

NetACT Research & CD paper
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UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

You must understand the community

Let me start off by telling a story about a group of well-meaning citizens who built a play-park for the children in their community.

For years a field in the densely-packed community has been standing open. It was zoned as a park-area, meant for families and especially children to play in. But very few children ever played there. One man saw this, and reasoned that it was because there was nothing for the kids to play with – no jungle gims, no swings, no round-about. It was just an empty field. So he got together a group of adults from the community, and they started advocating for the building of a playpark. They went to see the municipality, local NGOs, businesses: explaining that the children in the community are deprived, that they are not playing for they have nothing to play with.

And they were successful. They got municipal permission, they got funding, and a lovely jungle gim was built. Swings, round-about, slides, etc. It was opened with much fanfare and lauded as a prime example of community working for itself, of a community developing itself.

For a few days there were kids playing on the equipment. And then it stood empty and abandoned.. And the field was empty once again.

And why is this? The advocacy group never troubled to find out WHY the kids were not playing on that field. If they had gone through the trouble of actually asking the group they were allegedly serving, the kids would have told them that the trees that stand on that field sift down a seed throughout the year, one that makes them itch terribly. And THAT is why they do not play there, because they do not want to itch.

Well, this is quite a simple story to illustrate the point that I will be trying to make in this presentation, which is: *to develop a community, you have to understand a community*. The adults in this story thought they understood the problem, but they didn't. They never asked the kids what they wanted, and they never asked them why they don't play there.

The only way you can honestly claim that you understand a community, is if you listen to the community. Even if you are a member of the community – even if you have lived there for decades – can you truly claim that you know and understand every facet of the community? Especially you sitting here: you have studied, you travel, you have degrees and authority and status. Do your views truly represent everyone in your community?

Someone once told me that that “research is listening to people”. While this is a very simplified way of looking at it, this is how I want us to think about it today. Research is listening to people, and in the process giving them a voice. Research is the way that you allow your community development initiatives and interventions to truly represent your community and help your community in the way THEY need it, not in the ways you think it should be helped. So many community development initiatives fail (like the one in the story) because people did what they thought needed doing and never listened, or even asked, those they were supposed to be serving.

So that is what I will be speaking about today: the importance of empirical research for community development.

The reason why I am the one talking about empirical research today, is because I work at a research unit whose focus is providing such research help. The Unit for Religion and Development Research at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University is positioned as a research partner for faith communities. In different ways, and with different types of research, we help faith communities understand the context they exist in, and the issues they want to address, so that they do so in a more effective way.

Let me tell you of the research that we did with Tearfund, to illustrate the importance of research *before* intervention. For those of you who don't know, Tearfund is a UK-based Christian NGO, but they work all over the world, and particularly in Africa. Their core approach is through the local church, i.e. they believe that to make a difference in the community you must work with and through the local church.

In 2010 Tearfund contacted me. They had a HIV&AIDS department that has been doing stellar work on this burning issue. But everywhere that they have been working the issue of sexual violence has been coming to the fore. In all their interventions they at some point or another realised that they have to address SV, and all its various causes and consequences, if they want to make a sustainable, impactful difference on HIV.

They told me that this is what they have been realising in the various communities that they have been working. So they wanted to start intervening on this issue, and use churches as their partners. However, they felt that this is what *they* thought and experienced as outsiders. They were not sure if they were reading the situation correctly. Do they fully understand it? So they asked me to do preliminary, explorative research.

So, focusing on conflict areas affected by SV, where the problem appeared to be the most severe, I did research in the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Liberia. And what I did in all of the locations was simply listen to people. I did interviews with people from various walks of life – church leaders, community members, political leaders, SV survivors, NGO workers, etc. And while I had some structured questions for some of them, the majority of what I did was just to ask them what they thought about the causes and consequences of SV, and what role the churches play in relation to it.

And what the research showed was *not* what Tearfund was expecting. Yes, SV is a very, very serious problem. Even more than they thought. But what was a very unexpected surprise to them, was that the churches were not only NOT addressing the issue, the churches were actively contributing the continued perpetration of SV. Tearfund was planning to work with churches to help survivors and address the issue, but now they realised that those they wanted as partners were some of the biggest culprits!

Why this is, is the topic for another paper. Or even conference! The point that I'm trying to make is that the results showed a context quite different from what Tearfund expected. It called for a different approach to the ones they usually used in communities. It called for a different focus, with different methods. Basically, it called for a radical rethink of how to address SV.

Many organisations would hide research that show their core beliefs, actions and principles called into question. Tearfund believes in the power of the local church, and here the research was showing that the church is one of the biggest 'bad guys'! But here I have the utmost respect for Tearfund. They did not hide the research. On the contrary, they used it as a challenge, a challenge to help change how local churches think and act on issues of gender, power, masculinities, and sexual violence. They totally rethought how to approach the issue.

And the result?

- The We will speak out international coalition, dedicated to ending SV, with members such as IMA World Health, Christian Aid, WCC, WVI, CAFOD and UNAIDS. It is one of the first coalitions where leading Christian and secular organisations work together.
- Instrumental interventions in the Great Lakes Region, where UNAIDS for the first time ever agreed to work with churches, because Tearfund could (based on solid research) explain why it should be done
- Further research in various locations in the world: South Africa, Papua New Guinea and Bangladesh.
- Tearfund rebranded the department as the HIV&SV department. Understanding the context has led them not to only radically change how they engage in communities for development, but how they see and position themselves as well.

All of this would have been impossible if Tearfund did not in the first place recognise that they have to understand the context in which they are working. And that, in order to do so, they have to give those with whom they are working and supposed to be serving – i.e. the community – the lead. They have to listen to the community. And that is what the research made possible: it gave a voice to the community.

What is empirical research?

I realise that not all of you have engaged in empirical social research such as what I am discussing here. So for those of you for whom this is a new idea, I am going to give just a brief overview of how empirical social research usually progresses. Remember, this is IN GENERAL, every project is different. But we are looking at how research done with people usually goes.

- Focus of the research: Identify the questions the research wants to answer
Something that you have been wondering about (“Why is there so many high school drop-outs?”), something people in your community keep asking you (“Why can’t I find a job?”).
- Get a grip on it
Do not make it too big, e.g. “How do we make this the best place to live?” Narrow it down, e.g. “How do we ensure clean drinking water for all?”
Also make sure you understand all the relevant concepts, e.g. what is “clean drinking water”?
- Choose a research design
How are you going to do the research: surveys? Case studies?
- Decide on population and sampling
Who are you going to listen too? – POPULATION
Which specific members? Age, gender, employment status, etc – SAMPLING
- Choose your research methods
Interviews? Questionnaires? Focus groups?
- Fieldwork!
- Data processing
- Coding
- Data analysis
- Compiling findings and conclusions
- Report

So there are actually many steps, and many decisions you have to make in the process. The key is to making your choices based on what is best for the research question, for the topic. For example, if it

is a very sensitive and loaded topic, such as SV, then KIs might be best. If you want to get a general community opinion on a fairly neutral topic, such as unemployment, then a survey can work well.

The biggest challenge: your own world view

So here we all are, as potential researchers in our aim to develop and uplift the communities that we serve. While recognising the importance of research is the first, and very important, step, it is unfortunately not that simple. As those of you who have done empirical research will know: it is hard! It is challenging! But I want to discuss what I see as the main challenge to successful community-based empirical research. And that is our biases and mindsets. Each of us has our own worldview, mind-set, frame of reference. It has been created by our upbringing, our culture, our education, our churches... And what this frame in which we find ourselves means is that, if we do research, we do not do it objectively. On the contrary. That 'frame' not only influences how we hear what people say, but it actually also plays a decisive role in the questions that we ask. So we might think that we are creating an open space for people to have a voice, but in actual fact our own biases and thinking has already created limits to what can be said and explained.

Let me use, once again, an example from my own research experience. As those of you who know me already know, I'm a very staunch supporter of women's rights. I know in African circles the word 'feminist' is sometimes seen as a swearword, but I will outright say that I'm a feminist. So this is how I approached the research with Tearfund in 2010. Their research brief asked me to investigate the issue of SVAW. And in any case, that is how I saw SV: it is something perpetrated by men against women. So all of my preparation before the actual research was with this frame in mind: women are victims, men are perpetrators.

And then, with the second interview I did, a man started telling me about the effect of SV against men. I thank God that I interviewed him so early in the research project, for what he said totally changed how I approached the research. For he told me of how such male survivors are marginalised and stigmatised, about how it is becoming more common, about how none of the programmes working with SV survivors are equipped to work with male survivors. And what he told me made me realise that I was letting my frame of reference, my biases, create limitations for what can be learnt through the research. If my questions consistently position men only as perpetrators, the issue of SVAM cannot be put on the table.

So I rethought how I will do my research. I changed the focus from "SVAW" to SV in general. I explained the rationale to Tearfund, and it led to them also changing their focus from "SVAW" to "SV". And in all their programme interventions they now have a strong focus on creating space for male survivors (and female perpetrators).

It is very difficult to see our own biases, to see the restrictions that we create in our own minds. In planning your research there are a couple of ways of trying to overcome this issue.

- Firstly, who is determining the topic – the focus – of the research? Is it me, the outsider, saying that it will be on SVAW, or is the people in the community, who say that it should be on SV in general? So it will help if, from the start, you have community input on the nuances of what you are looking at.
- A thorough literature review can help you, as by reading you are alerted to other points of view and ways of seeing the issue.
- Group research is a good way of going about it. So you don't do the research on your own, but you do it as a team, especially if the team is made up of quite diverse people. It is one good way of overcoming your own biases.

- Discussing your research approach and methodology with a few trusted colleagues can be another way of opening your eyes.
- Open-ended questions can also help. So we don't ask "if you are raped, would you tell your husband", but we ask "who do you think you would tell if you were raped?"
- It helps if, with the interpretation of the findings, you have other people's input. With the responses that you get, either quantitative or qualitative data, to have a panel of people who help you in the interpretation of the data
- You can also ask other people to conduct the interviews or group sessions, if there is the possibility that your presence can be a problem. For example, if you are a man, using a female interviewer to interview female SV survivors would be a good idea. Or if you are a pastor doing a study of your own congregation, ask someone from outside the congregation to do the interviews.

These are issues to keep in mind with any type of research design that you use prior to your community development intervention. But there is a particular research design – participatory action research (PAR) – that is arguably particularly suited to community development.

PAR was designed with action in mind and is thus a commonly used approach to grassroots development. Particularly here in Africa, and in other developing world contexts, it has emerged as a research design particularly suited to helping develop initiatives responsive to the needs and opinions of local people.

The whole idea of PAR is that it is a reflexive process, that the community has input and the power with every step of the research process: with identifying the topic and research questions, with designing the research plan and tools, with the empirical research, with the interpretation, with everything.

However, especially if you are a novice researcher, this is a difficult research design to follow, simply because you have to have input from so many people with every single step. So to do real PAR can be very challenging. Yet the ethos, or philosophy behind PAR is something that I think we should keep in mind, no matter which research design we use:

- PAR emphasises the democratic nature of the research relationship. The emphasis in PAR is on collaboration between the researcher and the subject, with the subject becoming involved in the research process as an equal partner. The difference is not in the methods (tools) being used in the research, but rather on the underlying theory/ethos behind PAR. It is about an engaged researcher with an emphasis on social relevance, empowerment, and emancipation
- Knowledge is generated for purposes of action. Research is done with the aim of driving and informing action, not just for academic purposes. It is a means through which action can be planned and implemented.

So even if we do not do PAR, I think these are two core tenets that we should try and keep in mind with all empirical community research that we do: that the community is an equal partner in the research, and that we are doing the research for the purposes of action.

Ethics

Another, very important issue to keep in mind when doing research, is ethics. Especially when working in communities, doing community-based research as a basis for development, you have to be sure that you are doing the research ethically.

Increasingly, and internationally, there is an emphasis on ethical research. This is because for so long research was not done ethically. Someone studying HIV stigma, for example, would enter a community, asking probing questions, such as “You are HIV-positive. What will your parents do if they found out?”, or “You are HIV-positive. Do you think you will go to heaven when you die?” And the researcher leaves at the end of the project, going home to write up the results, publish, and gain academic stature. But we, here, are left behind in the community, with our souls ripped open by the probing, merciless questions. No support offered, no counselling. We have no idea what he is doing with what we said, he never shares the research results with us.

And that is why there is such a push for ethical research practices. So that those that we study – the community in which we are doing research – are not only NOT harmed by it, but actually draw benefit from it.

At Stellenbosch University each and every research project that works with people now has to have ethical clearance before research can start. And projects that are on sensitive topics, such as HIV, sexual violence, abuse, etc. have to jump through an incredible amount of hoops, as different committees make sure that those that are being studied – the subject community – are not hurt by the research process. So we have a Faculty-wide committee that first looks at our application for ethical clearance. We provide documentation such as our research design, interview schedules, consent forms, institutional permission, etc. They then check to see whether it complies with ethical standards, and advise us of any steps that we are missing out on. If the topic is very sensitive, such as SV, it is then referred higher up to the University-wide ethics committee. And for them you have to give even more detail...

Now even if your institution does not have such ethics boards instated, it is still the right thing to do your research ethically. For by following ethical research principles you ensure that you are recognising the community in the research that you do, and keeping their priorities and rights in mind. Ethical research would entail the following key principles:

- Asking for consent/permission
With the URDR we have to have signed consent form from every person that is part of our research. If a person is illiterate, we read the form and they give a thumb print or a “x”.
- Full information about the project
We have to explain fully what the project is about. People cannot be tricked into taking part. For example, I can’t tell someone that I’m interviewing him for research on community housing, but I’m actually doing research on spousal abuse.
- Permission to withdraw
People must be allowed to stop talking, stop taking part, at any point in a session. And they must know that they are allowed to withdraw.
- Anonymity
People’s identities must be not be revealed through your research. Not only their names, nothing that can lead to them being identified.
- Confidentiality
You cannot discuss what you have learnt with people outside of the project. For example, I can’t go home tonight and tell my husband “you won’t believe the sick things that are going on in the relationship of the one girl that I interviewed today”. Confidentiality is also about respecting those that take part in the research.
- Safe storage of data
You can’t keep your notes in your kitchen, where everyone can read it! Locked cupboards, password-protected computers

- Sharing of research results

The community must have access to the research results. They must be able to learn what you learnt from doing the research. You can do this, for example, by having a workshop after the research, and there explaining the research findings.

I hope that what this focus on research has made clear to you is that empirical research is the first step in community development. It is not a separate activity, an add-on. On the contrary, it is a key part of developing a community. The research process, if done correctly and respectfully, is an empowering, community developing process.