

‘Over-researched’ and ‘under-researched’ refugees

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A number of ethical issues emerge from working with ‘over-researched’ and ‘under-researched’ refugee groups.

Since 2012, I have been working at the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, undertaking data collection on the economic lives of refugees and host communities in countries including Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. This article is based primarily on reflections from this research and my years of interactions with various groups of refugees living in refugee camps and urban areas.

Over-researched groups

It is evident that some refugee populations are frequent subjects of ‘research’ – by academics, aid organisations, students and, to a certain extent, journalists. However, in the absence of concrete benefits from their participation in such studies, over-researched groups are increasingly distrustful and in some cases are declining to participate in further studies.

In my own work, I have noted the increasing expression of strong research fatigue from some groups, in particular refugees in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. Between 2016 and 2017, I conducted large-scale research in this camp. As usual I organised meetings with members of refugee representative bodies in the camp in order to introduce myself and our research and to seek their cooperation and participation.

At one meeting, after I explained the scope of the study and the rule of not providing financial compensation for research participants, some people asked what benefit our research would bring to them if we were not compensating them financially. I explained that this research project aimed to generate a better understanding of refugees in Kakuma among external stakeholders and ultimately to contribute to informing better policies for the refugees in the camp. At this point, one of the Somali elders stood up, pointed his finger at me, and commented:

“I have been living in this refugee camp since 2008 and received so many researchers like you. They all mentioned the same thing you just said but nothing has changed. Each time, we cooperated with researchers but we have not seen any improvement in our life. I cannot trust what you said.”

I encountered similar responses during fieldwork in Addis Ababa in late 2018. During interviews and focus group discussions with Eritrean refugee youth, a sense of fatigue and suspicion was visible, which of course affected the candidness of responses and engagement.

While refugees in Kakuma camp and in Addis Ababa live in very different circumstances – in protracted camps versus an urban capital – there emerged a shared sentiment of research fatigue and overall mistrust of researchers. As is widely documented, refugee participants engaging in research can often have high expectations for improvements as a result of their involvement. In focus group discussions, refugees expressed hopes that included an increase in humanitarian aid, the removal of regulations affecting their socio-economic rights, and better access to third-country resettlement. If these expectations are not met, or managed, disappointment and mistrust can arise over time.

This is an unfortunate result of the limited capacity of academic research to feed into policy actions, or at least of the unlikelihood that research will result in immediate policy changes in refugees’ surrounding environments. The fact that such groups of refugees continuously receive influxes of new researchers – like me – exacerbates their frustration and subsequently leads to their reluctance or refusal to participate in research.

Under-researched groups

On the other hand, I have also come across several groups of ‘under-researched’ refugee populations, whose presence often remains

under the radar and whose voices are less audible in the global arena. One such group is minority refugees in Addis Ababa – that is, nationalities which represent only a small fraction of the overall populations of registered refugees. At the inception of our fieldwork in Addis Ababa in August 2018, with support from UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, we organised introductory meetings with representatives from refugee communities of different nationalities to describe the aim of our study and to request their participation. Given the limited time and financial resources of our project, we focused on nationalities which made up the largest refugee populations in this context – namely Eritreans and Somalis. When I explained our main ‘target’ refugee nationalities, a representative of Burundian refugees requested to be included in our study. According to him, the minority groups such as those from Great Lakes region have been almost entirely excluded from these studies. He emphatically told me: “We want to be part of your study. I want you to hear our challenges.”

Similar frustrations at feeling excluded from research were echoed by groups of refugees with disabilities and elderly refugees in Kampala, Uganda’s capital. Both groups had formed associations that were

officially registered with local government authorities. In separate interviews, executive members of both associations all cited the lack of attention from refugee-supporting organisations as the main reason for establishing their own institutions.

“In Kampala, there are UNHCR, InterAid and other NGOs but they do not have any support programmes specifically designed for those with disabilities... we have been feeling marginalised. So we decided to come together to assist each other.”

Both of these associations promote awareness-raising activities and provide support for members through provision of counselling, skills training and formation of saving groups; however the level of support is often inadequate to cover the challenges facing them.

The case of Burundian refugees in Addis Ababa demonstrates that the size of a particular refugee population often determines the level of interest from researchers and policymakers. In Addis Ababa, as of 2018, the recorded number of Burundian refugees was 57, compared with nearly 18,000 Eritrean refugees. In the face of limited resources and time constraints, most researchers usually focus on refugee groups with higher numbers.



A Somali refugee in the streets of Kakuma refugee camp.

Furthermore, some groups are considered to be less relevant in current policy contexts, particularly for the international refugee regime. For instance, while the volume of research on forced migrants has greatly increased, the number of studies specifically addressing the issues of older refugees and refugees with disabilities remains limited. It is difficult to know if the absence of specific assistance programmes from aid agencies for such groups can be a considered a reflection of the lack of research on them, or vice versa. However, as indicated above, these under-studied groups of refugees may indeed be particularly vulnerable, which might merit more urgent attention from researchers and aid organisations.

Recommendations

For under-researched groups, researchers need to expand exploratory studies beyond current policy focuses. Under-researched groups may have some specific and complex but unaddressed challenges or vulnerabilities, which may not be able to produce statistically significant attention. For such issues, qualitative research with these groups can be a useful first step to glean their unheard views. Of course, conducting research itself provides no guarantee of any immediate changes for under-studied groups, and continued research that is not able to demonstrate impact may lead to the same pitfalls as 'over-researched' groups experience, including research fatigue and disillusionment. However, without a first step, their challenges will remain unaddressed. For some under-researched groups, researchers should highlight the need for research that informs policy in order to address neglected issues.

Meanwhile, for over-researched groups, it is vital that researchers, aid organisations, consulting firms, students and even journalists make concerted efforts not to conduct similar research with the same groups repeatedly. Coordination efforts should also include media and journalists working with refugees. While they may have different ethical codes of conduct and different purposes, from the perspective

of those who are 'being studied' it makes little difference whether they are media, academics or humanitarian agencies.

Data sharing between researchers and refugee-supporting agencies may be one way to mitigate the problem. Although the working procedures of academics and humanitarian actors differ considerably, academics are often able to gather rich empirical data which can be relevant for humanitarian agencies. For example, in 2013 we gave our full datasets in Uganda to UNHCR, on condition that UNHCR used the data strictly for programming purposes. This approach can work when done at the local level where both researchers and aid agencies share clear and concrete interests; while researchers share their data, UN and humanitarian agencies can provide logistical support for researchers and share their own data. To encourage this, academia needs to acknowledge the value of data sharing as an example of 'impact' and as a contribution to policymaking.

In addition, for over-researched groups, researchers should reconsider basic ethical research practices and implications for their work. While most researchers might embark on their studies with the aim of improving conditions for forced migrants, it is necessary to be open and honest about the possibilities and limitations of research projects in terms of making any – let alone immediate – policy changes in people's lives. It is imperative that we revisit how this basic reality can be communicated, diligently and responsibly, to refugee populations involved in research.

Moreover, the issue of reciprocity and fair reward for participants should be given more thought. Even when scholars are uncertain if the research outputs will ever be used by policymakers, a more direct and immediate way of providing reciprocal benefits for refugees is the provision of material compensation to participants. In addition to the actual costs accrued by participants due to research – such as transportation to research sites and their time – more consideration should be given to ensuring some level of reciprocity. Providing material compensation or gifts to participants is a controversial issue in forced migration studies. Nevertheless,

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in light of the significant research fatigue as well as resentment for time wasted among some groups of refugees, the practice has undeniable merits.

Ultimately, if these ethical issues with under-researched and over-researched groups are left unattended, the accountability

and credibility of the research community in the eyes of refugee populations may be significantly undermined.

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