

## Working with peer researchers in refugee communities

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**Refugee peer researchers can be a vital source of access, knowledge and assistance to refugee communities, and international researchers must consider how best to work collaboratively with them.**

As one of the oldest and biggest refugee settlements in Uganda, Nakivale has attracted the interest of international researchers year after year. I am a Congolese refugee and have lived in Nakivale since 2006. A statistician by training, I have been involved as a peer researcher in several research projects carried out in Nakivale.

There are numerous difficulties which I have observed in past research which could have been prevented through prior discussion. For example, in projects which rely on mapping the target population, miscalculations may occur if external researchers rely only on official data. For instance, my team was once assigned to interview a group of Congolese families estimated – according to an international agency’s database – to number 300 households; when we reached the village, however, we were surprised to find only around 50 households.

Climatic conditions can have a dramatic impact on research efficiency. When researchers target a large population in a limited time, a rainy period will inevitably cause problems. However, by simply communicating their expectations and aims, international researchers can be informed about conditions which may affect the outcomes of the project, and will be able to take the necessary precautions to limit disturbance to the research.

Ensuring peer researchers are fully informed of the objectives of the research means they will be able to explain these objectives when recruiting participants, as well as when managing expectations after the research has been completed. Peer researchers’ ability to translate questions into the local language and to discuss, clarify and

comment on research topics and interview questions can be vital. For instance, on one occasion it became clear to us that asking refugees questions related to returning to their country of origin was making some interviewees uncomfortable and some were missing interview appointments; it became apparent that this coincided with various rumours which were circulating about some refugees being forced to repatriate. We have also witnessed situations where refugees agreed to participate in interviews thinking that these were about resettlement opportunities in part because the researcher was a white person.

A further challenge is regarding feedback. People who have been involved in different research projects expect, quite understandably, to be informed about the results, how much they have contributed to solving problems, and what improvements will be made as a result. When they are excluded from such information, participants are disappointed and express their annoyance to new researchers, saying, “We have met people like you several times but have seen no changes. Perhaps you are like them?” When the international researchers leave, the point of contact remains the refugee peer researcher, who must stay in the community and answer these questions. For instance, some research is undertaken annually (for example, in Nakivale, research on refugee nutrition); can you imagine how annoyed people get when they never receive feedback on the previous year’s research? Participants need to be informed about how far research in which they were involved has reached its goals or how successful it has been in terms of changing opinions or programmes. This requires

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international researchers to be open with refugee researchers, equipping them with the knowledge to communicate outcomes.

Finally, research findings need to be made accessible. Publications should not be only online, where many refugees cannot access them. Information should reach even those people who do not have access to the internet, especially those who were part of the target population of the research. While potentially more difficult to realise, alternative formats for outputs may be more appropriate, such as

visual content, radio dissemination, and presentation at meetings and conferences.

Researchers must engage with peer researchers within refugee communities if they are to undertake research effectively and sensitively. International researchers need to learn, however, how to improve their practices for working with peer researchers and to plan for what might happen after they have left and the peer researchers remain.

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