

Implications of associations between INGOs and academic researchers:
Reflections from southern Sudan

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Introduction

Implementing independent academic research projects in post-conflict environments can pose methodological challenges to scholars and students alike. Forging associations with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is often necessary to overcome these hurdles. Such relationships may be beneficial to a researcher for many reasons, including obtainment of visas and permits, access to remote regions, logistical support, and evacuation in emergencies. However, these connections have theoretical and ethical complications that require further attention.

This paper seeks to fill the gap on these critical issues by framing the question in two ways. First, I examine the impact on research of being associated with an INGO. Even if an organization declares that its work is neutral, it may not be perceived as such on the ground, particularly in politically charged post-conflict areas. If people assume a researcher is employed by the organization, he or she needs to consider how the politics of the organization and its headquarters country may impact the findings. Moreover, this association may transform into a security concern if the INGO is targeted with violence. Another major consideration for research that is associated with an INGO relates to organizational expectations; a researcher must understand what the INGO expects in

return for its support and consider whether this will bias the project. A final set of issues is whether participants believe their cooperation with an academic study will increase the benefits they receive from the INGO; in turn, this may influence answers to surveys and interview questions.

Second, I explore the impact on the INGO of being associated with academic research. If research is negatively perceived by community members, there may be ethical ramifications if the work of the organization is compromised. The compensation of research subjects or enumerators may further complicate this issue, as could efforts by the researcher to contribute back to the community in exchange for its participation.

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in post-conflict southern Sudan. I draw upon personal experiences from a research trip to Central Equatoria State in 2007 and from an exploratory 2005 stay in Eastern Equatoria. Where possible, I complement this data with individual interviews and surveys of Sudanese in Central Equatoria. Both of these two states in southern Sudan suffered violence related to the civil war between north and south as well as to their proximity to northern Uganda.

The goal of this paper is to use my experiences in southern Sudan as a starting point from which to explore and reflect upon the implications of academic researchers associating with INGOs in post-conflict environments. After presenting a brief history of southern Sudan, I tell my story as a researcher who, in navigating this project, made decisions and learned lessons about conducting research in a challenging setting. While my work was specifically in Sudan, I feel that my reflection on these experiences may be of use to other scholars approaching research projects in difficult contexts. I believe this

paper is also important as it begins to illuminate the complex security problems faced by researchers in the field.

Context of the research

The people of southern Sudan suffer from extreme poverty after decades of violence and famine. Demographic estimates of the predominantly rural population hovered near 7.5 million people, 4 million of whom are displaced internally. Estimates that include returnees are as high as 11 million for 2007 (NSCSE, 2004). The north-south civil war raged nearly continuously since the country's 1956 independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule, after which the government in Khartoum systematically underdeveloped the south (Cobham, 2005) and enforced policies of Arabization, Islamization, and slavery. These processes over time, in addition to extant tribal lines, fostered a mosaic of religious, racial, economic, and ethnic identities that complicate the country's civil war and its reconstruction (Deng, F., 2006).

The aggressive violence between Khartoum and liberation movements, now mostly consolidated in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), left the entire south living below the international poverty line of one dollar per day. In the midst of this poverty, over 80% of children did not attend school, and generations have gone without education (Sommers, 2005; NSCSE, 2004).

The two parties signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005, ending 21 years of war that left over two million dead. The CPA delineated a six-

year interim period in which Khartoum, the SPLM/A, as the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS), and several other parties would share power and oil revenues in the nascent Government of National Unity (GNU). In a 2011 referendum, the people of the south are to determine whether to remain part of Sudan or to secede into a separate nation-state. The peace is fragile, as evidenced by the recent removal of GOSS ministers from the GNU after allegations that Khartoum was not honoring the CPA.

Development of the research design

Exploratory visit in 2005

In order to learn more about the area and to frame a relevant research project, I spent the summer of 2005 in southern Sudan as an education consultant for a European INGO. I was based in a remote village in Eastern Equatoria relatively near the southern border of Sudan adjacent to Uganda. Because of road conditions that were poor or lacking entirely, the drive to the village from northern Uganda took most of a day, despite that the distance was not that great. The people in this village live in tukuls (straw and mud huts) in the valley and up the slopes of the surrounding mountain range. Most of the people fled to these mountainsides for the past two decades to avoid being targeted by the aerial bombing raids that were characteristic of Khartoum's aggression against the south. At the time of my visit, villagers had begun to descend the mountain and resume living in the open valley. There is an active Catholic church with an associated primary school, secondary school, and a health clinic run by an order of Sudanese Catholic nuns.

The organization I worked for was the first and only INGO to have a semi-permanent compound here, which was still under construction during my stay. Another INGO made monthly food deliveries to the schools, but the area was otherwise only minimally assisted by humanitarian aid organizations. As an education consultant, I visited five small villages that were cradled in these mountains, assessing the quality and scope of schooling in the region. The ultimate report that I produced provided details about each school and made recommendations on how the INGO could further support education without duplicating efforts.

Several hours in a four-wheel-drive vehicle would take one into a somewhat larger population center with a small dirt airstrip and a temperamental connection to the internet. Several INGOs operated from compounds in this town, and the Catholic Diocese also had offices there. I spent several days in one of these compounds and was present for a distribution of seeds and gardening tools.

During this trip, I learned several lessons that informed my future research questions and the design of the project itself. The most striking was the difficulty of logistics. I realized that it would be nearly impossible to navigate southern Sudan without the support of an organization, whether from an INGO, a for-profit firm, a diocese, or a government office. For this reason, the project became dependent upon the logistical and other help given by an INGO partner. However, while in Sudan in 2005, I also learned that my association with an INGO seemed to impact how I was perceived by local Sudanese. Witnessing the seeds and tools distribution was a formative experience in that the power dynamic that could possibly develop between INGOs and local populations was quite evident to me. While on my own, many of those with whom I

interacted made assumptions about my access to resources, and I was often asked for money, either from myself personally or from the organization with which I was associated. By the end of the trip, questions surrounding aid dependency weighed heavily on my mind, and it was clear that, while I needed logistical support, I would further need to distance myself from the INGO so as not to influence the research in some way.

Research design of 2007 project

Based on my experiences in 2005, I formed a research project based on the following overarching question: How does international aid influence political development in southern Sudan? To approach this question, I developed a research design that incorporated the vertical case study approach proposed by comparative education scholars Vavrus and Bartlett (2006). A vertical case study sets up multi-level analyses, including the international or global context, national or organizational context, and local context. In transcending a traditional case study approach focusing on one level, Vavrus and Bartlett argue that "[w]hat makes single-level analysis 'incomplete and unbalanced' is often, though not always, the absence of contextualized knowledge that takes into account how larger forces, structures, and histories inform local social interactions and understanding" (p. 97). With this approach in mind, these sub-questions followed: What are the goals of and assumptions behind USAID policy with regard to democracy and peace-building? How do INGOS navigate these goals and assumptions, and how do they conceive of their role politically? How do the political attitudes of local Sudanese relate to their aid experience?

To answer these questions, I would of course need to return to southern Sudan. I sought to develop relationships with INGOs doing work in the region, eventually finding one whose regional director was intrigued by the research and also was willing to provide critical support for the completion of my research. Through that connection, I developed a large-scale project in which data would be collected from nine distinct areas located around the south. Shortly before my departure date, however, the main funding source for this project pulled the support after determining that conditions for research in Sudan were too dangerous. Thankfully, the INGO still agreed to host me, although the new financial constraints required me to stay in one location.

I was based in a large town in Central Equatoria whose surrounding lands are peppered with landmines. Violence there was aggravated by its proximity to Juba, the last-held government garrison town, and to Uganda, whose rebels committed atrocities against townspeople under the orders of Khartoum. I stayed in the compound of the INGO and was permitted to use their resources. In addition to accommodation and food, I used the vehicles of the INGO when not otherwise engaged, and I accessed the HR files of the organization to locate southern Sudanese with sufficient education to contribute to the project as research assistants.

In my research design, I combined quantitative and qualitative data collection and analytical strategies because "methodological pluralism...frequently results in superior research (compared to monomethod research)" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14). Mixed methods approaches can be complementary and rigorous (Brady & Collier, 2004), and they are particularly valuable in contexts of conflict (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006). The project design encouraged the collection of multiple types of data collected

from multiple sources on multiple levels; diversity of data can improve validity and reliability (Maxwell, 2005). I complemented policy analysis and interviews on the levels of USAID and INGOs with the collection of southern Sudanese viewpoints through interviews and a survey of almost 300 respondents. Collecting the perspectives of participants on the ground is an approach that is “widely recognized as a key component in understanding impact, but [has] rarely used been used in the humanitarian sector” (Hofmann, et al., 2004, p. 2). I also captured my own thoughts and reflection in memos, which proved to be an essential part of the research process.

As I learned in 2005, I knew that my association with the INGO would likely affect my research. Crossley (2001) urges scholars to recognize “the importance of collaborative research and partnerships between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’,” to value “research and development work that is more sensitive to local, social constructions of reality” and to employ “strategies that facilitate the strengthening of research capacity” of the developing countries in which they are working (p. 82). I have designed this project with these recommendations in mind, and thus I hired Sudanese research assistants (RAs) to carry out the oral survey in the surrounding area. I trained them in the appropriate research methods, informed consent, random selection of subjects, the importance of confidentiality, and interviewing techniques (Fowler, 2002). In addition to distancing myself from the data collection, using research assistants whom I trained and worked with closely helped me to build capacity in the area.

Implications of being associated with an INGO

To explore the implications for research of being associated with an INGO, I take several perspectives. First, I consider its influence on research, looking at how both the process and the findings may be affected. Then, I question how the INGO might be impacted by supporting independent academic research. These ethical and methodological considerations should be examined before undertaking research in and after conflict.

Impact on research: Process

A researcher operating in situations from acute crisis through reconstruction must consider how association with an INGO may affect the process of conducting research. In many ways, this relationship can have beneficial effects. Certainly, my 2007 research project could not have been completed without INGO support. However, there are potentially negative ramifications that also should be considered.

In challenging research environments, the primary benefit of working with an organization already established on the ground is taking advantages of its logistical system. Independent travelers are often looked at with mistrust during times of war and upheaval, and thus having an existing professional relationship can be extremely important in terms of visa acquisition and access to populations. In addition, infrastructure and security concerns both impact the ability of a researcher to complete a project, and association with an INGO can help one navigate through these issues.

In unstable and highly contentious areas such as southern Sudan, there is a great deal of suspicion of outsiders. The northern government in Khartoum had, in fact, not

permitted research in the area for decades (Ali & Matthews, 1999). The most obvious manifestation of this is getting a visa. For both trips, I would have been unable to obtain a visa as a student or as a researcher. However, by being considered staff of the organization, I was permitted to enter southern Sudan. Even with an organizational endorsement, securing a visa did not happen without much ado in both cases. In 2005, I spent hours waiting in an outpost in northern Uganda as the INGO representative negotiated for my entry visa on my behalf. In 2007, the political transition and tension between the GNU and the GOSS made the visa acquisition process extremely confusing and complex. The issues of whether visas were granted, to whom, and from whom, changed on a daily basis. My visa was one of the last granted in July of that year after a temporary moratorium was instituted.

Association with an INGO will likely provide access to populations, and it may open doors to government agencies, if they are functioning. By using the contacts of the organization or the people who work there, a researcher arrives with a personal and professional reference, and thus is more likely to be taken seriously by people in power. In addition, an INGO can provide access to the populations with whom it works. In 2005, I had access to schools, students, teachers, villagers, local officials, and military representatives because I was working for an INGO that was respected in the area. In 2007, I was introduced to the GOSS officials in the town.

In addition, travel in southern Sudan would also be next to impossible without the support of an INGO. There is minimal public transportation, and what little infrastructure exists is in extreme disrepair. Travel in southern Sudan is often done in four-wheel-drive vehicles, which are very expensive to buy and maintain, and thus out of

the budget of most researchers. In addition, driving these vehicles through mud and rock and around collapsed bridges takes a great deal of skill and experience. For both trips, I rode in the vehicles of the INGOs. In addition, representatives from these organizations were able to arrange flights when necessary.

On a related point, there are major security concerns about conducting research in southern Sudan. In my first trip, crossing through the active war zone of northern Uganda would have been impossible without being in an armed convoy arranged by the INGO and protected by Ugandan soldiers. In southern Sudan, there are concerns of banditry by Ugandan rebels (the Lord's Resistance Army) as well as of attacks by splintering rebels groups or other people. I stayed in a guarded compound at night during both of the trips, and the INGO took responsibility for health and security related evacuations, if one was deemed necessary.

While these positive benefits of associating with an INGO while conducting research in areas of conflict are important to consider, it is just as important to realize that this association can prove harmful to the process of conducting research. The first set of concerns is related to security. It can be problematic if the INGO is perceived as a non-neutral political actor by the host country, by people who are the subject of your research, or by others in the area. Research in conflict areas almost necessarily means that you will interact with soldiers, police, or militias while trying to finish your project. This could affect safety in many ways, particularly if there was hostility towards the INGO or its headquarters country. In my experience, most Sudanese did not necessarily distinguish between "America" and an INGO headquartered in the United States. In addition, INGOs can be associated with whatever the ruling party is, and therefore insurgents or

rebel groups may automatically assume that the organization is politically biased. Some have been accused of being spies, for example, so there are security concerns.

Association with an INGO can affect the process of research in and after conflict in another related way. Just as this relationship might grant you access to certain areas or populations that you may otherwise have been unable to access, it can have the opposite effect. In southern Sudan before the official establishment of the GOSS, INGOs would often have to get unofficial permission from the SPLA commanders in an area before doing any work there. If the controlling groups do not want the INGO to go to certain areas for any political or military reason, then an associated researcher would also be unable to go.

Impact on research: Findings

In addition to considering how association with an INGO might affect the process of conducting research, researchers must also consider how associating with an INGO might affect the findings of the research. This can manifest in multiple ways.

First, associating with an INGO may lead to the assumption that the researcher is, in fact, employed by the INGO and is its representative. The responses of participants may thus be different if they think that cooperation with a scholar's research or a student's dissertation would then lead to increased delivery of services by the INGO. One must consider whether the answers given are those that they think you want to hear in order to improve benefits from the organization.

I can recall moments during both visits when the concern that my association with an INGO was affecting how people perceived me. In 2005, during a school visit, I spent

a long time talking to the headmaster and teachers about their experiences. The students, I was told, were out for PE (Physical Education). Later, the children marched by in a line, singing a song that, to my ears, highly resembled a fight song. The entire image was very militaristic. Because the children were using a local language with which I was only facile on the most basic level, I asked the headmaster about the song that the children were singing. He told me that it was a song about how much the students love education and their teachers. At the time, I wondered whether he was unwilling to admit that there was a military aspect to the children's school, but with further reflection, I concluded that he was just selling his school and his students in the hopes that my needs assessment would lead to further financial investment by the INGO.

A following consideration for researchers who associate with INGOs in order to complete their projects is whether or not there are organizational expectations for your research. Often, in exchange for granting access to populations or for providing logistical support, the INGO might require that a researcher writes reports for them. One must consider how this affects the research and perhaps how that may create an official link to the organization. Not only might this damage perceived distance between the INGO and the researcher, but it potentially may compromise the researcher's ability to be honest about findings.

Impact on INGO of being associated with research

Finally, one must consider how the perception of the research might affect the organization. In 2007, my surveys and interviews were focused on collecting information on political attitudes and engagement. In a tenuous post-conflict environment, these are

not necessarily safe topics to be discussing. If I was perceived as an employee or representative of the INGO at that time, there are major ethical implications of this association – was I politicizing the work of the INGO? In addition, I was concerned that people would cooperation with the research will impact the services of the INGO. If they answered my questions, would they feel entitled to more aid or greater participation in the relief and development programming of the organization?

On a related point, one must also consider how compensation of research subjects, translators, or survey enumerators might compromise the work of the INGO. My concern was that my payment of research participants might lead people to expect money from the INGO in exchange for their cooperation in the future. For this reason, I did not provide any compensation for participation. However, many colleagues believe strongly in giving back to the communities in which they do research. This is an honorable intent, but in the cases when researchers are using the resources or accessing populations through an INGO, this relationship between researcher and community becomes somewhat more complex because of the power dynamic I had witnessed in 2005.

Conclusion

Conducting research in and after conflict poses numerous challenges, both conceptually and methodologically. In this paper, I attempted to use my experiences in southern Sudan to explore this in practice, and my writing could have taken many roads. For example, by being required to stay in one location in southern Sudan, the generalizability of my findings has certainly been compromised (Duflo, Grennerster, &

Kremer, 2006). I would argue that further reflection on field methods in crisis should focus on the possibility of generalizing from research conducted in these fragile and unique environments. However, by focusing on the role of the INGO, I believe that this paper brings to the forefront an issue that has increasing importance for both practitioners and scholars. INGO staff members in the field are increasingly being targeted by violence, and these workers are often holding academic as well as practical posts. Only one of many tragic examples of this is the recent death in Afghanistan of Dr. Jackie Kirk of the International Rescue Committee and McGill University. I believe that exploring how the research process and findings are influenced by association with an INGO, and how the research might affect perceptions of the INGO, are two steps towards understanding this phenomenon on a greater level. While my goal for this paper is to contribute to improved research methods in critical areas such as southern Sudan, I also strive to increase awareness of the greater global context of our research, in the hopes that such projects can be conducted without a violent end.

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