Refugee research, policy and practice: some frequently asked questions

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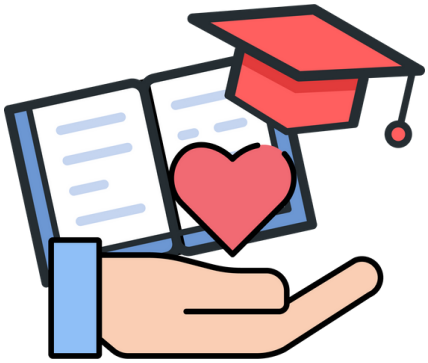
I have been working at the interface of academic research, policy development and operational practice for most of my career, primarily in the refugee field and most extensively for UNHCR. In this article, I address some of the questions that are most frequently put to me by people who have entered this field more recently, or who are planning to do so.

How does research undertaken by an NGO or international organization differ from the kind of academic research that takes place in a university?



In many ways, it does not differ a great deal. As in the academic world, the research undertaken by humanitarian organizations involves identifying a broad theme for analysis and then breaking that issue down into a number of more specific research questions. It involves the collection of relevant evidence (and I much prefer the word 'evidence' to 'data') from as wide a range of sources as possible, and the subsequent interrogation of that evidence so as to answer and revise the research questions that have been identified at the outset of the project. And, of course, it also involves the preparation and dissemination of a written or multi-media output that sets out the findings and conclusions of the research.

In other ways, however, the two enterprises are somewhat different. Research undertaken for an NGO or international organization usually has a specific purpose or application in mind. It might not even be referred to as 'research', given the 'ivory tower' connotations of that word, and the wariness of operational agencies in devoting scarce resources to that function. Indeed, the entity for which I was responsible at UNHCR was to all intents and purposes a research unit. But we sought to legitimize our work by describing it - and the words were very carefully chosen - as a 'Policy Development and Evaluation Service' (PDES).

There are some other differences. While analytical in nature, the research undertaken by NGOs and international organizations tends to avoid any overt reference to social science theory. In fact, even the notion of a 'theory of change' was one that I always tried to avoid while working at UNHCR, given its abstract nature and unfamiliarity to my operational colleagues. The analysis that we undertook was overwhelmingly qualitative in nature, rarely involved the use of any sophisticated methodologies and was, to be honest, less thorough and completed more quickly than a typical piece of academic research.

At this point, I should point out that my comments are based very much on the experience of the organizations for which I have worked, which might well not be typical of all humanitarian agencies. Some aid organizations, for example, make extensive use of quantitative population surveys and Randomized Controlled Trials, in which the case the gap between academic and non-academic research is arguably much narrower.

Given the relative absence of social science theory and method in the work of PDES, I often described our approach as "the systematic use of anecdotal evidence." Even so, we aspired to a high standard of intellectual rigour and were especially wary of our work being used to promote the image and reputation of the organization. It was for that reason that we published an Open Access Working Paper series titled 'New Issues in Refugee Research', which provided external researchers with an opportunity to disseminate their work widely, even if it was critical of UNHCR, the UN and its member states. At the same time, our evaluations of UNHCR operations adopted a 'storytelling' approach that focused on the preparation of compelling and comprehensible narratives, rather than the presentation of highly stylized and technical assessments based on formal criteria, indicators and logframes.

Finally, research produced by an NGO or international organization normally concludes with a set of policy proposals or operational recommendations, specifically geared to the needs of the organization. Over the past two decades, university research on refugee and humanitarian issues has also tended to move in this direction: first, because academics feel that if they are to study refugees and displaced people, then they have an obligation to improve the situation of those people; and second, because undertaking 'policy relevant research' is seen to be the most effective means of raising funds, gaining visibility and promoting personal careers.

I do not consider this to be an entirely positive development. On the one hand, there is a strong case to be made for research to be undertaken on issues that do not appear to be policy relevant, but which may nevertheless yield findings that significantly enhance our understanding of refugee issues and situations. On the other hand, there is a distinct danger that when policy relevant research is undertaken by

academics, they are liable to adopt in an uncritical manner the terms of reference, conceptual frameworks and vocabulary of the organizations who are funding and facilitating their work.

What impact does refugee research undertaken by academics have on the policies, programmes and practices of operational agencies such as UNHCR?

At the risk of disappointing some readers, my short answer to that question would be "not nearly as much impact as academics think it has, claim it has or would like it to have." This can be explained in a number of ways. Academic research is often slow to be placed in the public domain, a serious disadvantage for organizations that are dealing with fast-moving issues and situations. And it is often couched in language and written at a length which makes it inaccessible to busy policymakers without specialized training in the social sciences.

Above all, research is only one of many variables that feeds into the policymaking and programming process undertaken by humanitarian organizations. While it might be taken into account, research is unlikely to trump other considerations, such as the resources available to the organization, its relationship with a range of different stakeholders, including those which fund it, not to mention the internal rivalry that invariably takes place within any large bureaucracy and the competing interests that different parts of an organization bring to the process of policymaking and programme design.

How can the impact of academic research on humanitarian policymaking, programme design and operational practice be strengthened?

Many of the answers to that question should be evident from the preceding sections of this article. If your research outputs are lengthy, highly theoretical, methodologically and conceptually complex, then do not expect policymakers to read, digest and act upon them. Simply

placing your work in the public domain is not enough. You need a specific dissemination strategy for each of your research outputs - a strategy that is based on a good understanding of the interests and current preoccupations of any individual or organization that you are targeting.

And you need to identify what I would describe as 'gatekeepers' within those organizations - individuals and units that have a direct interest in your work, that appreciate its value and who can translate it into terms that are meaningful for the senior management and other staff of refugee-related organizations.

Finally, and contrary to standard academic practice, I would advise researchers not to worry too much about citation and direct attribution. If an operational agency finds value in your research and incorporates your ideas into their policymaking and programming processes, then they will not necessarily want or feel the obligation to give you explicit credit for your work. While this can be frustrating, such cases bring their own reward for researchers who have an interest in maximizing the real-world impact of their work.

Can I use my research skills effectively outside of academia?

My answer to that question would be, "yes, absolutely." When I returned to the academy after 35 years away, it was clear that university life had changed a great deal. And generally not for the better. Jobs were scarcer and more precarious. Competition for research funding was more intense. Academic life has become far more bureaucratic, as demonstrated by the establishment of formal assessment mechanisms, such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework.

During the same period, and on a more positive note, there has been a quantum leap in the amount of research, analysis and policy development undertaken by non-academic actors, ranging from community-based groups and human rights organizations, to national and international NGOs, government bodies, consultancy companies, the UN and other international agencies. As a result, there are far more research-related opportunities available in non-academic settings than was the case in the past.

Some simple advice in that respect. While I have reservations about the notion of 'policy-relevant research', you will naturally be of more interest to a potential employer if you can demonstrate a proven interest and expertise in the issues with which they are dealing. Name recognition is everything: publish as much as you can on issues of contemporary relevance, making full use of social media as well as the more traditional academic outlets. Do what I refer to as 'intelligent networking'. In other words, approach people who might be in a position to influence your career, not by making it obvious that you want them to give you a job, but by taking an interest in their work and ideas.

Be wary of internships, especially if they are unpaid, lack formal job descriptions and do not appear to offer the prospect of future employment or valuable contacts. And once you have completed your studies, do not hesitate to undertake any short-term consultancies that you are offered or that you see advertised. They provide an increasingly important entry point into the world of non-academic research and the related functions of policy development and evaluation.

Finally, there is a natural pathway to be taken from research into advocacy and activism. Unfortunately, this linkage has been undervalued by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations, many of which have established large teams of social media and communications specialists whose primary aim is to raise funds and attract publicity for their agencies. But their grasp of policy is often shaky, as is their ability to present both statistical and anecdotal information with the necessary degree of integrity. I would consequently encourage anyone with a background in refugee-related research to consider the employment opportunities available in the field of humanitarian advocacy.

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He has also worked for the British Refugee Council, Refugees International, the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, the Global Commission on International Migration and Chatham House.