



How can we obtain the information we need about refugees?

by Greta Uehling

Well-informed policy and programme decisions are based on high-quality research. Research in the forced migration field is made difficult by the prevalence of highly mobile and continuously shifting populations in insecure settings. Urban, self-settled and undocumented populations often have an interest in remaining invisible. Studies of refugees and IDPs are therefore extremely difficult to undertake in ways that ensure that they are reliable, valid and representative. Obtaining the information we need in a manner that is professional, ethical and sensitive to the needs of informants is an ongoing challenge. Academics have called for more rigour in the field of forced migration studies, and donors have called for tighter quality control.

"Our elaborate sampling methods basically disintegrated, and we were left speaking to the live bodies we could find."

In response to the problems confronted by researchers in forced migration contexts and in order to build on previous initiatives to examine why we know so little about refugees¹, UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit has proposed and led the formation of an ALNAP² Working Group on 'Evaluating the use of research methods in humanitarian contexts'. Oxfam, UNICEF, IRC, Feinstein Famine Center, Disaster Mitigation Institute India, HAP International, WHO, Save the Children UK and ODI are participating.

The Working Group met in early April to develop a common understanding of the difficulties of research in humanitarian contexts, discuss methods to best address these issues and decide whether further guidance materials should be developed. The

presentations commissioned for the workshop introduced discussion on the following questions:

- Host governments are often ambivalent or even hostile to the presence of forced migrants. How can researchers gain access to these populations in ways that do not endanger informants?
- Beneficiaries of humanitarian aid are prone to tell researchers what they think they want to hear. How can this be avoided?
- A sampling frame is extremely difficult to establish when a population is little known or highly mobile. Can this kind of research be representative?
- The short turn-around time that is often required for research and evaluations means it is often difficult for fieldworkers to elicit the desired information. How can construct validity be achieved in chaotic settings?
- When (and why) should viable alternative methods be considered?
- How can we ask questions of traumatised individuals in a way that does not re-traumatise them? Can survey research be conducted in a way that takes into account the needs of informants?
- Survey research is often carried out by nationals and students who are sent into insecure environments. What should be our ethical guidelines?

One of the most contested issues is when surveys should and should not be carried out. Scientific methods such as surveys may be associated with rigour and robustness in some quarters. In the context of highly mobile populations who do not neces-

sarily want to become objects of study, however, an over-reliance on the trappings of scientific objectivism may further distance us from potential informants. Fortunately, there is considerable consensus that a careful combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is the best approach for refugee and forced migrant populations.

As well as providing an opportunity for researchers and humanitarian organisations to learn from one another, the workshop set out to identify practical ways to respond to the methodological and ethical challenges of this kind of research. There exists considerable interest in drafting guidelines that, rather than providing 'how-to' information (which already exists), would provide information about:

- adapting existing tools to refugee and forced migration conditions
- choosing the right methods in limited security environments
- identifying the right people with the appropriate skills to carry out field research

For a report of the workshop, please visit www.unhcr.ch/epau or contact hqep00@unhcr.ch

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1. See FMR 18, p55, "Why do we know so little about refugees? How can we learn more?" by Jeff Crisp: www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR18/fmr18unhcr.pdf
2. www.alnap.org

This is a regular page of news and debate from UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU). For further information, or suggestions regarding this feature, contact Greta Uehling at UEHLING@unhcr.ch