

## Comparative and Interdisciplinary Research in Post-Conflict Settings - Lessons Identified

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*How should comparative research be conducted in large interdisciplinary projects? Based on first-hand experiences from a five-year, interdisciplinary, EU-funded Horizon 2020 project on community-oriented policing (COP), this policy brief reflects on what worked and what could have been done differently.<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinary research is increasingly regarded as an advantage, even a requirement, when it comes to application calls. The assumption underlying this is that better and more innovative results will be achieved if researchers from different scholarly disciplines apply their respective understandings to the same phenomenon. This, it is supposed, acts as a remedy to existing ways of thinking within a particular discipline tending to be constantly reproduced and reconstituted, in a process Fligstein and McAdam term a 'strategic action field'.<sup>2</sup> However, there are countless examples of purportedly interdisciplinary projects in fact turning out to involve little if any cooperation between disciplines. Doing comparative research as part of an interdisciplinary approach only adds to the complexity of the challenges faced.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY:** when two or more people from different disciplinary fields cooperate towards a common goal

Those taking part in the ICT4COP-project came from a diverse array of disciplines: anthropology, law, criminology, political science, sociology, technology, development studies, environmental studies and software engineering. In addition, the project involved the setting up of a Police Expert Network (PEN), which consisting primarily of police officers with experience in international police advising, but also representatives from civil society and academics working on police reform. The topics to be explored – which ranged from community-oriented policing (COP) to security to information technology and communication – were perceived as 'belonging' to different disciplines.

The main focus of the project was on understanding whether and how COP could improve human security in post-conflict areas. To address this, nine main research questions and a number of sub-research questions were developed, with particular emphasis placed on youth and gender. The various Work Packages (WPs) spanned four regions and 12 case countries: Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Kenya, Kosovo, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Serbia, Somalia, Somaliland, and Uganda. The challenge was therefore not only to ensure interdisciplinary work, but to combine in-depth case studies with comparative research.

### THE APPROACH

At our first meeting in 2015 – having acknowledged the challenges associated with interdisciplinary research – we conducted a session on assumed encounters, including discussion of core concepts that may be understood differently according to the scholarly lens applied. Examples of identified concepts included: COP; accountability; legitimacy; trust; post-conflict; corruption and organized crime; security; insecurity and human security; reform; state and non-state actors; formal and informal institutions; legal plurality; and hybridity and power.

Methodologically, researchers were encouraged to use mixed methods, as well as to employ co-production. In essence, co-production is an approach that emphasizes ongoing collaboration between researchers and the researched, and aims to put the principles of empowerment into practice.<sup>3</sup> Co-production is a promising way of conducting research for a number of potential reasons, including empowering the 'researched', en-

ensuring more valid and relevant research, and facilitating interdisciplinary research.<sup>4</sup> However, co-production also implies a number of challenges, which were explored in the project's methodological guidelines.<sup>5</sup>

Following fieldwork and desk studies, researchers were to input the research question answers into a 'matrix', categorized according to cases.<sup>6</sup> The matrix was updated throughout the research period and provided a means for the regional WPs to keep track of their work and organize findings. Moreover, it allowed the comparative WP to obtain additional in-depth information, beyond what was available in published articles, policy briefs and digital stories.

In order to build trust and mutual understanding, emphasis was placed on meeting face-to-face at least once a year. Our annual conference provided a platform for this, with researchers spending up to four days together and social activities incorporated into the scholarly programme. While most of this time was spent interrogating initial findings from the various cases, a comparative session was also included at which common concepts and phenomena, and how they were applied and understood differently across case countries, were discussed. Here, the anthropological concepts of 'emic' and 'etic' were used as an analytical starting point for debate.<sup>7</sup> In very simplified terms, when studying a cultural phenomenon one can have an insider perspective – which involves rich knowledge of the culture in question, as well as an attempt to explain this culture in its own term – or an outsider perspective, which involves looking for more generic patterns that can be compared across cases. These perspectives reflect what Clifford Geertz termed, respectively, 'thick' and 'thin' description.<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Pike, meanwhile, designated these the emic and etic perspectives, using as an analogy two distinct approaches to language: first, phonemic analysis of units of meaning, which reveal the unique structure of a particular language; and, second, phonetic analysis of units of sound, which facilitates comparison between languages.<sup>9</sup> By going in-depth and using an emic lens, we found that findings varied between contexts, which brought into question how useful it would be to translate this information into recommendations that would apply across cases. We also found that researchers gained valuable insight into the complexity of these contexts, and in the process discovered new ways of approaching the challenges they faced. While such in-depth contextual understanding was regarded as essential to the project, the sessions also revealed that – across several cases and in particular when an etic understanding was applied – a number of challenges and vulnerabilities bore similarities.

One example of this insight, which was unpacked through exercises and was found to be valid across cases, is that the findings not only relate to policing, but are embedded in a wider context of power politics, governance, and the social contract between citizens and the state.

Proactive reflection took place at regular intervals throughout the project period in order to ensure learning, including at our annual and WP meetings, through field research, and through our Quality Control and Coherence Reports. In the latter, quality and coherence were examined in terms of content (written and visual material), methodology, ethics, and the handling and storage of data.<sup>10</sup>

### A SELECTION OF IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

While the idea of the matrix was solid and a mixed-methods approach was encouraged, researchers were not originally asked to spell out which methodological approach had been used when gathering answers to the research questions. While most relied primarily on fieldwork, including interviews and focus group discussions, others also utilized secondary sources, such as similar studies conducted by others. This made it somewhat difficult to compare cases, and resulted in a number of discussions concerning how to avoid comparing 'apples with oranges'.

A related challenge regarding the matrix was that comprehensiveness varied across cases, mainly due to fieldwork being carried according to different time schedules. Among other reasons, this was due to the security situation in some case countries, which hampered fieldwork. Also identified as challenges were cooperation across disciplines – in particular integrating the technology component with others – and interaction between the police experts and researchers. Suggested ways of handling this included continuously encouraging work across disciplines, in particular between the police experts and the researchers, more face-to-face contact between researchers, and greater reading of one another's work, specifically between those from the technology side and the rest.

Challenges were also encountered in relation to research co-production, particularly as this approach was not properly adopted at the very outset of writing the research proposal. Furthermore, it soon became apparent that the degree to which it was being applied varied according to the researcher in question, which was a reflection of the different disciplinary backgrounds, as many did not have experience with this type of research. This was addressed through encouraging researchers to apply co-production.

## LESSONS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK THAT ALLOWS FOR COMPARISON

- A common understanding of the research questions is essential.
- Multidisciplinary research is a challenge in and of itself, and this should be made explicit at the outset.
- An openness towards other approaches, fields and disciplines is a prerequisite.
- Differences should be expected and embraced.
- Time and space should be made for interaction/dialogue across disciplines and cases.
- Formal and informal mechanisms should be put in place to ensure ongoing learning throughout the research project.
- Interdisciplinary thinking should be practiced on a regular basis (for instance by analysing the same issue from the perspectives of different disciplines).
- Where possible, fieldwork should be carried out to a similar timeframe across cases, thereby enabling fruitful exchanges on initial findings at an early stage.
- Organizing findings in a matrix according to cases and research questions can work, if the specific method of data collection used is spelled out.
- Co-production is a promising approach, but one which requires commitment and understanding by all those involved in the research project. It also requires regular reflection by researchers on how it can be practiced in such challenging contexts.

### NOTES

1. This policy brief was prepared as part of the Community-Based Policing and Post-Conflict Police Reform (ICT4COP) Project, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No. 653909. See: [www.communitypolicing.eu](http://www.communitypolicing.eu) Thanks to the coordinator of the project, Dr. Ingrid Nyborg, for comments. Any errors or omissions are mine.
2. According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012:9), a strategic action field is 'a constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (incl those who have power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. A stable field is one in which the main actors are able to reproduce themselves and the field over a fairly long period of time.' Fligstein, N. and D. McAdam (2012) *A Theory of Fields*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Rappaport, J. (2008) 'Beyond participant observation: Collaborative ethnography as theoretical innovation', *Collaborative Anthropologies*, 1(1), 1–31.
4. See, for instance, Ostrom, E. (1996) 'Crossing the great divide: Coproduction, synergy, and development', *World development*, 24(6), 1073–1087; Martin, S. (2010) 'Co-production of social research: Strategies for engaged scholarship', *Public Money & Management*, 30(4), 211–218.
5. ICT4COP, (2015, revised 2019) 'Basic Methodology for Field Research'. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU.
6. Africa Matrix (2019), 'Matrix 4, Africa', ICT4COP Matrix, D7.8, May. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU; Central America Matrix (2019), 'Matrix 4, Central America', ICT4COP Matrix, D9.9, May. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU; South Asia Matrix (2019), 'Matrix 4, South Asia', ICT4COP Matrix, D8.6, May. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU; South East Europe Matrix (2019), 'Matrix 4, South East Europe', ICT4COP Matrix, D10.6, May. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU.
7. Pike, K. L. (1967) *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*. 2nd ed. Mouton.
8. Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
9. Pike, K. L. (1967) *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. Mouton.
10. ICT4COP (2017) 'Quality Control and Coherence Report 1', ICT4COP D2.4. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU; ICT4COP (2019) 'Quality Control and Coherence Report 2', D2.5. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU. Guidelines were spelled out both in the Methodological Guidelines and in the Ethical Guidelines (ICT4COP (2015) 'Ethical Guidelines', ICT4COP. Internal project document. Ås: NMBU.)

### Author Bio

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### The Project

The ICT4COP research project seeks to understand human security in post-conflict settings by researching community-based policing and post-conflict police reform.

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) is the project coordinator.

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