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PANEL 7

Research:

What purpose does research serve?

Discussion on the current results, and relevance of GFPI research to GFP programmes

Moderator



Sairah Yusuf

Panellists



*Abdullahi
Benaiah*



Paul Wel



*Love
Calissendorff*



Nabila Hussein

The topic of the final panel at the inaugural Generations For Peace Institute (GFPI) Forum surrounded the question, "What purpose does research serve?" Agreeing on the definition of research to include any gathering of data, information and facts for the advancement of knowledge, the panelists focused on the research done through GFPI in the field of peace building. GFPI focuses on research as a way of bridging theory and practice; the aim is to invest in research that takes some of the more academic theoretical frameworks in peace building and links them to actual practice on the ground. The purpose of this panel in particular, was to discuss how theory is applied in practice, and to bring together different perspectives on what purpose research may serve to enhance GFP programming.

The panel was composed of GFPI staff member Nabila Hussein, researcher from the University of Oxford Love Calissendorff, and two GFP Pioneers whose programmes have been directly impacted by research - Abdullahi Benaiah and Paul Wel, from Nigeria and South Sudan respectively. The first to present was Love, who was commissioned by GFPI to complete a conflict mapping exercise in Juba, South Sudan to inform future GFP programming. Speaking from the perspective of an external researcher, Love identified two

main purposes behind commissioned research, "First, "external researchers provide an unfiltered account of what has happened, in contrast to the local community. People affected by conflict or violence find it difficult to assess impartially what has happened." Not only is the commissioned researcher external to the conflict s/he is assessing, s/he is also external to the organisation for whom they are completing the research. According to Love, he had no obligation to protect the GFP brand; his commitment was to producing quality research and reflecting the realities in Juba. The second purpose he identified was that of, "expand[ing] the horizons of contemporary research." For Love, "such research does not only benefit GFP, it benefits the entire field." Thus, in addition to observing situations with a more neutral lens, the external researcher produces work that is applicable to the field, rather than a particular organisation. Knowing how GFP programming is affecting the local communities in which it works, by tracking indicators and quantifying impacts, external researchers can inform other interventions and the peace-building field more generally.

Paul, GFP volunteer from South Sudan, was the second panellist to discuss his perspectives on research. Having carried out research himself, as a graduate student, Paul was very receptive to the arrival of external researchers seeking to carry out conflict mapping for GFP in Juba. According to Paul, "when [the external researchers] came, it inevitably raised questions. Why are they coming to research? Why are they asking questions? Are they going to spy?" For him, the scepticism from the locals was to be expected, in fact, he faced a similar response when carrying out his own research in Juba. The local population must see "the benefit of research for the community, it must be seen as beneficial for the country and not just for GFP," said Paul. He felt that if you wanted someone to participate in interviews and focus groups, you needed to gain their trust and prove your credibility. For Paul, external researchers need the aid of locals to gain the trust of communities, and he considered himself to have been that bridge for Love in South Sudan.

Whereas Paul immediately recognised that research was essential to strong GFP programming in Juba, Abdullahi from Nigeria was cynical at best. Abdullahi spoke of his past experience with researchers who, as individuals or on behalf of organisations, came to the local community, asked questions, made promises and then disappeared. Because of this previous exposure, Abdullahi admitted to being suspicious when external researchers arrived in Kaduna asking questions about the impact of GFP programming. He spoke of his reluctance to answer questions, and his overall scepticism – "What was this researcher going to tell me about my community? How was she going to help us?" In the end however, once the research was complete, and the findings of the research were made accessible to him and his team of volunteers, Abdullahi admitted to the usefulness of impact assessment. The report produced actually utilised the data gained through interviews, observations and focus groups to





assess the needs of Abdullahi and his fellow volunteers, and the effectiveness of GFP programming. Since the production of this report in 2013, the Kaduna-based GFP volunteers have adapted their activities and implemented their own means of assessing the impact of their work (in tandem with GFP HQ) so as to continuously better their programmes.

To conclude, Nabila spoke on behalf of GFPI to communicate why GFP considers research to be of the utmost importance. Her reasoning was threefold. Firstly, she spoke of the need to maintain high quality and sustainable programming that can have real and tangible impact on local communities. To achieve this, "GFPI commissions and carries out conflict mapping exercises prior to the start of GFP interventions, monitors and evaluates programming as it is ongoing, and provides informed recommendations to ensure that programming is continuously being strengthened." According to Nabila, the evidence collected, which includes positive behavioural change, reductions in forms of violence and increased levels of trust amidst conflicting groups, serves to empower GFP volunteers on the ground; for her, this is the second most important purpose of GFPI research. Thirdly, the research carried out by GFPI provides a knowledge base to inform curriculum and training material. "We want our Delegates and Pioneers to have the high quality materials, which marry theory and practice, upon which to build and inform their programmes," said Nabila. Whilst she recognised the fact that GFP volunteers

receive researchers differently in the field, as was the case with Paul and Abdullahi, she believed that the positive impacts of quality research far outweigh the negatives.

All four panelists discussing research made note of the difficulties encountered when carrying out quality research, amongst others: the immense preparation necessary prior to entering the field, the efforts dedicated to securing credibility while in the field, and the time invested in carrying out interviews and analysing data. However, despite inevitable difficulties, each panelist concluded that research, when carried out ethically and responsibly, and applied practically, can have a positive impact on the subject of scrutiny – which in these cases were GFP programmes. As Abdullahi aptly stated, "Research is only useful if someone acts on it!"



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