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Editorial Note *4*

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BUILDING CAPACITIES IN THE CIVIL SERVICE

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Navigating Qualitative Data Collection Challenges– Fieldwork Insights and Recommendations for Research with Development Project Beneficiaries,

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Abstract:

In development and migration studies, understanding the impact of policies and development interventions is one of the major research priorities. However, when carrying out research with beneficiaries of development projects in Africa, there are numerous challenges that - if not carefully considered - will jeopardize data quality. Even though there are some methodological articles and reflections on monitoring & evaluation and on quantitative research with beneficiaries of development projects, not much has been written on the specific challenges that qualitative data collection faces in these situations. Drawing on 28 FGDs and 144 IDIs conducted in the timespan of 18 months of qualitative fieldwork research with project beneficiaries in Southern Ethiopia, we give fieldwork advice, and provide actionable recommendations for future research, revolving around 1) the importance of pre-testing, 2) verifying age and other personal characteristics of informants, 3) the outsider-insider debate, 4) sampling and communication with NGO staff, 5) expectations, vulnerabilities and behavior of individuals.

Keywords: *field research challenges, migration-development nexus, beneficiaries, development projects, power relations, Ethiopia*

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Introduction

Academic research with beneficiaries of development projects in Africa implies important challenges to data quality, caused among others by an expectation for per diems of rural populations (Samb et al., 2020), own interests of NGOs implementing development projects in the area, weak institutional infrastructures, low literacy rates, and difficulty to verify age and other characteristics of research informants (Randall & Coast, 2016). Qualitative research, based on interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with project beneficiaries, is useful to explore the "how and why" a development intervention impacts individuals on the ground (Patton, 2002; Chen, 2015). In academic literature, there has not been a systematic methodological debate about the specific data collection approach needed for conducting interviews and FGDs with beneficiaries of development projects. This methodological article therefore aims to open a discussion and share challenges and best-practices in academic research with development project beneficiaries in Africa.

During the last decade, large donors such as the European Union and the United States have increasingly utilized their development cooperation to fulfill domestic migration policy objectives (Fine et al., 2019; Carling & Talleraas, 2016). In the context of the rising arrival of migrants and refugees, the EU gradually started to frame development cooperation as a tool for reducing migration (European External Action Service, 2016). However, the scientific evidence for the assumption that more development cooperation may result in less migration is still

missing. Academic research can only address this gap if it applies sound academic rigor and gathers genuine qualitative information from beneficiaries of these development interventions.

The academic and societal relevance of starting a debate about challenges and best-practices related to academic research on the impact of development projects in Africa is evident. High-quality research will allow for better information for policymakers and development practitioners, which will consequently increase the impact of policy and development interventions. Similarly, our article speaks to researchers who study development and migration-related topics in Africa. Our insights on challenges and best-practices from our data collection with project beneficiaries in southern Ethiopia will act as useful field research techniques for future research. At the same time, we advance the methodological debate around qualitative data collection in Africa by addressing important challenges that arise in in-depth interviews (IDIs) and FGDs with beneficiaries of development projects.

For this article, we draw on our experience from 18 months of qualitative fieldwork research in different areas of southern Ethiopia. Between December 2021 and May 2023, we conducted two rounds of research, consisting of 14 FGDs and 72 IDIs in each round. All interview partners and FGD participants were beneficiaries of a development project. The purpose of our research was to explore the influence of the project on migration aspirations of the beneficiaries. Our research therefore aimed to study how individuals that are addressed by development interventions plan their future and potential migration journeys. We collected data in two areas: one mid-land area where project beneficiaries work in rain-fed agriculture, and one low-land semi-arid area where informants engage in pastoralist and agro-pastoralist production. Between each round of data collection, there was one year time. We identified the same informants again and explored their evolving situations and opinions.

Throughout the pre-testing and main data collection of our fieldwork research in southern Ethiopia, we had to overcome several obstacles. These obstacles were related to communication and coordination with the implementing organization of the development project, verifying age and other personal characteristics of informants, logistical issues, expectations, vulnerabilities, and behavior of individuals from the different age and gender categories. As we learned how to best address these mentioned obstacles, we modified the approach, logistics, questionnaire, and sampling.

After a brief literature review, we will first address the building of trust and important communication with the donor, grant manager and implementing NGO, so that academic research on a development project can be facilitated. Subsequently, we will describe challenges related to sampling, gender dynamics, and conduction of FGDs and interviews. Lastly, we will outline an innovative research technique that is useful to qualitatively understand the evolving conditions, perceptions, and life aspirations of project beneficiaries over time.

Problem Statement

This section outlines the key problem that this article tries to address while policymakers and practitioners design development interventions that aim to reduce migration, there has not been a systematic debate on how to collect high-quality data from beneficiaries of these interventions. Qualitative data is required to understand the mechanisms of how different development projects influence migration outcomes. Even though there are some methodological articles and reflections on monitoring & evaluation and on quantitative research with beneficiaries of development projects, not much has been written on the specific

challenges that qualitative data collection faces in these situations. This article aims to address the stated problem.

In their book chapter *A Future Agenda for Migration Studies*, Pozzo, et al. highlight the need to research the influence of development interventions on “micro-level aspirations to migrate” (Pozzo et al., 2022, 491). Furthermore, the authors elaborate that “*this is an area particularly interesting for development, foreign policy and humanitarian actors, as they try to better assess how their interventions impact migration and forced displacement.*” (Pozzo et al., 2022, p. 491).

The migration-development nexus has been developed by Nyberg-Sørensen, Engberg-Pedersen and Van Hear in 2002 to explore the influences of migration on development and vice versa in a systematic way. While during the early years of the migration-development nexus authors explored the potential benefits of remittances (Page & Plaza, 2006; Ketkar & Ratha, 2009; Faist & Fauser, 2011; Olwig, 2007), the last years – especially since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe 2015 – saw the other direction of the nexus, the way how migration flows can be curbed through development processes as main research priority (Lanati & Thiele, 2018; Latek, 2019; Fratzke & Salant, 2018; Clemens & Postel, 2018; Angenendt et al., 2017). In this regard, donors such as the European Union are particularly interested in using their foreign policy and development cooperation to influence migration from recipient countries (European External Action Service 2016). Since a large variety of development projects aiming to curb irregular migration by increasing the resilience to climate change exist on the ground (see projects under the EUTF for Africa programme for instance), there is the clear research need to systematically unpack the mechanisms how different development projects and different types of development influence the migration aspirations of beneficiaries.

There are several fieldwork notes, methodological articles and research methods course books that explore challenges and best-practice examples of qualitative academic data collection in Africa. Some scholars (Funder, 2005; Sim & Waterfield, 2019) focus on power hierarchies between interviewers and research informants in Africa. Since research is often taking place in poorer, less-developed regions, data quality might suffer due to differences in income, knowledge, and job position. Samb et al. (2020) flagged the challenge of a expectation of per diems of rural populations in the Global South who often tend to seek per diems or other immediate benefit when engaging with development practitioners or researchers. In this context, Funder shares the experiences from his fieldwork:

‘ was clearly considered a strategic asset by some of the agents I interacted with, who saw me either as a potential instrument for securing further funding for the project, or as an asset in the power plays surrounding the community project activities,’ (Funder, 2005, p. 6).

The discussed topic - academic research on development projects - is similar but not identical to project monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The two mentioned concepts are about researching the influences of development interventions on beneficiaries or target communities. However, while M&E is often required by the donor or grant manager as a means of quality control and adjustment of future projects, academic research aims to explore development interventions to test and develop academic theory. Therefore, academic research cares about some degree of applicability to other similar situations. Furthermore, M&E intends to evaluate the performance of the project. In contrast, the focus of academic research might lay on something else – on theory-building, patterns and mechanisms that are applicable to similar situations in other areas. There is a body of literature concerned with M&E. Among scholars (Dighe & Sarode, 2019; Hay, 2010; Sridharan & De Silva, 2010), there is a consensus that M&E throughout the Global South is donor-driven because “donors are the primary intended users and evaluation clients” (Dighe & Sarode 2019, p. 4). Consequently, the research focuses on the donor’s interest, such as the linear - often short-termed - impact of the donor’s contribution (*Ibid.*).

Chen (2015) makes a distinction between evaluations of two categories: theory-driven evaluation and black box evaluation. While black box evaluations are interested in the outcome of a project, theory-driven evaluations explore the process - the “how and why” (Chen, 2015, p. 17). For the “how and why” process evaluations, qualitative methods, such as IDIs and FGDs are especially useful, as detailed descriptions and perceptions of the project participants are needed (Patto, 2002, p. 159).

In practice, academic research on development projects on the micro-level faces different challenges than M&E of an individual intervention. This is because donors and implementing organizations might be skeptical about the role and intention of the independent researcher(s) – whereas M&E is commissioned by the donor and/or implementing organization. To our best knowledge, at the time of writing there were no papers on challenges or best-practices on academic fieldwork research with beneficiaries of individual development projects on the micro-level. For these reasons, this article aims to open the debate by sharing our experiences from research in southern Ethiopia.

While there is some research on potential challenges in quantitative data collection - such as household surveys - in the Global South (Choumert-Nkolo & Phélinas 2018; Phillips et al., 2010; Sandefur & Glassman, 2014), specific considerations for IDIs and FGDs are scarce. The challenges in IDIs and FGDs are different to the ones of quantitative surveys. Within the discipline of migration studies, some methodological articles outline important instructions for conducting FGDs (Frisina, 2018; Currle, 2011), as well as IDIs (Fedyuk & Zentai, 2018; Gu, 2019). On the one hand their articles provide useful recommendations, such as the acknowledgement that “the interview needs to be carefully adapted to each data collection purpose” (Fedyuk & Zentai, 2018, p. 172). On the other hand, however, their advice refers to research with immigrants and refugees in the Global North. In Africa, with beneficiaries of development projects, different conflicts of interest arise. Namely, the expectation of per diems of rural populations, own interests of NGOs implementing development projects in the area, as well as verifying age and other characteristics.

Another shortcoming of research accounts is the absence of the temporal aspect, as put by Rigg and Salamanca:

> “Most geographical studies, often for practical reasons, involve single visits, from which change is projected backwards and, often, also extrapolated into the future. Identifying change based on such studies is problematic on several counts, not least their reliance on respondents’ memories, patchy secondary data, and researchers’ impressions. Longitudinal studies where the research site is re-visited and re-surveyed are comparatively rare. Moreover, a substantial proportion are cross-sectional re-studies involving sampling across a population. Panel re-studies where the unit of analysis – here, individual households – is followed over time are rarer still” (Rigg & Salamanca, 2015, p. 296).

Addressing this shortcoming, we will also discuss promising research approaches for IDIs and FGDs to understand the changes in evolving conditions, life aspirations, and perceived roles of the development interventions and other factors for these changes.

Results

The Importance of Pre-Testing

In our experience, investing sufficient time and resources to conduct a thorough pre-testing is of utmost importance – especially for research with beneficiaries of development interventions, since conflict of interest with the implementing organization and a expectation of per diems of the study population can impede data collection. Pre-testing helps to deepen the understanding of the terminologies, ideas, concepts, and questions used in the data collection. Pre-testing should take place in a different district, with similar characteristics, but geographically far away from the districts selected for main data collection, to avoid information contamination. The planned approach, sampling and selection of informants, consent procedure, questionnaire, collaboration with field staff and other involved entities, as well as translation, uploading and saving processes should be identical to the main data collection and should be critically discussed every day of the data collection. In our case, we simplified some of the questions that were not clear to informants, we exchanged used concepts, and modified the sequence of the questions. As to the duration, the pre-testing should be concluded when logistical and procedural steps such as transport, consent procedures, sampling, interviewing, translation, and data storage are smooth and well-rehearsed. Furthermore, at that point concepts and questions of the questionnaire should be clear to interviewers and research informants and problems that arise during the pre-testing should be solved.

To highlight the importance of pre-testing and the type of challenges it could uncover in qualitative research with project beneficiaries in Africa, we briefly enumerate the issues that we identified: 1) verifying age and other personal characteristics of informants, 2) the effect of the presence of the foreign researcher and of the field staff of the NGO at the data collection site, 3) issues related to sampling and communication with NGO staff, 4) logistical issues, such as the suitable place to in the field to conduct IDIs and FGDs, as well as other daily responsibilities and time constraints informants had, 5) expectations, vulnerabilities and behavior of individuals from the different age and gender categories. These five mentioned points will be outlined in the forthcoming sections of this article. It is important to stress that we identified them during the pre-testing. During the actual data collection, far less problems regarding those five issues came up and the questionnaire was optimized.

Communication with the various levels of staff of the implementing organization - donors, headquarters in the capital, project leader, field staff

Implementing NGOs have a natural interest to make their projects appear in the best possible light. If academic research is to be conducted in their project areas, implementing organizations and their staff will perceive this as a threat. If the research uncovers shortcomings or weaknesses of the project, their funding could be stopped by the donor, or their reputation might suffer, which could make it difficult for them to win projects in the future. In our experiences from the past, this can lead to project staff trying to influence the research outcome and findings. In practice, project staff might pre-inform and guide informants to respond to the research questions in a certain way. Consequently, the quality of the collected data will decrease, as a bias is introduced. Similarly, during our research with project beneficiaries in southern Ethiopia, we sensed that informants were pre-informed and instructed by the implementing NGO.

Since we identified this challenge already in the pre-testing, we took the following steps to address this challenge before starting the main data collection. We scheduled several meetings

with all distinct levels and positions of the implementing organization, donor, and grant manager. A European NGO is the grant manager of the development project that we studied. Therefore, as the first step, meetings with the person responsible for the development intervention at the mentioned NGO have been held in Addis Ababa. After receiving their support, we could approach the implementing NGOs at the highest level, in their head offices in Addis Ababa. When going from step one to step two, we recommend asking the grant manager to send an email to the implementing NGO to have his/her support saved in the emails. After having secured the goodwill of the country headquarter level of the NGO, the local offices of the NGO should be contacted. Again, we consider it to be a good practice to have emails sent from the headquarter level that document the approval of headquarter staff and of the grant managers. This way, field staff of the implementing NGO in the researched project area understand their supervisors and management board expect them to cooperate in facilitating the academic research.

It is still of utmost importance to invest the effort and time to establish trustful and open communication with the field staff of the implementing NGO. It is this same field staff that is key for the academic research in the informant selection and scheduling of IDIs and FGDs. They are the ones who know the beneficiaries and who could pre-inform them and thus introduce a bias into the research. In our case, we took the time to discuss with all four different levels: 1. Grant manager, 2. Country level headquarters of the implementing NGO in Addis Ababa, 3. Management board of the regional office of the implementing NGO in the research area, and 4. Field staff in the rural area who are in direct contact with the beneficiaries.

In all these four steps we explained our research objective in depth. These explanations should be completely honest. In our case it became obvious that the development projects aimed at increasing the resilience of beneficiaries to climate shocks. Our research was on the influence of climate-resilience projects on migration aspirations. It became evident during the meetings that managing migration aspirations – which was the scope of our research – was not the responsibility of the project implementers. Consequently, their mistrust decreased, and they saw our research as less of a threat to their work. Thus, it is extremely helpful that the implementing NGO understood well the purpose of the academic research and the interests of both sides are discussed openly.

Furthermore, we agreed and highlighted during the meetings that they could use the generated academic research on migration in their project areas to apply for further projects in the future. Likewise, the implementing NGO being able to facilitate and support research in their project area will be seen as a proof of institutional capacity by the international donor community. Having highlighted those points, the collaboration with the implementors became more trustful and the pre-information of the informants, which still occurred during our pre-testing, was not happening anymore during the main data collection. Thus, to achieve genuine data and to avoid bias, the researchers should engage in transparent communication with the implementing NGO, grant managers, and other involved entities.

Selection Criteria and Setting up Interviews with Project Beneficiaries

The selection criteria for the IDIs and FGDs depend on the cultural context of the studied area, as well as on the type of interventions brought by the researched development project. We conducted research in a pastoralist community, as well as in an area where the livelihood type was rain-fed smallholder farming. While the migration decision-making among the farmers was an individual thought-process, the cohesion of the pastoralist community was significantly higher, with mobility decisions mostly being taken jointly in the group and after consulting

community leaders such as prophets, and the elders. Consequently, individual interviews with random beneficiaries make sense in the agricultural setting. In this context, our data collection methods included IDIs and FGDs with project beneficiaries only. However, in the pastoralist community, a third form of data collection was needed: key informant interviews with community leaders, prophets, elders, and opinion leaders. Even though they were not direct beneficiaries of the project, their responses were at least as informative as the IDIs with project beneficiaries. This is because members of the pastoralist community share everything and if some of the community members benefit from the project, the whole community benefits in equal proportions. Furthermore, the mobility of the whole community was decided together - influenced by the elders and prophets.

Similarly, the creation of age categories should be adapted to social hierarchies. While participants of mixed age can result in an interesting group discussion in the farmer's region, we noticed during the pre-testing that young participants barely speak during FGDs in the pastoralist community as they respect the elders, leave the speaking for them, and feel obliged to agree with what they are saying.

When scheduling the IDIs and FGDs, local norms, holidays and routines of everyday life should be taken into consideration. Rural areas have market days one or two days per week. As these market days are important for the income of the farmers and pastoralists, interviews during the same time should be avoided.

Points regarding the place of the interview should respect the proximity to the houses of the informants, as well as some degree of privacy, so that onlookers or curious bystanders do not disturb the interview. Depending on the distance between house and location of the FGD, a remuneration to cover transportation cost might make sense. However, this is also best to be coordinated with the field staff.

Verifying Age and Other Characteristics

When selecting the sample size and sample composition, having access to the correct age and other personal characteristics of informants is paramount. In remote areas throughout Sub-Sahara Africa informants often do not know their age (Randall & Coast, 2016). On one occasion, we wanted to interview a 35-year-old man. 10 minutes into the interview we realized - due to his physical appearance but also due to the fact that even his children must be over 35 years old - that he must be at least 70 years old.[1] We therefore faced the dilemma that the beneficiary list that we received from the implementing NGO had inaccurate age information, and also that informants when asked directly about their age gave an incorrect number.

This happened due to three main reasons. First, the individuals in the studied community usually do not know their exact age due to illiteracy. Consequently, age is usually expressed as related to the main political events like shifts of regimes and natural events like famine in the region. Second, even though some could estimate the approximate age range, there is a tendency to report low age numbers. This may be usually related to cherishing younger age and not appearing old since there is a fear of aging (Randall & Coast, 2016). Even though the exact age is difficult to obtain, there is a chance to estimate the closer range if attention was given.

To approach this challenge, we contacted the field staff from the implementing NGO to verify if it would not also be in their interest to update their beneficiary list by trying to obtain more

[1] He said that his children were born during the Derg regime, which was in power in Ethiopia until 1991.

correct information on age. The field staff agreed and updated the list for us in two weeks. In our eyes, the numbers were better now but still not as precise as we would have wished.

During the main data collection, we then adopted the following strategy: when communicating with the randomly selected individuals that we wanted to interview in IDI or FGD to the field staff of the implementing NGO, we asked once again if they know them and if their indicated age is accurate. For every day of data collection, we thought of some back-up individuals who we could interview in case the selected informant is clearly out of the age group we needed. At the beginning of the FGD or IDI, the enumerators verified their age in person. Questions, such as "How many children do you have? In which school grade are your children? When did you finish school? Which regime was in power when you were born? In which regime were your children born?" were extremely helpful to verify the age in person. If a FGD participant was too old or too young, we would be able to quickly react and replace him or her by the back-up person that we thought of before.

A similar verification process is suitable for other characteristics as well – such as education, family size, skills, land size, among others. For our study, it was necessary that the informants we selected received at least two rounds of training for the project. Furthermore, the interview partners from the youth age group should be in the last year of school or should have recently finished school. These requirements were also discussed with the field staff of the NGO who know the town and have further contacted people in the field to double-check the information.

Gender-Specific Considerations

In the rural parts of Africa, gender roles and related cultural perceptions are stronger than in the urban area or in the Global North (Agholor, 2019). Our research took place in remote areas of southern Ethiopia, which required us to pay special attention to the way we collect data from female, as opposed to male informants. Undoubtedly, women in rural areas of Africa have less access to education, opportunities, jobs, and wealth (Baten et al., 2021). A lack of education means a lack of participation in public discourses and formation of social opinions. The power relations in marriage have created further inferiority thoughts among women.

During the fieldwork research, we could clearly sense that female FGD participants and interview partners were often too shy to speak freely before males or in public places. To manage this, we conducted IDI and FGD among women separately. In these cases, the interviewer was female to increase the level of trust and enable female informants to express ideas and feelings. Thanks to the experiences from the pre-testing, we understood the responsibilities that many female informants had in everyday life. Consequently, we scheduled the data collection at a convenient time - in the morning between breakfast and lunch preparation time.

The same goes the other way around: male informants are reluctant to speak to female enumerators. Therefore, to get the acceptance and genuine data we used male data collectors for male and female data collectors for female participants. Building on this experience, we recommend this approach for studies in similar cultural settings. Importantly, we stressed at the beginning of each IDI and FGD that there was no question related to intimate topics, such as reproductive health, sexual behaviour, family planning, political opinions, religion, etc. This helped to build the trust and to relieve the unease - especially among female informants who we observed to be more sensitive and timider.

The presence of staff of the implementing organization, of foreign researchers or data collectors from the urban area during the data collection

In our study area in southern Ethiopia - as in most regions in developing countries - there are a lot of local and international NGOs whose projects aim to support impoverished communities. In our remote research area, many individuals only know "outsiders" coming from the urban area with cars in the context of humanitarian assistance, charity, or development projects. In this context, NGO support and government aid has created a expectation of per diems among different rural areas of the country (Samb et al., 2020). This association of fresh faces with aid is even more pronounced when it comes to (especially white) foreigners. Our objective was not to provide food assistance, nor to implement a new development project. We wanted to conduct academic research and we saw the data quality challenged by the expectation of per diems. Therefore, we tried to address this problem by informing the study participants that there was no payment or support for them when responding to our question. The addition to that, during the actual data collection, staff of the implementing organization and foreign researchers were not present.

During the pre-testing, we discovered the detrimental effect of the presence of both the leading investigator who is European, as well as of the field staff of the implementing NGO. Informants would exaggerate their situation, as they expected that they would more likely qualify for aid if they painted a dire picture of their circumstances. When the local researchers conducted the IDIs and FGDs alone, we experienced the responses to be more genuine and unfiltered. As discussed in previous sections, we observed during the pre-testing how the NGO field staff guided and instructed the informants to respond in a certain way. In a joint meeting with the field staff, as well as with their supervisors in the district office of the NGO, we clarified our research and insisted that the NGO field staff should not be present during the data collection. This joint meeting resolved doubts of the field staff, helped to build trust between researchers and NGO staff, and resulted in the project managers instructing the field staff to cooperate with our academic approach and to not be present during data collection. From that meeting on, our experience was a lot smoother.

Lastly, due to the aid expectation of per diems of many rural populations in Africa (Samb et al., 2020) we experienced it as especially important to only have data collectors who were from the same ethnic group as the informants. Even though the data collectors were from the urban area, they were familiar with the community's native language and culture. Because of this, all data collectors were approaching the community by respecting their culture and norms. These made the study participants feel free to tell what they feel and know.

Direct and Indirect Beneficiaries: Household Heads and Youths

In many development projects, direct beneficiaries are listed as project beneficiaries and are the ones receiving training, cash, or in-kind support (UN OCHA, 2017). Indirect beneficiaries on the other hand are benefited as they have a relationship to direct beneficiaries (*Ibid*.). In our case, household heads were direct beneficiaries and received training regarding agricultural practices, as well as seedlings, from the implementing NGO training. The sons and daughters of the direct beneficiaries were considered indirect beneficiaries, as they depended financially and in terms of food supply on their father or mother who was supported by the project.

Since the migration propensity in our studied area is the highest among adolescent individuals, we decided to include the category of indirect beneficiaries in our research. Therefore, depending on the scope of the research, we suggest considering researching the influence of the studied development project on other indirect individuals, departing from the binary approach of comparing direct beneficiaries with a control group of individuals from the same area who are not in the project. Similarly, as described before, our research in the pastoralist area showed

that everyone in the community was an indirect beneficiary of the project. Since the cohesion of the community is extremely high, food and income are shared and mobility for finding grazing land is always done together in a group format, the relevance of indirect beneficiaries becomes more evident.

Presenting the Study During the Interviews, Managing Expectations of the Informants, and Recording Consent

When the study participants meet the data collectors, there can be a tendency from the informants to seek some immediate benefit that will be given based on their participation. This is common both for IDI and FGD participants (Samb et al., 2020). This happens for several reasons. Firstly, there is some degree of dependence on aid in many rural areas in Africa. Secondly, the implementing organization may pay per-diems to beneficiaries after training sessions or other activities (*Ibid*.). The challenge in such circumstances lies in getting the participants to be motivated to participate in the study without losing their trust and keeping them in the interview process.

It is therefore advisable that the data collectors receive research participants with a welcoming spirit and establish a good rapport before beginning the interview. During the rapport, trust and relationship should be well established which could help both parties to communicate openly and build a better way of understanding. In our case, the data collectors usually began with warm local greetings and raising common issues in society that concern all, like the rain condition and well-being of the family and communities for the case of household heads. When young participants are involved, we usually discuss education conditions, future aspirations, and visions. When the trust is built, it is easier to maintain the motivation of participants in the study and present the overall objective of the study.

After the rapport is established, the aim of the study and ethical issues should be presented. At this time, expectations regarding payments or other benefits should be managed. However, we should not forget to note the potential benefit of the study findings for future program planning and policy implications, even though the main objective is the academic one for now. In such ways, it was fruitful to gain their willingness and motivation without harming their expectations and redirecting it in a proper way. The right to participate or deny participation in the study should be presented clearly.

After the consent is read to the participants, their willingness to participate or deny should be requested by giving them time to think and reflect. There should be a chance to ask questions and clarify doubts. This scenario helps to deepen already established trust between the interviewer and interviewee. After the rapport was established, the data collectors should inform the participants that the IDI or FGD will be recorded for the purpose of the study only so that confidentiality will be maintained. Since some participants might not be familiar with an audio recorder, the device should be explained before starting the recording process.

Lessons Learned from the One-Year-After Data Collection

To understand whether development interventions bring a lasting change to the lives of beneficiaries, it is important to research the evolving opinions regarding the perceived influence of the project over time. To find the same informants for a second IDI or FGD months or even years after the first time, names, addresses or identifying information can be noted.[1]

[1] Importantly, names or identifying information should not be noted on the interview transcript itself to protect the informant's anonymity. Rather, a coding matrix can be used to reconstruct interview transcripts and list of informants. The coding matrix and list of informants should be stores in various places.

Based on our experience, a mixed approach consisting of three types of questions was very fruitful. Namely, 1) asking the same questions like during the first interview and analyze changes in their responses, 2) directly asking how life aspirations and perceived conditions changed since the first interview, 3) providing opinions and statements the informant expressed during the first interview and asking he/she still thinks the same way.

Naturally, numerous informants will have left the research area, especially if a longer time has passed since the first interview. The number of people who migrated from the area is an important finding. Hearing from the informants again a second or a third time is highly valuable for qualitative research with beneficiaries of development interventions. Conducting several rounds of data collection will help to make sure that the research is not only a snapshot in time. It helps us to explore whether a development intervention brings a lasting and sustainable change or rather a short "boost of optimism." Importantly, without several rounds of research with the same informants, we cannot understand the formation of beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the project's influence on conditions and life aspirations.

Conclusion

In both development and migration studies, academic research aiming to understand the effect of policy and development interventions on migration on the local level is scarce. The best research design and methodological approach depends on the aim of the study, as well as on the conditions of the study area. Our encountered challenges and best-practice examples from our 18-month fieldwork research with project beneficiaries in southern Ethiopia raise important points to take into consideration. Our advice is particularly helpful for qualitative research (specifically FGDs and IDIs) in rural areas in Africa, with the objective of exploring the influence of individual development projects. While our focus was the research on the influence of development interventions on migration aspirations of the individual, our field techniques may be useful for other disciplines such as health, psychology, or agriculture. This is because there are numerous development interventions designed to improve the health sector, agricultural production, or gender equality, among others. To explore the changing realities, practices, attitudes, life plans and conditions of project beneficiaries in these fields, academic research in Africa will face similar challenges.

For exploring the mechanisms – i.e., the how and why a development project influences the situation or the behavior of a project beneficiary – IDIs and FGDs are adequate data collection methods. The presented considerations and fieldwork approaches are necessary to address the considerable challenges specific to this kind of research: namely the expectation of per diems of rural populations, conflicting interests of implementing NGOs, specific social hierarchies, cultural norms, and gender dynamics, as well as low literacy rates and difficulty to verify age and other characteristics of research informants.

To conduct IDIs and FGDs with development project beneficiaries several field research advices have been highlighted, mainly revolving around the following six points: 1) the importance of pre-testing, 2) verifying age and other personal characteristics of informants, 3) the effect of the presence of foreign researchers and of the field staff of the NGO at the data collection site, 4) issues related to sampling and communication with NGO staff, 5) logistical issues, such as the suitable place in the field to conduct IDIs and FGDs, as well as other daily responsibilities and time constraints informants had, 6) expectations, vulnerabilities and behavior of individuals from the different age and gender categories. Sharing what we learned

regarding these six points during our fieldwork research hopefully enables other researchers to have considerations and recommendations that we would like to have had before starting our research.

Our fieldwork experience described in the foregoing sections lead us to the following actionable recommendations for research in similar contexts. Firstly, researchers should allocate at least 2-4 days to pre-testing, depending on the magnitude of the research project. During the pre-testing, researchers and data collectors should be sensitized to identify bias, strategic answers by the respondents or conflict of interests by the implementing organizations. Secondly, when planning the research design, the researchers should think of probing questions that can be used to double-check characteristics of research respondents, including age, livelihood, support received from the project, among others. Thirdly, field staff of the implementing organization, the grant manager or donor, or foreign researchers should not be present at the site of data collection. To increase trust and to reduce cultural and language barriers, data collectors should be from the same ethnic group as the respondents. Fourthly, before starting the pre-testing, the researchers should plan several meetings with the implementing organizations to build trust and to receive their unbiased support. The meetings should be first held at the highest level – at the country offices of the donor or grant manager. By having their support, the implementing organization will perceive less risk in facilitating the research. Fifthly, there should be female data collectors to conduct IDIs and FGDs with female respondents. And lastly, the data collectors should be noticeably clear about the independent nature of the academic research and about the guaranteed pseudonymization of the respondents, so that they feel confident to not be monitored by the implementing organization and to speak freely.

In the context of the identified research gap of the migration-development nexus, our pieces of fieldwork advice aim to shift the focus to the peculiarities of conducting academic research with beneficiaries of individual development projects on the local level. It is precisely due to these peculiarities that the influence development has on migration is expected to have its own mechanisms in the case of individual development projects. These mechanisms are quite different to the macro-level effect foreign aid has on international out-migration of the recipient country. Our article intended to share fieldwork advice, paving the way for the needed research. Without any doubt, the quality of needed research improves if several rounds of research are conducted. Our reflections hopefully help other scholars to research the perceived influence of development interventions over time.

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Niklas Mayer and Tadele Dana Darebo were the lead researchers. All authors contributed chapters to this article. Niklas Mayer compiled the different chapters and streamlined them.

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