Research Methods in Conflict Settings

Increasing numbers of researchers are now working in regions experiencing high levels of conflict or crisis, or among populations that have fled violent conflict to become refugees or internally displaced persons. Understanding of these conflicts and their aftermath should be shaped not only by the victors and their elite companions but also by the local people whose daily lives become intertwined with the conflict – and it is this “view from below” that this volume’s authors seek to share. Yet conducting rigorous research in these kinds of field contexts presents a range of ethical, methodological, logistical, and security challenges not usually confronted in nonconflict field contexts.

This volume compiles a rich variety of lessons learned by experienced field researchers, many of whom have faced demanding situations characterized by violence, profound and well-grounded distrust, and social fragmentation. The authors offer options, ideas, and techniques for studying the situations of people affected by conflict and, by focusing on ethical and security issues, seek ways to safeguard the interests and integrity of the research “subjects” and of the researchers and their teams.

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A VIEW FROM BELOW

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worked for *Der Spiegel*, *Stern*, and *Paris Match* among others. Connors worked in Afghanistan for fifteen months starting in November 2001 and then went to Iraq during the 2003 invasion. Of the fourteen months Connors worked in Iraq (April 2003–June 2004), ten months were devoted to filming the documentary *Meeting Resistance*, which he coreported, directed, and produced with fellow photojournalist Molly Bingham. The film, an intimate exploration of the motivations and methodology of Iraqi antioccupation fighters, was Connors’s directorial debut. *Meeting Resistance* was released in theaters across the United States in 2007. Since finishing touring with the documentary, Connors is focusing his attention on the field of conflict prevention and resolution.

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The incidence of conflict in the world and the proportion of the world’s people suffering from its consequences has steadily decreased over the past hundred years. Many of us have far less of a chance of dying a violent death than our grandfathers or grandmothers did. Most conflicts today are characterized by regions or nations turning in on themselves with devastating consequences for ordinary people. The distinction between combatant and noncombatant, so central to the Geneva Conventions and the protection of civilians, is all too often disregarded. In many conflicts the destruction of a people, and the direct targeting of women, children, the elderly and their way of life, are seen as a goal, or a justifiable means to an end. We label such inhumanity war crimes, crimes against humanity, or acts of genocide. Such acts are brutal in their execution and leave behind deep psychological and physical injuries that linger long after the fighting has ended. The effects of today’s armed conflicts extend over time and space far beyond the defined battlefield and often shape the lives of generations to come.

The humanitarian agencies of the United Nations, Red Cross, and Red Crescent Societies and humanitarian NGOs (international and local) seek to help people affected by conflict, by keeping alive the notion of a shared humanity and the importance of the innate dignity of each person. It is not about charity. It is fundamentally about values, and a belief about “people helping people.” To do our job well, we need a profound understanding of the politics and power dynamics of those waging war. When active armed violence ends and rebuilding begins, sustainable recovery depends on development structures that are responsive to available resources as well as the capacity and aspirations of the particular conflict-affected community. Context is everything. Without an understanding of context, humanitarian aid can be ineffective and postconflict reconstruction fails to materialize, leaving people vulnerable.
Exploring, describing, verifying, and understanding the situation in which people find themselves require knowledgeable, courageous, and highly skilled researchers, journalists, and filmmakers. These researchers, journalists, and filmmakers show the harsh reality of conflict to the outside world. They help amplify the voices of those in harm’s way. People working in conflict-related settings confront a range of ethical, methodological, logistical, and security challenges not usually confronted in nonconflict field situations. If such researchers, journalists, and filmmakers are to be credible, and are to build a coherent body of knowledge that shapes our understanding of what really is going on in conflict and its aftermath, they have to learn, develop, refine, and practice critical skills that allow objective and rigorous work to be carried out in conflict zones and among deeply distrustful and distressed communities.

Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Below is a compilation of rich insights and lessons learned by experienced field researchers, journalists, and filmmakers, all of whom have worked in demanding situations. The authors offer options, ideas, and techniques for studying the situations of people affected by conflict and, by focusing on ethical and security issues, raise key questions and seek ways to safeguard the interests and integrity of those being researched and of themselves and their teams.

The authors of this book all write from many years of experience working in conflict settings. They draw lessons from their work in conflict-affected countries around the world including Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, among others. They demonstrate that it is both possible and necessary to conduct sound and rigorous research and documentation in the challenging contexts of conflict zones. All of them have worked under harsh and challenging conditions and continue their efforts to expand our collective knowledge and improve our collective ability to understand better the realities on the ground and give relief and the hope of a better future to conflict-affected communities.

Their insights will benefit students, professional researchers, advocacy or action researchers, and journalists seeking to work with people affected by conflict, as well as governments and humanitarian and development policy makers. Governments and humanitarian organizations that commission research to inform their policies and programs can better understand how to conduct and evaluate research projects.

The United Nations Charter speaks of us as “One people.” One humanity. Peace, prosperity, freedom from fear, and human dignity are inalienable rights
Foreword

of us all. The contributors to this volume through their attitudes, approaches, and insights help us to understand how we can make progress in turning those values and principles into reality.

Valerie Amos
Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator
New York, March 2013
We wish to thank Peter Walker for his intellectual contributions to the development of this volume. The Feinstein International Center and the Norwegian Aid Council offered critical financial support for the writing of the book. Rosa Pendenza and Beth O’Leary provided administrative support. We also wish to thank our colleagues who assisted us in identifying our superb contributors and offered critical feedback at crucial points along the way, including Anita Garey, Laura Hammond, Jennifer Leaning, Dan Maxwell, Rosalind Shaw, Peter Uvin, Kim Wilson, and Helen Young. Thanks to the professional photographers who generously allowed us to use their striking images, in particular Mónica Bernabé, Molly Bingham, Mélanie Gauthier, Sébastien Gros, Catherine Hébert, and Kate Lapides. Anonymous reviewers gave critical feedback as we completed final edits. Our editor, John Berger, and his staff at Cambridge University Press enthusiastically and patiently supported publication of the volume. We wish to recognize and thank our colleagues, collaborators, and research assistants who live in the countries described in this book and make it possible for us to do our work well. Finally, we wish to thank the people who have given of themselves so that we might learn from their stories.