

The challenges and opportunities of conducting ethical and trustworthy qualitative research in health systems in post-conflict and fragile contexts: Reflections from a learning community

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Background

The ReBUILD consortium is exploring how to strengthen policy and practice related to health financing and human resource management in post conflict and fragile contexts. Ongoing research projects in Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zimbabwe deploy multiple methods, and all involve qualitative research including key-informant interviews, in-depth interviews and life histories.

<p>Project 1 Health financing How patterns of household expenditure in the poorest households respond to new health financing policies including changing user fee approaches and patterns across state and non-state sectors in the post-conflict setting.</p>
<p>Project 2 Health worker incentives What are the opportunities to reconcile health worker survival strategies with incentive structures that promote pro-poor healthcare.</p>
<p>Project 3 Contracting What mechanisms for managing contracts and performance introduced under humanitarian assistance are suitable for adaptation into a reconstructing system? Taking a critical approach to the payment-for-performance experience.</p>
<p>Project 4 Rural posting Whether a potentially less entrenched professional environment introduces opportunities for rural posting and other types of rationalisation.</p>
<p>Project 5 Aid architecture Aid effectiveness at the district level.</p>
<p>Project 6 Gender Equity Assessing the opportunities and challenges of building gender equitable health systems in the post conflict trajectory</p>

Focus

We have constituted a learning community with the ReBUILD consortia to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of conducting ethical and trustworthy qualitative research in post conflict contexts and the challenges and the learning points are summarised here. Experience shared to date highlights how some participants were unwilling to speak due to anxiety and lack of trust and the fear of reliving previous traumatic experiences:

(1) A fear that a signature in the informed consent process may have repercussions and the importance of considering when and where verbal consent is appropriate;

Learning points: In all ReBUILD contexts, some participants were reluctant to participate due to the consent procedure requiring a signature, and the fear that the signature may have repercussions. Careful and sensitive discussion is required in the consent procedure and future work should consider verbal consent procedures.



(2) Importance of strategies for establishing rapport and supportive non-judgemental questioning are particularly critical in post-conflict contexts where there might be anxiety about discussing issues with strangers and/or researchers;

Learning points: Rapport needs to be thought about throughout the research cycle through ensuring time and space to respond to all participants' concerns, using participant checking at the end of the interviews; following up through sharing draft analysis and reports.

(3) How far does the informed consent process stretch? - Many researchers shared experiences of participants telling a different or 'real' story once the recorder had been switched off and the ethical challenges of reconciling both "formal and informal stories" in the analysis process.

Learning points: We felt that the ethical and trustworthy approach is to write notes on the informal story and use this to inform the analytical process, but only include quotations from the formal story in the report (to ensure confidentiality). We also felt researchers can follow up with participants and ask them if they are happy with the information being used. In these situations, it is particularly important to go back to respondents with the draft analysis and report and ask for their feedback. This, in turn, builds trust.

(4) To record or not record the conversation? Some participants were not comfortable with conversations being recorded so researchers did their best to take comprehensive notes.

Learning points: The challenge is that researchers were not able to predict when or if a participant would refuse to be recorded; if so, they could have been better prepared. When there were two researchers, they could 'cope up,' as one would interview and the other would take detailed notes. When there was only one researcher, this was more challenging.



Summary Text

In post-conflict contexts participants may be more vulnerable and have reasons to be fearful of research encounters. Researchers need to act with integrity and be aware of the legacy we leave. Conducting qualitative research is always challenging, working in post-conflict contexts may pose additional challenges which can be supported through ongoing dialogue and experience sharing from learning communities.

