are from different backgrounds, each of which has a different status, their involvement enriches data collection. In post-conflict environments, participation also facilitates social reintegration and encourages the use of a variety of research tools, such as the Venn diagram, time trends, and interviews which help to offset research biases and enhance validity (Bar-On and Prinsen, 1999). The virtues of participation are that researchers can demonstrate a strong interest in justifying, maintaining and propagating PRA methods (Kapoor, 2002:114).

### **Opportunities and Limitations of PRA Methods**

The past two decades have seen PRA becoming the preferred methodology for participatory research. PRA is defined as a ‘family of participatory approaches and methods which emphasize local knowledge and enable local people to do their own appraisal, analysis and planning’ (World Bank, 1995:175). Built on a premise that participation in projects is fundamental to success, the PRA methods go beyond data

collection to include the identification of problems, which may lead to community development. Although originally developed for use in rural areas, it has evolved to include urban communities and this leads to using the new term 'participatory appraisal' (Preece, 2006:202). In parallel with the continuing use of traditional participatory methods, PRA is being used in various contexts, such as academic research in post-conflict environments, which is why this paper questions its appropriateness. Chambers (2007:11) posits that, 'more and more practitioners/facilitators have become creative pluralists, borrowing, improvising and inventing PRA methods to suit particular contexts, sectors and needs.

Historically, PRA evolved from several disciplines (anthropology, popular education, participatory research) so that local people with little education would be capable of doing their own appraisal and analysis (Chambers, 2007). This approach is aimed at bridging the power relations between researchers and the researched community so that reliable data can be collected. PRA evolved from Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and both methods are associated with visualization, however in most participatory research, PRA methods are used because it is argued that the use of RRA methods in the generation of information does not involve the subjects, and this contrasts with the 'constructivist view of knowledge as an interactive activity' (Bar-On and Prinsen, 1999:5). However, PRA involves local people through participation and empowers the researched in being part of the whole process, so that this would not only enable communities to identify their own problems, but also would empower them to take the necessary steps to reach a solution (Gladwin et al, 2002:424). Other key tenets of PRA include teamwork with people from diverse backgrounds and knowledge bases, and flexibility in terms of time (The World Bank, 1996). From these principles, PRA

has emerged not only as a useful research method but also as a community empowerment tool, which can lead to processes which can bring about social cohesion. It is assumed that participation, in many circumstances, is likely to improve the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of projects (The World Bank, 1994).

Despite the virtues of participatory research, PRA is not without its limitations. First, the issue of genuine participation has been questioned (Christoplos, 1995; Guijt and Shah, 1998). Boyd (2000:3), for example, questions how researchers can exercise control of methodology, analysis and writing of reports in a format and style which is acceptable to publishers and describes such research processes as participatory. Boyd termed these so-called bottom-up participatory appraisals subtle top-down interventions, which are controlled and managed by researchers with less participation by the researched.

Another weakness of PRA is its inability to equalize power relations among the researched group. These power relations exist in PRA methods because, according to Kapoor (2002), decisions are not reached by calculating the number of individual votes but they are achieved through qualitative discussions, hence it is usual that those who are more active in communities are heard most. The active members in participatory research normally overshadow the less active ones, thereby running a higher risk of research bias (Jacobson and Laudau, 2003). It is important to give equal opportunities to community members in decision making processes but, often, the poor and the uneducated ones are marginalised. In post-conflict environments for example, vulnerable groups such as women, children and disabled people are marginalised; however, the power and influence other groups, such as male

combatants, exert depends on how active they are. The existence of power relations in communities therefore affects the participatory processes in the usage of PRA methods.

### **PRA and Post-conflict Environments**

PRA is very popular with researchers in post-conflict environments, but it is necessary to raise questions about the practicability of this research methodology. Post-conflict environments, unlike other local communities, experience lack of trust and cooperation, emotional stress and trauma, and abject poverty, therefore it is sometimes difficult, or even impossible, to apply some of the PRA methods successfully in these environments. Many conflicts have occurred because of issues of lack of trust among community members, and also conflicts have been prolonged as a result of mistrust between peacekeeping troops and the warring factions. In Liberia, for instance, the lack of trust between the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and the warring factions prolonged the conflict in that country. The issue of trust is of significance in post-conflict environments because it contributes to social reconstruction, and also the 'building of social capital that can help prevent recurring outbreaks of violent conflict' (OECD, 2001:121). Research, in post-conflict environments, aims to facilitate bringing an end to conflict situations and to contribute towards development to improve people's livelihoods in communities. However, owing to the lack of trust in such environments, is it possible for researchers to obtain the necessary information by applying PRA methods?

Also, PRA methods are devised to facilitate access to the researched, but in post-conflict environments, where investigations sometimes go deep into individual

personal life history or discuss very sensitive and emotional issues, such as death or abuse, gaining access to people with such worries can be very difficult. Lack of trust, for example, may limit researchers' ability to gain access to respondents' expression of emotional experiences and states of being from which to gain the required data, or information needed. According to Bowd (2008), gaining emotional access in a post-conflict environment is a difficult process due to the intense suspicion engendered by the nature of the research and the researcher's status as an 'outsider'. Lack of access to respondents can lead to under-representation<sup>4</sup>, which is a methodological problem.

As discussed above, the lack of trust in post-conflict environments raises questions about the viability of using PRA methods in such areas. Applying PRA methods in such environments could mean borrowing these methods inappropriately, as suggested by Chambers (2007). Probably, researchers are not even aware that they are not gathering the required data. For example, it will be difficult for a female ex-combatant, who suffered much sexual abuse in a conflict situation, to narrate her past experiences when meeting a researcher for the first time. My past experience as an intelligence officer in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the civil conflict, when I served as a peacekeeper, revealed the difficulties one had to go through before gaining information from former combatants. Although these people will definitely provide some form of information when meeting you for the first time, often it is difficult to discern whether or not the information they have given is false. Generally, the truth is only revealed by degrees, following a process of familiarization with the interviewer and with the techniques being used, through which more comfortable, trusting relationships may have been developed.

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<sup>4</sup> Under-representation means insufficient or inadequately represented.

There is the need to recognise that the personal lives of many people in post-conflict environments have, in one way or another, been invaded. Most respondents will have suffered many atrocities during the conflict, sometimes resulting in their being in a state of shock and mistrust. They may have been attacked by their own family and friends, who had joined a rebel incursion, and may have become traumatized. Therefore, it will almost certainly be difficult for them to provide information about themselves to researchers, who are considered to be outsiders. Notably, some of this information can jeopardise their position in communities and affect their social status (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003), thus they may be very cautious and possibly frightened when speaking to researchers.

### **Lack of Trust and Other Methodological and Ethical Problems**

The issue of trust also affects sampling in post-conflict environments. Many social researchers use non-probability sampling, such as the snowballing technique, to collect data. Thus, snowballing is a useful way to identify links among individuals in various groups, and the way in which they interact. Contacting people, using snowballing, is much easier within groups that relate fairly well because people know the members of their groups, their contact numbers and addresses. Gatekeepers are normally those who link researchers with others in their groups. Whilst gatekeepers identify entry points, gaining access to respondents is based on trust. When there is lack of trust between the researcher and the respondent, and also among individuals within the same group, linking respondents can be difficult. Jacobson and Landau (2003) argue that the exclusion of people from their own group, or from other groups, through snowballing, runs a high risk of producing a biased sample which can affect

research outcomes. This paper, therefore, argues that using gatekeepers to facilitate access to entry points using snowballing does not automatically give researchers total access to respondents in post-conflict environments, but that building up trusting relationships is more likely to do so.

Moreover, the use of translators during the research process is based on trust. Many social researchers, such as those in post-conflict environments, use translators to assist with the interpretation of unfamiliar spoken local languages. However, it is known that the use of translators could result in inaccuracies in questions and answers, because some word(s) might be substituted with similar word(s) and that could wholly change the meaning of the original questions and answers. Whilst the use of translators could affect the research, researchers continue to need to use the services of translators. Apart from the fact that researchers can use multiple questions to discern whether or not the right questions are being asked by translators, they (translators) are likely to be more effective if their work is based on having formed trusting relationships.

In addition, the issue of confidentiality in a post-conflict environment is based on trust. Confidentiality means that any 'identifying information that could connect a respondent with an interview must be kept hidden and, as soon as possible, destroyed' (Druckman, 2005:160). In post-conflict research, where respondents provide their life histories, some of them would like to remain anonymous. Researchers also need to be circumspect about confidentiality so that, under no circumstances, will a report clearly identify anyone, or a field of study, which could compromise confidentiality. In many research environments, the issue of trust plays a major role in relation to

confidentiality. Respondents, having agreed by word of mouth or signed a contract provided by researchers, trust them to ensure that their confidentiality will be maintained. Without trust, it will be impossible for respondents to accept that any promise regarding confidentiality will be maintained.

Notably, the issue of trust is not new in social research and authors, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985:257), have emphasized the importance of maintaining a trusting relationship with gatekeepers and respondents, in order to facilitate the research process. However, trust has not been addressed as the main issue in social research. It is essential to attempt to address the issue of trust in post-conflict environments, where respondents are more inclined to hold back information should a lack of trust exist. Based on the fact that trust is a major issue in post-conflict environments, it is necessary to question whether PRA, as a stand-alone process, can provide the information required for post-conflict research. Interestingly, many post-conflict researchers have embraced PRA techniques and are widely promoting them without considering the fact that post-conflict environments are different from non-conflict areas. Adams (1998:226) posits that in reality, the researched can 'withhold information' or access to it, thereby making it difficult for researchers to obtain that information. Nevertheless, this paper argues that a researcher, who is considered to be an outsider, may be able to obtain the necessary information by having gained the respondents' trust. 'Door knocking', the main focus of this paper, is a way of building trust with respondents in order to acquire the information needed for research purposes.

### **‘Door Knocking’ – A Useful Method of Access**

Door knocking, as a concept, has different meanings in different spheres of life, such as: politics, religion, offering aid and in marriage. In politics, the term ‘door knocking’ is used to get supporters to do what is expected of them, for example, enrolment on the voters’ register to enable them to cast their votes. In the House of Commons deliberations in the UK, on Friday 12 February 1993, Mr Stern in canvassing for political parties to be alive, states that the labour party should be active, carry out door knocking at all times, and ask to see whether its supporters have registered (House of Commons Debate, 1993). In religion, door knocking is used to reach out to unbelievers and convert them. For example, in Switzerland, members of an evangelical church used ‘door knocking’ to reach more people and preach to them about the word of God. ‘Door knocking’ turned out to be good and people listened to the word of God (The Revival Fellowship, 2006:4) With humanitarian assistance door knocking is used to approach people for assistance. In Colorado, A Mexican couple who were deported from the US after living with family for 16 years knocked on the Casa’s door looking for work and a way to rebuild their lives (The Casa de los Amigos, 2007:5). However, door knocking as an entry tool in post-conflict research is analogous to that of marriage rites.

Door knocking forms part of marriage ceremonies in some African countries. Historically, door knocking was a ceremony where a man’s father proposes his son’s marriage to the parents of the girl he considers suitable for his son. If the girl’s father agrees to the proposal, he accepts items which symbolize the proposal, informs his daughter and then states what else needs to be done to complete the marriage (Omari, 1960:199). This means that a marriage ceremony is not a one day process, but that it

takes a couple of months to years to complete (Ampofo, 1997). Also, the would-be husband and wife do not have a say in the knocking process because it is the parents' responsibility to choose partners for their children, even without their consent. Door knocking is a ceremony that brings both the man and the girl's family members together, which in the African context, includes the extended family comprising parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents.<sup>5</sup>

In modern times, however, this form of knocking has changed considerably. The practice of parents choosing partners for their sons is considered a thing of the past. In modern forms of door knocking, a man's family knocks at his fiancée's parents' house with a simple message that their son has seen a beautiful woman in their household and wants to seek her hand in marriage. The man's family present drinks or cola nuts as custom demands. Anarfi (2003:32) termed such items a 'knocking fee', indicating the man's intention and seriousness with regard to marrying the lady. Then, the girl's parents will ask their daughter whether the drinks should be accepted. When the girl agrees, the items are accepted to signify her approval of the proposed marriage. This form of knocking is somehow different from the one discussed by Omari (1960) above where both sets of parents decide for their children. In modern societies, the consent of the girl is sought by her parents before accepting the items because it is argued that problems in marriages affect the couple first, before the parents recognise their difficulties and have the opportunity to offer the support that they think is necessary.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://cultrad.blogspot.com/2007/05/customary-marriage-in-ashante-land.html>

From the different usages of the term ‘door knocking’ its utility can be identified through certain key words: approachability, familiarization, trust and assistance. For instance, knocking enables suitors to familiarize themselves with their partners’ parents, so that they can discuss issues concerning arrangements for marriage ceremonies. Without such familiarization, suitors are considered aliens to the girls’ families, and therefore, they cannot discuss any marriage plans. It is only when you have been introduced to the extended family members at a door knocking ceremony, as discussed above, that you can engage in such discussions. This enables all the family members to know the would-be husband of their kin.

Considering the above, I argue that door knocking is a useful concept that captures and conveys the need for familiarization in post-conflict environments. Door knocking will enable researchers to build trust and cooperation in communities so that they can gain the information they need through discussions with respondents. Through extensive familiarization with respondents, the withholding of information by the respondents is likely to be reduced. As in marriage ceremonies, the researchers become part of the family and attain an ‘insider’ status. They become part of the community; hence, they are able to gain the trust of respondents, which eventually facilitates collection of data in the research process. It is important to note that, in post-conflict environments, door knocking can take different forms since every post-conflict environment is unique, depending on the culture of a particular area. Therefore, researchers need to use techniques, which would appear to be the most appropriate ones in the local area, in their attempts to access respondents. Approaches to door knocking should be flexible to avoid researchers sticking to the usage of only one process when trying to gain access.

## **The Background to the Research Area**

Sierra Leone, a West African country which is rich in natural resources, was plunged into political turmoil in the early 1990s when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Foday Sankoh, invaded the country from Liberia. These political upheavals led to a series of coups and counter-coups between 1990 and 1998, when the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) was established with a mandate to organise disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes. Some of these programmes, however, have been criticised by academics and practitioners alike for their lack of community participation (Faltas, 2004, Kingma, 2000, Colletta, et al, 1996). Firstly, DDR programmes have been criticized for giving preferential treatment to ex-combatants at the expense of other community members (Colleta, et al, 1996:8). Critics hold the view that, given that the tailor-made re-integration programmes for ex-combatants are individually oriented, that seems to ‘create a feeling of injustice in the community’ (UNDP 2005).

Secondly, DDR has been criticized because, even among ex-combatants, not all of them receive equal treatment; for example, groups such as females, disabled, and child soldiers are sometimes excluded from the DDR process, or less attention is paid to them (Galama and van Tongereen 2002:220). Moreover, it is argued that a community coming out of a war situation is so devastated in its infrastructure, and also that it has so few opportunities to generate income, it is difficult for such a community to focus more on individual combatants instead of focussing on the entire community. Critics stress the fact that, normally, focussing on ex-combatants leaves communities with nothing; meanwhile, communities are supposed to receive ex-

combatants and facilitate their reintegration processes. This study aimed at exploring how a community-based approach to DDR can address the issue of exclusion, and involves all groups within communities, in order to facilitate effective peacebuilding. Community participation theory was used to put the research into perspective.

### **Application of Door Knocking in Sierra Leone**

I applied door knocking in Sierra Leone when attempting to gain access to respondents in some communities. It took about four weeks for me to familiarize myself with the people of Bo and Kenema Chiefdoms. Having door knocking in mind, as a ceremony where suitors' parents provide drinks and kola nuts as a token to get access to their girlfriend's family, I used a bottle of local gin as a gift offering when knocking at chiefs' palaces. As custom demands, I used the linguist or the secretary to announce my presence and my mission to the chiefs. Normally, I pay courtesy calls on the chiefs, who serve as heads of the areas, to access communities. The chiefs then used their authority to ask their subjects to give me all the assistance I needed for my research. This is essential in the sense that, in certain places that I visited, people asked me whether or not I had been officially introduced to the chief. With that in mind, they attached some importance to my study, and also saw my visit to the community as official.

Having officially introduced myself to the chief, I used small gifts, such as books, pens, pencils, children toys, and torches, to gain access to people in the community. At certain times, I shared drinks with adults to create an enabling environment for discussions. Such unofficial gatherings provided me with much information which was necessary for the research. It also gave me an opportunity to suggest dates on

which to meet some of them, officially, for interviews. This is like 'door knocking' in marriages, where the ceremony enables suitors to discuss issues, and also, sets out official dates for actual marriage ceremonies.

Furthermore, I took an active part in few community activities, such as community work, sports and games, funeral ceremonies, christening, and religious activities and, in the process, identified various groups in the community, such as the elites, ex-combatants (male, female, disabled and child ex-combatants), Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees, and other community members. It is important to note that prior to going to Sierra Leone as a researcher, I had the opportunity to work as a peacekeeper in Kenema for a period of eight months, so I already knew the general area of Kenema and Bo districts. Returning to the same environment not only facilitated my familiarization process but, as some of my friends recognized me, it was good to renew friendships and some of them proved to be helpful contacts in my work. That led to me being considered to be an insider rather than an outsider. These elements helped me immensely in the research process because the people concerned assumed that I understood and shared their predicaments. Apart from my old friends, I found many people with whom I came in contact with for the first time to be friendly, approachable and willing to provide me with necessary information to the best of their knowledge and ability.

Having received this form of cooperation and friendliness from the locals, I started thinking more about whether or not my previous experience had something to do with the assistance I received from them. I asked myself these questions: how would they have received me if they were meeting me for the first time, or had not familiarized

myself with them? Would they have cooperated and given me the information I needed? I kept asking myself these questions over and over again.

Also, I realized that a large number of researchers come in contact with locals in post-conflict environments. As a result, some local people become exasperated with them, and deem research processes as time wasting, especially any academic research which does not yield immediate benefits. This phenomenon I termed 'research fatigue' in post-conflict environments. Apart from the fact that respondents held back information because of having endured the ordeal of recent conflict, it is also important to note that research fatigue can also lead to holding back information. Respondents perceive some of these researches as a waste of time, without resultant economic gain. So the question is: how do researchers, who are considered to be outsiders, gain the information that they need in post-conflict communities? Do they settle for partial information without even knowing that respondents are holding back information from them, or do they engage in some activities which may lead to the gaining of trust?

The paper argues that researchers can gain trust through familiarization, getting to know the community through active participation in all activities, sharing community concerns and progress, and understanding community values and cultures. Participating in such activities may lead to respondents being willing to think of a researcher as an insider rather than an outsider. As an insider, the researcher can gain access by helping to create a trusting atmosphere, which may enable not only physical but also emotional access to people with whom that might otherwise prove difficult or

impossible. Though one can argue that being an insider does not guarantee trust, at least it can serve as a platform on which trust could be built.

### **Door Knocking and Methodological Issues**

Door knocking was used to address some methodological constraints in Sierra Leone. Firstly, door knocking facilitated my access to individuals, whom otherwise they would have been difficult to access. Regarding physical access, the following response is instructive: *'Since the end of the war, I have seen researchers come and go, but I have never spoken to any of them. They are a nuisance to me and my family because of the way they engage people's time without any reward. You are the first person I have spoken to at length concerning this war, and this is because you have been with us through thick and thin. I wish other researchers would do the same'*<sup>6</sup>. The above statement points to the fact that, despite the number of researchers, who visit some of these war torn countries, there are some people who have never reached out to researchers, despite the wealth of information that those members of the community possess. Though the respondent above mentioned lack of reward, we cannot overlook the fact that lack of trust makes respondents keep their distance from researchers. I argue that through door knocking, researchers can establish trust with respondents, so that even without any obvious reward, they (researchers) will be able to obtain the necessary information from them. Having gained physical access to communities, it is considered to be very important in post-conflict environments to also, find ways of gaining greater emotional access to members of those communities. It is worth noting that people, whose self confidence has been dented as a result of being in conflict situations, would avoid researchers. Such a lack of self-confidence

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<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with a male ex-combatant in Kenema, Sierra Leone on 1 August 2008.

can result from issues relating to physical and/or sexual abuse, grief relating to the loss of loved ones, loss of homes or other possessions, and unemployment. The fact that, in the normal course of everyday life, people have to get close to colleagues in order to be aware of their past experiences means that the same can be applied to post-conflict environments in the gathering of information. During the door knocking process, I observed that it was very difficult for some people to talk about their bitter experiences. From my past experience as a practitioner, I knew how difficult it was for female ex-combatants to talk about some of the ordeals that they went through during the conflict. It was not, therefore, surprising that some female ex-combatants even failed to participate in the DDR process because of the stigma attached to being an ex-combatant, and also found it difficult to divulge their experiences to researchers. At a religious ceremony, I met a female ex-combatant, who had failed to participate in a DDR process, and asked her to give an account of her past experience to me. When speaking about her experiences of the conflict, she obviously felt that she could confide in me and told me that I was the first person, apart from her family, to be given that information. Prior to coming in contact with her, obtaining such information from a female ex-combatant had been somewhat difficult; but, because we shared the same faith, she trusted me and revealed some information about herself to me. This shows that door knocking can be done in different ways (formally and informally) and researchers need to exploit every opportunity to gain the trust of respondents.

One important issue, learned from accessing people through the door knocking process, was the length of time that it took for a male researcher to build up sufficiently trusting relationships for appropriate emotional access to be granted in

relation to females rather than males. This difficulty could be attributed to: (1) culture - the Mendes (the main tribe in Bo and Kenema districts) are patrilineal and the Poro society prepares men for leadership roles in their communities; whilst the Sanda society teaches young women the responsibility of adulthood and to be submissive to their husbands. Whilst women take backstage in activities, men are always at the forefront, hence they are more easily approached than women; (2) religion – the Mendes are predominantly Muslims and in their Muslim tradition visitors are welcomed by men. Many of my door-knocking experiences first introduced me to men before having the opportunity to speak to women. Apart from the cultural and religious factors, I realised that being a male researcher also contributed to this barrier. A female researcher, for instance, might have found it easier to access women. Consequently, I argue that in order to attempt to eliminate bias, when door knocking male researchers need to go the extra mile to foster the trust and confidence needed for women to permit appropriate emotional access for research to take place.. In situations where ‘fixers’<sup>7</sup> or translators are used, females, could be of immense help to male researchers.

Community access is based on active participation in community activities. As a sports enthusiast, I was a regular spectator at the football matches of the two premiership clubs (Bo Rangers and Nepean Stars). Also, I participated in community cleaning up exercises. These and other community activities assisted my progress when trying to organise people for interviews, conducted using PRA methods, and facilitated active participation in the process. During some of the PRA sessions, it became apparent that not all the available information was being divulged owing to

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<sup>7</sup> Fixers are people who help researchers to access communities. They introduce them to gatekeepers and also help them to find their way around in the area of the research.

lack of trust between some members within the participatory groups. For instance, using a Venn diagram to illustrate various groups and their relationships with one another, two ex-combatants (A & B), who did not want each other to know they had a relationship with a particular group (C), which did not draw their circle into overlapping with that group (C). Later, when I wanted to confirm the result, it was realised that both A & B did not want each other to know that they had any contact with (C) because of lack of trust between them. Through familiarization, some of these issues will be made known; door knocking facilitates triangulation in research, for example.

Secondly, the door knocking process may facilitate researchers in their attempts to construct validity. The construction of validity may be facilitated by door knocking. In qualitative research, various variables are used to investigate issues. However, the question is do researchers take time to explain all the variables when framing questions; do respondents understand the variables in the questions? Furthermore, are the responses a true reflection of what is being investigated? Bias in research outcome can occur in situations where researchers were unable to satisfactorily construct the variable aspects of the questions and respondents' answers failed to give accurate indications of what was being explored. Through door knocking, I realised the need to explain certain key words: such as community participation, social capital, community capacity, and community capability to respondents, which enabled their understanding of those variables and the possibility of correctly answering the relevant questions. This was done through a pilot project, where the conducting of sample interviews was used to ascertain the level of respondents' understanding. It is very easy for researchers to assume that respondents understand most of the

terminology that they have incorporated in the questionnaires. It is only through researchers developing an understanding of the respondents that they can help them to familiarize themselves with the specific terminology used, so that respondents' need for further explanation of those terms will be likely to gradually diminish. Even in situations where researchers explain these terms to respondents, some difficulties may still arise regarding understanding them owing to respondents' inadequate education and their reluctance to openly discuss problems relating to continual misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the terminology. It is only through building up familiarization and trust with respondents that they will boldly express any misunderstanding that troubles them. Door knocking gives the opportunity to address such misunderstandings and, thereby, it may facilitate data collection and, probably enhance research validity eventually.

Thirdly, door knocking serves as a useful process for snowballing in post-conflict environments. As mentioned earlier in this paper, during the snowballing process, a researcher may become biased towards a particular group in a community when respondents lead the researcher to members within their own specific groups. During the door knocking process, I identified various groups within the communities, such as, ex-combatants, non-combatants, and community elites. Afterwards, I targeted some influential people within these groups and used them as entry points to their colleagues within the same groups. Identifying these groups during that process helped in addressing research biases towards particular groups of people. Information was obtained from various groups within communities, and that information facilitated my community-based research. In order to reduce biases in post-conflict

research, door knocking is necessary in identifying various entry points for snowballing.

Moreover, I selected my fixers in various communities through the door knocking process. As already stated, through door knocking, it became blatantly apparent to me that, in terms of establishing access to appropriate familiar and trusting contact with future female participants, so I realised that, as a male researcher, the barrier could be overcome by employing the services of a female fixer. In most of our rounds my fixer targeted females and involved them in conversation to establish good relationships. It was noted that females understand each other much better because they have similar issues which are often ignored by men. It can be argued that, through door knocking, researchers can choose competent and trustworthy gatekeepers or translators to assist them in obtaining the necessary information for their research.

### **Door Knocking and Ethical Considerations**

The issue of trust plays an important role in informed consent. During the process of door knocking, I informed the local people about the nature and purpose of my research well in advance and, at the same time, I had the opportunity to give encouragement to those who were not very comfortable with the concept of participating in the research process. The trust that was established by the door knocking process enabled respondents to give their consent to participation in the research. In post-conflict research, where respondents sometimes narrate life histories, gaining respondents' consent is necessary as any attempt to overlook that would be tantamount to invading their privacy. During one of my interviews, a gentleman who was narrating his experiences following capture by a rebel group, who was taken as a

prisoner of war, broke down in tears. I informed him of his right to discontinue, but he remarked that: *“You are my brother so I don’t mind telling you my past experience. How can I continue to keep all this information? Though I feel very bad telling people, it takes some of the stress away”*<sup>8</sup>. Such a remark indicates that, despite the difficulties some respondents had in speaking openly to researchers, through familiarization and trust building, their consent could be gained. Besides, through door knocking, it is easy to get those who are undecided to participate in the research process.

Also, I used door knocking to gain the confidence of respondents by assuring them that their personal and confidential information would not be made public. Gaining such trust cannot be done speedily. It requires a lengthy period of familiarization, during which potentially helpful practices: game playing, sharing meals, drinking together, and/or entertainment may be used. As a practitioner, it became obvious that it took me a long time to gain the confidence of ex-combatants. I took a considerable amount of time to do that, but, having established that trust, nothing was kept secret from me. The following question that is likely to be postulated: how can researchers spend enough time to familiarize themselves with respondents? Here, the issue is not to provide a time frame for researchers, but for them to be aware that guaranteeing anonymity alone is not enough for respondents to believe that their confidentiality will be protected. Some form of trust building is required at the door knocking stage, such as in the following examples: clarification that respondents’ identities would not be disclosed; absolute confidentiality would be observed at all times.

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<sup>8</sup> Author’s interview with a male ex-combatant in Kenema, Sierra Leone 1 August 2008.

On the other hand, unexpectedly some people requested the inclusion of their names in the subsequent publication of the research findings, as they wished to indicate that they had participated willingly in the research. It is important to note that, even in post-conflict research not all participants asked to remain anonymous because they stated that not all the information, which they had divulged, was of a personal nature. However, in situations where confidentiality is required, researchers need to build healthy relationships to gain the trust of respondents in order to obtain the information they need. It is noted that confidentiality, alone, will not encourage respondents to provide all the required information without trust having been engendered.

### **Door Knocking: Some Constraints**

In spite of the above advantages, door knocking was not without constraints. First, door knocking can make researchers become integral parts of the communal ways of life of communities, which may lead to subjectivity in ways of thinking, rather than objectivity and independence. In post-conflict environments, where people cannot afford basic necessities, such as food and water, researchers can be integrated into such communities by offering the locals some forms of assistance. Whilst considering these as being humanitarian gestures, they could influence the responses of respondents so that they reflected the views of the researchers, and that could compromise the research findings. When attempting to reduce subjectivity in the research, I kept reflecting and questioning myself about whether or not my interactions with respondents were affecting the research process. Therefore, it could be argued that, through constant self-assessment and adjustment, and critically

reflecting on the aims and objectives, subjectivity in the research findings may have been reduced, even with the application of door knocking.

Also, familiarization sometimes raises false expectations of individuals in communities, or opens up old wounds. During my stay in Kenema, I rented a one room apartment in a family house. A close neighbour expressed a desire that I should arrange for her son, who had become very used to me during my stay in the community, that he should be adopted by me so that I could take him to live in Europe permanently! At the end of my stay, when it became clear to the family that I had no intention of doing that, there was sadness. Prior to that, despite having told them on many occasions that I was only a student researcher with no intention of adoption, they never believed me. It is noted that in post-conflict environments, where people have previously endured harsh conditions, people may come to perceive even student researchers as people with power and authority, who could help them to overcome their predicaments<sup>9</sup>.

With regard to opening up old wounds in the research environment, I encountered a female ex-combatant who told me that, during the war, she had lost her husband and three children. Having a strong desire to forget about her past, she had avoided the presence of researchers since the war ended. During the process of door knocking through which I gained access to her, I unknowingly upset her when I posed a question about her past experience that she later stressed she considered to be an insensitive approach, which then led to her weeping inconsolably. In asking questions

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<sup>9</sup> I wished I had the power and the authority accorded me to help the little boy to become better educated in Europe.

in post-conflict environments, researchers need to be thoughtful and observant when studying the moods of their respondents during interviews.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the constraints encountered through familiarization, the issue of trust needs to be stressed, in post-conflict environments, in order to address some of the methodological and ethical problems encountered during the carrying out of the research. Many authors have discussed problems associated with post-conflict research but they have neither identified, nor stressed the issues relating to trust, which need to be addressed, so that solutions to some of the methodological and ethical problems may be dealt with. Whatever methods have been used in the collection of data, the incorporation of the issue of trust building is essential for the facilitation of the research process. In my research in Sierra Leone, I used door knocking to familiarize myself with and to gain trust in communities. The importance of using local culture (door knocking) in addressing local problems cannot be overemphasized. It builds on local knowledge and it is understood by the indigenous people. In Bo and Kenema districts in Sierra Leone, the local communities did not find it surprising that researchers' knocked at people's doors because that had always been the main practice used to reach people. In communities where mobile phones, telephones and internet are rarely used, the first approach to a family is to knock at their door at sunset when they are back from work. In other parts of the world, such a practice as the system of door knocking, which has been illustrated above, would not be conducted in the same way, owing to their different employment and cultural practices. It can be argued that it is imperative for researchers to use approaches that are suitable to their areas of study.

Using local knowledge, such as that gathered during the process of door knocking, is very important because it can be used when transferred to other post-conflict areas. Many areas have cultures, which can be used by researchers to familiarize themselves with local people, so that they gain their trust. I used door knocking in Sierra Leone due to the importance marriages play in people's lives. In other communities, different forms of door knocking other than the one I used in Sierra Leone, can be used to get close to the researched. In conclusion, it is important to stress the fact that the techniques used, when attempting to gain access to people, are not of primary concern (since researchers can choose to use various techniques when applying them to different post-conflict environments, according to which appear to be appropriate); but of more importance is how to use a variety of techniques in order to build trust and to address some of the methodological and ethical issues, which are likely to assist in the facilitation of the research process. In post-conflict environments, it is important to emphasize the fact that the major concern is that of trust, which needs to be remembered in all research situations.

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