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Striving for the impossible?

Participatory Research Strategies among
Clandestine Populations
(an East African case study)

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Research project (2001-2)

- Coping and networking strategies of self-settled urban refugees
 - From D.R.Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, fled in 1990s
 - Not in camps, to Dar es Salaam (Tanzania)
 - Majority with illegal status -> clandestine population
- Combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in order to
 - Obtain compatibility and consistency of data
 - Do comparative analyses across nationality, gender and age

Data collection tools

○ Survey questionnaire

- In collaboration with Congolese and Rwandese research assistants
- Soliciting personal information & network member information
- Drafted, translated, back-translated and tested in pilot

○ Semi structured interviews

- On basis of preliminary analysis of survey results
- Adapted, following first exchanges from researcher's interests to refugees' interests
- Included aid agencies and government institutions

Sampling & selecting

○ Stratified sample

- Preset quota for gender, nationality and age
- Snowball sampling because “hidden” population
- Increasing representativity of sample
 - through multiple entries into community
 - maximum 2 network members of each respondent

○ Selection criteria

- Transient population -> criteria on length of stay in asylum country
- Migration motivation (economic versus political)

Locating participants

- Living clandestinely -> scattered across metropolis of 3 million inhabitants
- Role of recruiters indispensable to locate interviewees
- Necessary to establish trust relationships
 - Not only for data collection
 - Yet also for chain referral
- Must guarantee confidentiality of identity and contact information
 - Implication for social network data

Meeting strategies

Clandestine & scattered across the city

- First contact via recruiters (young men Co + Bu)
- Second meeting on informants' conditions
- Congolese contacts were easy
 - Meeting in public spaces in neighborhood
 - In people's homes
- Burundi men and women hiding from neighbors
 - Meeting outside of the neighborhood
 - Huge efforts to pretend to be Tanzanian
- Rwandans hiding from Arusha tribunal
 - 1994 Genocide

Gender & politics

- Female gender an advantage in a politically laden situation
 - Male aid workers (Fr & Be) had reportedly had problems with refugees in camps
 - Refugees acknowledged preference for women interviewers (*“even though they may also be spies”*)
 - According to one academic, researcher had not been approached by Tanzanian secret police for talking to refugees, because *“you are just a woman”*
- Survey data also showed women are better at networking in political refugee situation

Who is researcher ?

- Several discourses circulating on who researcher “really” is:
 - “cannot be a poor student, how can she afford to come here and walk around just talking not working?”
 - *“must be an agent from UNHCR to find where are the refugees, or from an NGO looking for a project with refugees”*
 - Or *“an agent from the Arusha tribunal to locate genocidaires from Rwanda and denounce them”*

Participants' actions

- Playing on sympathy and pity
 - *group of Congolese women in worst clothes, man in computer business, female house owner/ Japan business*
- Showing professional approach
 - *group of Burundi women in professional attire, Burundi politicians with message to Belgian government)*
- Hidden but not silent
 - *Rwandan man wanting to be heard, not seen (many remained unheard and unseen)*

Conclusion

- Added vulnerability of hidden population because of political complexity → no joint action possible
- Showed resilience and strategies to cope with vulnerable situation by individual actions and discourses
- Succeeded in lobbying for their solution to plight, i.e. working permit instead of material assistance from aid organizations