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Research fatigue among Rwandan refugees in Uganda

Cleophas Karooma

Refugees in Nakivale refugee settlement demonstrate research fatigue, yet a return visit by one particular researcher reveals an interesting twist to the tale.

During my doctoral research¹ in 2009–13 with Rwandan refugees in Nakivale, one of Uganda's oldest refugee settlements, I noted many expressions of research fatigue during interviews. Complaints about over-research tend to arise from a combination of the sheer repetition, frequency and often redundancy of research in the camp, as well as a sense that research fails to bring any tangible or substantive change or benefit to the residents being studied. In some cases, research may be seen as part of a system of surveillance and control. In other cases, research may be seen as benefiting the lives and careers of researchers while leaving the lives of those being researched – the refugees – unimproved in any significant way, regardless of their contributions of information, time, energy and resources.

Between 2009 and 2013, the repatriation of Rwandan refugees (and the invocation of the Cessation Clause) attracted much attention from both local and international researchers. During data collection in 2011, a refugee woman leader angrily said:

“We are tired of researchers coming to record our stories amidst all the problems we are encountering – forced repatriations, sleeping in the bush for fear of being rounded up at night and taken to Rwanda, reduction of our food rations, prohibition from accessing land and social services. Nobody cares. You just get our stories and videos of how we are suffering and [you] disappear.”

Another refugee asked, “Will your research feed my family?” A participant in a group discussion also noted, “We think that researchers take pride in our increasing problems in order to research more. ... We are still facing the same problems despite the number of researchers we have met.”

Due to uncertainty and fear of being forced to return, most refugees were unwilling to trust anyone with their information. The interviewees believed that UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, had conspired with the governments of Uganda and Rwanda to force refugees back to Rwanda.² In addition, refugees may not be able to anticipate the consequences of their contribution to research projects; this uncertainty can frighten them and eventually thwart their participation.³ In one case, a refugee woman who had told a researcher that she had saved people during the 1994 genocide told us of the insecurity and worry created when the researcher published her story with her name and photo.

In order to build trust and prove the voluntary and informed nature of interviewees' participation, I presented my informed consent forms and explained to the refugees that my study was for academic purposes. In one focus group discussion, however, a male participant said:

“We know you want our stories to take them to ... the Rwandan government and UNHCR in order to

chase us [out of Uganda]; you must be sent by them and you are here deceiving us that your research is for academic purposes."

They labelled me an agent of the stakeholders that had planned their forcible return. However, I re-stated my purpose, showing my student/university identity cards. This additional information helped to build some trust and they eventually signed the consent forms. Having won some trust, however, another refugee man asked:

"You said your study is for academic purposes. How is it going to help us? We are unwanted in Uganda. But we don't want to return to Rwanda. How will your research benefit us?"

I explained that the research would come up with policy recommendations to influence policy in order to address the question of forcible repatriation – an explanation which sounded less than satisfactory to them.

The refugees were concerned about the promises made to them by researchers. They said that some researchers promise feedback and invitations to conferences; some promise scholarships for the refugees' children; others promise that the research will solve the refugees' problems. "I don't believe them anymore because they disappear as soon as they get our stories. When you follow up with a telephone call, they do not answer," said one interviewee.

Interviewees were also concerned about the impact of questions about their reluctance to return to Rwanda, pointing out that some questions reminded them of previous experiences or traumas. As one respondent said, "Some questions remind me about how my wife and children were killed in Rwanda. They bring back such horrible memories. And yet the researchers do not even follow up to find out whether we have recovered from the trauma they bring to us through their interviews." In such cases researchers should always look for ways to give immediate benefits – such as counselling and incentives – and feedback, rather than promising post-research dissemination, which may not even be possible as communities might have moved on by the time any research results emerge.

Did they benefit?

After completion of my PhD, I made a return visit to Nakivale in 2015 to meet my respondents again and to get updates regarding repatriation and Cessation Clause processes. Although some people had already moved out of the camp and integrated into local Ugandan communities (for fear of the Cessation Clause), I was able to meet most of my respondents.

Now the refugees had a different view about research. They said it was because of research that they had not been chased out of Uganda. They recounted several pieces of research that had been published both locally and internationally, pointing to publications by the Refugee Law Project, Barbara Harrell-Bond's Fahamu project, other academics and several non-governmental organisations which fought for Rwandan refugees' right not to be returned forcibly. They also talked about some refugees who were actively writing about the Rwandan refugee problem and their reasons for not returning. Whereas previously they had dismissed the whole process as over-research which did not solve their problems, they now said that it was due to the researchers and other advocates that the Cessation Clause was not invoked in 2013. Given this change of attitude about the potential contribution of research, it would perhaps be helpful if camp administrators could raise wider awareness among refugees about the importance of research.

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1. Karooma C (2017) *Rwandan Refugees in Southwestern Uganda: Their Attitudes and Responses to Repatriation 1994-2012*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York. The author would like to express her gratitude for Barbara Harrell-Bond's supervision and mentorship during the author's doctoral studies.
2. Harrell-Bond B E (2011) 'Cessation Clause Uganda Style', Working Paper 11-001, Northwestern University Center for Forced Migration Studies bit.ly/HarrellBond-CFMS-WP11-001
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