

The composite approach: research design in the context of war and armed conflict

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ABSTRACT *Researching in contexts affected by armed conflict presents many challenges beyond those normally encountered by social scientists. Focusing on these special difficulties has, in the past, often obstructed the task of understanding the methods that are applicable to situations of armed conflict. This paper aims to suggest a means of rectification. First, it introduces some of the particular issues that relate to field research under conditions of armed conflict and, second, it suggests a possible strategic approach to mitigating these. Overall, it is argued that a creative combination of different methods and techniques, broadly termed ‘the composite approach’, represents the most effective way of dealing with the challenges that working in a conflict-affected situation presents.*

It has been increasingly acknowledged that effective research design in war-affected societies depends on an understanding of the origins and nature of the conflict as it is experienced by those involved in, or affected by, it. Similarly, it has been recognised that working within a conflict-affected region cannot be regarded as a ‘neutral’ activity. Instead researchers, relief workers and local support staff are frequently seen as having a significant bearing over the course, and even the outcome, of the conflict itself. These concerns have in turn led to a perception that researching in conflict areas presents such special challenges that it is difficult or impossible to apply rigorous methodological norms expected of social science research under these conditions.

The particularities of researching in the context of armed conflict

So what are the special challenges to research in the context of armed conflict and are they different in kind or merely in intensity from difficulties which are common to social science research anywhere? This section begins by reviewing some of the more pertinent issues that relate to undertaking research in conflict-

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affected societies, before critically examining a number of different methodological strategies. In particular, problems of access, sampling, generalisation and bias are considered, as well as some of the numerous ethical issues which arise in this area of the discipline. This is followed by an analysis of the merits and demerits of three basic methodological categories: the experimental method, the survey method and the ethnographic method.

A fundamental problem is that 'the researcher in war is governed by a multitude of unpredictable parameters which tightly control appropriate action' (Barakat & Ellis, 1996: 149–150). For instance, traumatic conditions that have affected people's experiences may also inhibit their ability or willingness to communicate them. As a consequence, researchers can no longer assume the existence of a body of verifiable data. Instead, information tends to be the product of individual attempts to make sense of confusing and often threatening events (Simmons, 1995: 43). While these conditions can be found in other research contexts, they are unlikely to occur with the same degree of intensity as in war-affected contexts.

Particularly compounding are difficulties relating to access to information, to research settings and to respondents. Some of these are essentially practical, but from a methodological point of view the main concerns are with neutrality and representation. Understanding an armed conflict requires access to all the groups involved in or affected by it. However, for the main protagonists, who, by definition, do not accept the legitimacy of their opponent's case, any association with 'the other side' can be interpreted as a hostile act. Similarly, the expression of any alternative to their interpretation of events by groups or individuals under their control can be discouraged by appeals to loyalty or punitive sanctions. In these circumstances, it is often neither possible to gain equal and uninhibited access to all groups nor to ensure that the research sample contains representative informants. Many people disguise their identities or claim leadership or spokesperson status which they do not in fact possess, while some vulnerable groups remain deliberately invisible under threat of reprisal or through a general fear of strangers. The methodological challenge is to find ways to mitigate and compensate for these often severe limitations to access.

Another problem particularly pertinent to working in conflict-affected societies is developing a coherent sampling strategy. Since much of the credibility of a given piece of research depends on the criteria and procedures for choosing what is to be studied, the selection of subjects, locations and time frames ideally should be based on a thoroughly implemented theoretical analysis. While every research context does place certain constraints on the range of choices, the conditions in areas affected by armed conflict mean that once an appropriate strategy has been developed it is often difficult to implement within an acceptable level of reliability. The instability of populations and conditions are such that any plan that relies, for example, on a fixed sampling frame for the purposes of selecting a random sample is unlikely to be reliable and is often simply not feasible. The selection of settings and case studies for qualitative research are often conditioned more by what is practically possible (in terms of access and security) than by a theoretical analysis of their typicality (Nordstrom, 1995). As a consequence, clearly categorising different population groups, stake-

holders and belligerents for the purposes of sampling is similarly problematic.

Should the researcher succeed in gaining access to a conflict, it is likely that the generalisation of his or her results will prove troublesome. This is because the experience of conflict by different groups (even in the same location) can be so radically different that generating general hypotheses from case studies becomes extremely difficult. So 'it is important to recognize that the greater the heterogeneity of a population the more problematic are empirical generalizations based on a single case' (Gomm *et al*, 2000: 104–105). In conditions of war it is especially difficult to relate the study of one case to others on the basis of comprehensive theoretical criteria. Data relating to social conditions and human needs are usually not collected or are overshadowed by the reporting of major events such as the flight of refugees, violence and destruction. Sources tend to be incomplete and unreliable as interruptions caused by armed conflict mean that information is not systematically collected and is commonly lost or destroyed. As a result, much of the data available is only that collected for purposes of conflict. For example, food supply and population figures are often falsified by those in administrative control in order to obtain aid, or are sometimes used or suppressed to give a false impression of ability to deal with shortages.¹

Consequently, the risk of bias is particularly high in areas of violent conflict. The interface between the researcher and the researched is affected by a number of factors specific to, or exacerbated by, conflict situations. The first is the issue of trust. The short time often made available to carry out field-based research in conflict-affected sites does not permit a close relationship to develop. Second, these time constraints often do not allow for the exhaustive gathering of quantitative and qualitative information which might have led to a more penetrating and complete understanding of the situation. The preoccupation with survival among respondents tends to supersede memories of other actions, especially those leading to the conflict. They may, for example, recall the more recent or dramatic events and reinterpret their past attitudes in the light of what they have now come to believe about those events. As a result, it frequently becomes difficult to attribute the correct significance to important variables influencing the research topic. For example, it may be difficult to establish exactly when innovations that might have resulted in adaptations to conflict evolved within society.

Third, there are some research techniques that are not universally applicable in a conflict situation. Since respondents are commonly affected by fear and suspicion, structured or rigid semi-structured questionnaires/interviews, for instance, may appear threatening and thus prove an inappropriate means of soliciting data (Barakat, 1992). The level of such reactivity is influenced by the respondents' background and circumstances, as well as by the type of information that is requested. Traumatized individuals do not readily give coherent or complete accounts of their lives and are more often moved to communicate fragments to an individual who is perceived as posing no threat—usually after a long period of association and acceptance. A fourth factor is that, since many of the communities affected by war belong to minority ethnic groups whose language and customs are not generally known to outsiders, the use of interpreters and translation represents another common source of bias (Lelo, 1993). Fifth, respondents may be motivated by what they perceive to be the

researcher's intentions or potential usefulness. They may mistrust the aims and credibility of the process or they may seek to use it for their own purposes. In either case, the information they give is likely to be false or incomplete.

Sixth, in addition to bias resulting from the reaction of respondents to the research process itself, the researcher can contribute his or her own bias. Many methodological approaches (particularly those applied to conflict situations in non-industrialised countries), mostly follow analytical frameworks drawn from social conditions prevalent in temperate, industrial societies. Researchers may consequently assert rather than demonstrate causation of armed conflict and its perceived effects. As a result of such assertions, they often tend to ignore some degree of complementarity among other historic, political, economic and socio-cultural factor variables often long associated with the onset or perpetuation of a local armed conflict.

Another factor which relates to working in conflict-affected areas is the ethical difficulties a researcher is likely to find. When studying devastated and vulnerable individuals and societies there is a particular danger of doing additional harm (Olujic, 1995: 197). The information uncovered may, for example, be used as a potential weapon in the conflict itself. As such, confidentiality is more than a protection of privacy. The researcher may, as a consequence, be caught between the conflicting obligations of protecting respondents from the risk of violent reprisal and disseminating findings which could promote justice and reconciliation (Marriage, 2000; Barakat & Ellis, 1996).

The methodological landscape

Traditionally, there have been three methodological categories for attempting to mitigate these problems: experimental methods, survey methods and ethnographic methods. Experiments produce highly reliable numerical data that are easily analysed. Artificially controlled conditions (for example of extraneous variables) ensure high construct validity and high internal validity. They are most appropriately used for testing hypotheses and establishing statistical associations between variables. In conflict situations, however, a true experiment involving the random allocation of research subjects to those affected or unaffected by the explanatory variable is not usually practically, politically or ethically possible. Instead, 'quasi-experiments' are used in which the selection of populations for study on the basis of significant difference takes the place of random allocation. These typically compare areas that have experienced some political, social and economic changes and others that have not, allowing the researcher to observe whether or not these changes have contributed to the emergence of an armed conflict. Alternatively, two areas—one experiencing conflict and one that is not—may be studied in order to observe processes leading towards armed conflict (Levy, 1995). The requirements for quasi-experimental design, however, tend to limit its practical field application. The researcher may typically have control over when to carry out the measurements, but be unable to predict the exact time changes occur in the community under study. Since the quasi-experimental method can only test one variable at a time, difficulties arise over which variables to observe and when. They are therefore generally not a feasible

approach to the study of long-term change. As a result, findings are often obtained at the expense of low ecological validity and inclusiveness.

Surveys share many of the strengths of experiments, but are similarly limited by an emphasis on control. Their primary value is in the scale and representation of the populations they study and in their ability to establish statistical associations (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1991). As with the experimental model, however, the demands of working in a conflict situation usually prevent random sampling, as the total population is rarely known to the researcher. Subjects are often in constant flight or in hiding, while others are under the control of armed authorities who may or may not have exact knowledge of their numbers and location. Either way, it is uncommon for conflict protagonists to disseminate such information accurately. In these circumstances, the sources and extent of the sampling bias cannot be known and thus cannot be controlled in the statistical analysis. Therefore in conflict situations it is frequently necessary to use non-random methods such as quota sampling, which first requires often unobtainable levels of knowledge of the population under study and second cannot easily be held to be representative (Moser & Kalton, 1971: 132–135). Moreover, since surveys are generally based on a single frame of a cross section of the population at a particular time, they are, by themselves, an inadequate means of examining the evolution of armed conflict and its effects. This is because, although data collection and analysis are comparatively rapid, situations are nearly always in constant flux and can change significantly in very short periods of time. Consequently, survey penetration is usually shallow and concentrated on what is measurable at that time rather than on probing the less tangible and more qualitative aspects of the conflict (Lyon *et al.*, 1991). A corollary of this is that surveys tend to treat data as discrete units thereby limiting the descriptive aspects of the information obtained and reducing their usefulness as a basis for comparison.

Ethnographic studies, on the other hand, are small-scale investigations of well defined communities or particular social groups. They are essentially concerned with seeking explanatory variables for phenomena observed in natural settings by aiming for high ecological validity. A wide range of predominantly qualitative data collection methods is used. The purpose is to cross-reference or triangulate accounts produced by different sources and methods about the same situation. Unlike the survey model, this method studies processes by continuously sampling informants and situations at different times. Unlike the experimental approach, it makes no attempt to influence or control conditions. Such a methodology has a number of advantages for research in conflict areas. Its exploratory nature is particularly suited to the investigation of settings that are little understood. This is invariably the case where violent conflict has broken out. Another methodological advantage is its capacity to study communities over a given historical period. Moreover, the ability to use multiple methods and sources and analyse them systematically has practical advantages in the light of the many challenges to reliability, validity and access discussed above. Furthermore, the research process itself also allows the researcher to be party to any developments that may threaten personal safety and to develop coping strategies to deal with interruptions and changes.

Nonetheless, these advantages are achieved at the expense of reliability and

inclusiveness. Difficulties in generalising the findings from the researched community to others affected by the same conflict or to derive general theories about the nature and causes of conflict are profound. In the first instance, finding and researching other communities for the purpose of comparative study, while possible in peaceful conditions, poses many logistical problems in an armed conflict. Second, by its nature, the method is not replicable by other researchers in other contexts and, while the triangulation analysis can identify specific biases associated with different methods and informants, the particular perspective of the researcher is difficult to assess and account for. Ethnographic research is therefore best suited to initial, and exploratory research, especially in the investigation of social phenomena that are little known and understood. Alternatively it can be used to cross-validate the results of experiments and surveys.

Clearly, even in mainstream social research in relatively stable social conditions, none of these approaches can be entirely self-sufficient; progress towards social understanding lies in their complementarity. Acknowledging this complementarity in the choice of research strategy in conflict situations is key to meeting many of the challenges discussed above. The following discussion therefore outlines the strengths and limitations of different research styles and techniques and suggests ways in which they can be combined in an effective composite research design.

The composite approach

It is clear from examining the advantages and limitations of each of the main methodological styles that a fourth approach, which we may call 'the composite approach', is necessary if the difficulties surrounding research in conflict areas are to be overcome. This section will outline the different elements of this method. It will argue that the use of multiple sources and methods in response to changing conditions, and the need to quantify and generalise, necessitates an amalgamation of some components of the ethnographic approach with the use of surveys and, in some specific instances, quasi-experiments. These commonalities are looked at in terms of participatory rural appraisals, eliciting oral testimonies, establishing focused discussion groups and initiating programmes of direct observation.

By using a composite approach, case study techniques can be utilised to shed light on the nature of the category in general. According to Homer-Dixon (1994), the purpose of a case study is to ascertain the relevant variables for a particular area of study and so help to generate hypotheses about the nature of the phenomena under investigation (the effect of the conflict on traditional social institutions for example). These then need to be tested by comparison with further cases and/or surveys. They can also be used to investigate the causes of phenomena identified by other means. One particular use of the case study, which can be conducted as a quasi-experiment with pre-planned controls and a standardised measurement of indicators, is participatory rural appraisal (PRA). This type of case study technique aims to enable local people to conduct their own analysis, to plan and to take action (Chambers, 1994: 958–959). The selection of the case to study and its relation to the wider social context should be

established primarily by secondary research. A review of the relevant literature forms an important part of the background to field research preparation by providing a base of knowledge on which to build a research strategy. The theoretical aspect of a study should also draw on points that have been raised in the literature from which a synthesis for an alternative analytical framework may be developed, integrating various theories on local circumstances and their applicability to a particular case. A literature review should also provide information on the recent history of the political economy of armed conflict in the selected region. Such an analysis is helpful in that it provides a degree of background knowledge with which to identify gaps in the understanding of the societal aspects of an armed conflict.

In this way, the use of preparatory literature analyses can supplement inevitable omissions in the field data and reduce unnecessary exposure. The researcher can, in other words, avoid prolonging dangerous and intrusive contacts with informants by effectively focusing on key issues and information gaps (Fielding, 2001). This is only true, however, if the researcher considers the purpose for which these secondary sources were prepared. Since all information is collected selectively to meet particular objectives, this is an important source of bias. It is also important to assess the reliability and validity of the methods used to collect it. Research findings from previous case studies can often become polarised in their view of political events and armed conflict. Other potentially 'tainted' sources may include governmental documentation, NGOs' field reports and international organisations' national development plans. All of these can, however, be analysed to ascertain any links and share traits between changes in the quality of livelihood, social stability and armed conflict once their epistemological limitations are recognised.

Secondary research can thus be used to identify one 'crucial case' that appears to be either 'most likely' or 'least likely' to fit a theory developed to understand a particular conflict setting. As such, the problems associated with a case-study method's ability to be generalised can be somewhat ameliorated and a single case can be used (as a 'plausibility probe' at least) to confirm or challenge the theory under examination—although it is likely to be more effective in eliminating untenable theories than in validating plausible ones (Eckstein, 2000: 143–152). In relating the case study to the wider population in which it occurs and then to comparable situations elsewhere, the triangulation of methods and sources will, except in the case of co-ordinated synthesis evaluations, be necessary. Such an approach can be an important means of facilitating evaluation research concerned with both the effectiveness of a particular project or programme in achieving its goals or producing benefits and, crucially, whether it would work elsewhere (Gomm *et al*, 2000: 99). That is, to reach general conclusions about the most beneficial ways to deliver aid to war-affected populations.

As such, the field data gathering exercise should be framed so that local perspectives can be obtained. To do this, it is necessary to devise a comprehensive strategy using a range of composite techniques that are capable of achieving the objectives of the research in the difficult environment of the conflict and its aftermath (Adams & Schvanevedt, 1991). Each of these, illustrated in Table 1, has to be matched to the research objective that it is best

equipped to serve. Direct observation, for example, should take the form of simple observation or a more prolonged participant observation according to the requirements of the situation. In the first case, interpretation depends on prior understanding; in the second, understanding evolves through participation in the research setting.

With regard to simple observation, Hamdi (1991) suggests that one way of compensating for the possible constraints on time for research in the field is to devise a checklist of observations to be made. Targeted and, in some cases quantified, observation of crucial indicators is often the least obtrusive way to test conclusions suggested by qualitative investigation.² More prolonged observations can help to provide an in-depth understanding of community life in the selected sites. By living among the different local communities that are experiencing armed conflict or its effects, a researcher can collect information informally and more comprehensively through observation and indirect questions. This helps to get to know the subject more deeply and reduce the risk of cultural bias. The knowledge gained in this way is not only valuable in itself, but is a necessary input for identifying interest groups and key individuals to be interviewed, as well as appropriate ways to arrange such discussions with them (Thakur, 1993). The unstructured nature of the different types of data obtained from observations, however, means that it is usually not conducive to statistical or comparative analysis for the purposes of generalisation. To overcome this limitation, additional data need to be gathered through the use of other field techniques in a composite strategy (McCall & Simmons, 1969).

Another method to be incorporated into the composite approach is the identification of key informants from whom to elicit oral testimonies. These can be obtained in both the exploratory stages of research planning and in the later phases of a case study. That is, they can be used as one of a range of methods to gain information and negotiate access for the conduct of further investigation as

Table 1. The composite approach

	<i>Social adaptations</i>	<i>Social, political and economic changes</i>	<i>Conflict processes</i>	<i>Effects of armed conflict</i>	<i>Conflict resolution</i>
Quasi-experiments				*	
Baseline, second or final-stage surveys	*	*		*	
PRA	*	*			*
Oral testimonies		*	*	*	*
Focused group discussions	*	*		*	*
Direct observations	*			*	

Note: *offers answers to research objective.

part of a situation analysis. The degree of interface structuring between the researcher and the subject depends on the purpose of the interview. In an initial situation analysis, contact with a person in a leadership role ostensibly in agreement with the purpose of the interview can involve a series of fairly specific, if open-ended, questions. If the purpose is to obtain an oral life testimony, the initial contact is likely to be exploratory until trust is established. The selection of key informants in a conflict situation has to be based on prior knowledge of the society. In the case of an initial contact, the choice is usually dictated by the authority structure in the area. The researcher should be cognisant of both who *has* the power and who *perceives* that they have the power to grant access (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

In a typical qualitative case study, the choice of key informants will be based on the results of participant observation or PRA. Oral testimonies should thus be obtained from the population according to the theoretical basis or theme of the research programme. That is not to say, however, that data collection should be formulaic. Where there are strong reservations or mistrust over certain topics, direct questions are not put. Instead, the interviewer prompts spontaneous discussion by the use of 'cue questions', such as remarks or indirect enquiries, that allow respondents to broach the subject in their own way if they so choose (Davies, 1997: 146–148). No pre-conceived questions, specific order or schedule is imposed upon the respondents. Rather, they are encouraged to relate their opinions in a way that draws on their own experiences. Each informant is able to use their oral testimony to present the perspective they choose devoid of external restrictions. Because oral histories are not confined to one limited encounter, but are recorded over a number of meetings until both parties are satisfied that everything has been covered and understood, attention is often drawn to key areas of research that would otherwise have been ignored. As a result, oral testimonies are a holistic means of gathering detailed accounts of what may have happened during past periods of armed conflict and of providing explanations of aspects of the situation that the researcher initially found unclear or complex.

Focused group discussions can also be established as a local consultative practice for government planning, as a method of participatory evaluation or as a component in adult education programmes. They can either provide information and opinions about situations, aspirations and priorities for future developments or a retrospective reflection upon past events. As such, they may be structured around a theme, such as budget planning, tax collection and so on, or around a particular place where the effects of a conflict are not fully understood. By using data-gathering methods such as asking group members to complete non-attributed 'post-it' notes on a given topic, confidentiality can be assured and new insights into the local experience obtained. In the case of the Adjumani region of Uganda, researchers were able to use this method to challenge governmental analyses of the security situation. By asking group members to highlight what they perceived to be the main obstacles to development in the district rather than accepting 'official' accounts of reported crime, planners were able to assess local priorities more accurately (Barakat, 1999).

In this way, focused group discussions can be used both to minimise the risk of bias and to establish questions on key areas of interest for more detailed

investigation by other methods as part of a composite approach (Pratt & Loizos, 1992). First, data are gathered in order to establish common perceptions of the possible causes and effects of armed conflict as well as on the roles of the various stakeholders and belligerents. Second, focused discussions with a number of groups are used to find out the relationships and interactions between the different population groups. The method may identify patterns of interaction and reasons for both conflict and co-operation between belligerent groups by identifying institutions controlling distribution and access to public goods or by assessing the changing nature of power and authority in an historical socio-cultural context. As a method, it is particularly designed to be flexible, so that discussions can incorporate ideas generated by the groups that would otherwise have been overlooked by the researcher. As with oral testimonies, the selection of participants in focused discussions is critical and requires prior understanding of the structure and composition of the population to be studied. In the first instance, it is necessary to know what groups people themselves identify with and customarily use as discussion fora. As a general rule, this method is found if group members feel comfortable with each other. Since larger groups will often be dominated by the most vocal to the detriment of other members and perspectives, it is preferable to conduct discussions with small, homogeneous groups which are representative of the wider population. To do this, it may be necessary to start with a general meeting in order to explain the purpose and needs of the research and hear suggestions for arranging smaller representative groups.

Even so, an inherent weakness of the focused group discussion method remains the difficulty in establishing effective and representative population samples. As a consequence, there is often some doubt as to whether the information obtained is generally valid. Unless used in a combined strategy with other methods, personal perspectives are hard to compare. Respondents tend to over-emphasise or exaggerate aspects of their experiences depending on political sympathies and perceptions of identity. Not all key informants have the same ability to express themselves, so people with fewer verbal skills may be overlooked in the process of selecting individuals and establishing groups (Pratt & Loizos, 1992). Another limitation is that, if used in isolation, this method tends to generate information that is not detailed enough for statistical quantification and so has limited use in the testing of variables. By itself, it cannot, for example, be used as the basis for quantifying the need for emergency relief—although the insights it provides may help to target resources efficiently by providing an understanding of existing distribution systems. In other words, in these respects it can be a useful tool if used in combination with other methods as part of a composite approach.

A composite methodology can also be enriched by the incorporation of a baseline survey. This is used mainly as the starting point for planning, monitoring and evaluating interventions or as the initial phase of a longitudinal study. Three factors make it appropriate for use in conflict situations. First, it can be designed to formulate a series of longitudinal studies that can record changes in pre-determined indicators after the introduction of a particular policy or activity. Second, it represents a systematic way of obtaining quantitative data from a pre-selected sample population that can be statistically analysed and thus lead to general conclusions. Third, it offers specific answers to direct (usually not

complex) questions about the condition and nature of a particular population.

By itself, however, it is quite difficult to implement in war contexts. First of all, it is unlikely to be reliable or valid unless it is preceded by some other research activity (secondary research, rapid appraisal, qualitative case study, etc), which allows the researcher to target appropriate variables in an effective manner. Second, the large number of variables under analysis involves the asking of a great many questions, taking more time than respondents in precarious circumstances can afford—especially if this is done through interpreters. In these circumstances, it is often more appropriate to select a small number of key variables that can be covered by a few very simple questions, as a means of verifying and measuring phenomena already examined by other methods incorporated in a composite methodology. Similarly, instead of attempting a potentially unreliable random sample, the researcher can use previous qualitative research to design a quota sample covering the different population groups. This might then inform a second or final stage survey aimed at relating variables and testing hypotheses generated by first stage research or at analysing baseline data and secondary sources. Indeed, in the case of Puntland, Somalia, where data were both scarce and contested, a baseline survey was undertaken which randomly selected households within a quota of 12 local communities served by centrally administered health-service provision. By using a cross-sectional study from a semi-random sampling base such as this, a quantitative representation of a comprehensive range of variables (the role of overseas relatives, the prevalence of debt, the cost of education, and so on) could be obtained (Barakat & Deely, 2001: 75). Since it aims to answer specific research questions based on a comparatively small number of indicators through a limited number of carefully designed (and pilot tested) questions, a research design like this often has more chance of success in the uncertainties of a war context.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that careful research planning is essential when preparing to work in a conflict-affected area. While no generally applicable blueprint of how to conduct research in such an environment can be said to exist, an approach which utilises and combines different methodological strengths is, we suggest, to be preferred. In fact, the detail of such a composite is likely to be determined by the research objective being pursued. Nonetheless, a number of guidelines are discernible. First, it is clear that an orientation phase is essential. It should involve exploring the available information, consulting and arranging access with key people, careful logistic preparation and initial less-structured appraisals. Second, a comprehensive literature analysis, which forms the basis of the research design, is also vital. Third, the design itself should, in the case of surveys or comparative research, be pilot tested. The false urgency that infects so many interventions in conflict situations should not be made an excuse for compromising on properly structured research. Fourth, before the main exercise of collecting data is carried out, careful negotiation is necessary. There should be meetings with administrative officials and community leaders in order to explain the aims and objectives of the fieldwork and enlist respondents' support and co-

operation. It is essential that researchers are sensitive to the tensions and context within which they are working or they risk losing, at the very least, the data that they have collected. Fifth, while preceding researchers occasionally may have already made life more difficult in the field by the way they undertook or reported their work, many already-completed studies do represent a source of valuable insights.

Sixth, the chosen research strategies and techniques must be closely matched to the research purpose (both in policy and theoretical terms), to the type of research question and to the cultural context of the region. They must also be able to respond to unforeseen circumstances and rapid changes in the research setting. Creativity and flexibility are essential in devising a valid and viable combined strategy to meet these challenges. As Thakur (1993) argues, to make comparisons of different ethnic, religious and belligerent groups, and to identify key stakeholder interests in an ongoing armed conflict is always problematic. It is essential therefore to study the nature and consequences of armed conflicts by using a variety of methodological strategies combined in a generalist, or composite, approach.

Notes

- ¹ There is often a considerable discrepancy between the donors' and the prospective recipients' estimates of those potentially in need. In Puntland, Somalia, for instance, the United Nations believes the population to be about 850 000, whereas the regional administration puts the figure at around 2.5 million (Barakat & Deely, 2001: 73).
- ² For example, Zimbabwean agronomist Ben Madondo, conducting an appraisal in the headquarters district of the Mozambican armed rebel movement RENAMO shortly after the peace settlement, spent a day making quantified observations of two indicators from a seat beside the main thoroughfare. The first was the incidence of symptoms of malnutrition in children. The second was the number of women dressed in a full set of traditional clothes. The high incidence of the first confirmed that women farmers were not meeting the nutritional needs of their families, the low incidence of the second that male farmers had not resumed cash cropping, since their first obligation on completing a sale was to provide new clothes for their wives. Using this route through the district as a cross-section, he also recorded all evidence of overgrown, reopened and cultivated land and compared it with pre-war data on cropping and farm yields. In this way, he obtained a rapid assessment of the state of agriculture and food security in the district.

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