



Centre for Research on
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Lessons from Fieldwork in Mozambique

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Lessons from Fieldwork in Mozambique

When conducting quantitative survey research, a well-trained researcher should read ‘structured questions’, guide respondents with the existing response categories and record the responses on paper or a digital device. If the respondent does not understand the question, the researcher has to read it for the second or even third time. If on the third time the respondent does not answer then the researcher can assume that the respondent does not know or wish to answer. For qualitative research, data collection methods and procedures are different. For example, an interview guide on which qualitative interviews rely on are not composed of ‘structured questions’. Instead they use ‘semi-structured questions’ without pre-assigned response categories providing space for the researcher to explore the information provided by the respondent depending on responses given. This could be through follow up questions, such as: how, why, what, where and so on.

While a researcher can be trained to make in-depth follow up questions, this per se does not guarantee the success of the research because there are times that even with a good research plan in place it is not conducive to collect genuine data. The success of conducting research is often associated with the way researchers overcome unexpected and unpredictable issues that arise during the data collection process. Often these issues are of a *location* nature – suggesting that the site where data collection is taking place has specific characteristics that make it differ from other sites; *gender* – suggesting that, gender norms or characteristics developed due to earlier socialization processes mean that individuals of a certain gender may have more information than others and respond or participate in the research in a different way to others; and *authority collaboration* – suggesting that some authorities can interfere or affect the data collection process in some places more than others.

This Research Note “*Lessons from Fieldwork in Mozambique*” explores some of the unexpected issues that arose during qualitative research data collection for the project ‘A political-economic analysis of electricity grid access histories and futures in Mozambique’ (POLARIZE).² It considers differences in the locations where the fieldwork took place, gender of respondents and authority collaboration, and it reflects on the strategies that the researcher adopted to overcome fieldwork challenges.

The data collection consisted of key informant interviews with staff from the Mozambique electricity company (EDM) and citizens from the target communities who are EDM customers/end users. The interviews covered topics such as the progress and challenges EDM faces to deliver electricity to the population as well as capturing citizen experiences of electricity connection and supply.

² A political-economic analysis of electricity grid access histories and futures in Mozambique’ – (POLARIZE) is a research project of the University of York, funded by UKAID, in partnership with several institutions including the Centre for Research on Governance and Development (CPGD). It aims to examine the historical-institutional and political-economic factors shaping electricity network development in three cities with differing governance structures: Maputo, Beira e Nampula. <https://www.york.ac.uk/igdc/research/polarize-project/>

Location

This Research Note considers location by the city where the data collection took place. The POLARIZE project covered three cities in Mozambique: Maputo, the capital city based in the Southern region; Beira in the central region; and Nampula city in the Northern region. Due to dynamics of operation of EDM in Maputo City, the project also included data collection in the adjacent city of Matola.

In the cities of Maputo and Matola and to certain extent Beira, the community respondents tended to express their views in detail even revealing their resentment quite openly and without fear about certain issues. In contrast, in Nampula City, the respondents tended to speak less. Their responses tended to be very short. This may be associated with ‘low levels of information’ linked with formal education, access to news media and debates of public affairs³, however it is interesting to know the strategy that the researcher adopted to collect more detailed data in this case.

Besides applying the probing techniques and follow up questions taught during the project’s qualitative data collection training, as it can be seen in the below quote, the researcher managed to collect data using soft skills during engagement with the respondents:

“Each region has its own way of being and thinking. It is wrong to think that all cultures are the same. In each city or neighbourhood, the way of being, acting, speaking and proceeding is different. The key of all is modesty and respect to other. It is not possible to enter in the field and exit in the same way. We always learn something. In this project I learnt that if we are humble, know to respect the differences and act according to local habits we can obtain the information that we need”.

CPGD researcher

In spite of respondents living in a ‘low information’ context, the researcher was capable of motivating them to speak out about issues from the interview guide, using a strategy of modesty, humility and respect to others.

A second aspect related to location, specifically Beira city, is the post-disaster context. In March 2019 an intense tropical cyclone (Cyclone Idai⁴) made landfall at Beira City, affecting the central provinces of Sofala, Manica and Zambézia and neighbouring countries Malawi and Zimbabwe. Strong winds and flooding caused catastrophic damage in and around Beira including loss of life, the displacement of thousands of people and significant damage to all major infrastructure (buildings, transport, electricity and water supplies).

The data collection took place in February 2020, eleven months after the cyclone occurred. Personal reflections from the researcher acknowledge that the community

³ District profiles from the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2012) reveal that (i) households in Nampula are less likely to own a radio or television to access news media than those located in Maputo City, Beira, and/or Matola, and (ii) school enrolment levels as a proportion of the population are lower in Nampula than in Maputo City, Beira and/or Matola.

⁴ See background here: <https://www.unicef.org/mozambique/en/press-releases/one-year-after-cyclone-idai-25-million-people-mozambique-remain-need-humanitarian>

interviews in Beira had a different dynamic to other locations, particularly because of the topic of the interviews. In most neighbourhoods the electrical system had not yet been fully restored which meant that the respondents were very motivated to talk about their experiences.

“People saw the research as if it was a breath of fresh air, a way to express their concerns which at some point created embarrassment because everyone wanted to talk, everyone had a story to tell.”

CPGD researcher

Whilst having detailed and open responses was beneficial for the research it did create some challenges for the researcher as she perceived that some respondents were hoping that the interviews were a way to get their concerns presented to EDM as quickly as possible to be resolved. Where this was detected the researcher proactively and sensitively reminded the respondents about the purpose of the research so as not to lead to any false expectations.

Gender

As outlined in the introduction, data was collected from two types of respondents in each location: (i) employees of the state electricity company (EDM) and (ii) ordinary citizens who are EDM end-users/customers. The experiences of the researcher were that, across both groups in general, men tended to air their views in more detail than women. However the main difference was noted with female respondents in Nampula City who were much more reserved than female respondents from other cities. This was especially the case with EDM respondents where the female technicians/employees were much more cautious in their responses and/or unable to provide additional data to supplement the interviews, differing from their male colleagues and colleagues from other locations.

It is possible that the gendered differences in responses to electricity issues is related to gender norms and early years of socialization within the family and community where boys in Africa in general and Mozambique in particular are strengthened to be integrated into the public sphere and girls towards the domestic sphere and procreation (Shenga 2018).

Gender norms and responses can be anticipated in the design stages of data collection to a certain extent. One way to help take this into account is to have a gender equality and ethics protocol for data collection work. This is something that the Centre for Research on Governance and Development (CPGD), who conducted this data collection, have in place. Due to women's marginalisation in Mozambique, gender sensitive issues are integrated into CPGD's research. In large studies where field teams involve numerous researchers, our standard practice for mixed-sex data collection research is to ensure that at least half of the researchers are female. This does not only integrate female researchers but also guarantees that female respondents who do not feel comfortable to be interviewed by male interviewers can be interviewed by female interviewers. This also reduces the need to substitute respondents during data collection. As there was only one position for this research project, CPGD purposely recruited a female researcher to undertake this work.

Similar to the researcher's initiative to engage respondents in the different location settings, where information was lacking or the respondents were not as forthcoming, the researcher used soft skills to encourage, where possible, female respondents to provide more detailed information.

Authority collaboration

In general the data collection was conducted smoothly without any interference from authorities. The researcher, following standard protocol for survey data collection, introduced herself to the state authority in each location (in this case the municipality authorities in each of the respective cities) in advance of any data collection by providing an official CPGD letter, signed and stamped, informing about the background and purpose of the research. The researcher was also displaying a CPGD credential identifying her as the project researcher throughout the data collection period.

In most locations data collection proceeded as planned however some challenges were experienced in Beira and Nampula City. In Beira, during fieldwork in communities, the researcher was stopped midway through conducting interviews and had her work material (interview guide, credentials) taken with an allegation that she had not passed through the administrative post to stamp the credential letter. Despite the researcher informing the municipal authority at the start of the data collection she made the decision to again pass though the administrative post, the case was resolved by the end of the day.⁵

In Nampula city after informing the municipal authority and providing the official letter there was a reluctance to provide "authorisation" to the researcher⁶. After several days of patience and persistence the researcher was granted "permission" to continue six days later. This made the data collection to be very squeezed because time in each location is well accounted for in terms of the number of interviews that are planned for each day as well as accommodation and meal expenses that are designed to fit within the goals and budget of the study. In consultation with the project lead/co-principal investigator, the strategy agreed for the interim period was for the researcher to proceed with interviews pending the "authorisation" and that in the event it was not granted the data collected during that time would not be used. Since "authorisation" was eventually granted all of the data collected could be used for the study.

Conclusions and discussion

This Research Note reflects on some of the challenges that emerged in relation to location, gender and authority collaboration during data collection for the POLARIZE project. It shows that the researcher managed to overcome these challenges using different strategies. On location specificities, the researcher applied her soft skills

⁵ Resulting in the loss of almost a full working day.

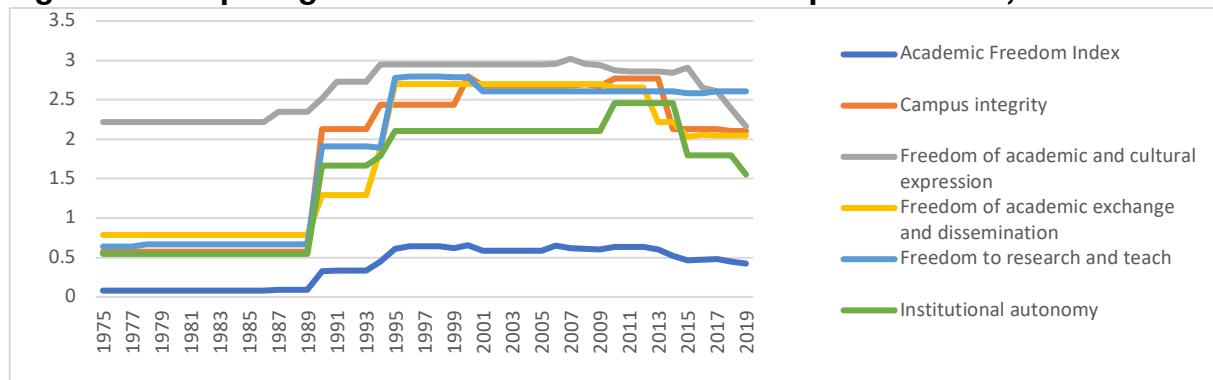
⁶ Authorisation is not required to conduct research but as a matter of courtesy we proactively inform the local authorities in advance of data collection to build trust and transparency between the research team, the authorities and communities involved.

when she realised that she was in a ‘low information’ context where the respondents were less informed. She revealed that humility, modesty and respect gained the trust of respondents to speak out more. With respect to gender, a strategic decision was made in advance of the data collection to recruit a female researcher to reduce the impact of gender norms and motivate female respondents to be more comfortable during interviews to speak and respond – something that male interviewers tend to not manage, due to early socialization that discriminates women.

On authority collaboration, after some challenges with an authority not “authorising” the conduct of the fieldwork, the project chose a pragmatic approach to proceed with fieldwork whilst continuing to engage with the authority. We chose to do so because we understand that first, our letter was not asking for authorisation to conduct a study but to inform them about it. Second, scientific and/or academic freedom is a constitutional right (see no 1 of article 94 of the Constitution of the Republic⁷ and Figure 1 for general trends) and it is also present in other legal provisions.⁸ Given that it is a constitutional right, citizens and academic institutions do not need authorization to exert it. However, we understand that it is part of good ethical protocol to inform authorities (in this case the municipality) on the conduct of the research so that researchers are not misperceived within communities. In other words, ‘to not enter in someone else’s house without speaking with the owner’.

When research institutions look for authorisation, this contributes towards the subversion of this constitutional right as it creates a wrong awareness to the authority that to carry out research it is required to grant an authorisation. This is something that Mozambican social scientists have to take into consideration so that they do not contribute towards the violation of academic freedom in the country.

Figure 1: Comparing academic freedom in Mozambique over time, 1975-2019



Source: V-Dem V10 dataset 2020.

Academic freedom index in Mozambique has been below mid-point (.5) since 2015. Its decline is affected mainly by declines in institutional autonomy followed by freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, campus integrity and freedom of academic and cultural expression.

⁷ No. 1 of Article 94 of the Constitution of the Republic states that “All citizens have the freedom of scientific, technical, literary and artistic creation”.

⁸ Scientific/academic freedom is provided for in Article 2 of the Higher Education Law (Law 27/2009, of 29 September) as one of the general principles of academics. In addition, Article 6 of the Higher Education Law provides for academic and intellectual freedom.

Overall, an important lesson learned from this research experience is that whilst it is important to plan well in advance to try to anticipate the challenges that might arise, it is equally important to have a pragmatic and flexible approach so that the researcher(s) can adapt and respond to challenges and changing circumstances as they unfold.

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CPGD Research Note Series

1. Shenga, C. & Howe, L. (2018) “Data on Citizens Concerns in Mozambique”, *CPGD Research Note 1* (June).
2. Shenga, C. & Macome, A. (2020) “Lessons from Fieldwork in Mozambique”, *CPGD Research Note 2* (October)



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