Boston Consortium *for* Arab Region Studies

Methods Handbook

Conducting Research with Refugees:

Reference Guide & Best Practices

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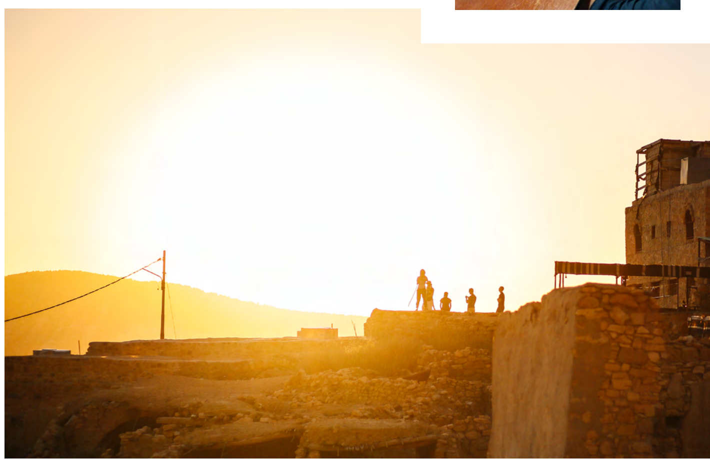
Contents



Introduction

ABOUT THE HANDBOOK

This document summarizes the proceedings of a 3 May 2017 workshop held at Northeastern University in Boston that featured discussions led by a core group of research academics and practitioners from the Forced Migration Researchers Consortium.

It is designed as a reference guide for researchers planning field projects. The guide aims to identify potential challenges, consider important ethical, methodological, and practical questions, while offering some best practices based on the collective experiences of the workshop's participants.

The handbook is hardly a conclusive instruction guide, but may present new fundamental perspectives that may help researchers refine their research projects. The document is laid out in three parts following the research cycle from design & planning, to data collection, to analysis & outcomes:

1. The first part, "**Design & Planning**," looks generally at the challenges of research design, advantages and techniques of participatory research ("Searching for participation"), and the potential utilization of translators as key participants in research design and execution ("The Translation problem").

2. The second part, "**Data Collection**," looks at an original case study of participatory research in Nigeria, including the project's obstacles and achievements ("Youth enabled research"), while exploring the interplay between planning and improvisation during data collection in the field ("Qualitative methods in tough spaces").

3. The third part, "**Analysis & Outcomes**," considers who benefits from research, who is engaged in outcomes, and who findings get disseminated to ("Research for…whom?"). It also explores the kinds of narratives research findings are presented within, and how these narratives can support or complicate policies, practices, and public attitudes surrounding forced migration.

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

The 3 May 2017 methods workshop on which this document is based addressed a range of forced migration research themes through a series of moderated discussions.

Workshop participants included humanitarian practitioners from the U.S. and abroad as well as academic faculty and graduate researchers from twelve universities. Researchers from the Forced Migration Field Researchers Consortium led discussions, and their bios and contact information are available at the end of this handbook.

The Consortium includes members from Boston, Clark, Harvard, Northeastern, Oxford Brookes, Tufts, and Worcester State Universities, the Feinstein International Center, the International Institute of New England (IINE), the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS).

Part 1:
Design & Planning

Searching for "participation" in participatory research with forced migrants
Amira Mohamed & Adam Saltsman

This session put into question the idea of "participation" as it is commonly used in humanitarian research in contexts of displacement by asking who gets to participate and at what level.

While humanitarian agencies have often considered participation a means to "empower" refugee clients, a participatory action research approach is also a way to achieve a more "authentic" set of findings that more closely adheres to the experiences and perceptions of the target population.

Yet critics point out that forced migrant "participants" often have little power over the research agenda and the policy or programming objectives of such research.

Discussants considered possible methodological tactics that graduate students, academics, and practitioners can use to address the uneven power dynamics of research and create space for transformative practices by integrating principles of participatory action.

Key Challenges & Questions

How can migration research benefit from qualitative and feminist methodologies?

Best Practices

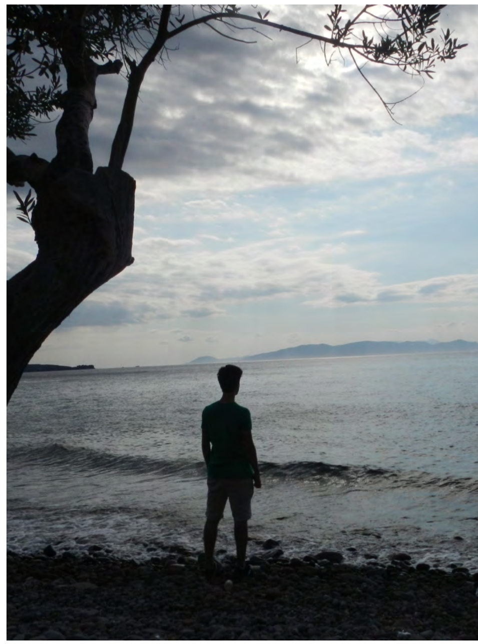
Critical participatory research embedded in feminist methodologies provides opportunity for co-producing research with subjects. It envisions research as a collective effort to design research agenda and work together on all levels of the research process for the purposes of transformative action.

"Who are we studying?
We are studying the invisible,
subaltern communities. Research
is the best opportunity to get
their voices heard."

Amira Mohamed

"We have to … acknowledge migrants as co-producers of knowledge, because knowledge is a social construction itself. Instead of casting a passive image of refugees, we should frame them as agents of knowledge."

Amira Mohamed



Key Challenges & Questions

What does it actually mean to engage in participatory research in contexts of forced migration?

What are the barriers to such approaches and how can researchers navigate them?

Are we achieving validity in the eyes of the people participating in the research?

Can participatory research help build trust, reduce interview fatigue of respondents, and avoid creating "subjects" who "feel like they are in a zoo" when being researched?

Best Practices

One test of validity should be its "authenticity," instead of thinking of validity simply as the minimization of bias.

Given that the word "authenticity is highly subjective, the key point here is authenticity is in the eyes of the participants. Readers are referred to Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (2000). "Validity as Authenticity"; Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (2000). "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences," in The Handbook of Qualitative Research."

Participatory research and the search for authenticity help address some of the power imbalances between migrant communities, researchers, and humanitarian organizations. You cannot erase power imbalances from research work, but you can have collective agenda setting and co-construction of knowledge with participants that acknowledge and mitigate these imbalances.

Participatory research can occur before and after data collection: research design and questions should be developed collectively before data collection, while participatory analysis after collection can create outcomes that are transformative to the community being researched.

Key Challenges & Questions

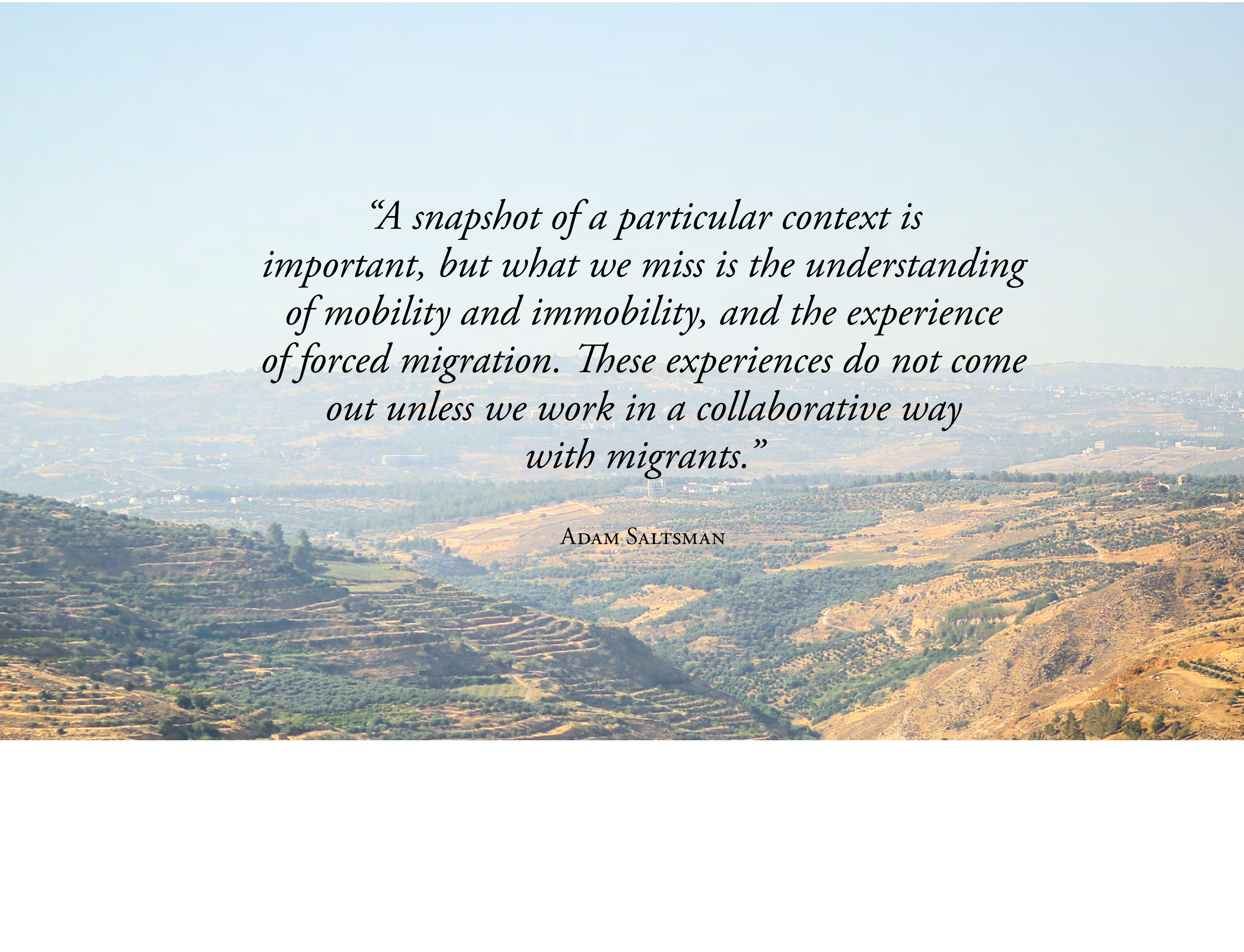
How do gender, race, and class impact qualitative research with displaced populations?

How do we assess our positionality and control for these variables?

Best Practices

For some researchers, empowerment is part of the agenda. An example of a study was given where domestic women workers and migrant workers in Egypt were part of a research project that collected data, but also opened up opportunities for both sets of workers to find jobs.

A researcher cannot shed whatever layers of privilege they have, but can recognize their privilege, identity, and interrogate their own research team's assumptions. Reflexivity is crucial.



“A snapshot of a particular context is important, but what we miss is the understanding of mobility and immobility, and the experience of forced migration. These experiences do not come out unless we work in a collaborative way with migrants.”

Adam Saltsman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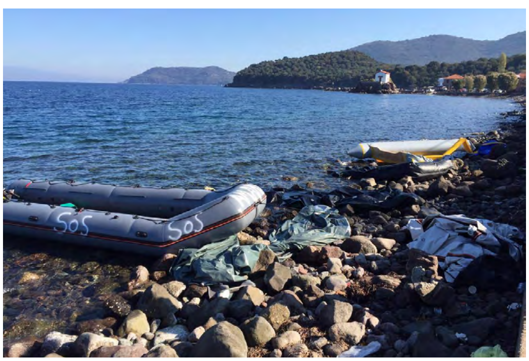
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Key Challenges & Questions

Where does research end? When does participation stop? How and in what ways do you end a research relationship?

What should be the limits for developing personal relationships with refugees while doing research?

How can researchers manage situations when co-participants are xenophobic or are not ethically/politically/intellectually in agreement with the researcher?

Best Practices

Social science comes from the idea of fly on the wall: just observe, but do not do anything. But our human tendency to connect to those around us makes this impossible. Researchers need to acknowledge their positions, how participants perceive them, and how they relate with participants on a social level: this is critical in managing bias.

Relationships are bounded by IRB, but the boundaries blend and you do not always want to dismantle boundaries. Long-term relationships can be very prosperous, sometimes helping to identify new research questions or leading into other projects.

"Translation problems take place even if you are speaking the same language: jargon, social class, and gender play a role in meaning making."

Adam Saltsman

The translation problem in research with refugees – is localization the answer?
Karen Jacobsen & Graeme Rodgers

Translators can present a critical opportunity for participatory research, and are particularly under-utilized in research design and planning.

One of the biggest but least discussed problems for researchers is having to work with translators or interpreters in interviewing refugees. This applies to resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum alike. This panel explored some of the problems (e.g. inadequately trained interpreters), best practices (e.g. use of back-translation), and consequences (e.g. credibility of an asylum case in court) of the translation challenge. Ways in which localization of research (i.e. working with local teams) can address the challenge were discussed.

The specific challenges and adaptations of the International Rescue Committee were also covered.

Key Challenges & Questions

How can translation be an asset, rather than simply an obstacle, to the research process?

Best Practices

Researchers should understand the criticality of translators performing tasks not limited just to directly translating, but also allowing the researcher to see cultural, ethical, and historical frames of populations. At times, translators can even be trained to perform research without the presence of the researcher for better results. This technique can allow researchers to indirectly access areas that are not safe for external visitors, or may be heavily distorted by the presence of an outsider.

Researchers are encouraged to spend time “hanging out” with translators as key informants, and with migrants to understand what research questions and phrasings make sense, and what questions are not relevant.

Triangulation of different research instruments also helps to test the accuracy of translations.

"We tend to underinvest in translation, we tend to go into the field too quickly, and we try to compensate a little bit by stripping our questionnaires down to very simple questions, but then we lose nuance."

Graeme Rodgers

Key Challenges & Questions

Refugees speak a wide range of languages and dialects, and it is almost impossible for a researcher to get a full picture without help from a translator. With this complexity, how can data distortions from errors in translation be avoided?

Best Practices

Back-translation is a powerful tool for testing the accuracy of the translation process, not only to identify flaws in translation, but also in identifying the cultural frames or intellectual assumptions that are causing translation distortions or represent fundamental problems with the underlying research question.

Using multiple translators and getting input from a range of nationalities, genders, and backgrounds allows valuable insights to translational flaws. Having translators critique each other's translators in a collaborative process is time consuming, but allows much more refined questionnaires and data collection.

Data analysis should also feature active consideration of the possibility of distortions in data based on inaccurate translation. Researchers in the analysis phase should be able to contact the original translator to ask about certain phrases or word choices that may seem out of place or inaccurate. After the fact, translated information can be "brought back" to the original statement through careful analysis and questioning why translators provided certain words or phrases.

Key Challenges & Questions

Similar to researchers, translators have their own positionality vis-à-vis migrants and researchers. For example, an American with a second language in Arabic interviewing Syrian refugees is a different case than a Saudi interviewing them. How can we manage this positionality?

Best Practices

Take time getting to know the positionally of yourself, the interviewee, and the translator as a system. At times it may be better to have a shared gender and nationality between the interviewee and translator, and at other times the opposite may be true.

Researchers should know the ethical and cultural biases of their translator to prevent distortions: for example, a translator who does not use the term “rape” because they believe women should not discuss rape with strangers.

Translators are more prone to project their own assumptions onto translations when translation is done only through an audio recording because they do not have the benefit of facial expressions or other context clues. Translators working through audio files should know the context of the interview such as the age, nationality, whether others were in the room during the interview, and other contextual clues.

"Oftentimes being an outsider to a culture gives you an incentive to ask naïve questions. It is useful to ask those naïve questions, because sometimes as locals we take certain answers as given."

Graeme Rodgers

Key Challenges & Questions

Very often translators create their own autonomous space during the research process. How should we ensure the trust relationship between the researcher and the translator?

Best Practices

You do not want to "just hire a translator for one day," but rather build trust and be able to ask socially and politically sensitive questions about the research work.

"Everything is framed—culturally, ethically, historically—by translators and researchers, but this isn't getting enough play."

Karen Jacobsen

Key Challenges & Questions

When translators are so critical in research, should they be included in authorship?

Best Practices

Anyone significantly involved in research should be included in authorship, but the motivations of translators are not always related to academic acknowledgment.

Part 2:
Data Collection

Youth-enabled research in settings of displacement
Zoe Dibb & Kim Wilson

This session explored self-reporting techniques and participatory research through the case study of TEGA: Technology Enabled Girl Ambassadors, which has trained more than 100 girl researchers in countries like Nigeria, Rwanda, India, Indonesia and the U.S. to document their own environments.

The girl researchers receive intensive training and then are remotely monitored as they use an interactive mobile-based system of data collection.

Based on Lean Research Principles as well as the concept of Shared Identities, TEGA has found that its technologies and protocols have implications for youth in contexts of stability as well as displacement.

This session explored how the TEGA system may be adapted to environments of internal displacement, refugee settlement and integration. It also examined the potential role of "young people" (ages 18-24) in researching their own surroundings.

Key Challenges & Questions

Can members of a community provide more authentic information than outsiders given the interactive distortions, cultural assumptions, and trust limitations that outsiders bring as baggage?

Best Practices

TEGA found a dramatic difference in the data collected by outsider researchers and data collected by young girls about their own communities about what it means to be a girl in these settings. Traditional research techniques were slow and expensive and intimidating for the girls.

By contrast, after undergoing training, girls became effective and superior data collectors compared to traditional techniques. When a girl was tasked with interviewing another girl, they were much likely to give authentic and candid information, especially on sensitive but important topics like romantic relationships, educational aspirations, and attitudes toward gender norms.

Relying on girls' comfort talking to their peers diffused intimidating power dynamics present in traditional research techniques.

Key Challenges & Questions

What is the role of new technology and remote research using online platforms and data collection?

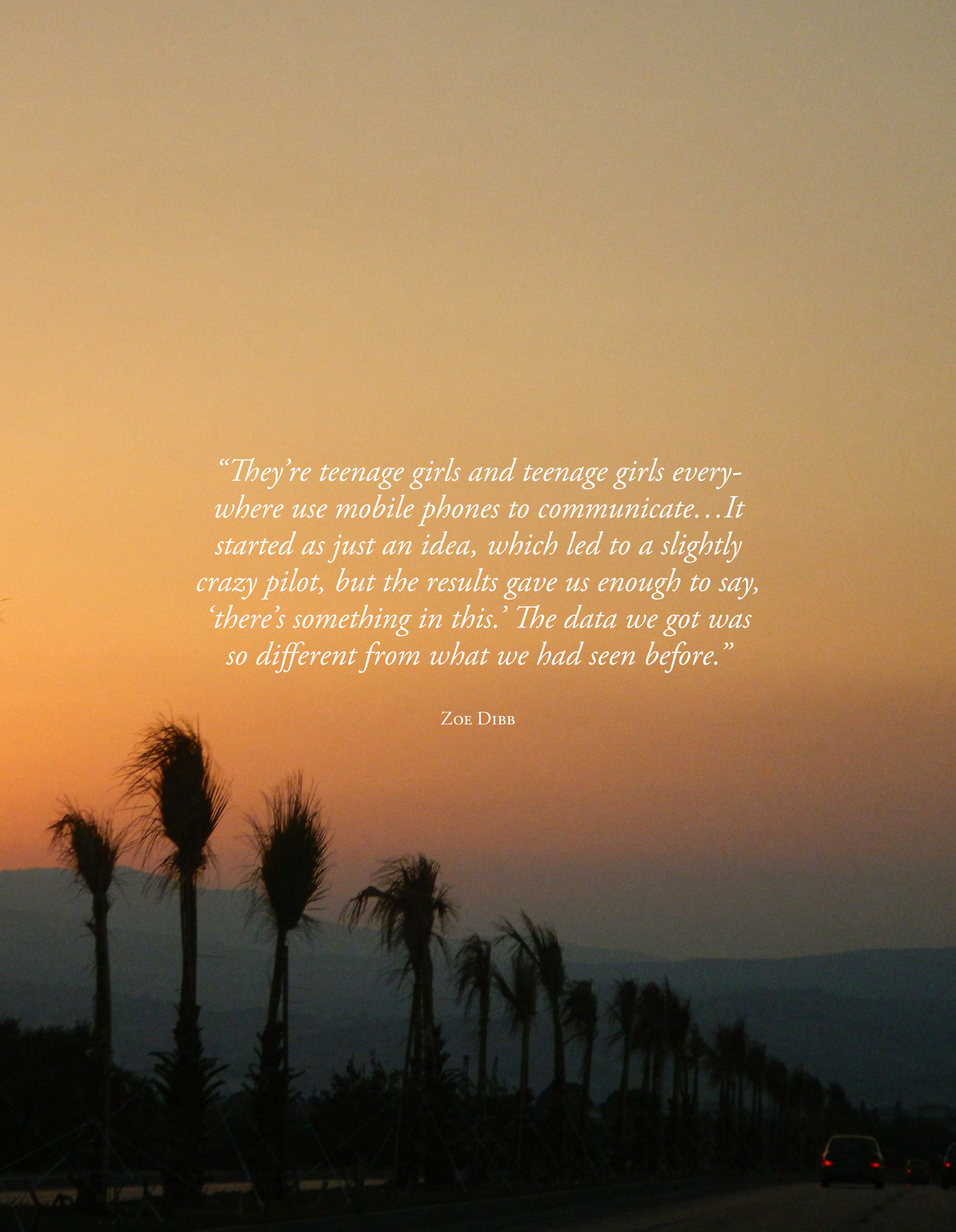
Best Practices

Girls were trained to use a smartphone app that only requires basic reading skills; after 3 months of training they are certified to be interviewers.

Initially, 40 emojis were used for coding data and tagging each other, but this process ended up slowing down interviews and was removed.

Now, photographs, videos, notes, surveys, and other qualitative data can all be securely collected and uploaded by the TEGAs smartphones.

Digital and online platforms also allow access to hard-to-reach settings and migratory populations.

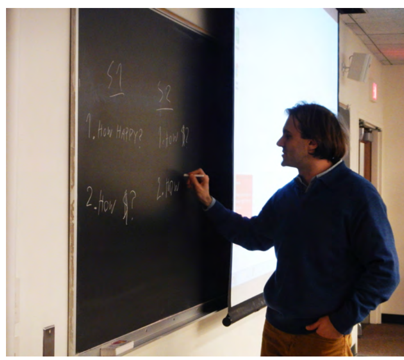


"They're teenage girls and teenage girls every-where use mobile phones to communicate…It started as just an idea, which led to a slightly crazy pilot, but the results gave us enough to say, 'there's something in this.' The data we got was so different from what we had seen before."

Zoe Dibb

"Lean Research is simply a set of principles, the four R's: rigorous, right-sized, relevant, and respectful."

Kim Wilson



Key Challenges & Questions

How do you deal with the subjectivity of data collected by young people about their own setting? Is this included in part of the training?

Best Practices

When TEGAs started collecting data, there were doubts that girls with low education levels could collect valid, unbiased information, or that they would have the skills to put their respondents at ease and probe effectively.

However, after coherent training, certified by the Market Research Society, and a three month practice period, the girls reliably produced a high quality of information. Subjectivity training is provided based on principles including courage, being non-judgmental, and being trustworthy.

Particular emphasis is placed on being non-judgmental because TEGAs are asking sensitive questions and may hear answers that conflict with their own beliefs, for instance is they are interviewing someone of a different religion. Finally, a survey asks the girls to rate how much they think the interviewee was truthful as a sort of debrief.

Key Challenges & Questions

How do you protect digital data, especially while still in the field?

Best Practices

Any collected data on the phone disappears as soon as they get to the next question, because there is risk of militants including Boko Haram finding the phone and having access to data.

Girls also are required to sign a contract where they are not allowed to share information and state that they understand confidentiality.

Key Challenges & Questions

How do you select participants? How and where are they trained after being selected?

Best Practices

Girl researchers are selected based on a set of minimum criteria: they need a certain level of reading comprehension, demonstrate confidence, and have adaptability in their learning ability.

Key Challenges & Questions

How is the data funded?

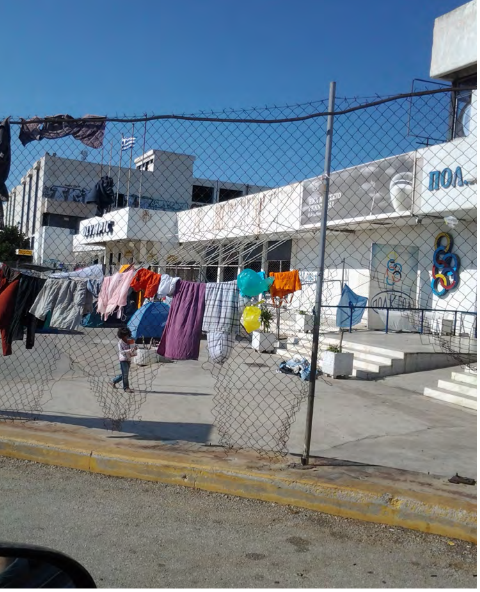
Best Practices

TEGAs are paid researchers and are funded through partnerships with NGOs and other organizations commissioning TEGA research to inform their programs.

Academics became involved as external consultants to help develop the research methodology.

"It was a very iterative process. It wasn't like we started this two years ago and then we stopped. We designed something that was very basic at first, and then we took the best bits of that and created something great… next we're working on a better desk research and analysis tool."

Zoe Dibb

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Key Challenges & Questions

How do you convince the local leaders to allow girls to participate in the research? How do you keep from negatively or dramatically disrupting the dynamics of a town by recruiting young girls for this research?

Best Practices

First, the project is presented as an asset to the community. Any potential costs to the community are considered, and the project is only implemented in a town if there are no reasonable concerns of harm. Building strong relationships in the community to pave the work for the girls to conduct interviews is critical.

A lot of community work was necessary to convince community members that girls with smart phones were not sex workers or social hazards, but over time the dynamic was normalized and supported by the community.

Project managers also deliberately chose phones for the girls that were not too gaudy or desirable. The phones are expensive, but not to an extent that no one else in the community could own it.

Key Challenges & Questions

What is the line between research, empowerment, and social advocacy?

Best Practices

The project is deliberately designed to change the way participating communities think about girls, and to change the way girls think about themselves, including their right for an education.

Once girls become confident in conducting interviews for example, they start talking to other boys, men, and even religious leaders. Girls go from lacking confidence to being incredibly confident, able to understand and communicate to entire communities, and to talk to strangers.

Additionally, girls generally do not begin speaking English, but through the course of their participation become very confident in English.

Finally, to be certified as a "gold TEGA," girls are required to design a project that will benefit their community as a certification capstone.

In short, this is a social intervention project supported and enacted through research, rather than the other way around.

Qualitative methods in tough spaces
Danilo Mandić

As much as researchers plan their work, improvisation is always necessary when conducting field research, particularly in "tough" spaces where unpredictability is a common feature.

Fortunately, the more one prepares, the better one is able to improvise. This session explored the differences between interviews, surveys and ethnographic observation in refugee sites, and how they fit together to support improvisation.

The session discussed the limitations and advantages of different ways of observing and talking to refugees, navigating refugee camps and other sites, recruiting informants, recognizing and reacting to trauma, building trust, sampling respondents and evaluating data quality.

Particular attention was given to high-turnaround camps on the Balkan Route during the recent migrant crisis.

"If anything is specific to tough spaces—tough camps, tough urban refugee neighborhoods—it's the increased need to be pragmatic."

Danilo Mandić

Key Challenges & Questions

Often, researchers make the mistake of seeing preparation and improvisation as polar extremes.

The more troubled a research site is the more risks, the less stability, and the less space for rigid research design execution.

Best Practices

In reality planning and improvisation strategies are complementary: the more one prepares, the better one is to adapt. In "tough spaces" there is an increased need to be pragmatic and to prepare to be pragmatic.

Once in the field, a researcher should have pragmatic alternatives laid out ahead of time, with a plan B, and a plan C, and a plan D.

Researchers should also allow themselves and their team to make mistakes and constantly learn in an iterative process.

Key Challenges & Questions

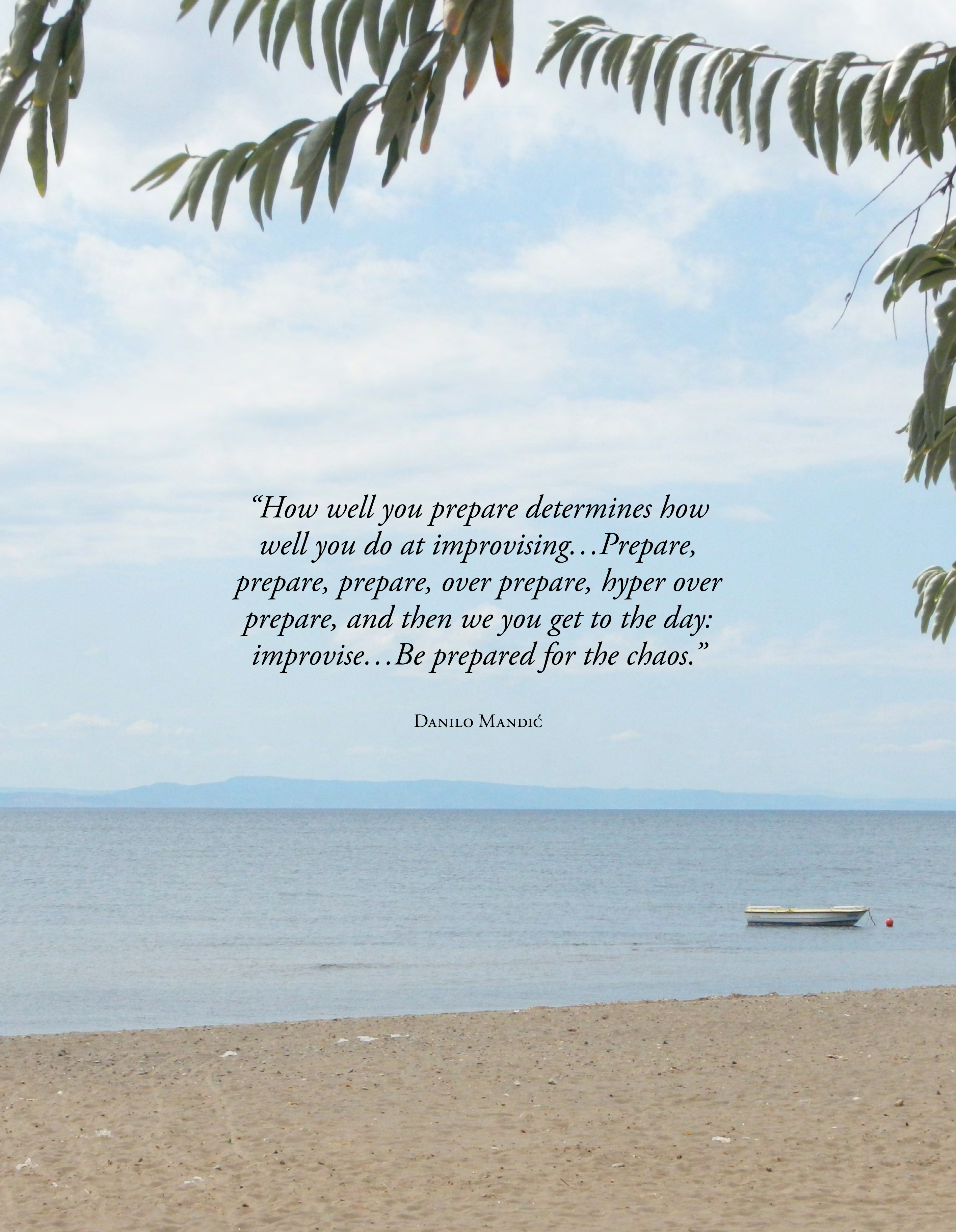
What happens when a research plan “falls in the water” as soon as the researcher enters the field and begins attempting to collect data?

Having a research design fall apart once reaching the field is a nearly ubiquitous experience for researchers of forced migration and other hidden, mobile, or vulnerable populations.

Best Practices

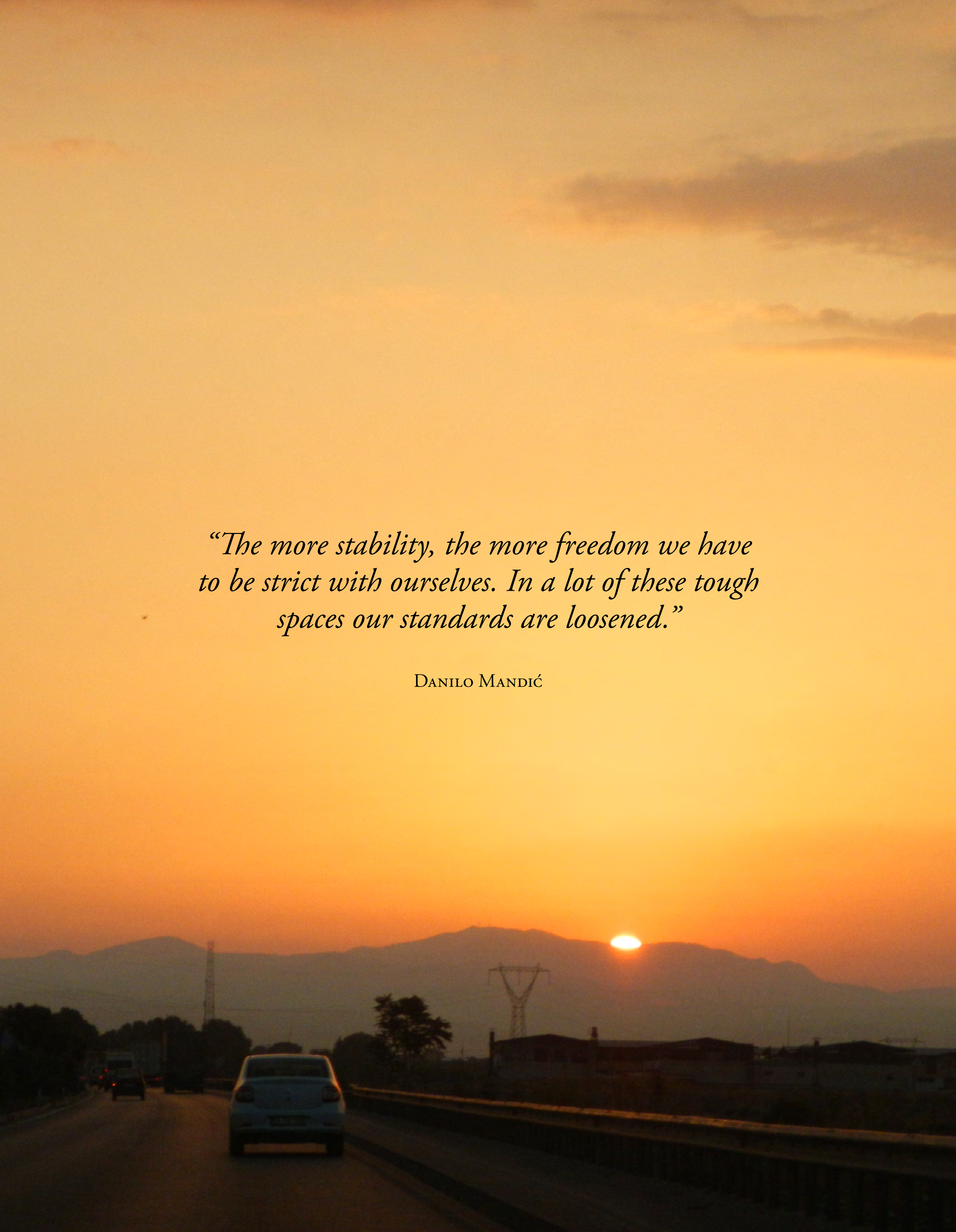
Triangulation of multiple research techniques allows a researcher to adapt to different conditions. A researcher should not go out and say, “I want to do ethnography,” but rather be able to do ethnography, surveys, and in depth interviews in different contexts when the situation is right.

For example, if a participant who the researcher wanted to conduct an in depth interview with is only available for ten minutes, if the researcher has a short survey prepared they can still collect valuable data: preparation and flexibility allow good data collection despite complications.



"How well you prepare determines how well you do at improvising…Prepare, prepare, prepare, over prepare, hyper over prepare, and then we you get to the day: improvise…Be prepared for the chaos."

Danilo Mandić



"The more stability, the more freedom we have to be strict with ourselves. In a lot of these tough spaces our standards are loosened."

Danilo Mandić

Key Challenges & Questions

How can researchers overcome the intense community politics and lack of trust of foreigners commonly experienced in "tough spaces"?

Best Practices

Get to know the space in advance, including who the informal street leaders are, the kinds of vulnerabilities like riots that are common, and the experiences of individuals who have spent time there in the past including journalists, aid workers, and migrants who passed through previously.

All researchers have multiple identities: you can use these multiple identities within the bounds of reason, ethics, and without lying to build rapport and trust with different communities. For example, a researcher may go by "Dan" among Kosovars, but as "Danilo" among Serbs. Careful consideration about situationally appropriate dress, tone, mannerisms, and other forms of presentation are all critical.

Take advantage of institutional memory: the cops refugee centers for example have the memory of being refugees during the Balkan Wars 20 years ago. Asking histories not only provides valuable data but builds trust with members of the community.

Key Challenges & Questions

How can a researcher deal with trauma of residents that may be more prevalent in "tough spaces"?

Best Practices

If a researcher is dealing with a population where trauma is anticipated, the researcher needs training both on identifying and dealing with the full spectrum of trauma symptoms.

This can be achieved through reading the numerous documents on the topic from Harvard, WHO, and HSRP. Simulating worst case scenarios like a respondent having an emotional breakdown during an interview help researchers from being caught off guard. Preparation and resources for dealing with secondary trauma is absolutely essential.

"Learn the space: just because it's a tough space doesn't give an excuse to not know it. Talk to people who have been there, look in the news, have their been riots? Who are the street leaders?"

Danilo Mandić

Key Challenges & Questions

The difficulty of producing good data in tough spaces results in widespread misperceptions and prejudices about them.

Researchers often enter these spaces with false assumptions based on inaccurate conventional narratives and bad data.

Best Practices

When reading up on a "tough space" in advance, consider how surveys or other data may have been skewed. For example, UNHCR surveys rarely consider the "anchoring effect" in their design.

Generating good findings is in part about researchers' willingness to overcome confirmation bias and being willing to question pre-existing assumptions.

Look at both the top down perspective and the bottom up perspective. The narrative presented by UNHCR of refugees in Thessaloniki from the top down may not represent the perspective of refugees or smugglers from the bottom up.

Part 3:
Analysis & Outcomes

Research for... whom?
Zeynep Balcioglu, Graeme Rodgers
& Denis Sullivan

This session explored a fundamental question about outcomes: How do we generate research products that have relevance for a variety of audiences including academics, policymakers, aid/development practitioners, and refugees themselves?

What are the research needs of policymakers and practitioners, and can academics meet these needs? Are there opportunities where research can be directly beneficial to the individual refugees being researched?

What creative products other than academic papers can maximize the impact of research findings (e.g. visualizations, Podcasts, white papers, briefings, workshops)? What kind of impact should researchers realistically and responsibly expect?

> *"Doing research in the field, we face a dilemma: we want to be both academically sound and policy relevant at the same time. How do we do that? Is it possible to have the best of both worlds?"*
>
> Zeynep Balcioglu

Key Challenges & Questions

What contributions can academics from other fields contribute to refugee studies?

Best Practices

There are so many audiences relevant to refugee studies that researchers must be collaborators and networkers to get an accurate picture. Academics from a range of fields including geography, migration, political science, anthropology, urban studies, economics, and regional studies should all be considered inclusive to generating good research, rather than working in competition.

Similarly researchers should collaborate with a range of actors including local, national, and regional political leadership, the general public, aid practitioners, and development specialists in order to produce more accurate and broadly relevant information. Because of this wide array of audiences, there is a fundamental need for collaboration across disciplines.

Key Challenges & Questions

How can researchers share their findings with other institutions given bureaucratic and organizational silos?

How can interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and international collaboration be expanded?

Best Practices

The best collaborations tend to be based on strong interpersonal connections of trust, not large scale institutional memorandums. Personal networking is critical.

Collaboration takes time, effort, and money. Researchers must recognize that disseminating data is as much a job as collecting and analyzing data.

"Research is a tool to demonstrate the effectiveness of our programming, so we [IRC] are increasingly invested in good research… Research that's policy relevant can only be academically rigorous as we take research increasingly seriously."

Graeme Rodgers

Key Challenges & Questions

Is it possible to make research both academically rigorous and relevant to policymakers?

Best Practices

There can be complimentary benefits to academic and practitioner research because practitioner research tends to be very focused and specific, while academic research allows generalizability and identification of broader themes.

Practitioners also rarely have time to focus on data collection or analysis because they are too busy with day-to-day crises: there is a strong demand and interest for research, but not enough time to conduct it. Researchers can then think of themselves as additional external capacity.

Driven by donor's increasing demand for evidence of positive outcomes, IRC's in house research unit has begun conducting more rigorous research on resettled refugees "at a level of quality that could be published in academic journals." Because there is an increased interest in rigorous research produced in house, there is also an increased appreciation for external academic findings.

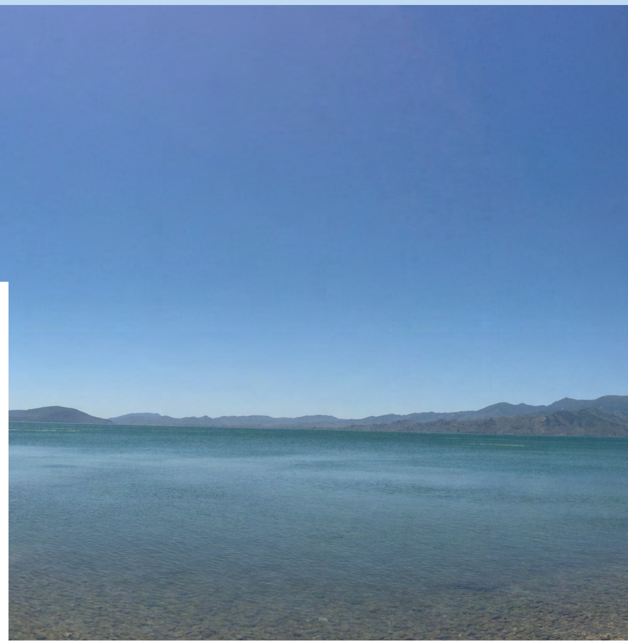
Key Challenges & Questions

With convergence between policymakers, practitioners, and academics, how does a researcher maintain impartiality and objectivity of their findings?

Best Practices

One concern with policy relevant research is that the implications of research may lead to policy that is not in tune with a researcher's political perspectives: a good researcher needs to be ready to "go where the data leads" regardless of its policy implications.

Practitioners often ignore research that does not confirm pre-existing practices or assumptions, meaning researchers need to present challenging findings as opportunities for practitioners to achieve better programming—not simply as critiques—in order to be listened to.



Key Challenges & Questions

What kind of impact is it reasonable and responsible for a researcher to expect to achieve?

Best Practices

Despite a desire by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to find clear evidence of the direct impacts of research, these causal connections are not usually apparent. Researchers need to be satisfied with the "butterfly effect": third, fourth, or fifth order effects of good evidence on policymaking and practice over time. Impact may arrive ten to fifteen years later, for example the case of a 2016 medical training program in Syria that was largely designed based on research conducted in the Balkans conflicts of the 1990s.

Having humility and honesty with oneself and with participants about the limited outcomes of research is critical: immediate positive outcomes are not likely and long-term outcomes are usually not in the researcher's hands. Appropriate career choice is important here: for those who want to see immediate outcomes, aid work or advocacy may be preferable.

Another effect of research can be increasing funding to practitioners through increased awareness, although this blurs the line between research, journalism, and advocacy.

Key Challenges & Questions

How can researchers minimize their demands on practitioners and respondents while conducting fieldwork?

Best Practices

Researchers must be honest and self-reflective of the demand they put on aid workers and refugees to participate in research.

Refugees' working days, family demands, and other time commitments may make even a 30 minute interview a serious stress to a respondent's schedule. Researchers should be cognizant of the weight of demands, and send time getting to know the daily routines of communities where they are conducting research in order to identify busy periods when ethnographic observation may be preferable, and break periods when requesting interviews may be less intrusive.

Researchers should be cognizant of the weight of demands, and send time getting to know the daily routines of communities where they are conducting research in order to identify busy periods when ethnographic observation may be preferable, and break periods when requesting interviews may be less intrusive.

Key Challenges & Questions

How does a researcher decide the format and tone of a research projects based on the audience?

Best Practices

Researchers should be aware that the academic paper is often not the best medium for communicating to a range of audiences. Consider how different audiences may best receive information, and be creative in how to structure information through visualizations, podcasts, or other forms.

Being able to collect data with mixed methodologies is important because policymakers and practitioners may prefer quantitative data, rather than strictly qualitative data.

Products for different audiences should consider the political implications of data. Academics may not reflexively consider the political repercussions of data or findings, for example the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is considered an objective truth in academic contexts, but may be inflated or deflated by political actors and aid agencies based on political motivations. Publications produced jointly between academics, policymakers, and practitioners must consider these sensitivities.

Creative products especially in social media can have powerful impacts on policymakers and the public, but this approach is being developed ad hoc today and does not yet have a systematic framework for conduct or ethics.

Key Challenges & Questions

Does collaboration across institutions also have a role in research planning and collection of data?

Best Practices

Interdisciplinary collaboration is helpful not only in disseminating information, but also in planning, collection, and considering ethical challenges.

For example, the discourse on the portrayal of others from photography can be applied to think about the ethical questions faced by researchers writing on refugees.

"Do academically rigorous research and then when you see the conclusions—whether you like them or not—go to policymakers. This is the right field to be academically rigorous, policy relevant, and practitioner friendly… stay in your academic lane, but dabble: publish an Op-Ed, Tweet, post a blog, record a Podcast, find any way to make an impact."

Denis Sullivan

Narrative approaches to research with refugees Anita Fábos

All research outcomes have their own narratives, but the origins and implications of these narratives are not always thoroughly considered by researchers. Narratives have long been central to the work of refugee and forced migration scholars, practitioners, activists, and the subject populations themselves.

Increasingly, scholarly attention has shifted to the ways narratives are elicited and, subsequently, used as evidence in a range of high-stakes settings—the courtroom, the asylum interview, and public forums like the media. In all of these settings, the content, texture, and form of the narrative shape rulings, decisions, and public opinion.

This session considered the ways in which stories told by, for, and about migrants are used in various ways to shape research agendas and policies. It also noted the the importance of paying attention to institutional, national, and global narratives about refugees, as well as the ways these are used to further a variety of vested interests.

By situating refugee and forced migration narratives within the framework of multiple and competing power relations, this session considered the processes, ethical dimensions, and modalities of producing narratives, as well as the outcomes of these situated narratives for individuals, groups, institutions, and the state.

> *"Refugees are part of societies, rather than outsiders in states of exception."*
>
> Anita Fábos

"The consistent tropes of the 'grateful refugee,' the 'good refugee,' these sorts of stories continue to shape not just policy but also the kinds of research that we end up conducting."

Anita Fábos

"The stories of border crossings, of asylum seeking, of integration are very much migration management stories. They are about helping or channeling people on the move."

Anita Fábos

Key Challenges & Questions

Narratives impact not only policy but also the kinds of research questions that are considered.

These narratives have two challenges: first, they deal with relations of power, but do not always fully acknowledge these dynamics. Second, narratives are often biased to conform to archetypes at local, national, and global levels of analysis.

Individual narratives tend to be narratives of integration: integrating into an idealized stable community versus a co-produced process of creating shared belonging.

On the national level, displaced peoples are usually described through national frameworks: stories of displacement are usually stories of state management. Narratives of this type inherently are linked to state-based policies and "methodological nationalism."

Meanwhile, at the global level, analysis focuses on flows and networks and an abstracted, often impersonal "diaspora."

Best Practices

From the forming of the initial research question through the presentation of findings, researchers should consider the kinds of narrative their research is embedded in. Reflective questions to consider include: Is the narrative telling an individual, community, national, or global story? How does the researcher's narrative contrast or add to existing narratives at that level? What are the intentions of the narrative being produced?

Individual stories should be situated in a framework of mutual and conflicting power relations.

Researchers should consider deviating from conventional and self-reinforcing state-centric narratives of forced migration. Taking an alternative narrative approach can reveal new and valuable perspectives: consider instead telling the narrative from the perspective of "subaltern outsiders" who are "subsidiary to the narrative of the nation-state."

"In national narratives there is a very significant absence of a refugee-centered narrative. The narratives in this regard are very much about state-based policies but… seeing from the refugee's perspective is harder to find."

Anita Fábos


TOMB
No:G9
WE
ARE NOT
HAPPY HERE

Annex: Abridged Biographies

ADAM SALTSMAN
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Adam Saltsman is an Assistant Professor of Urban Studies and Director of the Intergenerational Urban Institute at Worcester State University.

Adam researches and publishes on issues of displacement and migration, looking in particular at gender and forced migrant agency within exclusionary political spaces. He specializes in participatory methods and has advised humanitarian agencies on gender and mixed methods research.

Adam received his B.A. in Cultural Anthropology from Colby College and his M.A. and Ph.D. in the Department of Sociology at Boston College.

AMIRA MOHAMED
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Amira Mohamed is an assistant professor at the Department of International Development, Community, and Environment at Clark University.

Both her Masters and PhD degrees focus on the nexus between gender, migration and globalization while her PhD dissertation had researched the vulnerabilities of female domestic workers in Egypt.

Her work involved advocating for the rights of migrants, formulating response strategies, conducting operations research and evaluation, leading sizable international programs, nurturing results-focused partnerships and building institutional capacity through training.

ANITA FÁBOS
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Anita Fábos is an anthropologist who has conducted research and outreach among refugees and other forced migrants in urban settings in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.

Her scholarship and practice pursues a number of interconnected themes in the area of forced migration and refugee studies. Starting with a lengthy period of action research, NGO activism and outreach in Cairo, Fábos' research and writing has followed the movements of Muslim Arab Sudanese.

She has worked as the Director of the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies program at the American University in Cairo, Programme Coordinator for the graduate program in Refugee Studies at the University of East London, and is currently at Clark University where her students have carried out community-based projects that have investigated refugee participation in community development initiatives, refugee access to higher education, and refugee livelihoods in Worcester.

CHARLES SIMPSON
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Charles Simpson has worked on Syrian refugee issues with BCARS since 2014. His research focuses on social resilience of Syrian refugee and host communities in Jordan, Turkey, and Europe. He has an M.S. in Security & Resilience Studies, and a B.A. in International Affairs from Northeastern University.

DANILO MANDIĆ
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Danilo Mandić is a comparative historical sociologist and College Fellow in the Department of Sociology.

Mandić received his AB from Princeton and his PhD from Harvard. His interests include social movements, nationalism, social theory, ethnic relations, civil war, and organized crime. He has done extensive archival and ethnographic work in the Balkans and Caucasus.

He is interested in conceptualizing organized crime as a neglected non-state actor and in understanding the interrelations of states, social movements and illicit flows of people, goods and ideas in regions with separatist disputes.

DENIS SULLIVAN
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As Director of Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies (BCARS), Prof. Sullivan has focused the Consortium's attention to the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, conducting field research in Jordan and the Balkans.

Prof. Sullivan teaches political science and international affairs at Northeastern University, and has been a consultant to the World Bank, USAID, U.S. State Department, U.S. Department of Defense, Council on Foreign Relations, colleges, universities, and human rights organizations.

GRAEME RODGERS
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Graeme Rogers is Technical Advisor for Research at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in New York.

He is responsible for promoting research that supports IRC's US Programs, to strengthen the organization's commitment to evidence-based programming. An anthropologist by training, his current focus on refugee resettlement in the US builds on a long-standing research interest in the local-level dynamics of durable solutions for refugees. This includes voluntary repatriation and local integration in both urban and rural settings, across numerous countries in Africa and Asia.

Previously, he has developed and taught graduate level courses on forced migration at the universities of the Witwatersrand, Oxford and the New School. Dr. Rodgers has consulted widely on displacement and migration in the context of large-scale development projects in conflict-affected contexts in Africa, for governments, bilateral agencies and the private sector.

KAREN JACOBSEN
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Karen Jacobsen holds the Leir Chair in Global Migration at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, where she also directs the Feinstein International Center's Refugees and Forced Migration Research Program.

Karen is a recognized expert in the field of forced migration, and she consults and writes widely on this topic. From 2000–2005, she directed the Alchemy Project, which explored the use of microfinance as a way to support people in refugee camps and other displacement settings.

Karen received her B.A. from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, her M.A. from Northeastern University, and her PhD in Political Science from MIT.

KIM WILSON
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Kim Wilson is a Senior Fellow at Fletcher's Center for Emerging Market Enterprises and also at the Feinstein International Center.

She graduated from Wellesley College and Simmons Graduate School of Management. She is interested in the financial resilience of households and markets at the base emerging market economies. She is the 2009 recipient of the James L. Paddock teaching award at The Fletcher School.

ZEYNEP BALCIOGLU
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Zeynep Balcioglu is a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science at Northeastern University, specializing in public policy and comparative politics.

She has a strong background and research interest in migration and public policy. Zeynep is currently on the Scholars Advisory Board of the Boston Consortium on Arab Region Studies (BCARS) and organizes workshops on the Syrian Refugee Crisis in the MENA Region and the Balkans.

Her current research focuses on refugees' access to social and welfare services in host countries.

ZOE DIBB
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Zoe Dibb is the Senior Manager of Evidence at Girl Effect in Malawi. She previously worked as Roving Project Manager for Girls Education Challenge with Save the Children, UK in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, DRC, and Mozambique; Manager of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning for Theatre for a Change in Malawi; and as a Program Support Officer for WVP Kenya.

She received her MA in Poverty and Development from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex.

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BCARS, the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies, is an international network in which policymakers, practitioners, and scholars from the United States, Europe, and the Arab region meet and work collaboratively to advance policy and research, strengthen a scholarly community, and mentor the next generation of policy analysts and scholars, especially for understanding the Arab Region. BCARS is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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