

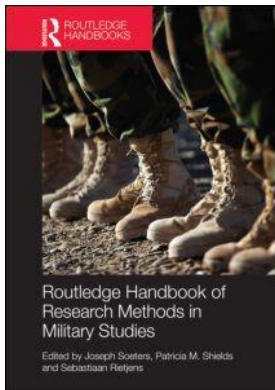
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5

DOING MILITARY RESEARCH IN CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS

Björn Müller-Wille

Helmand Monitoring and Evaluation Programme (HMEP). Although not classified, access to HMEP findings remains limited to official use only. More information can be requested at www.helmandmep.info

HMEP forms part of the multinational and multi-agency Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and is designed to help improve the effectiveness of stabilisation and development programmes in Afghanistan. Since 2009, HMEP has supported the planning process within the PRT, tracked progress against plans (How well are we doing?) and provided evidence for what interventions are most likely to generate desired results (Are we doing the right things?).

HMEP is innovative in that it does not assess the effect of military efforts in isolation. Instead, it asks how the military and other agencies collectively achieve desired higher-level objectives. The organisational link of HMEP to the planning section within the PRT means that more attention is placed from the start on the question of how progress can be monitored and evaluated, obliging agencies to clarify the logic of planned interventions, which in itself improves plans. HMEP produces all source assessments drawing on information from the military, civilian agencies and open sources. In addition, it also performs its own primary collection of data. Since October 2010, HMEP has conducted the largest quantitative survey in Helmand as well as a large number of in-depth interviews. This has allowed HMEP to produce quarterly reports and formulate recommendations that have influenced strategic decision-making and planning.

The main challenges HMEP faced include:

- The development of a clear, logical and assessable theory of change that brought the logic of different agencies together, to some degree reflecting different (occasionally conflicting) ambitions and agendas (Church 2006: 34). Moreover, the higher-level objectives HMEP focuses on generally tend to be less precise and tangible than lower level ones (often intentionally). Military plans remain particularly challenging, as they normally do not clearly outline the logic between first, second and third order effects, let alone the assumptions on which this logic is based.

- Setting up systems to validate that interviews are not falsified and that the selection method of interviewees is followed.
- Presenting results and setting priorities in a fashion that is useful to a broad range of stakeholders.

HMEP modelled regressions to find out which interventions are most likely to generate support for the government. While confirming that the provision of core state functions does indeed improve the legitimacy of the state, it found the emphasis on the justice sector much more promising than services topping the list of things respondents wanted the government to focus on such as education and health.

Introduction

This chapter seeks to outline the specific challenges that researchers encounter in conflict environments. While few of these are unique to research in life threatening conditions, they tend to be exasperated here. The chapter is structured around the chronological order research projects normally follow. It sets out by highlighting issues around the tasking, i.e. the formulation of the research question, followed by matters arising around the research design and planning, collection of data, the analysis and finally issues related to the dissemination. The content reflects a practitioner's view and is centred on the author's own experience of such research and each section seeks to outline the challenges, possible solutions and what shortcomings remain even after such solutions have been applied. Although the military itself constitutes the object of some research (e.g. assessments of how headquarter structures operate or how soldiers react to stress), the bulk of research in conflict environments is focused on the effects of military activities on the operational environment. This chapter focuses on the latter, i.e. research aimed at informing an ongoing intervention.

Tasking: Formulating the research question

Constituting the starting point of research projects, the formulation of research questions is critical. In conflict environments, the military itself often functions as a gatekeeper enabling studies of itself and the effects it generates. The following three aspects are of particular interest: researchers' dependence on the military, the military's limited ability to formulate precise and achievable questions and institutional and personal motivations and drivers determining what questions the military chooses to pursue.

Dependence: Gatekeepers decide what research can be pursued and by whom

A key limitation researchers in conflict environments face is to obtain access to the research object. Whoever controls access can determine what research questions may be effectively pursued, by whom and by what means. At home, researchers may circumvent limitations in access imposed by the military by contacting military staff directly. In hostile environments, access is much more limited and controlled. Unless foreign researchers engaged in the geographical area prior to the conflict (for this see e.g. Giustozzi 2009), it is likely that they will depend on other

institutions to facilitate physical access and provide costly security arrangements. Normally, government agencies and IGOs, including the military, or NGOs, think tanks and the like provide such entry. Local researchers, who could potentially operate more independently, are often drawn to these institutions too, not least for financial reasons. As a result, these gatekeepers fund, facilitate and in one way or another control the bulk of research.

Despite this, there are also several international studies that were carried largely without depending on such outside support. In Afghanistan many of such studies focused on the insurgency (see e.g. Giustozzi 2009; Van Bijlert 2009; Farrell and Giustozzi 2013).

In general dependence does not simply mean that researchers are less free in determining research questions. More often than not, the gatekeepers determine both the research agenda and select what researchers they will task (fund). As a result, most research is demand-driven and little, if any, primary research conducted independently without direct support from the gatekeepers, each one of which pursues its own interests. While this also applied to HMEP, the programme was designed to support decision-making of an institution that encompassed a large range of military and civilian agencies from several countries. As a result, it pursued research questions in relation to the higher objectives pursued by all agencies, assessing the effect of their combined efforts and thus collective interests.

Clarity: Gatekeepers are often not proficient in commissioning research

The clients' limited ability to formulate clear and achievable research questions is another concern. One reason for this is that most military staff do not have research backgrounds and are used to task subordinates who are equally methodologically illiterate and uncritical. It is very common that researchers are provided with a general topic rather than with clear terms of reference and a specific research question.

The rotation of personnel, resulting in limited expertise, is another weakness. Those formulating terms of reference and commissioning research tend to spend a limited amount of time in theatre. If they return to theatre, they rarely do so in the same capacity. This means that many are inexperienced in their specific new role and have limited knowledge about what the organisation already knows.

As other researchers, the HMEP team had to spend much time negotiating with the client to establish clear and achievable research questions.

Relevance: Gatekeepers have good reason to avoid the most important research questions

Arguably the most serious shortcoming of research in hostile environments is to be found in what research questions are *not* pursued. Most funding for research is linked directly to individual institutions, each one of which makes a specific, but limited, contribution to the overall intervention, and requiring specific decision-making support. At best, questions focus around each funding institution's specific concerns, and aim at improving its contribution. At worst, research supports personal career ambitions and institutional interests. Generally, overarching questions that would be most useful for the combined effort of all involved tend to be ignored. It is for instance rare that comprehensive conflict assessments, outlining the main actors and their interest, conflict dynamics and the resilience of local institutions, are commissioned, let alone repeated and updated at a later stage.¹ This means that the problems the intervention in its entirety is seeking to address are poorly analysed, systematically discussed or understood. In

reality, research tends to be compartmentalised and ‘solution’, rather than ‘problem’ focused. Institutions tend to focus research on issues directly affecting their activities and rarely ask if or how their activities contribute towards shared strategic aims of the collective of intervening actors, for example towards a resolution of the conflict/problem. The focus tends to be on how they can improve what they do (doing things right), rather than asking, if they are focusing on the right issues (doing the right things). This focus on lower level objectives also means that the vital overarching questions often remain unformulated (OECD 2012: 29; De Coning and Romita 2009: 2; Stabilisation Unit and DCDC 2012: 2).

One reason why organisations avoid questions about whether they ‘do the right things’ is that they may not like the answer. There is little incentive to fund research that may indicate that efforts make little difference. Quite the contrary, many institutions consciously avoid such questions. It is rare to see the military on operations really embrace these questions, and use findings to intentionally adapt and add more value. This even applies to multinational headquarters that have been set up and designed to last but a few years, where one might expect institutional interests to be less prevalent.

Another reason is that it is generally difficult for many people and institutions to see their own activities and the environment in which they operate from the outside. One can only assess if the institution pursues the best course of action by looking at it from a position that is somewhat detached from the institution itself. People often find it difficult to look at themselves and their institution through a new lens. The lack of well-developed and documented theories of change makes it even more difficult (Stabilisation Unit and DCDC 2012: 1). Personal incentives reinforce this tendency. Most people like to do a good job, ideally one that their superiors understand and appreciate to gain promotion or other benefits. They will therefore stay in their comfort zone and focus on producing what *their* part of an organisation normally does, can digest, comprehend and appreciate. For the military, this often means that research tasks are formulated based on the interests of a specific subset of organisation, for example a branch of the headquarters.

A third reason can be found in the time lines of such research. Assessing what impacts or what contributions (military) activities make to higher-level objectives normally requires time (Rietjens et al. 2011). However, research that comes to fruition over longer periods, thus, only benefiting successors, is generally avoided. This is not necessarily a result of planned and conscious decisions, but rather because superiors tend to face a number of immediate concerns and questions they want addressed. Thus, daily short-term (tactical) concerns crowd out long-term (strategic) ones. An organisation that rotates on a six monthly basis will understandably view research that takes four months to complete as long-term project. Those that take more than six months are often not even considered, and if they are, they require buy-in from successors to be completed.

The position of HMEP in the PR T is very helpful in this respect. Exploring the progress of a combined effort, rather than that of an individual programme, and in a situation where progress (or failure) cannot be attributed to a single actor, institutional interests played a very limited role in the design of the research framework. While some agencies wanted to add research questions, and some occasionally took issue with findings, HMEP was never told to shy away from exploring any questions.

Improving research by asking basic questions about the problems we seek to solve

In short, research conducted in hostile environments generally takes the commissioning organisation and its activities as a starting point rather than the problem(s) the intervention as a whole

is trying to address. It tends to focus on issues that are easily understood by the institution's staff, and normally centres around how the institution can improve what it does (efficiencies) rather than trying to examine if the institution delivers what is most needed (effectiveness), and all of this within relatively short time frames. These limitations do not just shape research questions, but also the research design and the methodologies applied.

To improve the situation, staff in headquarters, ideally supported by researchers, should start with a discussion of what fundamental and basic questions they and their successors collectively need to answer to understand the problem their intervention is trying to address and then work out priorities and who can contribute in what way to answer them over certain periods of time. For HMEP such conversations proved crucial, making long-term research projects more easily achievable, producing data sets spanning over several years, and delivering products that contribute both to a better understanding of the problem and inform strategic decision-making with a view to improving the intervention as a whole.

Research design and planning

Planning and designing research in conflict environments is inherently difficult. Security concerns accentuate most of the uncertainties researchers normally face, at the same time as additional challenges occur.

Lack of baseline data

One considerable hurdle in the design phase is that data generally is scarce, out of date or lacks accuracy (see e.g. Glenn and Gayton 2008). The host nation often has little capacity to generate data and what little exists will be based on uncertain assumptions or extrapolations. In some cases, elements of the host nation government may even have an interest in inaccurate data, as it might decrease their opportunities for rent seeking and possibly even shift the power balance. Population data is a good example. In Afghanistan, for instance, a proper census might potentially change election results.² Nevertheless, even without any resistance to produce accurate data, displacement is likely to make population data unreliable. Often older baseline figures are not based on a thorough census either. As a result, circular situations often arise in which the research design is based on assumptions that will be informed and refined by the resulting research findings.

For surveys, for instance, HMEP found it challenging to design a representative sampling frame, as no population data is available. By asking respondents about how many people live in their household/compound, its surveys themselves informed population estimates and refined the sampling frame of subsequent surveys. In short, much research requires considerable collection of primary data, which, especially in the case of quantitative methods, is required for an adequate research design.

When access to data is scarce, the close relationship with gatekeepers offers key advantages. The first advantage is that these institutions tend to be supportive of the research they commission. A crucial form of support is that staff offer their own time for conversations, make documents available as well as share findings and sometimes even the underlying raw data from previous research. Often researchers do not just obtain information from the commissioning institution but also access to staff and data from other partner organisations. A particular feature of conflict environments is that the number of institutions working alongside the military tends to be relatively limited. Most of them are government or IGO funded, often organisationally linked (e.g. in Provincial Reconstruction Teams), generally cooperative and mutually

supportive. This means that a large proportion of the pool of existing research and data tends to be readily available for researchers, allowing them to draw on, and constructively add to, existing knowledge. HMEP certainly benefited from being part of this establishment, giving desk officers from other agencies the confidence to apply pragmatic approaches to the sharing of data, often shortcutting cumbersome bureaucratic processes.

Uncertain access to data

The limited and often unpredictable prospects of collecting primary data also pose further constraints. To begin with, the uncertainties related to the changing security situation make it difficult to estimate timelines, methods, required resources and costs for the collection of data. When budgets are fixed, delays and increased costs in the collection phase are likely to eat into the assessment resourcing, and thus the scope and quality of the analysis of the data. Often, the only way to find out what data can be collected, when and how is to try it. It is therefore likely that researchers have to adapt the research plan and design as they experience unforeseeable hinders. In the worst case, research questions have to be adapted.

In reverse, those commissioning and undertaking research often have strong preconceived ideas about what methods of data collection are feasible and reliable. This can lead to a research design that accepts more compromises than needed and that discounts methods that are more sophisticated, before they have even been tested (Mansfield 2013: 12). This was for instance the case for HMEP when exploring ways to study the political economy in the Taliban-controlled desert areas. Here survey techniques proved more promising than expected, and key informants proved more willing to be interviewed than anticipated. As a result, more emphasis could be put on these methodologies and some research questions expanded. Yet, other research questions had to be dropped, either because they were based on preconceived ideas that were proven inapplicable, or because their pursuit would have require more resources and involved more risk.

Where access is limited, researchers either depend on others to provide the security and enable access, for example by accompanying patrols, or they have to rely on local staff for the collection of data (see also Sriram et al. 2009). Both solutions are associated with problems of their own.

Letting internationals collect data

The option of collecting data themselves does not just put the researcher at greater risk. It also influences sample selection, size and biases. The dependence on the provision of security means that dedicated resources (transport or protection) may be re-assigned, thus delaying or completely denying the collection of data during the researcher's time in theatre. It is rare that security resources are exclusively devoted to ensure that a particular research project can be conducted as planned. Normally, research is added to patrol movements that primarily pursue other tasks, while facilitating some research. This makes any random and representative samples, for example in the case of interviews, impossible. Instead, sampling points (and respondents) are often selected based on where opportunities arise. The method also effects what sample size can be collected. It is certainly impossible to select samples randomly in this way, which excludes quantitative approaches. That is not to say that qualitative approaches are inappropriate or fail to add value. Just as quantitative methods, they do nevertheless have limitations. While adding much narrative and explanations, one should not treat such findings as representative for the population as a whole. Researchers also need to be aware of how the presence of an armed escort, or in some cases even armed researchers, is likely to influence interviewees' responses (social desirability bias). This approach clearly limits what questions can reasonably be asked. For

instance, it is highly likely that respondents will express more positive views about accompanying international forces than they would under other circumstances. HMEP only used international staff to conduct selected key informant interviews.

Letting local staff collect data

The use of local staff for collection of data may overcome some of the constraints mentioned above, but the dependency on intermediaries creates new worries. Duty of care is an important factor easily overlooked. While local researchers may have better access to sources than international staff, they may also be more dependent on the extra income the collection generates. Those commissioning researchers must therefore not put undue pressure on local nationals to take unnecessary risks. It is also important to ensure that local collectors can contact researchers, possibly via an intermediary, in case they run into problems with government authorities or international forces. HMEP used local staff extensively, and exclusively for quantitative interviews.

In reverse, local collectors have strong incentives to avoid risks by fabricating data, collecting it in different locations or from different people, or by different means than intended. A rigorous validation framework is therefore essential. However, even when balancing risks adequately and operating with honest and willing local nationals, researchers should run pilot studies to establish what collection methods are likely to work. To ensure the best possible outcome, one should first test the preferred collection framework, for example random sampling, and then adapt ambitions. Too ambitious collection methods are likely to force local nationals into dishonesty.

Researchers are likely to find it challenging to find qualified local staff, especially in societies with low literacy levels. The most qualified segment of the population is generally in full time employment (often working for internationals) and not available for *ad hoc* work or unwilling to undertake it. If one could draw on this group of people, for example teachers, research would generate unintended negative consequences, for example by undermining education efforts. Thus, the recruitment pool of sufficiently qualified people is often limited. This means that the qualification standards may have to be lowered or that people have to be brought in from other geographical areas. Both are likely to influence the quality of the collection. The former, because staff will have limited ability to adhere to given instructions and document findings, the latter because non-locals often do not have the same access to contested geographical areas or key informants. Training sessions that convey an understanding of methods and offer the opportunity to practice the collection are essential. Digressions from instructions may well result from lacking knowledge rather than from a conscious choice to cheat. However, training is unlikely to fully compensate for a lack of basic schooling. Delivering and monitoring such training is often impeded by cultural and language barriers. In general, it is also difficult to find local staff with the experience and qualifications to manage collection teams, again somewhat reducing the quality of the collection and recording processes, and possibly of the data provided.

Gatekeepers are willing to take risks and accept research constraints

While institutions commissioning research are generally well aware of all these constraints and challenges, they are not necessarily discouraged by them. Many are willing to take the risk of commissioning research that may not be possible to undertake, and to adapt ambitions to what is possible as limitations become apparent. Not only is there a greater need for flexibility regarding collection methods, coverage, methods of analysis, timings and sometimes even regarding

an adaptation of the research question for research in conflict environments. It is probably more prevalent too. HMEP was certainly allowed to explore what research was feasible.

Collection of data: When the plan hits reality

As indicated above, researchers in conflict environments must expect and prepare for disruptions during the collection phase, often created by security or logistical challenges. It is important to offer collectors alternative approaches, such as alternative sampling points or methods they can use to obtain the data sought if the initial plan fails. This does not just require that alternatives are thought of in advance, but also that researchers are in continuous contact with collectors and clients to agree on alterations and to undertake corrections. All changes must also be recorded as they influence the data set and how it can reasonably be used.

Independent validation is essential

If researchers themselves do not collect data, independent processes validating the collection methods are required. This is particularly important if contracted local nationals or subcontracted organisations undertake the collection. In absence of control measures, incentives to ‘cheat’ are likely to outweigh advantages gained from adhering to a rigorous collection process. HMEP’s experience from the field demonstrates that businesses have limited incentives to set up appropriate (and costly) internal validation processes and to detect and reveal more than marginal shortcomings. As there are often few or no alternative providers, researchers do well not to trust arguments that the provision of a quality product is in the business own long-term interest. It is worth noting, however, that the mere existence of an independent validation procedure is likely to reduce fraudulent behaviour.

Taking survey techniques as an example, conventional validation techniques are often easier to use than technical solutions. While GPS phones or other technologies can track interviewers’ movements effectively, HMEP could not use such equipment as it would endanger interviewers and mark them out as collaborators with the international community. The preferred conventional validation method consists of call backs, where validators contact a respondent after the interview to confirm that the interview took place and ideally by asking a set of control questions from the survey questionnaire. To allow for such call backs, one must either obtain respondents’ contact details (which they may not be willing to provide) or opt for selection procedures that, if repeated, would identify the same respondent. The most common approach is to use the accommodation as a selection criteria (house or compound) and a clear raster defining who in the household should be interviewed. Physical call-back visits can validate both the application of the selection criteria and that the interview took place. Results from the validation will inform decisions on how the obtained data can reasonably be used and what conclusions can be drawn from it. In some cases small adjustments may be sufficient, while a complete re-collection of data may be required in others.

Delays

Delays in the collection are common. It is therefore important that a system is set up in which the collected data is recorded and entered into a database straight after they have been obtained during the collection phase. This will ensure that collection issues are identified early, for example misunderstandings regarding how interviews should be recorded or conducted, allowing for adjustments and possible recollection in time. If research findings are to inform decisions at

a particular time, researchers can also use the already available data to a certain extent to draw preliminary conclusions and refine them, once the full data set has been received.

Language barriers

Language barriers and translation issues may also come to bear during the collection phase. The most obvious problem with translations is that researchers often lack the language skills to undertake the translation itself or judge its quality. Perfect translations do not exist. Even when performed by highly skilled professionals they cause friction and require some interpretation and compromise. This is why a re-translation rarely results in the original wording. The people used for translation services in support of researchers in conflict environments are normally not trained professional translators and are not in full command of English. As a result there is more room for misunderstandings, misinterpretations and over simplifications. Researchers need to take this into account when designing questionnaires and offer explanations, ensuring that instructions are clear, simple and unambiguous. Moreover, they need to resist the temptation to over interpret responses and nuances, in order to reach more distinct conclusions and recommendations.

Managing the above risks for text translations is relatively easy. Researchers should draw on a team of translators that control and proof read all material. Regarding oral translations, risks for mistakes are generally higher. Normally translators have less time for reflection and reach the point of exhaustion faster. In such cases recordings of conversations prove very useful, as they capture how questions have been translated and record full answers, not just translated ones. HMEP found an increase in quality if others than those interpreting during an interview produced transcripts.³

Assessment: Verification and triangulation of results

The challenges outlined above limit the confidence researchers can have in collected data and in validity of the conclusions drawn based on it. As in other areas, researchers should always seek to verify results drawing on data and information from a range of sources. However, the scarcity of data often makes this particularly difficult in conflict environments (Stabilisation Unit and DCDC 2012: 2). It also increases the risk of so-called circular reporting, as other, seemingly independent sources, often draw on the same source. Population data is a good example. In the absence of reliable and up-to-date census data, many institutions undertake efforts to model population figures. However, almost all of them will take what official data there is as a starting point and partially base calculations on the same data set. This means that the flaws contained in the official data transpires all demographic estimates which comparisons are unlikely to reveal.

Frequently, resourcing prevents the collection of additional data for ‘triangulation’. This may invite researchers to seek validation of their results in similar exercises run by others. Again, survey research offers a good example. Often survey data from one organisation is compared with that from another covering the same geographical area. This comparison is all the more attractive, if the questionnaire design is similar, making a comparison of results relatively easy. While interesting and useful, this approach offers limited scope for proper validation, partially because the method used to obtain the data is too similar, and partially because such data tends to be delivered by the same provider. Nevertheless, HMEP found that more rigorous alternatives sometimes prove difficult as other, independent qualitative or quantitative research is unlikely to examine the same questions in the same area during the same period.

Even if such alternatives exist, researchers may not be aware of it. Although the willingness to share data has markedly improved over the last decade, classifications combined with a plethora of computer systems that do not speak to each other pose a considerable hindrance (see also Mitchell 2009). Even if researchers have the required clearance and access to workstations, they need to familiarise themselves with and search for information in several differently organised systems. As an example, at least seven separate IT systems are used in the Helmand PRT alone. Short tour lengths often mean that information is saved in an inconsistent manner or that procedures change over time. Consequently, researchers often rely on personal relationships to become aware of research and data that may be useful. These informal relationships also prove most useful for the coordination at the planning stage of research conducted in different organisations.

Another severe limitation is that many organisations only save research reports, not the raw data on which they are based. This is particularly common when the collection and analysis is outsourced. This means that collected information that could have proven useful is not available.

In the end, researchers in conflict environments often have to rely on single source or 'similar' source data than those in more stable environments. At the same time, proper 'triangulation' is arguably even more desirable in conflict zones than elsewhere due to the increased uncertainty during the collection phase (UNDP 2009: 110).

One core problem researchers face is the trade-off between validation and triangulation of findings on the one hand and the timely delivery of the analysis on the other. For research intended to inform decision-making, the timely delivery will normally weigh heaviest. In that case, researchers need to take particular care to emphasise the limitations of their approach.

Presentation of results: Methodological illiteracy and dangerous products

The presentation of results is arguably just as important as the findings themselves. At best, the message is easily understood, tailored to the audience's information needs and convincing (Jans 2014, Chapter 3 this volume). At worst, products can be misleading or misinterpreted. Problems arise both on the side of researchers and on the side of audiences.

Misleading presentation of results

Military staff produce much research in theatre themselves. By no fault of their own, many of these professionals have but rudimentary methodological knowledge, which influences the quality of products. A common problem is the confusion of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Like others, the branches of intelligence, information operations, psychological operations and other military staff are often interested in representative statistics on the population's perceptions, behaviour or other socioeconomic data (see also Rietjens et al. 2011). Thus, questionnaires are devised and put to the local population by patrols or uniformed specialists accompanying them. Results are then processed in headquarters and presented in the form of graphs outlining what proportion of the population has what characteristic.

While understandable and tempting, this approach is problematic for two reasons. To start with, sample sizes tend to be limited and the selection is rarely random. This means that the confidence levels achieved are low and the margins of error high. Hence, without knowing it, military staff often present results that are very unreliable and by no means representative. Identifying trends over time based on such data is impossible. Changing the intervention based on such loose data is irresponsible, not to say dangerous.

Moreover, the temptation to produce quantitative data means that the opportunity to undertake qualitative research that can offer important explanations, narratives, ideas and insights is missed (Glenn and Gayton 2008). In short, considerable resources are allocated and risks taken to produce useless data, and chances to collect data offering further critical insights are wasted.

More methodologically proficient researchers also find themselves forced to simplify findings. Results are often ambiguous, with conflicting narratives and different variables pointing in different directions and displaying geographical and other variations. Hence, researchers not only have to choose what relationships in a data set they explore, but also which of the results they present and how. Properly caveating findings, for example with probabilities or methodological limitations, is also challenging as most decision-makers find it difficult to properly make sense of them. Generally, the question is not so much about what researchers present, but also what they leave out and why.

Clients' unrealistic demands and misinterpretation

Understandably, decision-makers can be frustrated when presented with too many caveats when they want clear answers. Rather than having to make sense of all findings themselves, they often prefer researchers to tell them what the findings 'really' mean. Hence, researchers can feel pressured to present clear and simple recommendations to prove 'useful'. The problem is that research into complicated (and interesting) questions, such as how best to improve local security or how to generate support for host nation security forces, is based on models and simplifications that need explaining, adding to the caveats outlined in the paragraph above. In addition, one can rarely infer causality with full certainty from the facts examined when studying questions relating to such higher-level objectives. While researchers can establish associations between different variables and assume what changes have or would contribute to a certain development, findings remain uncertain (DFID 2012: 38), again adding to the caveats. As outlined above, it is rarely practical for researchers to outline all limitations of their research in presentation material. When choosing what caveats and limitations to include, they should bear in mind they risk taking on the decision-making function themselves, without the client's knowledge, if they do not make key limitations and assumptions clear.

Given that the amount of research produced in conflict environments remains very limited, and that decision-makers have little time, they have a tendency to disregard caveats and to use whatever data and findings are available. The argument 'some data is better than no data', frequently results in an overreliance and trust in data and findings that is inappropriate.

One way out of this dilemma is to ensure that research projects focus on a single research question broken down into explicit sub-questions, and to examine it using different approaches. Such focus studies are likely to generate results that are more reliable and prove more useful. However, this requires the client to be precise in their terms of reference, to have the courage to, and take the responsibility for focusing resources on a particular issue, thus, disregarding other interesting questions.

Conclusion: Improving research of the military in conflict environments

Many common research challenges are exacerbated in conflict environments. While most external factors lie beyond the influence of researchers (although their findings may bring about positive change), they have to adapt to the restrictions posed by insecurity. However, researchers

and their military gatekeepers can achieve much by improving their relationship. Assuming that the research ultimately seeks to improve the intervention (rather than pursuing institutional or personal interests), some simple changes would be particularly beneficial.

The commissioning of research should be centralised within headquarters to ensure a sensible allocation of research resources. This should involve discussion across headquarters about what questions are relevant. In a first step, the headquarters needs to establish what it (and its successors) collectively needs to know about the conflict their campaign is to address. A better understanding of the problem lays the foundation for an improved intervention logic. In a second step, they need to think about how research can contribute towards testing and refining their theory of change and earlier research findings.

Researcher advisers should be involved in this process from the start to elaborate on what key questions can reasonably be pursued, how, following what time lines and to what costs. Based on these considerations and on what is already known, a priority list of research questions can be produced, each one broken down into sub-questions, and the collection and analysis resourced (including military means). This more systematic approach to research would ensure clearer tasking throughout the organisation and that research projects collectively could be aggregated into a more useful whole.

This would increase clarity of the aim of research, improve its focus to what is most relevant and ensure that good use is made of the resources available.

Notes

- 1 Exceptions to this are the periodic civilian assessments that were carried out by the Liaison Office in Uruzgan Province (see e.g. TLO 2009, 2010; Rietjens 2011).
- 2 The last official, but incomplete, population census in Afghanistan was undertaken in 1979. Although mentioned in the Bonn Agreement in 2001, a full census had still not taken place by 2012. The Afghanistan Population and Housing Census (APHC) was cancelled and replaced by a Socio-Demography and Economic Survey (SDES), rolled out in 2011 and planned to be completed in 2014.
- 3 For more information on the use of interpreters, see e.g. Van Dijk et al. 2010.

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