African Affairs Advance Access published December 29, 2015

*African Affairs*, 1–16 doi: 10.1093/afraf/adv067
© The Author 2015. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of Royal African Society. All rights reserved

RESEARCH NOTE

# MISTAKES, CRISES, AND RESEARCH INDEPENDENCE: THE PERILS OF FIELDWORK AS A FORM OF EVIDENCE

CHRISTOPHER CRAMER, DEBORAH JOHNSTON, CARLOS OYA, AND JOHN SENDER*

**ABSTRACT**

Drawing on examples from rural Ethiopia and Uganda, this research note highlights some of the difficulties experienced in fieldwork. These difficulties do not justify the reluctance of increasingly risk-averse universities and funders to support independent fieldwork in Africa, but they do show that the rationale for research and the features of its design can provoke animosity and tensions. They also show that our own failure on occasion to appreciate local political dynamics made the situation more difficult. Challenges and threats came not only from local political forces but also from multinational companies and Fairtrade organizations uncomfortable with our findings and with fully independent research. The research note argues that the details of our experience have a practical value for other researchers, and that at least some of them should be treated as substantive forms of evidence and insight, rather than simply as threats or failures. We conclude that some crude best-practice norms and pressures on academics to form partnerships to conduct policy-relevant work may undermine the potential for truly independent and intensive field research. However, crises should not necessarily be seen as an unwelcome interruption to smooth processes of research; they can illuminate the context and power relations that the research is trying to understand.

IN THE COURSE OF FIELDWORK IN LOW-INCOME COUNTRIES there is considerable scope for misunderstanding and tension. As Helen Epstein argued in her account of the rapid transmission of Ebola in Monrovia during 2014, there is plenty of scope for rumour to spread among African populations to the effect that foreigners, perhaps in cahoots with local politicians, are

*Christopher Cramer (cc10@soas.ac.uk) is Professor of the Political Economy of Development, Deborah Johnston (dj3@soas.ac.uk) is Reader in Development Economics, Carlos Oya (co2@soas.ac.uk) is Reader in the Political Economy of Development, and John Sender (john.sender@gmail.com) is Professor Emeritus of Economics, all at SOAS, University of London.



Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

bringing trouble.[1] To these factors, we must add the significance of political interest in certain research activities. Following Jan Breman, we agree that there are 'extreme difficulties associated with research which takes subordinate classes as its focus. When introductions take place via the locally powerful, such research faces formidable obstacles: both because of the mistrust of the poor and the opposition of dominant classes.'[2]

Despite this, there is still too little exploration in the writing up of research of the mistakes, crises, and threats faced by researchers. This research note draws on several years of fieldwork for the project on Fairtrade, Employment and Poverty Reduction in Ethiopia and Uganda (FTEPR) to discuss some of the difficult experiences of the authors.[3] The challenges and threats we faced came from local political forces and from multinational companies keen to discipline labour. We also encountered hostility from Fairtrade organizations uncomfortable with our findings and uneasy with fully independent research. The article argues that this experience may have a practical value for other researchers and that it should be treated as a substantive form of evidence and insight, rather than simply as 'threats' or failure.

Considering the potential threats posed by and to research, and how they can be overcome, is particularly significant given the growing 'research-related risk aversion within UK universities. The external world has become a challenging environment, that is, a place that aid workers, or researchers for that matter, no longer feel safe in.'[4] Obtaining 'university agreement for Africa-based research, for example, is increasingly problematic'.[5] Instead, 'Internaut' researchers trawl satellite images and web postings, resulting in a loss of ground truth.

If we are to prevent this trend from undermining original data collection in Africa, it will be important to assess fully the multifaceted risks of fieldwork, and how they can be managed. We begin with an account of how

1. Helen Epstein, 'Ebola in Liberia: an epidemic of rumours', *New York Review of Books*, 18 December 2014. See also Luise White, 'Social construction and social consequences: rumours and evidence', in Gary Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath (eds), *Rumor mills: The social impact of rumor and legend* (Transaction Publishers, London, 2005), pp. 241–54. And on Mbeki's critiques of Western biomedical approaches to HIV/AIDS see Nathan Geffen and Edwin Cameron, 'The deadly hand of denial: Governance and politically-instigated AIDS denialism in South Africa' (Centre for Social Science Research, Working Paper 257, Johannesburg, 2009), <http://www.cssr.uct.ac.za/sites/cssr.uct.ac.za/files/pubs/WP257.pdf> (30 October 2015).

2. Jan Breman, 'Between accumulation and immiseration: the partiality of fieldwork in rural India', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13 (1), pp. 5–36, p. 5.

3. Christopher Cramer, Deborah Johnston, Bernd Mueller, Carlos Oya, and John Sender, 'Fairtrade, Employment and Poverty Reduction in Ethiopia and Uganda', May 2014, <http://ftepr.org/publications> (30 October 2015).

4. Mark Duffield, 'From immersion to simulation: Remote methodologies and the decline of area studies', *Review of African Political Economy* 41, Supplement 1 (1990) pp. S75–94, p. S77

5. *Ibid*. p. S86.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

researchers were threatened in a flower-growing town in Ethiopia. We then move on to describe and discuss a frightening incident in rural Uganda, where our co-researchers narrowly escaped a homicidal attack. Next we analyse the pitfalls in rural Ethiopia of inadequate political awareness in research design, before moving on to discuss the hostility from Fairtrade organizations and some of the more widespread challenges to the pursuit of independent research. We argue that, at worst, the institutionalization of best-practice norms and the pressure for academics to form partnerships to conduct policy-relevant work may undermine the potential for truly independent and intensive field research.

*The politics of research methods in a company town*

The local elite does not always welcome outsiders picking over the details of social relations and economic activities in their domain. Whatever formal research clearance may have been secured (and in our case we had an abundance of formal letters of introduction and official authorization forms), locally dominant individuals and organizations can restrict research "access" in a variety of ways. Fieldwork then becomes embroiled in the political economy it is trying to understand. When research becomes part of the tussle of interests, ideas, and institutions, clearly this may constrain research and shape findings, but it may also reveal that local political economy in sharper contrast. Conflictual encounters in the course of fieldwork may reveal the complexities of what otherwise may at a distance simply look like a developmental deal between states (foreign and domestic) and private business intended to generate jobs, foreign exchange, and fiscal revenue. For example, Jonathan Parry found that the imprisonment of his collaborator in Bihar, India, and the ways that a UK research institution became drawn into the politics of struggles between the state and Naxalite movements, sharpened his understanding of the boundaries of political conflict and complicated his own appreciation of relationships between research and normative judgement.[6]

Two episodes in particular in our research on the FTEPR project improved our understanding of the political economy of states and of the role of the private sector. After three years of fieldwork, the tables were turned on our research team in Ziway, Ethiopia. Following many days spent interviewing wage labourers who lived in one of the main centres of flower production in Ethiopia, six of us, three UK researchers and three Ethiopians, were called to the tiny reception area of the lodge where we

6. Jonathan Parry, 'The anthropologist's assistant (or the assistant's anthropologist?): The story of a disturbing episode', *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 72 (2015), pp. 112–27.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

were staying. Waiting for us was an intimidating group of seven men who introduced themselves as state officials of the *woreda* – the district. Some were security officials, some we could not identify. The apparent leader of the group, a quite imposing figure, claimed to work as Public Relations officer for the *woreda*. It was quickly obvious that it was not a friendly visit, as the team was subjected to a lengthy and uncomfortable interview and given a lecture, under duress, on appropriate research methodology.

The men subjected us to insistent questioning about what we were doing. Why were we interested in wage employment? Did we have authority to do this research? What questions were we asking people? How had we chosen the interviewees? We showed all of the seven increasingly aggressive men various official letters of approval for the FTEPR project, including letters from federal and state levels of government. The letters failed to impress the group. We made phone calls to contacts in Addis Ababa, but nothing seemed to help.

We had, much earlier in the research project, visited the *woreda* offices to explain what we were doing, to show officials the letters of introduction and support for our work that we had from federal and regional state levels of government, and to obtain city maps. We had also managed to meet the Dutch owner of Sher Roses, the company that dominated flower production and logistics in Ziway. He appeared to have no interest whatsoever in our research (or, indeed, in Fairtrade). But the posse of officials who held us at the lodge now, informally but firmly, were increasingly insistent that we had not followed correct procedures.

One of the things that vexed them was the focus group that the research team had arranged, in a meeting room at the lodge, the evening before. Focus groups were designed specifically to discuss women's experiences of sexual harassment and exploitation, a sensitive theme that had cropped up in some questionnaire responses and in other less formal interviews in several research sites in Ethiopia. And the focus group in Ziway had come to the attention, somehow, of the men who were interrogating us.

Following recommendations on research ethics, we had printed a consent form for participants in the focus groups. The female researchers, one from the UK and one from Ethiopia, had made it clear that the women who had agreed to take part in the discussion had no obligation to stay or to sign the form, that their decisions and opinions would be respected by the research team, and that any comments they made would remain unattributable to named individuals.

The leader of the men at the lodge and the others harangued us about this consent form, alleging that we had forced women to sign a document that they had no way of understanding, and that meant they were not anonymous. In fact, a copy of the consent form was passed around at the start of the focus group; its contents were read out and discussed carefully. The

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

protection of the women's anonymity in any reports on the research was guaranteed.

The interrogation in the lodge reception lasted nearly two hours. The leader of the *woreda* team spoke some English. At one point he raised his voice and insisted, angrily, on how bad our research methodology was. What we had been doing was wrong. If you are interested in employment issues, he said, you must do it a different way. First, you should ask to meet the owner of the firm. You should explain to him what you are interested in and that you want to interview some workers. If he approves, he will select some workers for you and bring them to the head office, where you will be able to interview them. This is how you should do it, not wandering about the town talking to people outside their workplace without first seeking the permission of the firm's management and owner.

The officials demanded our passports. We refused. They were increasingly angry. After a couple of hours, the officials took the Ethiopian researchers into town to the police station and confiscated their identity papers. The UK researchers hired transport to take them to the police station and found a dingy room divided in two by a glass panel. On the other side of the glass the Ethiopian researchers were at a table surrounded by four or five police or security people, all sat in chairs except the young, better-dressed "security agent", who sat on the table and aggressively leaned in towards them, especially close to the female researcher. We waited in a room next door. The local public relations chief and his colleague came in and were furious that we were witnessing proceedings in the station. 'You do not know our culture. In our culture, you cannot come and stay here, you must go out.' We left, but waited outside the police station. The Ethiopian researchers were allowed to leave after a few more hours but their identity papers were kept overnight. We all went back the next morning to the police station and, after arguing for several more hours, managed to recover the identity papers and to persuade the local officials to let us all leave.

Some months later we discovered by chance that the leader of this group, who had told us he was a *woreda* official, was employed by Sher Roses.[7] Some form of blurring between local state and the vertically integrated multinational corporation was not wholly surprising in Ziway, which had fast become a kind of company town.[8] Ziway is dominated by and has been reshaped by the huge stretch of greenhouses at the southern edge of town, in which the production of roses for export has created many thousands of

7. See, for example, Kaleab Minda Fortune, 'Ethiopia: faltering flower fortunes', 12 January 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201401140998.html> (30 October 2015).
8. EHPEA, 'Voice of EHPEA Weekly Newsletter, Issue 1, No. 6', 10 January 2014, <www.ehpea.org/files/downloads/e_newsletter/e_newsletter_issue1_no6.pdf> (1 November 2015).

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

jobs directly and, through the induced demands of a largely new workforce, a large number of indirect jobs. Agri-Sher, and its local manifestation, Sher Roses, has also built a school and a hospital in Ziway. Ziway is one of the main sites of the rapid expansion of flower production in Ethiopia. The sector is associated in many people's minds directly with the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi.

Meles's government supported the local growers association and negotiated with foreign investors such as Sher and also with the Dutch government, who provided financial and technical support. The Ethiopian government also facilitated low-cost land leases for investors and cheap loans through the Development Bank of Ethiopia. The government takes credit for promoting what has come to be regarded, with considerable justification, as one of the outstanding successes of Ethiopia's impressive growth.[9] There are, however, still disputes about floriculture, including complaints about its environmental impact and compensation for displaced families.

Beyond its interest for the process of research, this episode helped reveal the tentacles of corporate influence in a town dramatically transformed by recent investments in flower production. What we experienced at the hands of local administrators – and, it turns out, a company employee – was arguably just one part of the broader story of efforts to create and control a new labour regime, with contradictory welfare effects. For creating new agro-industrial production on this scale involves more than subsidized land and loans, an efficient state-run airline, cold-storage facilities at the airport, and favourable agro-climatic conditions.

Qualitative interviews revealed a range of mechanisms through which agribusiness tries to press people into behaving as disciplined members of a regular workforce. Marx's 'protracted civil war over the length of the working day' is being fought out in globalized flower-producing farms in places like Ziway.[10] We found that in flower-producing areas in Ethiopia unpaid overtime is routinely exacted; that essential protective clothing for chemical sprayers is only distributed when Corporate Social Responsibility auditors are scheduled to visit; and that workers are punished for taking short breaks from work in the oppressive heat and humidity of the greenhouses.[11]

9. Arkebe Oqubay, *Made in Africa: Industrial policy in Ethiopia* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015).

10. Karl Marx, *Capital* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1975), Vol. 1, Ch. 10.

11. It is not only newly established exporters of agricultural commodities from Africa who are engaged in coercive struggles to control workers' time. The BBC's exposure of involuntary, 16-hour working days in factories producing for Apple is just one example among many of abuse in a more mature manufacturing sector. See, for example, Richard Bilton, 'Apple "failing to protect Chinese workers"', BBC News, 18 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-30532463> (1 November 2015).

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

People are trained into committing to routines, and as workers they must be integrated into a highly disciplined and time-sensitive production process. Inside the greenhouses, roses grow in digital alternation: long neat beds of rose stems switching with clean rows of earth inside huge humid hangers, the repetition broken only by patches of ragged clothing hung along the plastic walls.

The more obviously brutal side to labour relations on the flower farms may be fading – though sexual harassment of very young women continues to be commonplace. But, in a context of excess labour supply, the entire productive endeavour is underpinned by non-economic coercion – the force of the police and local administrators, who are required to ensure undisturbed conditions of competitive production.[12] At the same time, it is important to note some contradictory (and beneficial) effects of the new capitalist social relations of production in Ethiopian flower production: providing a huge increase in employment for people often desperate for access to jobs; making a significant contribution to addressing Ethiopia's foreign exchange constraint; and generating learning-by-doing among policy makers in Ethiopia as well as among entrepreneurs.[13] The contradictions are even more acute when it is acknowledged that FTEPR research evidence suggests that employment on the very same flower farms in Ziway is characterized by significantly better working conditions and higher pay than on most other Ethiopian flower farms.

The lesson in research methods handed out to us at the police station bore a remarkable likeness to methods too often used by researchers. On the rare occasions when wageworkers are included in Fairtrade research, for example, information is usually collected from lists of wageworkers provided, and sometimes selected, by employers or by officially sanctioned worker representatives.[14] These lists may well be censored and are certainly unlikely to contain all casual workers, let alone recently dismissed or disgruntled workers. The other main source is focus groups, with group

12. See Stathis Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro, and Tarek Masoud, *Order, conflict, and violence* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008).

13. Arkebe Oqubay, 'Made in Africa'.

14. Angus Lyall, 'Assessing the impacts of Fairtrade on worker-defined forms of empowerment on Ecuadorian flower plantations', commissioned by Fairtrade International and Max Havelaar-Foundation (Switzerland, (2014); Sarah Klier and Sonja Possinger, 'Final report, Fairtrade Impact Study: Assessing the impact of Fairtrade on poverty reduction through rural development' (Centre for Evaluation, CEval, Saarland University, Saarbruecken, 2012), p. 6; Stephanie Barrientos and Sally Smith, 'The ETI code of labour practice: Do workers really benefit?', (Independent report commissioned by ETI, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 2006), p. 4; Ruard Ruben, Ricardo Fort, and Guillermo Zuniga, 'Fair Trade programme evaluation: Impact assessment of Fair Trade programs for coffee and bananas in Peru, Costa Rica and Ghana' (Centre for International Development Issues, Radboud University, Nijmegen, 2008), p. 23; M. Omosa, M. Kimani, and R. Njiru, 'The social impact of codes of practice in the cut flower industry in Kenya' (report, Natural Resources Institute and DfID, London, 2006), p. 7.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

membership guided by employers' advice, or over-representing the leaders of the permanent workforce, rather than large numbers of illiterate casual (female) wageworkers. No convincing rationale for the selection of members of these focus groups is provided.[15] The unrepresentative workers who appear on these lists or in these focus groups are, all too frequently, interviewed on their employer's premises.[16] But workers who are not interviewed in private and with credible assurances of confidentiality may go to great lengths to avoid the risk of being seen to offend dominant classes.[17]

There is also a second dimension to this experience that bears reflection. It has become common for social science researchers to consider their 'positionality',[18] to think through and write a great deal about the analytical implications of the differences (or, less often, similarities) between themselves and their research subjects, of what are often relations of power between observer and observed.[19] The usual, understandable refrain is that of the subaltern position to which a researcher consigns an interviewee, especially a poor interviewee, in a developing country. The researcher does this by dint of an asymmetry of knowledge and wealth, an asymmetry often amplified by racial difference.[20] But it is salutary, especially for those social science imperialists trained as economists, to reflect on a version of what research subjects may experience.

15. Barry Pound and Alexander Phiri, 'Longitudinal impact assessment study of Fairtrade certified tea producers and workers in Malawi' (Natural Resources Institute and Fairtrade Foundation, London, 2009); Ana Maria Romero González, 'Estudio sobre la cadena de valor del café ugandés de comercio justo: análisis de la cadena de valor del café robusta de Uganda de comercio justo y su impacto en los medios de vida de los productores Ugandeses' (Report, Intermón Oxfam, September 2010); Rachel Wilshaw, 'Exploring the links between international business and poverty reduction: Bouquets and beans from Kenya' (Report, Oxfam, 2013), <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/bouquets-and-beans-kenya> (30 October 2015).

16. Joachim Ewert, Adrienne Martin, and Valerie Nelson, 'Assessment of the social impact of adoption of codes of practice in the South African wine industry' (Report, Natural Resources Institute and DfID, Washington, DC, 2005), pp. 22–3. Lyall, 'Assessing the impacts'.

17. In Nicaragua, for example, according to those workers interviewed outside cooperative coffee processing mills, 'visitors often come to the mill to ask about their working conditions, but they are afraid to say anything negative for fear of losing their job'. Joni Valkila and Anja Nygren, 'Impacts of Fair Trade certification on farmers, cooperatives and laborers in Nicaragua', *Agriculture and Human Values* 27, 3 (2010), pp. 321–33, p. 326, published online May 2009; see also Lyall, 'Assessing the impacts', p. 10.

18. See, for example, Gillian Rose, 'Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics', *Progress in Human Geography* 21, 3 (1997), pp. 305–20.

19. One anthropologist perceptively notes that 'Scholarly self-reflection often degenerates into narcissistic celebrations of privilege.' Philippe Bourgeois, *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003), p. 14.

20. One example of the more complex power relations in play is van Onselen's discussion of how a sharecropper whose biography he wrote pressed him for a loan, knowing full well how much van Onselen needed him to talk: Charles van Onselen, 'The reconstruction of a rural life from oral testimony: critical notes on the methodology employed in the study of a black South African sharecropper', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 20, 3 (1993), pp. 494–514, p. 508.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

The local officials were invoking state power (regional and local) and – in ways we did not fully appreciate at the time – multinational corporate power too. We were the interviewees. We were not formally detained or arrested – though the Ethiopian researchers did have their identity papers confiscated – but we could not have chosen just to walk out of the lobby of the lodge. We felt compelled to explain our actions and answer the barrage of questions put to us. We did not really know what the purpose of all this was; we were unnerved.[21] It is not a great stretch to see parallels of discomfort between this bizarre interview and the protracted interviews at the heart of much development research. It may even be a useful lesson for researchers conducting fieldwork to experience a few moments of anxiety and have the tables of the interview turned from time to time.

*Dangerous research liaisons: fear and rumour in the field*

There were other ways that FTEPR research provoked suspicion and even hostility both within Ethiopia and Uganda and internationally. The experiences discussed here may contribute to something of an emerging literature on research methods, their entanglement in social relations and political economies being studied, and the implications for findings and indeed for the ethics of research.[22]

The most serious incident in Uganda took place at a research site near a large-scale coffee plantation that has been the subject of international NGO criticism and protracted NGO-financed litigation.[23] FTEPR researchers were labelled 'land grabbers' by a local campaigning political figure (and gatekeeper) who has been internationally promoted as a 'community leader' by NGOs.[24] We tried hard to meet this man, who had received so much support from ActionAid and FIAN, to explain our research objectives; but he decided that FTEPR was a stooge of the coffee plantation

21. Anyone familiar with the publications of Human Rights Watch on Ethiopia would be concerned: 'Arbitrary detention and ill-treatment in detention continues to be a major problem. … Mistreated detainees have little recourse in the courts and there is no regular access to prisons and detention centres by independent investigators.' Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014* (Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 2014), <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/ethiopia> (30 October 2015), pp. 120–1.

22. Breman is one earlier contributor: see Breman, 'Between accumulation and immiseration'. For one example of intense conflict over the publication of research findings involving a funding agency – DfID – see David Mosse, 'Anti-social anthropology? Objectivity, objection, and the ethnography of public policy and professional communities', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (2006), pp. 935–56.

23. FIAN, 'Land grabbing in Uganda: Evictions for foreign investment in coffee in Mubende', July 2012, <http://fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/2012.07_Land_grabbing_in_Uganda_Fact_sheet_Mubende.pdf> (30 October 2015).

24. Neuman Kaffee Gruppe, 'Chronology of events, Kaweri Coffee Plantation – 2000 to 2013 – [Germany/Uganda]', <http://business-humanrights.org/it/node/75475> (1 November 2015).

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

owners and began to use the local radio to stoke hostility towards the research team. Meanwhile, our team leader often heard from local residents that the head of the local administration denied any knowledge of our project, despite the fact that he attended a series of meetings intended to gain his approval for our research. This reached a climax when researchers were warned of a credible and imminent threat to their lives. Some people had bought fuel, were working themselves up into an aggressive fury by drinking alcohol, and were about to force the FTEPR team into a car and set fire to it. A man that the team leader had recently befriended in the area rushed to him to tell him that he had bumped into the group while they were drinking and discussing their plan. As the research team leader had himself seen petrol being purchased and some heavy drinking, he immediately took our enumerators to the nearest police post to write a statement; he also contacted the district police commander. It turned out that a prominent Kampala-based pastor had only recently been burned alive in his car in the same sub-county, just a couple of villages away, in another case related to contested land.

In Ethiopia, there were also some dangerous moments. For example, early in the fieldwork FTEPR enumerators were locked up by local police. It took some persuasive negotiation by the research supervisor, drawing on his own political experiences and knowledge of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front officials, to get them released.[25] Political suspicions had been unwittingly inflamed by FTEPR researchers' choice of battery-powered torches as a gift to thank respondents for taking the time to answer the survey questionnaire. If the senior researchers had more detailed knowledge of the local context, they would not have chosen this particular gift: the torch turned out to be the symbol of a locally active and banned opposition organization, and the fieldwork was under way shortly before elections.

In the previous examples, the very characteristics of the research made its politicization in one way or another inevitable. In this case, by contrast, it was researchers' inadequate attention to the iconography of local politics that caused our difficulties. Based on these experiences, we would like to make a broader point by, first, reviving Breman's emphasis on the 'mistrust of the poor and the opposition of dominant classes' as formidable obstacles in the way of independent intensive field research.[26] Research design needs to accommodate this likelihood rather than assuming friction-free access to research subjects via supportive gatekeepers, or rather than relying on

25. The political skills and connections of research assistants are rarely discussed in academic publications. For a noticeable exception see Townsend Middleton and Jason Cons, 'Coming to terms: Reinserting research assistants into ethnography's past and present', *Ethnography* 15, 3 (2014), pp. 279–90.
26. Jan Breman, 'Between accumulation and immiseration', p. 5.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

absurd notions of homogeneous 'communities'. Second, the episodes recounted here suggest that all those interested in field research, regardless of the topic, would benefit from engaging with the burgeoning literature on the methodological challenges of research in contexts affected by violence.[27] Because research is not about violence does not mean that physical risks to researchers and research interviewees will not arise from the interaction between research and local political economies.

*The challenges of doing independent research*

These and other fraught encounters were not predicted: they threatened the research itself and, despite careful training and research and ethical protocols, on occasion they threatened junior researchers' safety. To some extent this was a direct consequence of the fact that FTEPR research was independent and that researchers went to lengths to protect that independence, even though it made the work more risky and complicated.

While the independence of academic research is often taken for granted, there are two reasons to focus on its implications here. First, there is not a great deal published on what being fully independent might mean, and what its implications for the conduct of fieldwork and the findings generated might be. Second, it may be increasingly difficult to protect this independence in a world of constrained funding, of risk aversion, and of rising pressure on academics to find ways of securing a 'pathway to impact', as the bureaucratic literature around the UK Research Assessment Framework has it.[28] It is common for research agendas to be shaped by collaboration with research partners or local institutions offering access; such links may not be just a mechanism for a 'pathway to impact' but also a precondition for being able to carry out research. Whether or not researchers are actually independent of governments (or NGOs or other organizations), they often struggle to convince the respondents of their independence. Meanwhile, there are other sources of compromised research independence, such as working with sample frames and population lists provided by local authorities, NGOs, or employers. Yet research independence is never total. Mosse's comment about anthropological knowledge production extends beyond anthropology: to whit, that it 'is embedded in sets of social relationships: among them relationships between fieldworkers and those they

27. Christopher Cramer, Laura Hammond, and Johan Pottier (eds), *Researching violence in Africa: Methodological and ethical challenges* (Brill, Leiden, 2011); Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson and Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'Transparency in intensive research on violence: ethical dilemmas and unforeseen consequences', *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 13, 1 (2015), pp. 22–7.
28. For example, RCUK, 'Review of pathways to impact', 2014, <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/innovation/impacts/> (30 October 2015).

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

research, between professional colleagues and collaborators, between supervisors and research students'.[29]

The independence of FTEPR research took two particular forms. First, it was not commissioned by Fairtrade organizations and it eschewed "guidance" by people working for Fairtrade. This marks it out from work such as the CEval evaluation that Fairtrade International refers to as 'independent research' but that was in fact commissioned by Transfair Germany and the Max Havelaar Foundation Switzerland.[30] It also marks FTEPR research out from other research, for example that of the Natural Resources Institute, whose case selection and methodology were 'given' by the Fairtrade Foundation:[31] the Natural Resources Institute is described by the Fairtrade Foundation as its 'research partner', though in another Fairtrade report it is referred to as a provider of 'independent research'.[32]

Second, FTEPR research avoided the common recourse to off-the-peg sample frames. Rather than take convenient short cuts by asking employers for lists of their workers or asking local government officials for the official list of the "heads" of households, this project constructed its own, new sample frames through area-based sampling using handheld computers with GPS technology. Again, although this choice imposed some financial costs on the research, these are outweighed by the analytical advantages of working with an unbiased sampling frame.[33] Undoubtedly, it would have been quicker and cheaper to work with existing official lists and to interview workers at their place of work. However, the insights gained from insistence on an independent approach to research yielded new results concerning the spread of the benefits claimed by Fairtrade.

29. David Mosse, 'Misunderstood, misrepresented, and contested? Anthropological knowledge production in question', *Focaal* 72 (2015), pp. 128–37. For a rare discussion of the relationship between researchers and research assistants, see Kevin Deane and Sara Stevano, 'Towards a political economy of the use of research assistants: reflections from fieldwork in Tanzania and Mozambique', *Qualitative Research*, 24 March 2015.

30. Fairtrade International, 'Monitoring the scope and benefits of Fairtrade, Fourth Edition' (Fairtrade International, London, 2012).

31. Valerie Nelson and Sally Smith, 'Fairtrade cotton: assessing impact in Mali, Senegal, Cameroon and India (NRI, University of Greenwich, 2011), p. 28.

32. Fairtrade International, 'Monitoring the scope' (Natural Resources Institute and Fairtrade Foundation, London, March 2013).

33. Christopher Cramer, Deborah Johnston, Bernd Mueller, Carlos Oya, and John Sender, 'How to do (and how not to do) fieldwork on Fairtrade and rural poverty', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 35, 1 (2014), pp. 170–85. See also Christopher Barrett and Jeffrey Cason, O*verseas research: A practical guide*, second edition (London, Routledge, 2010), pp. 106–7, for examples of the challenges encountered by researchers trying to build reliable sampling frames from 'official' registers and lists, and how such 'sampling frames' are the outcome of complicated combinations of political and logistical biases. On unanticipated costs of using GPS-based sampling, see Kristen Himelein, Stephanie Eckman, and Siobhan Murray, 'The use of random geographic cluster sampling to survey pastoralists', Policy Research Working Paper No. 6589 (World Bank, Washington, DC, 2013), <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/1813-9450-6589> (30 October 2015).

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

The struggle to maintain research independence carried over into the dissemination of our findings. This is another area of rising significance for academics, given the strong institutional encouragement to disseminate broadly rather than merely to publish in peer-reviewed journals. We welcomed critical responses and methodological questions when presenting preliminary findings at dissemination events. However, we were struck by the vehemence of a few members of the audience who were paid to represent the Fairtrade Foundation and Fairtrade International. In particular, they pressed on us the unjustified expectation that FTEPR researchers should share data with them *before* disseminating more widely and should present them with our dissemination plan.[34] They also insisted – when evidence of child labour in Fairtrade certified production was presented – that FTEPR researchers divulge the names and addresses of those (children and their employers) involved, against the anonymity requirements of the research ethics approved by our university and the project funders.[35]

Later, Fairtrade hostility intensified, ranging from explicit legal threats to flailing tweets accusing FTEPR of political bias and bad science. These were unsettling but clearly not as serious as the threats made to fieldworkers in Ethiopia and Uganda. It was noted above that Fairtrade organizations have described as 'independent' research that they have commissioned themselves and by researchers they refer to as 'research partners'.[36] They do appear to find it difficult to deal with truly independent research. Before the threats and social media criticism, the Fairtrade Foundation had contacted our funders (DfID) in an attempt to delay the publication of our findings, and had issued a public statement (widely reported in the press) that seriously misrepresented FTEPR research.[37] These misrepresentations, diverting

34. ISEAL, 'ISEAL conference 2013: impacts and innovation', 11–13 June 2013, <http://www.isealalliance.org/about-us/annual-conference/2013-conference> (30 October 2015).

35. In contrast, when the Fair Labour Association reported child labour in the Nestle 'chain', Nestlé immediately agreed to a published 'corrective action plan'. Fair Labour Association, 'Independent External Monitoring of Nestle's Cocoa Supply Chain in Ivory Coast – 2014–2015' (FLA, Washington, DC, 2015), <http://www.fairlabor.org/affiliate/nestle> (30 October 2015).

36. Researchers on Fairtrade have been exhorted to work closely with Fairtrade to 'maximise the usefulness of studies for all stakeholders'. Sally Smith, 'Understanding the impact of Fairtrade: Presentation summary' (Max Havelaar Netherlands, Fairtrade Impact Day, 18 April 2013), <http://www.shared-interest.com/media/61069/impact_studies_-_summary_sally_smith_april2013.pdf> (30 October 2015), p. 2. These exhortations create comfortable expectations of what constitutes good research practice. If consultants advocate using a methodology 'designed to focus on positive outcomes and identifying the underlying factors for success, in line with an "appreciative inquiry" approach', then they are probably more likely to be commissioned to evaluate Fairtrade activities. Elaine Jones, Sally Smith, and Carol Wills, 'Women producers and the benefits of collective forms of enterprise', *Gender and Development* 20, 1 (2009), pp. 13–32, p. 16.

37. The episode in part echoes Mosse's accounts of how former colleagues in a development project in India sought to disrupt publication of his anthropological account of the project. David Mosse, 'Anti-social anthropology?'.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

attention from the substance of the report, continued – for example – with the CEO of Fairtrade making absurdly misleading statements to the press.[38] With growing emphasis on broad dissemination and the impact of research, academics are likely to face more pressures of this kind.

A final dimension of the challenge of independent research involved the training and selection of research assistants and enumerators, and the issue of working with local partner organizations. It is widely recommended that researchers should build fieldwork capacity in institutions based in poor countries. But many forms of compromise to research independence may have to be made when researchers are compelled by their funders to tick 'capacity building' boxes when planning fieldwork. For example, it is common practice to claim to work closely with one of the small number of normally favoured 'local partner' organizations in order to satisfy donors' demands for capacity building. When the more experienced 'go-to' partners were approached by FTEPR in Uganda and Ethiopia, they showed no enthusiasm at all for difficult and time-consuming rural fieldwork; in Uganda, one quite well-known economic research organization seemed more interested in earning a substantial rent or in taking a cut from an event organizer/caterer in return for hosting over-elaborate FTEPR 'workshops' in the capital city.

FTEPR invested heavily in the search for, and training and selection of, excellent individual researchers who led teams of enumerators – who also went through lengthy training and selection courses, followed by extensive piloting and on-the-job training, and by further re-training whenever a new phase of fieldwork started. Academics with many decades of experience in rural fieldwork not only designed the training programmes, but also participated directly by leading training sessions, organizing practice and pilots, and selecting enumerators.

This type of selection through training and piloting is made more difficult by having to work through and beyond the game of the donor-funded project training session – with its inflated per diems, travelling expenses, and refreshments.[39] FTEPR did succeed, however, in investing in the longer-term formal education of some of its most effective research assistants.[40] Again, promoting high-quality research may conflict with bureaucratic

38. James Ashton, 'When price is all that matters, can Lidl and Aldi afford to offer a wider choice of ethical products?', *The Independent*, 24 February 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/news/when-price-is-all-the-matters-can-lidl-and-aldi-afford-to-offer-a-wider-choice-of-ethical-products-10063003.html> (30 October 2015).

39. 'Trainings have become the ubiquitous social practice through which development aspirations are enacted jointly by donors, brokers and villagers fortunate enough to be included in a programme.' Susan Cotts Watkins and Anne Swidler, 'Working misunderstandings: donors, brokers, and villagers in Africa's AIDS industry', *Population Development Review* 38, Supplement (2012), pp. 197–218, p. 207.

40. See Christopher Barrett and Jeffrey Cason, O*verseas research*, p. 88, on how well-selected and trained field research assistants may become longer-term collaborators for independent academic researchers, and help create networks of high-quality field research assistants.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

demands for short-term training workshops in local hotels. Some donors would do well to reassess their expenditure patterns in the light of the compromises provoked by inadequate funding for doctoral research.

*Conclusion*

Fieldwork can place researchers in a variety of crises of a practical and political character. This article, it is hoped, shows how greater analytical attention to such crises can help to make for better researchers and better research. Those seeking to do fieldwork need to develop unusual skills that go beyond the textbook prescriptions; the required skills involve a form of crisis preparedness or 'adaptive capacity'.[41]

What were the impacts on the project of the crises outlined here? One answer would be simply to account for the way that fieldwork was (or was not) curtailed or changed. For example, in Ziway the fieldwork had been completed and so the detention of the team had no impact. However, when the team in Uganda came close to being murdered, plans for qualitative research in that area were abandoned.

Seeing fieldwork crises only in terms of the effect on planned research would be too narrow. Fieldwork crises may have two uses, both a function of the fact that research becomes a part of local political economies. First, if researchers experience some of the uncertainty and exercise of power relations that they often impose on research subjects, this may help in developing their own sensibilities. Second, the crisis may provide – rather than an interruption or threat to the research – an acute revelation of the context and power relations that the research is trying to understand. Crises and mistakes become themselves a form of evidence. Rather than papering over the cracks – distracting people's attention from such things to present a faultless, linear process of research design, implementation, and analysis – errors should instead be highlighted and analysed. An emerging literature is starting to engage with these issues and it is hoped that this research note contributes to this literature.[42]

Some of the challenges to the pursuit of (relatively) independent research relate to the growing pressure on academics to plot out and follow 'pathways to impact', as well as to tensions between research integrity and the institutionalization of research practices. At worst, the institutionalization of best practice norms may conflict with the possibility of doing intensive field research. In our own case, the pressure from the Fairtrade Foundation to

41. Mendel Giezen, Luca Bertolini, and William Salet, 'Adaptive capacity within a megaproject: a case study on planning and decision-making in the face of complexity', *European Planning Studies* 23, 5 (2015), pp. 999–1018.
42. Jonathan Parry, 'The anthropologist's assistant'; David Mosse, 'Misunderstood, misrepresented, and contested'.

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

release the names and addresses of employers and families of children employed for wage work highlights how different norms of transparency and accountability may come into conflict. The broader issue is clear in the discussion of the Data Access and Research Transparency initiative in the United States. It has been argued that implementing a 'disciplinary norm of data access would undermine ethical research practices, endanger research participants, and discourage research on important but challenging topics'.[43]

Downloaded from http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/ at School of Oriental and African Studies on January 4, 2016

43. This is because 'developing and maintaining their subjects' trust constitutes the ethical and methodological foundation of their ability to generate scholarly insight'. Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson and Elisabeth Wood, 'Transparency in intensive research on violence', p. 22.