

# Measuring Livelihoods and Environmental Dependence

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Methods for Research and Fieldwork

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## Chapter 2

# Why Do Field Research?

*Victoria Reyes-García and William D. Sunderlin*

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*The aim of science is not to open the door to infinite wisdom, but to set a limit to infinite error.*

Bertolt Brecht, *The Life of Galileo* (1939, scene 9)

### Introduction

Field research is a methodological approach to observe behaviour under natural conditions. Field research is traditionally contrasted to research conducted in laboratories or academic settings, or to research exclusively relying on existing, or secondary, data. In the social sciences, the collection of raw data *in situ* often – but not exclusively – occurs in a geographical and cultural context not familiar to the person collecting the data. Differently from other methodological approaches, field research in the social sciences allows the researcher to engage in detailed observation and conversations that give the opportunity to elicit information regarding the data being collected. Many techniques and methods for data collection can be used during field research (Bernard, 1995), including:

- **Observation** of events as they occur in natural settings sometimes expanded by means of a contextual inquiry. Observation can be naturalistic or participant, when the researcher engages in the observed activities.
- **Archival research** or the study of information from already existing records, such as national census or local publications, but also personal documents.
- **Field experiments** or experiments conducted in natural settings in order to understand causal relations among phenomena.
- **Surveys** or the collection of systematic data on people's actions, thoughts and behaviour through asking direct questions in natural settings.

In the next section, we outline reasons that justify the investment in field research in general. Then, in the section that follows we ask why one should do

field research in poor developing countries. We pose the question at three levels: the interest of society; the interest of the community being researched; and the interest of the researcher. Before concluding, we also discuss some of the ethical challenges related to doing field research. This last section helps one understand how to prepare and carry out field research properly, if one should decide to do it.

### **Four basic reasons for doing field research**

Field research has been a common technique in the social sciences during most of the 20th century (see Box 2.1). But field research, including the collection of data through household surveys – the main method discussed through this book – can be expensive, time-consuming and, in some cases, invasive. Who likes to have strangers ask personal questions concerning your level of education, the number of chickens on your farm, possibly illegal uses of the forest and the amount of remittance income you got from your daughter who lives abroad? So what is it about field research that justifies the often extraordinary amount of effort involved in conducting it, and especially in doing it well? After all, tons of data – including household-level data from developing countries – can be downloaded in a few minutes and free of charge from the internet. Why, despite the high costs in time and money, have researchers from many disciplines adopted field research as a valid methodological approach for collecting data? We outline four basic reasons:

#### **Overcoming lack of data**

Field research is often necessary to fill an information void related to the problem to be investigated. Often there is very little or no existing information concerning a problem in a given place or given topic. The problem might be known or suspected by hearsay and rumour, or through reports in newspapers and on the radio, but without primary data to analyse it in a scientific and systematic way. If there is information concerning the problem in the national census, it might be inadequate for gaining insights on its cause, development and possible resolution. For example, national census information is often available at high levels of aggregation only. Field research allows us to test theories at a low level of aggregation because field researchers typically collect information on some of the basic units for decision-making parameters (communities, household, persons). Even when some amount of data exists, gaps might need to be filled. In that case, one could conduct targeted supplementary field research to collect the complementary data needed. Field research makes possible the scientific exploration of problems in geographic

### **Box 2.1** *The birth of fieldwork*

Anthropologists attribute the development of the modern tradition of field research to Malinowski, through his study of the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea (Malinowski, 1922). Malinowski argued that anthropologists needed to get off the verandas of the missionaries' and government officials' houses to see what local people were really doing. The basic idea was that, only by immersing oneself in people's daily activities and talking to local people in their homes and fields, could one hope to understand them.

Indeed, in my first piece of ethnographic research on the South coast, it was not until I was alone in the district that I began to make some headway; and, at any rate, I found out where lay the secret of effective field-work. What is then this ethnographer's magic, by which he is able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life? . . .

Field-work consists mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages . . . And by means of this natural intercourse, you learn to know him, and you become familiar with his customs and beliefs far better than when he is a paid, and often bored, informant. (Malinowski, 1922, pp6–7).

For many years, field research was the most common – and sometimes the only – methodological approach of cultural anthropologists. Once mainly a domain of anthropologists, field research is now widely conducted in most of the social sciences, including geography, sociology and economics (Udry, 2003).

areas or on research topics where there are few pre-existing data. Indeed, the major rationale for the PEN project was the lack of comparable data on the relationship between forests and poverty (Chapter 1).

## **Understanding the context**

Even in cases where there is a perfect set of available data to answer a research question, researchers opt to conduct complementary field research. Economists, for example, often conduct short field research visits to understand the social and economic context of the location where the data were collected (see, for

example, the work of Pender (1996) in the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) Village Level Studies). For example, imagine that you use information from the national census to study a region's economy. You find that most people derive their livelihoods from agriculture and that most land is communal. But you also find a high inequality of income in agriculture. The finding is puzzling: why is there so much inequality if land is held in common? Field research can help you understand the context of your findings. It might be possible that, because there are high taxes on private land ownership but no taxes of communal land ownership, people declare lands as communal (to avoid taxes) but use them privately in accordance with customary rules for land distribution.

Field research can thus provide a deeper understanding of the local situation, allowing the researcher to measure the origins, scope and scale of a problem, as well as to gauge local opinions on the causes, consequences and means to resolve a problem. In the best of cases, with a large and representative sample of households, it might be possible for research results to serve as an input for rethinking or guiding policy at the national level. But even short of this, local case study research might provide vital insights for understanding and resolving a pressing problem.

### **Controlling data quality**

Field research enables control of the accuracy of data collection through at least two mechanisms. First, field research enables corroboration or confirmation of data via triangulation (see Chapter 11). For example, answers to household surveys can be checked against information from other interviewees, observation or written records locally available. Field research helps the researcher determine which results are valid. Second, field research enables the researcher to select sensible questions for the specific cultural context being investigated (for example, to avoid asking Muslim respondents about pork meat consumption).

Furthermore, cultural or ethnic differences can affect the interpretation of a question, but people's willingness to give accurate answers might also vary depending on their trust of the interviewer. For example, in a culture where government and/or business are perceived as being corrupt or exploitive, responses to questions from outsiders are likely to be affected by the local perception that responses may be obtained and abused by government officials or others. As discussed later in this book (Chapter 11), fieldwork can improve the quality of the data collected by: (a) increasing the trust of people in the researcher, and (b) allowing questions to be identified that might be sensible in a given cultural context, as well as improving the way those questions are being asked.

## Opening new frontiers of knowledge

Observing the local reality often tells you things that cannot be observed through national census or survey data. Field research thus puts researchers in contact with a situation that can open their eyes and enable them to initiate new lines of thinking. Field research can provide an empirical basis (and, in some cases, the only basis) for challenging conventional wisdom or for testing a research question, a theoretical proposition or a hypothesis related to a pressing issue.

## Reasons for doing field research in poor developing countries

Why should we do field research in poor developing countries? To answer this question it is appropriate to frame the issue in a larger context: Why should one do *research* in poor countries, not just field research but also the entire linked research enterprise – including research conceptualization and design, bibliographical research, analysis of the census and other national data, and the like? A preliminary answer to these questions is rather obvious. Poor developing countries are places that are often beset by many problems including:

- Low income, livelihood insecurity, vulnerability and poverty.
- Insufficient and unreliable access to health care and education.
- Lack of voice and power of ordinary people in the national and local policy.
- Gender oppression and inequality.
- Lack of access to markets with subsequent low prices for the produce.
- Inadequacy and unfairness of laws and regulations.
- Victimization of local people by powerful outside entities (for example, government, military, private enterprises).
- Lack of recognition of rights, including: tenure over land and resources (customary and/or statutory); citizenship; civil rights; human rights.
- Problems related to environmental management and conservation (for example, deforestation, restriction to access natural resources, climate change).
- Conflict and war.
- Natural disasters (for example, earthquakes, droughts, hurricanes, tsunamis) and epidemics (for example, HIV/Aids, ebola virus).

It is important to point out that *all* of these problems exist to a degree in so-called developed countries, making it important to ask why we should conduct social science research in developing as compared to developed countries. One possible answer is that a variety of problems can be more severe (though not

necessarily so) in developing rather than in developed countries, and that the means for addressing them (in other words, financial, institutional capacity, and so on) can be more limited in developing countries. Additional knowledge concerning these problems, generated through the collection and analysis of primary data, is often useful for understanding and formulating policy or institutional solutions. Furthermore, in some countries with less freedom to conduct research, outsiders can poke into social and political issues that would otherwise not be researched and, hence, challenge the status quo. In the best of all possible worlds, research effort should be directed in proportion to the severity of social, economic and environmental problems, though this is not always the case.

So – getting to our central question – why should we specifically do *field* research in poor developing countries? It is important for the following reasons:

1. Field research can reveal new or related problems that the researcher was unaware of. Researchers often go to the field with a preconceived idea of the scientific or social problem they want to address. Upon arrival to the field, they often discover that the problem of interest for the researcher is not the most urgent priority for people in the area (see Box 2.2).
2. Field research can serve as a vehicle for local people to comprehend and address a problem they are facing, thus making it possible to work towards a solution, or, at least, to give local people a means for inserting their views into the policy process (see Box 2.3).
3. Field research can be directed not only at understanding a problem, but also at monitoring and/or evaluating government policies and programmes that might have been put in place to address the problem. For example, field research can help to understand how integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) actually work, and to evaluate the real conditions that affect the success of those programmes. Other examples of programmes related to livelihoods in forested areas and environmental problems are: social and community forest programmes; eco-tourism; payments for environmental services (PES); and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) schemes.

In keeping with the quotation from Bertolt Brecht that opens this chapter, the achievements of household field research can be justified even if they are modest and do not achieve ‘infinite wisdom’. If the research can help lessen the effects of a problem by pointing out a policy error and leading to a policy course correction, it may end up having been worth the high costs involved and the disruption of daily life. Ultimately, the utility of field research to society is partly related to whose interests it serves.



**Box 2.2** *Fieldwork as an eye-opener: An example from Guatemala*

José Pablo Prado-Córdova

Our research project was aimed at exploring the cause-and-effect relationships between the conservation status of the Guatemalan fir (*Abies guatemalensis* Rehder) and its socio-economic functions at the household level in the adjacent rural villages within this species' distribution area. Fieldwork was carried out during the period 2004–2006 and entailed interaction among villagers and botanists, plant ecologists, foresters, agronomists, entomologists, economists, enumerators and students from both the University of San Carlos in Guatemala and the University of Copenhagen. The original research question for the socio-economic component of this project dealt with estimating the economic importance of *Abies guatemalensis* in nearby peasant households. This was decided without consulting villagers regarding the extent to which this question was valid or even relevant for the proposed aim of the research project. Soon we came to realize that this species plays a minor role in local households' economies. We also learned that conservation threats such as poaching were more associated with external agents, who take the lion's share of the selling of illegally harvested branches, than with local agents. Fieldwork was an eye-opener for those involved in the project and made us adjust our original set of research questions in order to come up with a more realistic, problem-focused approach.

**Box 2.3** *Participatory ethnocartography with the Achuar, Peru*

Martí Orta-Martínez

In a series of workshops held in Lima and Iquitos in 2005, the umbrella organization of the indigenous peoples in the Corrientes River (Federación de Comunidades Nativas del Río Corrientes, FECONACO) asked for research that mapped the activities of oil companies in their territory. FECONACO aimed to get scientific evidence for the environmental impacts that these activities have in the communal territory of the Achuar indigenous peoples.

To answer the call, a team of researchers of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) designed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) plan involving both UAB researchers and members of FECONACO. Researchers trained a team of indigenous monitors in the use of global positioning system (GPS) and digital and video cameras. After training, indigenous monitors walked the territory and collected information on old and new oil spills. Researchers cross-validated these data with results obtained from a temporal

study of satellite images in order to assess the spatio-temporal environmental impact of the oil companies on the indigenous territory.

FECONACO has used the information generated by the team of researchers and indigenous monitors to initiate legal complaints to the government of Peru regarding the impact of oil companies in their territory. The research has empowered indigenous communities, allowing them to support their case in legal confrontations with the oil company. It has also raised the environmental standards of the oil company, with obvious environmental benefits for indigenous peoples.

### **Whose interests are served in doing field research?**

The discussion above assumes there is only one frame of reference for judging the utility of field research: that of the academic community and the society at large. But of course there are various interests involved in weighing the merits of undertaking field research involving data collection through household surveys. In this section we focus the discussion on the interest of (a) society at large, (b) the community that is the target of the research, and (c) the person or team undertaking the research.

#### **The interests of society at large**

The discussion above basically justifies field research on the basis of increasing our scientific understanding of a given problem. We have also established that conducting field research is justified if it serves to understand, diminish and/or resolve the problem it is designed to address. But ‘society at large’ is a complex entity. Which part of society at large do we mean? Much of social science research in developing countries is funded by bilateral or multilateral donor organizations in collaboration with national governments and institutions. In the best of cases, all institutional parties that manage research are of one mind regarding the importance of the research. But, in some cases, the research is more a reflection of international rather than national priorities. Furthermore, national or more local priorities are not necessarily in agreement in some research interest areas. For example, national governments might not have an interest in research focusing on the social conditions of ethnic or religious minorities that outside researchers consider worthy of study.

Research regarding tiger conservation in India provides an example of how international agendas often dictate what needs to be researched. The rapid decrease of the tiger population has led both to policy responses by the national government and to an increase in research on the topic, but neither of these

really take into account local priorities. Following an international trend (Smith and Wishnie, 2000; Chan et al, 2007), the government of India in 1973 enacted 'Project Tiger', a set of political measures to protect this emblematic species mainly through the creation of protected areas, such as tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries. Unfortunately, these measures generally do not take into consideration the presence of people living inside or around the protected areas. Research on the topic has focused on the biology of the species and on the causes of its disappearance, such as poaching or habitat destruction (Madhusudan and Karanth, 2002), but not on the interactions between local people and wildlife. Thus, policy measures and the research agenda have both followed trends established by international conservationist organizations and have neglected local priorities, such as access to natural resources, development and protection from wildlife. It is important for conscientious researchers to be mindful of these dynamics and of the fact that society is composed of many actors, not all sharing the same interests.

### **The interests of the community being researched**

Does field research conducted in a given community end up serving the interests of that community? Ideally, this would be the outcome, though often it is not. And, even worse, bad field research can cause or aggravate problems in the community being studied.

Ideally, field research can at least provide an indirect benefit to a community by, for example, serving as the information base for development projects or policy reforms that eventually redound to the benefit of the community. In some cases, the benefit can be more direct – such as in cases where action research is focused on understanding and remedying only the problem experienced by the community. However, many field research projects fall short of these objectives. It is important for research institutions and individual researchers to attempt to design research in such a way that community interests are served, either directly or indirectly, in spite of the fact that this is a difficult challenge.

Frequently, respondents in target communities reap absolutely no benefit from research, in spite of having collectively put hundreds of unpaid hours into answering questions. This might result from any combination of bad preparation, poor design, implementation, data collection, analysis, policy outreach and policy impact, among other factors. A frequent retrospective lament of many university students and senior researchers is that their hard work in the field has ended up 'gathering dust on a shelf'.

Often, however, research is deliberately extractive in character and has no intention to directly benefit the community being researched. Often extractive research can be justified by indirect benefits to the community researched

(for example, through policy change) and possibly to other communities to which the results may be generalizable. However, in some cases, field research does not attain even the indirect benefits sought.

How can we best assure that field research serves the interests of a given community, if that is a goal of the research? One way to do that is to involve local people in the conceptualization, design and/or implementation of the research (see Box 2.3). It is not always practical or possible to carry out field research in this way, but is an option that should be considered by researchers who are strongly inclined toward assuring that communities benefit from research efforts carried out in their midst. Another way of benefiting local communities is directly sharing the knowledge generated through the research with them, as was done by several PEN researchers (see Box 2.4).

**Box 2.4** *Returning information to participants:  
The Community Baboon Sanctuary, Belize*

Miriam Wyman

A study was conducted within the Community Baboon Sanctuary (CBS), Belize, a small community-reserve under the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Category IV protected area status to protect the black howler monkey (*Alouatta pigra*). Research assessing conservation from different perspectives involved interviewing 135 of the approximately 220 landowners within the seven villages that make up the CBS. Additionally, fieldwork surveying forest and land cover change covered all seven villages. The research results were returned to the CBS villages through meetings and through dissemination of written materials:

1. Meetings

The researcher returned to the CBS to make a formal presentation to the Women's Conservation Group, the management body representing women leaders from the seven CBS villages that oversees conservation efforts and research within the CBS.

Additionally, the researcher visited each of the seven village leaders and organized a meeting in each of the villages for interested residents. The meetings provided a good opportunity to not only summarize the research findings, but also to answer the questions or concerns of residents regarding the goals and process of the research. Several meetings provided a forum for residents to communicate with each other on how this research could improve their livelihoods or resolve local management issues.

2. Written materials

Short, non-technical reports (3–5 pages) were developed and handed out to residents at all meetings and to each of the seven village leaders.

A laminated poster showing research results was used at every meeting and left with the director of the CBS. A copy of the dissertation was sent to the CBS director, as will copies of any future publications from this research.

Not only is sharing research results an ethical thing to do, but results can also help with future management decisions and support for future funding. In the case of this particular research site, the CBS director is interested in using this study's findings for future grant writing to improve conservation and development projects.

Field research can potentially uplift local people by valuing their knowledge. Many local people are used to having their opinions ignored. By trying to understand local perspectives and putting them in the public arena, researchers can provide an avenue of empowerment and communication between local people and authorities that otherwise would not exist. Finally, in some cases at least, especially where there is no research fatigue, local people might simply enjoy the interaction with somebody from the outside asking interesting questions, bringing pictures of faraway places and just spending time with them.

## **The interests of the researcher**

Field research is done not just to meet societal and community objectives, but also those of researchers themselves. Various academic and personal interests motivate the implementation of field research by researchers and university students:

**Academic interests:** There is often a pedagogical component in social science curricula that gives attention to 'learning by doing' and learning by having first-hand contact with, and knowledge of, the day-to-day realities experienced by the people being studied.

Such curricula tend to espouse a training approach where the practicum embraces all aspects of the social scientific approach, from beginning to end: theory; methods; identification of a problem; formulation of a question or hypothesis; draft research instrument; pretesting; community household census; random selection of households; implementation of a household survey; data entry; data cleaning; data analysis; write-up; and restitution to the community. Indeed, the structure of this book reflects such an approach.

Relatedly, field research experience is sometimes a requirement for obtaining a degree in a specific field of study (such as anthropology or development studies).

**Personal experience:** Field research provides the opportunity for a unique personal experience. Field research entails the discovery of new places,

challenging oneself, often learning how to work in a class, race, ethnic, cultural and linguistic context different from one's own and learning how to overcome difficulties in this unfamiliar context.

Understanding the world through field research is a valuable personal asset. In many types of employment (including jobs in the conservation and development sectors), field research experience adds to the value of an academic degree.

While a positive personal experience and growth are important motivations (and these help in doing good fieldwork), there is also a risk that fieldwork can become 'academic tourism'. It is important for researchers to reflect on their motivations for doing field research, and to answer the question: 'who will really benefit from this research?'

## **The challenges of field research**

What has been stated above appears to be – we hope – a set of convincing arguments for conducting field research in general, and field research in developing countries in particular. As long as the interests of society at large, the community, and the researcher are all met, why would one hesitate to conduct such research? Reflecting on what happens in the real world of research, there are some good reasons to hesitate and to reflect deeply on whether field research is truly worth the investment. The main challenges in conducting accurate and useful field research are ethical and personal. We outline below some of the more important ethical challenges, and, in Chapter 9, our colleagues discuss personal challenges while being in the field.

### **Ethical challenges**

Field research raises ethical issues and it is important to be fully aware of them beforehand to address them adequately. The following are among the most important issues that must be thought through before and during field research:

**Perpetuating unequal power relations:** Bear in mind that communities that are the subject of field research may not always have the power to authorize or object to the field research being done. They are often on the receiving end of a prior decision made by people in government and/or academia 'the research will be conducted in village X'. Even if researchers ask village or town leaders for permission to conduct research, there is often no latitude for the leaders to say no. Conversely, communities are often unable to promote (in other words, to fund) or authorize research in cases where they want it done (say, to reveal a problem), as villages often lack the financial means to fund research and authorities can prohibit research that is too sensitive.

Closely related is the fact that local people often have no say in the content of the research to be done. For example in the 1980s and 1990s, much of the content of social science research in forests in developing countries was motivated by concern for the protection of forests and biodiversity and gave little (or lesser) attention to the well-being and rights of forest dwellers (West et al, 2006; Chan et al, 2007). Similarly, since 2006–2007 the focus has shifted to the role of forests in the global carbon cycle. Participatory approaches (see Box 2.3) can address these problems to some degree. However, the participatory approach is not always an appropriate mode of research and it should not be used in situations where science is not well-served by the consultative process.

The unfortunate and often invisible reality is that among the three interest groups discussed above, the communities are the least powerful.

**Releasing of sensitive information:** During field research, sensitive private information might be disclosed, potentially resulting in embarrassment for or harm to community members. Researchers should protect the privacy of participants. To prevent the release of sensitive information in settings where interviews are conducted face to face, researchers should select their methods of data collection, processing and publication carefully. For example, researchers should strive to conduct household interviews privately – out of the hearing range of eavesdropping neighbours or local government officials – both to guarantee privacy and also to improve the quality of communication with (otherwise) reluctant respondents. Researchers can also minimize the risk of public release of sensitive information by assuring the confidentiality of the names of respondents and the names of research villages.

**Issues related to data ownership:** Researchers conducting field research assume they have full ownership of the primary data being collected. But in cases of research on sensitive topics, for example, on issues related to territorial rights or traditional ecological knowledge, local people might be interested in the use of the primary data for non-academic purposes. The matter of relinquishing control of research data enters into a realm of ethics that researchers seldom think about beforehand.

**Unexpected outcomes:** The implementation of research sometimes stirs up local emotions related to the problem being investigated. In those cases, government authorities might act against local people who have chosen to become vocal. Or sometimes, the published research leads to policy reform or rethinking of programme objectives, and these reforms or new objectives are sometimes contrary to the interests of people in the community. For example, documenting widespread illegal forest uses may lead to stronger law enforcement towards local violators. While the researcher might not have intended these outcomes, it does not alter the fact that – in the worst of cases – the outcomes can be devastating and cannot be changed.

Almost all research endeavours have some relation to politics and power, and for that reason alone, one must be mindful of the consequences of conducting field research.

## **Overcoming the challenges**

The negative consequences described above can often be avoided with foresight and – above all – a conscientious attitude on the part of researchers. In various parts of this book, reference will be made to steps one must take to uphold ethical standards in designing and implementing a research project. Here, we merely list a few basic principles that should be borne in mind as researchers embark on their projects:

- Consider participatory research approaches, but only if they are feasible, practical, and are consistent with the topic being investigated (see Box 2.3).
- Make sure that target communities are adequately consulted prior to doing research, and engage in these consultations mindful of the unequal power relations mentioned above.
- If the research project involves indirect rather than direct benefits to the community, explain this candidly to community members.
- Guarantee anonymity in the processing and publication of data (for example, the names of respondents should not appear in publications) and then rigorously uphold the promise.
- Tell members of the community that you will give them a full accounting of what has been found through the research, and then come through on this promise. Returning information to communities can be done in simple and inexpensive ways (such as community workshops), even for graduate students with small budgets.
- Prepare yourself for the field. Minimize culture shock by getting a big head start in learning the local language and by informing yourself about customs, mores and traditions. The more prepared you are, the more enjoyable your field experience will be.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, there are good reasons for doing field research and yet also various reasons to be hesitant before committing oneself to this time- and resource-demanding activity.

In deciding whether and how to do field research in developing countries, prospective researchers need to be mindful of whose interests are being served



and the ethics of the research enterprise. Researchers need to go beyond the deceptively comforting assumption that a research project is well-conceived and worthwhile if it is initiated and funded by an international donor organization and endorsed by a national government. Researchers should be aware that their presence in the field, rather than contributing to the welfare of the people that supply the data and host them, can be potentially abused in power struggles and that research results can be used to fuel those struggles. So, in weighing the ethical considerations of field research, it is important to think through ways to avoid perpetuating unequal power relations and to affirm a moral commitment to the community by planning ways to guard sensitive information, by anticipating sensitive issues related to data ownership and by striving to conduct the research in such a way that unwanted outcomes are prevented.

In our elaboration of the challenges of field research in poor countries, we do not want to dissuade prospective researchers from undertaking this activity. Instead, our message is that field research can be of great service to the community being studied, to society at large and to the researcher if – and only if – serious and responsible thought is given to the challenges that surely lie ahead.

## **Key messages**

- Field research has several benefits: it can be used to overcome a lack of data from existing sources, to understand the local context, to control data quality, and to open new frontiers of knowledge.
- To guard against unwanted outcomes, great care and forethought should be invested in understanding whose interests are being served: that of society at large, that of the population being researched, or that of the researcher.
- Fieldwork involves several ethical challenges: unequal power relations between outside entities (like the government, international donors and the researcher) and the community being researched; the need to guard against the release of sensitive information; field research data ownership; and avoidance of unwanted outcomes for the local population.

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