Rethinking research methods in protracted violent conflicts in Mozambique: fieldwork in complex emergencies

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper argues for the need to use multiple sources and methods that respond to research challenges presented by new forms of war. There are methodological constraints and contention on the superiority given to positivist and interpretivist research designs when doing fieldwork in war situations, hence there is a need to use integrated data generation techniques. The combined effect of severe limitations of movement for both the researcher and researched fragmented data because of polarized views about the causes of the war and unpredictable events that make information hard to come by. Data is both scarce and contested (ReliefWeb, 2018). War presents challenges associated with standardized research design, particularly sampling and sampling procedures, access, interviewing and ethical considerations in high-risk areas. The research focus was Palma, a town in the volatile Cabo Delgado province in the North of Mozambique, where the bloodbath of innocent victims has taken to new levels. Dozens of people have been killed after thousands of Islamist militants invaded the town on 25 March 2021. What warranted this research was the need to ascertain the perceptions of victims of the war on the evolution of the conflict, its impact and the efficacy of intervention policies and projects and make recommendations for improvement. However, undertaking to research the insights of victims of war and the actions of humanitarian agencies presented a lot of challenges that required

Design/methodology/approach – This research was guided by the postmodernist mode of thought which challenges standardised research traditions. Fieldwork experiences in Cabo suggest the need to use the composite strategies that rely on the theoretical foundation of integrative and creative collection of data when doing research in violent settings.

Findings – The fieldwork experiences showed that the standardised, conventional and valorised positivist and ethnographic research strategies may not sufficiently facilitate understanding of the dynamics of war. There should not be firm rules, guidelines or regulations governing the actions of the researcher in conflict. As such, doing research in violent settings require reflexivity, flexibility and creativity in research strategies that respond to rapid changes. Research experiences in Mozambique show the need to use blended methods that include even less structured methodologies.

Originality/value – Fieldwork experiences in Cabo challenges researchers who cling to standardised research traditions which often hamper awareness of new postmodernist mode of thought applicable to war settings. It is essential to study the nature of African armed conflicts by combining creativity and flexibility in the selection of research strategies.

Keywords Research, Ethnography, Survey, Conflict, Mozambique

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Doing research in war-torn, complex and entangled emergencies presents constraints compared to those usually encountered in peacetime. Field research in Mozambique, the Cabo region, illuminates the constraints of relying on dominant standardized research designs and presents opportunities for adopting flexible methods applicable to crisis situations. Based on the experiences in Cabo, the paper seeks to suggest strategies of rectification and argue that successful research in a violent context is conditioned by the magnitude of instability and the flexibility of research strategies. A creative blending of different research methods and techniques represents the most effective way of dealing with the constraints of doing research in conflict-affected settings.

Not much is known about data collection in an active conflict. War contexts present severe limitations of movement for both the researcher and researched, fragmented data because of polarized views about the causes of the war and unpredictable events that make information hard to come by. Data is both scarce and contested (ReliefWeb, 2018). War presents challenges associated with standardized research design, particularly sampling and sampling procedures, access, interviewing and ethical considerations in high-risk areas. The research focus was Palma, a town in the volatile Cabo Delgado province in the North of Mozambique, where the bloodbath of innocent victims has taken to new levels. Dozens of people have been killed after thousands of Islamist militants invaded the town on 25 March 2021. What warranted this research was the need to ascertain the perceptions of victims of the war on the evolution of the conflict, its impact and the efficacy of intervention policies and projects and make recommendations for improvement. However, undertaking to research the insights of victims of war and the actions of humanitarian agencies presented a lot of challenges that required

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Received 5 August 2022
Revised 5 November 2022
Accepted 17 January 2023
creativity, innovativeness, flexibility and reflective approaches. The enduring questions that guided the research were:

Q1. What are the key challenges to research in the context of conflict in the Carbo region, and are they different from difficulties encountered by social science researchers in peacetime?

How do we get to know the views of people in Cabo on the humanitarian crisis and its implications for peace, security and development?

As shown by subsequent sections, the first step of the research was to take the survey approach to generalize knowledge of the humanitarian crisis in Mozambique. This is consistent with the positivist-realist position that “there is a real-world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories and constructions” (Maxwell, 2012: 5). Given that reality is not always objective, generalizable, predictable and repeatable, the second step, which reinforces the first and its ability to close its inherent gaps, was to take an ethnographic approach which tracked on multiple realities (subjectivities) being experienced by participants. There are multiple realities and multiple meanings in practice, reflecting the diversity and heterogeneity of participants. The researcher got to know how informants experienced, interpreted and constructed the violent conflict and its attendant problems of humanitarian crisis through in-depth engagements. For instance, there were varied explanations of the nature of the conflict. Some saw it as an ethnic conflict. Others are perceived as a resource-based conflict. Others conceived it as a product of extractive political institutions. Others saw it as a deep-seated historical marginalization of the gas-rich Cabo Delgado as a province, resulting in high levels of youth unemployment plus the forced displacement of the coastal fishing and agricultural communities, a view reinforced by Salite et al. (2021). This fuelled and radicalized the youthful population to subscribe to the Ansar al-Sunna jihadists. The violence was an expression of displeasure by youth through terror against the local communities and multinational companies. Others also saw it as a global war on terror being fought on Mozambican grounds and that “the international community has been slow to respond to this emerging threat, possibly due to a perception that the risk of it spilling over into relatively stable neighbouring countries was low” (Smith, 2021, p. 2). As such, what appears on the surface to be conflict, understanding of it is heavily contested because, organically, conflict produces bitterness and anger.

The paper takes the following steps. In the first section, it introduces the Cabo Delgado’s humanitarian crisis. The second section raises constraints that relate to field research under conditions of armed conflict. The third section, which builds from the second, highlights a creative combination of different research techniques and suggests possible blended approaches to mitigating fieldwork challenges.

**Cabo Delgado’s humanitarian crisis in context**

Mozambique has been experiencing an increased number of conflicts and regional and international interventions by the humanitarian community. Mozambique, being the first country in Southern Africa to get independence through armed insurrection, is under constant threat from the violent and terror-driven insurgents, in particular the Ansar al-Sunna, whose primary objective was to establish an Islamic state that controls liquefied natural gas estimated at 160 trillion cubic feet worth billions of dollars in Northern Mozambique, Cabo Delgado province (Smith, 2021). This group is traced back to 2017, when it started off its terror campaign by targeting “shops, homes, farmsteads, kidnapping women, looting, conducting mass beheadings of civilians, among other unspeakable atrocities that are categorized as war crimes (Bonfoh et al., 2011; Davis, 2020; Smith, 2021) and crimes against humanity by international law statutes and conventions” (Musakanyi, 2021, p. 1).

Amnesty International projected that over 2,000 civilians had been killed, whilst over 700,000 had been internally displaced during the start of the insurgency. To date, Cabo Province has experienced a huge blow to the economy because of the halting of foreign investment. As a poor Province, foreign investment is at the epicentre of every development. The domino effect is financial instability because of decreased foreign investment and weak governance, which are sufficient fodder for conflict.

A lack of governance and a proper security response by both the Mozambican Government and southern African leaders made Cabo a high political risk (Neethling, 2021). However, President Filipe Nyusi has said that his government expects to make over US$100 billion from natural gas projects. The income will provide tax revenue, create 70,000 well-paid jobs over 20 years from 2022 and reduce Mozambique’s dependence on foreign aid from the USA, UK, Sweden and Norway, among others (Mack, 2002, Cotton, 2021). On the contrary, to date, the insurgents have left hundreds of thousands without food and basic medicines. The humanitarian space is rapidly shrinking. However, leaders of international organizations and governments have stayed silent when they see gross abuses by Islamist.

**Scholarly debates on research constraints**

Research in war zones has many levels of complexities and dilemma but also presents researchers with valuable lessons into design, particularly the need to rely on composite strategies. There are scholarly variances in views on the challenges, difficulties and courses of action taken by researchers in conflict. For instance, Ford et al. (2009, 1–2) observed how “lack of infrastructure and human resources, as well as the presence of violence, can limit both access to populations over time and the ability to conduct research. As a consequence, conventional research methodologies when applied to conflict settings without due adaptation may compromise the quality of the eventual results”. However, the authors overlooked the potential of integrated research approaches that can assist in overcoming barriers to research (Howard, 2018). More importantly, the authors have also ignored the view that every research context is different and the researcher can never be fully trained for all conflict situation.

There is no consensus among conflict researchers on the correct research strategy. Haer and Becher (2012, p. 3) encouraged “probabilistic quantitative research even in conflict zones, drawing on as precise population data as possible”. The authors recommended randomization procedures. To the contrary, other authors such as Ford et al. (2009) are view that in active conflicts, it is extremely difficult to capture the violence in numbers, instead qualitative approach through the collection of personal witness testimony might be feasible. Other authors also
follow ideas of Ford et al. as random sampling especially by randomly knocking on people’s doors might cause a security threat to the respondents (Höglund and Öberg, 2011; Cohen and Arieli, 2011; Bretherton and Law, 2015; Kamel, 2017). The middle ground authors think that in such circumstances rapid assessments may be the only feasible option for data collection (Dahl, 2018). However, all the suggestions still cause difficult decisions of sample size. A growing number of scholars are suggesting the use of participatory research methods, that involve focus group discussion, participant observation and visual methods (Mazurana et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2019; Shesterinina, 2019). However, participatory research has its own challenges and difficulties. For instance, the flow of information does not come from individuals but groups. To close the gap, suggestions of snowball sampling was offered by Malejaq and Mukhopadhyay (2017) as a method that addresses “trust deficit inherent in war zones where informants tend to be suspicious of newcomers. The building of embryonic “trust networks” is in fact an absolute necessity, as informants are more likely to share information with those they have come to know and trust. Snowball sampling can therefore be understood as a form of social infiltration into an impervious setting in which the proper introduction can get a researcher a long way”. Although there are scholarly contestations on the rightful data mobilization strategy in armed conflicts, they overlook how conflict setting is dynamic and subject to rapid deterioration to allow a single or multiple methods to carry the day. For instance, data collection systems may be disrupted and the study populations may become displaced.

Most authors are concerned with the scientific validity or quality of data emerging from conflict zone as there are inherent difficulties in collecting high quality data in conflict settings (Ellington, 1998; Höglund and Öberg, 2011; Bretherton and Law, 2015). They argue that data collection systems are poorly implemented because of volatility of the situation (Cohen and Arieli, 2011), given that insecurity impede movement and access (Norman, 2009 Moss et al., 2019; Musamba, 2021) and chances of collecting new data (Mazurana et al., 2013), the volatility of the setting may affect study designs that require a large sample size (Kobeissi, 2022) or a long follow-up period.

Another dilemma is of balancing three things: the security of the researcher, that of respondents and the theoretical framework undergirding research that gives insight into experiences of war. The challenge is fully exposed by Robben and Nordstrom (1995, p. 4) who observed that conflict-based research involves challenges and responsibilities beyond that of other settings “responsibilities to the field-worker’s safety, to the safety of his or her informants, and to the theories that help to forge attitudes toward the reality of violence, both expressed and experienced”. Research in armed is not a neutral exercise. It has considerable potential to infringe upon the privacy, well-being and security of its subjects. These are also tied to access and the ethical challenges of asking people to describe war experiences that may be traumatic, personal or risky (Moss et al., 2019). The view is corroborated with Bailey (1996) who cites factors that influence security such as the content of the research, the general conflict situation in the field and the characteristics of the researcher, including nationality, ethnicity and gender). The identity of the researcher matters in rebalancing the security the researcher and that of informants. The researcher’s gender, age, culture and how one presents himself or herself affects data collection and analysis (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Musamba (2021, p. 3), in his dos and don’ts of navigating research in armed conflict zones, observed that “once in the field, how one presents oneself is the next challenge. In areas controlled by state services, an honest and transparent presentation allows one to avoid potential problems with security services, as well as with military and civilian intelligence personnel. That said, in some cases, too much transparency about where we’re going or whom we expect to meet and interact with can also cause problems”.

There considerable ethical dilemma researchers in red zones experience (Shesterinina, 2019). Although some authors such as Thomson (2009, p. 27) implored the researcher to “act beyond the ethical imperative of doing no harm; we must display empathy, look out for the emotional safety of our interviewees”, others challenge this view by citing the absence of rigorous scientific rules that guide research in armed conflict (Campbell, 2017; Lekha et al., 2009; Kamel, 2017; Kate and Lake, 2018). Gallaher (2009) is of the view that it is challenging to remain ethical when researching militant, rebels and belligerent groups because of their informality and it is obviously much more difficult to get reliable information from them. Thomson (2009) also mentions of government interference in highly politicized research environments that militate against ethical considerations such as impartiality. A plethora of literature has already cited ethical dilemma around managing the expectations as we as emotions of participants (Thomson et al., 2013). Wood (2006) and Van Damme (2013) agree on how it might be difficult to get informed consent, record interviews, avoid psychological harm to respondents, psychological demands of research for the research team and giving back research out to informants.

Research experiences in carbo

Doing research in unpredictable war zones runs contrary to the established method in research councils and academic institutions. Literature remains fragmented in systematically explaining specific steps taken when researching conflict settings, the potential dilemma and how to overcome them. Evidently, research in peacetime stands in a very different relationship with war-torn environments. Yet, the majority of research tools available are for peacetime. As argued by Barakat (2010, p. 6):

The researcher in war is governed by a multitude of unpredictable parameters which tightly control appropriate action. For instance, traumatic conditions that have affected people’s experiences may also inhibit their ability or willingness to communicate them. As a consequence, researchers can no longer assume the existence of a body of verifiable data. Instead, information tends to be the product of individual attempts to make sense of confusing and often threatening events. While these conditions can be found in other research contexts, they are unlikely to occur with the same degree of intensity as in war-affected contexts (Barakat et al., 2010).

For instance, the standardized research design overlooked the need to understand the origins and nature of the war, as it is experienced by those affected by it and those involved in humanitarian efforts. Although the researcher made an effort to retain impartiality and a balance in sample size, it increasingly became recognized that war-torn regions present severe limitations in identifying the rightful sample size (Bailey, 1996; Moss et al., 2019; Kobeissi, 2022). There were constraints in
gaining uninhibited access to all groups to ensure sufficient representatives on informants. More so, there was a general fear of strangers among vulnerable groups such as women and children. Sometimes, the researcher would meet overly excited individuals who assumed positions of spokespersons of conflict-affected groups (gatekeepers). These presented a special challenge in applying systematic and rigorous methodological approaches expected of social science research.

Even the researcher could not be regarded as a neutral, unresponsive or unaffected person because the effects of war had a significant bearing on emotions, mainly when talking to refugees, rape victims, those maimed and amputees or those who lost loved ones (Williams, 2016; de Guevara and Boás, 2020). Although reflexivity is a hallmark of good research (Lynch, 2000), it remained extremely difficult to objectively stand out the war experiences when looking at and listening to victims of war. The Carbo experiences left the researcher stressed and traumatized, inherited from those of participants. Again the expected research norm of impartiality was severely challenged in several dimensions because of intense exposure to the vagaries of war and terror experienced by informants. For instance, the researcher went into the Carbo conflict zone carrying his own constructed ideological position and assumptions about the war. These biases might have originated from media coverage and formal and grey literature. In addition, the data collected squarely fitted into pre-conceived concepts and abstractions. It is difficult to avoid collecting data that fits a preconceived notion of the situation. However, to overcome this challenge, the researcher adopted reflexivity, which is an ability for self-scrutiny – to be conscious of limitations and constantly adjust perspectives and methodologies. Shacklock and Smyth (1998) see reflexivity as the conscious revelation of the role of the beliefs and values held by researchers in the selection of research methodology for the generation of knowledge and its production as a research account. However, the researcher was constantly reminded by Burgess (1984, p. 23) writing that “being a stranger, an outsider in the social setting, gives the researcher scope to stand back and abstract material from the research experience”. As observed by Richardson (2000, p. 929), “Knowing the self and knowing the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges”.

Although the standardized research norms advise researchers to be sensitive by not forcing questions on heavily traumatized questions (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2008), Carbo’s experiences reveal to the contrary, as evidenced by a lot of traumatized survivors of war who wanted to share their stories with the hope the researcher who assist in ending the war. Yet, research does not end the war.

In addition to limitations of impartiality, doing research in a war-affected context is confronted by unpredictable scenarios which directly affect the selection of appropriate methodologies. For instance, as the conflict was exponentially rising, former communities could be seen shifting alliances, including restricted movements that affected access of the informants. The shifting of people and tumultuous situations resulted in the researcher getting fragmented data. It can be argued that wartime situations present such challenges.

In established research approaches, the sequencing of theoretical frameworks and points raised from literature as organizing principles in providing information necessary for synthesis is often broken when mobilizing data in an active conflict. Experiences in Carbo show that the fluidity of the conflict does not give the researcher sufficient legroom to visit secondary sources of data that enable tracking of key theoretical frameworks and information gaps. Where grey literature is available (government documents, field reports from humanitarian agents and the security sector), the information will be polarized, tainted and conflicted. It is extremely difficult for people in conflict to disseminate information accurately. In circumstances where information has been collected, sources tended to be incomplete and unreliable. The information would not have been systematically collected because of interruptions from war. Even if we find the varied conceptualizations too many or too few, managing the fluidity of information is problematic. It is also imperative to know that participants have exposure to other sources of information (radio, television, WhatsApp and newspapers) that influence the construction of reality. The remarkable divergences in views are simply differences between subjectivity and objectivity. Since thinking processes in violent conflicts are not linear, subjectivity and objectivity positions often intersect, a view reinforced by Banyanga (2021) and Dahl (2018). This immediately raised problematic issues such as power differentials.

In most Cabo communities, the people are organized based on the political economy of patron-client relationships, thereby making understanding an individual’s perspective fraught with difficulties. Knowledge and location are intrinsically related in Cabo. Civil war knowledge is embodied, embedded and grounded (institutionalized) in socio-historical narratives. Although knowledge was shared, transferred and transmitted, it had the context of its origins and is sustained by the language and culture of the Cabo people. The traditional leaders, who are the custodians of norms and values that govern the behavioural pattern of community members, controlled and validated the knowledge in rural communities. Culture, social life and historical contexts are shaped by the most powerful members who control how information flows and what information with little input from weaker members. Also, the knowledge claim had to satisfy the political interests of particular groups.

One of the dilemmas to grapple with in complex emergencies is how potential participants are identified, approached and recruited to build a sufficient sample size. Given the security sensitivity around the topic, aid workers, government officials, lawyers for human rights, women, traditional leaders and victims of torture were selected through a combination of snowball, convenience, accidental and purposive techniques considering their positions, power and accessibility, victimhood, knowledge and roles. The diverse recruitment gave voice to the various perspectives of the respondents on the humanitarian crisis. The critical case was also adopted where torture survivors were identified and interviewed (Gray, 2014, p. 221). The context of violent conflict provided for opportunistic sampling (Emmel, 2013), mainly when new people emerged as potential sources of information.

However, recruitment was always guided by principles of the right to self-determination, informed consent and express permission by respondents. While obtaining clearance from the respondents in the form of written and signed or oral consent could be the first step towards protecting the participants, crisis
situations challenge this standardization of doing research. In other words, there were often circumstances when informed consent was simply impractical. For instance, Diener and Crandall (1978) suggest that fully informed consent should include: describing the overall purpose of the research, telling the participants about their role in the study, stating why they have been chosen, explaining the procedures, including the amount of time required, clearly stating the risks and discomforts and stating that the participants may withdraw at any time.

Experience in Cabo research shows that it is extremely difficult for participants to agree to sign the consent form, fearing that it will worsen their vulnerability. Participants prefer word-of-mouth consent. Why? To begin with, it gives the opportunity to quickly withdraw their consent if they are no longer comfortable with the questions. Again, interviewees participated in this research as volunteers; as such, the researcher was compelled to respect the right to self-determination. The researcher prepared three distinct consent levels that hoped to be valid: fully informed, partially informed and reasonably explained consent. For example, while fully informed consent required the researcher to sufficiently explain the research’s goals, the participant’s role and the benefits accrued out of participation, partially and reasonably informed consent gave me discretionary powers of selecting what to share with the participants. However, interviewees did not prefer the first level of consent in written form but were comfortable with oral and reasonably informed consent – as symbols of trust and confidence. Others permitted the researcher to quote parts of the conversation and cite their names against those words. The researcher was asked to take the recorded audiotape to the government official and then destroy it. Surprisingly, most young victims who agreed to be recorded asked the researcher to playback the recorded interview. This allowed the researcher to ask the interviewees to comment, delete or add. Participants were also given the researcher’s contacts to facilitate the relay of additional information. However, this is not logistically possible in war-torn and war-prone settings where the communities are always mobile.

Also, there is the issue of “trust” or mistrust among the interviewed participants in war-tone regions. Building trust between the researcher and the researched in war-tone situations is usually a huge challenge. In the case of Mozambique, the war experience created mistrust at a different level of the interviewing process. Mistrust was seen at the level of the researched not trusting the researcher; mistrust among the researched themselves and who is trusted to provide information about their experiences. Trust, in this case, was related to “confidence” and “assured reliance” on the researcher. During field research, many of the participants at the beginning were not very comfortable talking and narrating their experiences to the researcher as he was considered a “complete stranger”. This lack of trust emanates from the fact that the researched were not sure if the researcher’s identity was true or if he was a spy. It is important to emphasize that trust is a relational phenomenon as it requires the efforts of both the researcher and the researched to create a trusting, non-suspicious and open conversation. However, in the case of Mozambique’s conflicted-affected region, it was difficult to establish a foundational level of trust to engage in a more comprehensive and open conversation with the participants. Because many participants did not feel comfortable talking with a stranger about their experiences, some censored their stories and chose what aspects they felt more comfortable talking about. This slowed down the interview process. In such a scenario, lack of openness from the researched poses a potential question of whether they think the researcher will be able to keep their sensitive stories confidential and anonymous.

Again those in positions of authority wanted to be recognized as a way to consolidate their power and others wanted their names to be mentioned as a form of displaying their resistance. More so, the degree of confidentiality in conflict prone remarkably differs from peacetime. For example, confidentiality cannot be maintained on the information of individuals who want to endanger themselves or others. Can then frankness and confidence be traded off with a threat to life? In Africa, most western ethnographers continue to fail to reveal information that participants may want to harm others. As such, they have been misconstrued as colluding with research participants to harm others. As observed by Ford et al. (2009), communities and situations are different, yet peace researchers adhere to the universalized code of research ethics. Many ethical considerations from ethics committees can be dismissed as misplaced and exaggerated as they ignore a uniquely distinctive “Ethno” of communities affected by conflict. As such certain myths on peace research have been constructed without being subjected to systematic investigation on their efficacy in Africa. For example, there is a running assumption that if ethnographers wish to find out the insider views of participants, they need to immerse themselves in the world of communities and be “warts and all” to gain participants’ confidence and trust. This contradicts the existential realities of war-torn and conflict-prone Cabo communities.

On the contrary, conflict-affected communities trust “outsiders” more than they would their own. Second, war-affected communities are at their lowest thinking levels and see outsiders as carrying out action research to provide an olive branch and third, conflict-affected communities want to be heard; they want to tell their side of the story to whoever can lend an ear, fourth and often ignored, conflict-affected communities normally build resilience to any further shocks and potential trauma. Under these circumstances, researchers have recorded things they want to see (bias) and forgotten the rest.

Identifying gatekeepers and gaining access can be extremely difficult in war situations because of restrictions of movements. Doing research in war zones requires permission from government officials, including police and the military (Goetz, 2003; Longman, 2013; Smith, 2021). These do not give easy access without a clear understanding of the purpose of the research, how it will benefit the government and the affected civilians and how the findings will be disseminated. To mitigate the potential challenges, the researcher relied on local contacts who assisted in the selection of the right officials to talk to and those who perceived they had the power. The researcher was fortunate to get help from previous contacts (informal contact) and government officials who smoothed the path to Garbo. The researcher had an option to enter into partnership with relief workers in accessing the field but cooperating with government officials was helpful in easing the passage to Carbo.
Five categories of respondents were identified:

1. Rebels who were directly involved in instigating insecurity;
2. Victims of civil strife (women and men);
3. Policymakers responsible for providing policy and oversight (government officials, parliamentarians, ruling and opposition parties);
4. Humanitarian safeguarding agencies and civil society [NGOs, CBOs and faith-based organizations (FBO)]; and
5. Cultural and traditional leaders.

The question was how to approach and recruit informants in a volatile context? While it is easier in peaceful settings to make appointments through email and telephone, sending letters seeking consent and authorization from the gatekeepers, these are problematic in active conflict – because of suspicion, trust, what one is investigating, one’s identity and whether or not what you are investigating is align to the interests of the participants. In the case of Mozambique, appreciate their struggles, show you are part of the community and help them find a sustainable solution to the conflict. The researcher indicated that he was neutral and independent, not working for the government or any international organization or NGO working against their interests. The participants were psychologically alert because of their wealth of experience living in war-torn zones and engaging in violence and illegal activities. They could read the psychological and body language of the interviewer to confirm his understanding of their struggles.

Although the researcher’s experiences in Cabo were quite similar to those discussed by scholars, a composite strategy was taken to address the shortcomings from literature and other researchers. The following section argues for the need to employ multiple sources and methods that respond to research challenges presented by unpredictable conditions. It further discusses the strengths and limitations of different research strategies and suggests ways in which they can be integrated in conflict situations. What emerged from research experiences in Carbo is that there are several uncontrollable variables affecting the research process. Some of these include renewed shelling because of shifting battle lines, propaganda, time limits because of cultural practices as well as difficulties in using the established research methods.

**Triangulation of methods and sources**

Doing research in the Carbo region has challenged the established method in research by suggesting the need to integrate some components of the survey, case study and ethnographic research. The composite strategies feed into each other (Onwuegbuzie, 2002). For instance, the case study of the Carbo region helped to ascertain the horror of the conflict and the efficacy of humanitarian assistance. Several research questions were generated on how we get to know the views of the participants through surveys. The responses were then fed into ethnographic approaches. What was consistently common among these varied research strategies was that they were participatory in eliciting views of wartime experiences (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay, 2017). They allowed telephone, face-to-face and observational surveys, in-depth interviews, photographs and focus group discussions to take place. Unlike the established research method, which uses mixed methods to try and compensate for each strategy’s weakness and validate data, the composite approach is meant to respond to the restraints paused in war-torn settings.

The first step in this research included a thorough pre-field preparation that involved learning much about the pre-war Carbo Delgado region. A baseline survey was conducted as the starting point for planning, monitoring and evaluating the evolution of the war, gaining access to the Carbo region and appropriate research tools for use in conflict situations. The researcher was uncertain about the root cause of the fresh conflict and decided to develop the content survey through newspapers, analysis datasets and telephone interviews. The idea was to understand the complex situations before the war and how these fed into the conflict or might have been exacerbated by the war. Having prior knowledge of the Carbo population was helpful in the selection of key informants and structures of authority. Understanding the culture, traditions and social structure was extremely helpful in sampling and sampling procedures (Emmel, 2013; Longman, 2013).

Pre-field preparation helped to provide a rich background description of historical wars in Mozambique, which eventually helped situate the survey and ethnographic interviews. It further helped to identify the causes and effects of wars and predict how the contentious subsoil resources would change the behavioural patterns of various conflict actors.

**a. Survey**

The process the researcher followed in developing the survey started with a reflection on the topic and the concepts it consists of its dimensions and then moved on to define their variables (indicators), which eventually enabled the development of the study’s aim and objectives. For example, the survey helped establish that the militant Islamist group had gained ground across the country’s territory. Violence had displaced nearly two out of every 25 citizens from their homes. The supply chain of the food economy had severely been cut. The insecurity wrought by the group and other criminal opportunists had grown exponentially over the past six months. Grey literature and research outfits consensually pointed out that Mozambique was burning with widespread unrest. Other data sets repeatedly stated that the unrest was confined to a small area of Cabo. The survey approach was not spared of challenges. For instance, although surveys helped give statistical associations and were also lauded for capturing a wider scale and representations of people under study, in war situations, the approach (questionnaires, for example) was of very little use in eliciting data as the informants’ response to the structured question were affected a combination of fear, suspicion and illiteracy. In situations where victims of war give oral life testimonies, trust is a central issue. In conflict settings, a very close relationship between the researcher and the researched is challenging to develop to the level of gaining full trust. For instance, the researcher was confronted by strong reservations (a sign of mistrust) on topics that had to do with the contribution of government to the causes of war.

While there is scholarly consensus that surveys produce somewhat reliable numerical data that are easily analysed, the researcher’s appearance holding a pen and survey forms in the
war-torn Carbo region raised concerns, which might have compromised the information sought. In conflict situations, a true survey involving access to research subjects, especially those affected, is not usually practically possible. Although the survey was extremely helpful in assessing the social and economic impact of the war, it presented limitations for the researcher to observe changes and unforeseen circumstances and compare informants’ experiences in different geographical areas as people were disproportionately affected by war. At some point, abrupt changes occurred in the community under study when they received information about the insurgents coming in. When people ran away, the variables under investigation dramatically shifted. More importantly, this prevented random sampling, as the potential informants were always on the run. The instability of informants and war conditions challenged the fixed sampling frame in a particular random sample. It was extremely difficult to know the total population because of constant flight and hiding. A good research is dependent on coherent and rigorous sampling procedures and the selection of informants. However, in war situations, the fleeing of informants militates against developing a systematic sampling strategy. What emerged from this research is that the success of research is dependent more on access, security and non-random sampling than on good samples and sampling procedures.

The research had come up with an alternative research approach to fall back on, that is, ethnographic strategies and techniques. As a mitigating measure, the researcher adopted all the data collection techniques a war situation would allow – including non-random methods such as quota sampling, observation and semi-structured, unstructured interviews and informal discussions, especially in informal but secure settings. Methodologically, these were helpful since they are not held to fixed sampling frame in a particular population because of constant flight and hiding. A good research is dependent on coherent and rigorous sampling procedures and the selection of informants. However, while non-random techniques were appropriate, they are extremely limited to identifying participants based on their positions, power, accessibility, knowledge, roles and functions. Evidence shows that civil war would have disrupted all these structures, as most people were more itinerant than landing. As such, there was no chance for pre-interview conversations with interviewees to ascertain feelings of safety and confidence in participation. Many participants did not have time to be explicitly informed of what they were getting into and explain their rights, including refusing to answer specific questions and not to be recorded.

a. Ethnography
Because of the constant shift in the population spurred by the war, the researcher decided to follow up with ethnographic investigations involving small-scale interviews with individuals and groups. The aim was to explore explanatory variables on informants’ perceptions of the war. However, given that the people constantly shifted settlements, it presented constraints in making comparisons of different ethnic, religious and belligerent groups and identifying key stakeholder interests in an ongoing armed conflict. To overcome the challenge, the research had to adopt a variety of ethnographic methodological strategies. In the context of Cabo conflict research, ethnography became a mixture of participant observation and interviewing, an idea supported by Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1995, p. 1), who defined ethnographic research to involve ‘the ethnographer participating, overtly and covertly, in people’s daily lives – watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions. For Willis and Trondman (2000, p. 5), it is […] a family of methods involving sustained social contact with agents and richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience. The method was quite significant because it allowed me to continuously sample informants at different times and geographical areas. The survey method could not afford me this opportunity since it did not apply to interruptions and changes. Borrowing from Crotty (1998, p. 7), ethnographic methodology aids the researcher to:

[...]

Apart from generating rich data essential to assess the violent conflict, the ethnographic method allowed face-to-face (in) formal encounters with respondents to probe for clarification and uncover more ideas (Kombo and Tromp, 2006, pp. 93–95). Researching active conflict required what Greene (2007: 20) observed as a “multiplistic mental model that actively invites readers to participate in the dialogue […] multiple ways of seeing and hearing various ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is essential and to be valued and cherished”. As such, investigations in conflict zones require integrating various data collection and analysis strategies (Creswell, 2012; Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2014). This was significant because my study focused on the opinions of my participants.

The research in Mozambique shifted away from classic ethnography, which takes at least six months to several years, to modern condensed fieldwork where the researcher visited a site for two weeks every few months or so during a study lasting two or three years. Such diversified ethnographic was suitable for turbulent environments and helped to address various ontological and epistemological issues around the conflict. Ethnography gave the researcher sufficient legroom to employ different data collection methods such as reflexive, collaborative and participatory methods. For instance, in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to capture the fundamental feelings, attitudes, experiences and knowledge that influenced the respondents to construct conflict and its effects. This ethnographic interviewing was distinguishable from other forms of interviewing. It encouraged informants to shape the questions being asked and possibly even the focus of the study, resulting in data being a co-production between interviewer and interviewee. Gergen (2001) considers such an interview as “collaborative inquiry”, and Thagard (1997) views it as “collaborative knowledge” when participants in an interview are co-investigators (Babbie, 2012) and a “conversational partner” Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 4). Relatedly, Patton (1990, p. 353) observes, “interviews are interventions”. However, the researcher also learned about the limitations of ethnographic interviews. Participants would not tell you everything at once. Participants may not tell everything because they are a complex web with different opinions, experiences, backgrounds, gender and level of education. It is simply
impossible and the researcher will never know if they have omitted something because this was outside of their confidence boundaries, they did not think it was relevant or because they deliberately did not want to highlight it. It was naive on the part of the researcher to believe that we get to know everything in the mind of participants. What emerged from Carbo is that some informants were largely interested in discussions that had to do food handouts than real experiences of the horror of war. The researcher realized the fissures in the research objective that overlooked data that related to the victims’ needs. These needs were overshadowed by researching on the evolution of conflict and its impacts, such as the flight of refugees, violence and destruction. To compensate for limitations, the in-depth interview method was blended with focus group discussions.

In temporarily secure and peaceful settings, the researcher adopted ethnographic focus group discussions to establish perceptions of the possible causes and effects of armed conflict and the relationship between groups in relation to the war. The researcher got to know the roles performed by various groups in either perpetuating the conflict or intervening in stopping the horror. Different patterns of interaction among victims and perpetrators of conflict emerged from the focus group discussions, who had access to humanitarian assistance and why and who had power and why. The researcher did not initially think about the points raised. However, although the method was significantly helpful in generating new ideas, it had its own constraints. In war situations, some individuals assume the responsibility of being a spokesperson for other people and therefore dominate the discussion. Relatedly, because of the threats of war, it was extremely difficult to find a homogeneous group that shared the same historical and cultural background. It is inevitable, given that war is experienced differently by the same people in the same location.

The ethnographic method of focus group discussion was significant as far as eliciting responses that challenged the official narratives on the causes of war and what needs to be done to silence the guns. Insights from the conversations were helpful in understanding where humanitarian assistance was needed most and the distribution of resources could be improved. However, in war settings, the focus group method presented challenges, especially in coming up with a representative population sample, which then compromises the validity of the information. There was a tendency to select those who could clearly articulate their experiences, overlooking those with less oratory skills. Experiences were exaggerated, others over-emphasised their experiences depending on their positions and perceptions of the war.

What emerges from fieldwork is that respondents constructed their own and each other’s experiences through everyday encounters. Therefore, the conceptualization of violent conflict is a product of two structural and interactional forces. As one interviewee indicated, “the past is the present”. In the past, security was selectively provided to interact, enmesh and experience the humanitarian crisis together with those researched. As a researcher, it is complicated to be objective and remain consistently honest in interpreting shared experiences without being prejudicial, judgemental and biased.

Positionality and potential biases
The dilemma confronted by this researcher was to decontextualize and become detached from those observed. Really, how practically possible for a researcher in conflict zones to step out of humanity and feelings? Remember, ethnographic interview research methods force the researcher to interact, enmesh and experience the humanitarian crisis together with those researched. As a researcher, it is complicated to be objective and remain consistently honest in interpreting shared experiences without being prejudicial, judgemental and biased.

More so, as a researcher coming from Zimbabwe, it was nearly impossible to distance myself from objectivity because of the emotions generated by seeing the chronic humanitarian crisis. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to suppress emotions from the research process, particularly when friends have been subjected to torture and brutality. As such, going into the Mozambican context to research means importing biases into the research. As a result, the researcher’s identity was not
experiences and how it was mitigated. The research was not static as well. Research is a process. As such, the researcher and the researched’s identities are subjected to ongoing reconstruction.

From a practical perspective, one of the fundamental ethical challenges is to enter the research site of the Mozambican conflict with an open mind, similar to Glaser and Strauss’s (1968) notion of fieldwork as a “clean slate”. It is extremely difficult for a researcher to be free from prior experience with the potential to influence bias and prejudice, especially in the labelling of the humanitarian crisis and the nature of the conflict. The categorization of informants was influenced by the framing of positivist thinking of civil wars. The biggest challenge in fieldwork is how our pre-conceived ontologies (the nature of reality of humanitarian crisis) socialize the researcher to assume certain epistemological positions (how we know there is a humanitarian crisis). More significantly, how the researcher constructs his identity in the research as an expert knower and how he/she further constructs his identity concerning the participants continuously demand reflexivity and re-examination of research processes.

The following section focuses on the distress that arose as a result of asking people to discuss their narratives and experiences and how it was mitigated.

**Ethical considerations and potential violations**

Working in conflict-affected areas presents enormous ethical difficulties of doing additional harm, especially when interviewing vulnerable individuals and groups. Krause (2021) also observed that testimonial stories may conjure up bad memories that stress and traumatize informants. Some participants broke down as they shared memories of heinous torture and losing loved ones and property. Such horrendous accounts somehow triggered heavy emotions and revenge feelings. Research evidence from experiences in the Northern Uganda conflict has already shown that researching in active protracted conflict emergencies has a potential for physical and/or psychological harm, causing distress to participants and eventual victimization. While the researcher might not expect either physical risks and psychological damage or distress to occur, asking about people’s narratives, experiences and interpretations may arouse feelings of anger, hatred and bad memories. More often, when the researcher noticed this happening, the researcher slowed down the interview or skipped questions that triggered emotions. To minimize and overcome such potential challenges, the researcher thoroughly checked question reliability as words carry different meanings in different contexts. This involved censoring politically sensitive questions that could trigger emotions without compromising research objectives. Careful planning and thorough preparation before the research start are always helpful in minimizing potential risks. In extreme circumstances, it is advisable to respond by terminating the conversation immediately.

They were faced with rebalancing ethical considerations and showing participants that the investigator understood their circumstances. The benefits of showing sympathy are that participants felt comfortable, therefore, open to talking about more sensitive issues. They felt listened to for once, which they had expected from the state authorities or those supposed to protect them. As an outsider–insider researcher, while it might have been difficult to eliminate or suppress sympathy and biases from the research process, the researcher heavily relied on reflexivity – a mirror through which the researcher continuously examined his own biases and the influence of identity, position and power. At some point in the narratives – how women and children were raped and wombs ripped off; the researcher was overwhelmed by personal feelings and anxieties. The reactions were triggered by a mental picture of what the researcher saw in Uganda’s civil war. This then created a challenge related to reflexive positioning, especially on how the researcher had to maintain a professional distance and maintain a balance between “insider” and “outsider” status in the context of a humanitarian crisis. Volatile contexts make the researcher get in physical contact and is also pressured to be emotionally close to the participants. According to Hermann (2001, p. 79), researchers studying conflict are seldom “pure outsiders” and would rather fall into the categories of either insiders or “involved outsiders” – that is, with extensive knowledge of, experience with and links to the context.

**Conclusion**

Through this article, the sharing of Cabo experiences is meant to communicate the importance of particular practical challenges that may need extra attention in conflict settings and how to overcome them. Every single war context is different, also is Cabo in Mozambique. The practicalities of conducting research in Cabo do not always go hand in hand with formal requirements of standardized research. More generally, Cabo has recurring wars, but there are limited reports of experiences of research conducted in the context of such conflicts and wars. The conflict is characterized by instability and rapidly change in circumstances and pose major challenges to the conduct of research, a view shared by Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay (2017), who observed that “studying active conflict zones in the 21st century is uniquely difficult. New forms of war and non-state armed actors blur the lines of the battlefield.”

However, my experiences with research in Mozambique does not only align with other discussions about research in conflict zones but also provide evidence that it is possible to do research in volatile conflict zones. This was achieved through implementing a range of strategies that helped to navigate between various zones controlled by government and militants. This involved rigorous preparation and a flexible but tailored research design that shifted away from the dominant standardized research strategies. The composite strategy showed what works and how and why works under conflict circumstances. During fieldwork in public emergencies, the researcher goes through a process of shifting through numerous research strategies and techniques. In conflict zones, the researcher always makes mistakes and plans will not always work. While there are guidelines of doing research in peacetime settings, there no such blueprints for war torn environments. There are no firm rules, guidelines or regulations governing the actions of the researcher in conflict. As such, doing research in violent settings require flexibility and creativity in research strategies that respond to rapid changes. Research experiences in Mozambique show the need to use blended methods that include even less structured interviews. However,
guided by reflexivity, the combined research strategies and techniques remained closely related to the objectives of the research, sensitive to the horrors of conflict and respectful to cultural context.

Besides increasing the knowledge base of future researches, the composite strategies used in Cabo region expand on the theoretical foundation of integrative and creative collection of data when doing research in violent settings. Consistent with Romano’s (2006) views, there is need for flexibility and allowing more time than initially expected when doing research in conflict zones. Although the goal with this article has been to provide a practical guide for researchers new to fieldwork in conflict contexts through honest sharing of methodological experiences, it is significant to note that research in armed conflict is still fraught with challenges partly because of the new forms of violence between state and non-state armed actors. Although Kamel (2017) thinks “research in conflict zones is rising in importance”, Moss et al. (2019, p. 1) counter argue that “fieldwork in conflict settings is still not commonplace”.

References


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