

# Taking the Research Experience Seriously: A Framework for Reflexive Applied Research in Development

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Interdisciplinary scholarly literature considers how research processes may adversely affect their participants. Building on this work, this article addresses the processes and practices of applied research in contexts in which imbalances of power exist between researchers and those being researched. We argue that research activities in international development and humanitarian work that are typically operational, such as needs assessments, baseline studies, and monitoring and evaluation, represent interventions in the lives of participants, with the potential to create value or harm, delight or distress. The ethical and methodological dilemmas of this intervention have received less attention than purely academic discussions of human subject research. How can applied researchers meaningfully reckon with the effects of the research process on both those conducting it and those participating in it throughout the research cycle? In response, we introduce an approach co-developed over seven years through engagement with applied researchers across sectors. We discuss four interrelated principles—relevance, respect, right-sizing, and rigor—intended to invite a commitment to ongoing process improvement in the conduct of applied research. We also propose a framework to guide the implementation of these principles and illustrate the tensions that may arise in the process of its application. These contributions extend conversations about research ethics and methods to the operational research realm, as well as provide concrete tools for reflecting on the processes of operational research as sites of power that ought to be considered as seriously as the findings of data collection activities.

Here you come to ask us the same silly questions that you go sell to aid sponsors. Now when the aid comes, you keep it for yourself. I don't want to answer any question. Go take the answers for the ones we provided last year. You're all crooks of the same family. You'll ask me my name, my family size, the kind of goods I have, and so on and so on. I am tired of all this and I am not answering a question, nor will anyone else in this family (McCreeless 2015, 3).

This was a mango farmer's reaction in Burkina Faso when he was invited to be part of a monitoring and evaluation survey by a nonprofit social investment fund. This is not an isolated remark. Researchers working in settings of humanitarian or development interventions have observed the effects of "research fatigue" on participants in their studies (Omata 2019). A growing body of scholarly literature critically engages with the experience of "being researched" (Clark 2010), analyzing the potentially unpleasant or harmful effects that the research process can have both on those conducting research (Bouka 2018; Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019) and on those participating in it as research subjects (Wood 2006; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Sukarieh and Tannock 2013; Thomson 2021).

Echoing the questions and concerns this literature brings to the fore, this article directs its attention to a different setting and modality of research. This analysis has stemmed from our reflections on the applied research processes of

international development and humanitarian organizations,<sup>1</sup> which often take the form of operational research and are typically conducted either by the practitioner organization itself or in partnership with academic institutions (Lewis et al. 2019). This type of research encompasses both instances in which an organization involved in development practice determines a research question and seeks to answer it through its interactions with human subjects and data collection activities that development organizations implement as part of their programmatic operations, such as monitoring and evaluation, impact assessments, needs assessments, and more.<sup>2</sup> Despite the extensive body of work analyzing the programmatic operations of development organizations, the research activities of these groups have received comparatively less scrutiny (Lewis et al. 2019, 201; Myrntinen and Mastonshoeva 2019, 244).

<sup>1</sup>The boundaries of the universe of "international development" are porous, rather than fixed, and this field of practice intersects and overlaps with other spheres of action, such as humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and more.

<sup>2</sup>Applied operational/practitioner research is not delimited by whether the outputs are published. The field of operational research often refers to internally oriented activities with the aim of improving an organization's practice. When we refer to operational or applied research conducted by practitioners (either individually or in partnership with academics), we include both those internal and often unpublished activities (e.g., audits, monitoring and evaluation, etc.) and the research that a practitioner organization or external research team may conduct to answer questions intended to inform practice.

How can organizations engaged in applied research meaningfully reckon with the effects of their research process on both those conducting it and those participating in it? How can that meaningful reckoning happen throughout the research cycle, from design to data collection, analysis, write-up, and dissemination? In response to these questions, this article introduces an approach that aims to facilitate a respectful, relevant, right-sized, and rigorous research process.

We first discuss why we consider activities such as monitoring and evaluation, needs assessments, and other operational data collection research, and how these forms of data collection compare to academic research. Next, we offer a brief history of the origins of the approach we discuss, and introduce the four principles underpinning it, followed by a discussion of how we have implemented them and what we have learned about navigating the trade-offs and tensions that emerge in the practical application. In the concluding section, we reflect on the evolution of our thinking and practices over time and outline future directions.

The problems and dilemmas with which this article engages are not new, and nor are the approaches it proposes (Leith and McCreless 2018, 2). The ethical and methodological dilemmas of operational research that we discuss are persistent, proliferating despite a wealth of critical literature on “aidland” and development (Dogra 2013; Rutazibwa 2018). Emphasizing the innovation or exceptionality of our approach would elide the commonality of the frustrations, experiences, and insights of the scholars/practitioners who have informed its development. We therefore articulate the contributions of this article in ways that acknowledge the ongoing work among diverse and differently situated stakeholders who seek to improve ethical and methodological engagement with research participants in international development and beyond. To that end, this article offers an applied research perspective that can complement and enrich academic conversations on the methods and ethics of research with groups termed to be vulnerable (Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Hugman 2010; Turner 2019), in settings of violence (Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Brigden and Gohdes 2020), or in the context of aid and development activities (Hammett, Twyman, and Graham 2014; Pascucci 2017).

Further, the article highlights that operational research is a key way in which organizations intervene in the lives of individuals enmeshed in their activities, whether those individuals are research participants, intended program beneficiaries, enumerators, translators/interpreters, or other interlocutors. We argue that operational research interactions are sites of power that are worthy of examination both because of the role of development institutions in knowledge creation (Fouksman 2017, 1850) and because the process of data collection is yet another way in which these institutions exercise power over the communities in which they operate (Krystalli 2020). Acknowledging that considerable thought and effort is invested in the design and implementation of development interventions, this article makes a normative contribution by proposing that similar care and reflection should inform the processes of data collection associated with monitoring and researching those interventions.

Finally, building on excellent recent analyses of research practices in humanitarian, development, and conflict settings (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Lewis et al. 2019), the present article not only identifies the potential ethical and methodological challenges that operational and other applied research in these contexts presents, but also discusses a specific framework with which to navigate them. Unlike

our earlier publications, whose main aims were to engage applied and academic researchers in co-developing the approach or to introduce development practitioners to it, this article represents our first scholarly publication on this subject. One of its contributions lies not only in introducing the approach to an audience that may not yet be familiar with it, but also in critically reflecting on the use of these principles and framework in practice, including highlighting the trade-offs that arise when implementing them and concretely discussing how to navigate these tensions. Significantly, this framework and the critical reflections on its application incorporate the experiences of scholars and practitioners (and people who inhabit both categories), who have implemented this approach over the past seven years, thus representing collective insights at the intersection of scholarship and practice.

We specifically caution, however, against reading this article as only or primarily relevant for those who work as development practitioners. For those whose professional work unfolds predominantly in the realm of academia, understanding the broader ecosystem of actors and interventions that shape people’s experiences of being researched is essential for designing and implementing ethical research. Further, as our own pedagogical experiences within the academy highlight, students of development and (critical) humanitarianism at all levels of study, many of whom are pursuing or considering careers in this field, often seek ethical and methodological guidance that goes beyond the realities of designing and implementing research within academia. As such, putting the scholarship on the ethics and methods of “field research” in conversation with the operational realities of development organizations highlights potential synergies, as well as draws our attention to the limitations of methods/ethics advice that only considers fellow academics as its primary audience. The approach we discuss herein can serve as a roadmap for institutional conversations, training opportunities, managing collaborations, and ongoing reflection within a range of organizations, with the ultimate goal of addressing the power imbalances of applied research and the ways those affect various actors’ experiences of the research process.

### Operational Data Collection as Research

Some might argue that the monitoring and evaluation activity that led to the Burkinabe mango farmer’s exasperation in the opening excerpt did not constitute research in the first place. “Research data generated by NGOs inhabits something of a liminal space,” Henri Myrntinen and Subhiya Mastonshoeva (2019, 228) argue. This feature of operational research can lead certain scholars and practitioners alike to dismiss needs assessments, audits, monitoring activities, and impact evaluations as being “just” part of programmatic work, falling outside the realm of whatever research is imagined to be. The fact that research activities of practitioner organizations do not always lead to publication (or to publication in peer-reviewed academic journals and books by university presses) further accentuates the impression of liminality, “as exemplified by the term ‘grey literature’ that is often used” for such outputs (Myrntinen and Mastonshoeva 2019, 228).

This view of operational data collection as potentially “not research” stems in part from certain differences between academic and practitioner research that merit recognition. We do not posit that scholarly and practitioner research are monolithic realms of action, or that they are entirely distinct from each other; we recognize that it is sometimes the same

individuals who conduct this kind of work in different roles and configurations of partnerships. Rather, we suggest that the purpose, forms, outputs, outlets, audiences, funding streams, and temporalities of applied research among practitioners can differ from those of other scholarly research (Armstrong et al. 2015; Lewis et al. 2019; Myrntinen and Mastonshoeva 2019). Importantly, unlike exclusively academic research, applied research often begins in response to operational realities and needs in a given context and to funding priorities set by humanitarian and development donors. Those priorities, coupled with the time pressures that development/humanitarian practitioners face to deliver services in addition to conducting research, often shape both how that research is framed and how it unfolds in practice.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Pratyoush Onta (2011, 54), “the development imperative forces analysts to focus on service delivery of the immediate relief mode,” thus overshadowing attention to the lives of these organizations “in the broader social canvas.”

Despite these differences, we argue for the importance of treating operational data collection activities as research. The humans on the other side of an enumerator’s clipboard or tablet pre-loaded with questions about this year’s harvest *experience these data collection interactions as research*. The etymology of the English word “research” traces to the sixteenth-century French *recherche*, meaning “to seek.” Needs assessments for aid distributions, refugee intake questionnaires and life stories, impact evaluations of nutrition or agricultural programs, and multiple cycles of monitoring and evaluation of various kinds are all iterations of seeking—and the pleasure and burden of being sought falls on the subjects being researched. In this sense, research *as a process* is an intervention in people’s lives, regardless of the institutional identity of who is conducting it, whether and where the output will be published, or who the funding agency may have been.

#### Four Principles for a Better Experience of Applied Research

The ambiguous connotations of framing applied research as an “intervention” allow both for the possibility of agency, or even delight, in participation in research *and* for the likelihood that the process of research itself feels like a burden, an imposition, or a cause of harm in the life of research participants. The approach we discuss here originated in response to the tensions between these possible experiences of being researched.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, fifty development researchers, practitioners, funders/donors, and people who worked at the intersection of these roles and identities gathered for a workshop organized by MIT D-Lab and The Fletcher School to share stories of their experiences of applied research. The individuals at the gathering represented a range of institutional positions, from smaller, private development consulting firms to affiliates of universities, NGOs, donors, and large international organizations.<sup>5</sup> Participants spanned an array

of countries of origin and locations of operation, across the “Global North” and “Global South.”<sup>6</sup> What united the workshop participants was a sense of frustration with the way applied research in international development was conducted, whether by practitioner organizations independently or in partnership with academia.

The articulated concerns related to the ways in which the conduct of research often privileged the goals and questions of those designing and directing the data collection—and, in particular, those situated in the “Global North”—over the participants’ experiences of the process of research. Four specific areas of concern were particularly salient during this initial workshop, and were echoed in subsequent trainings and gatherings. Each of these four concerns maps on to well-documented critiques of both academic and practitioner research, and has shaped the four principles of the approach we discuss here. Drawing from participatory design (Sanders and Stappers 2008; Hussain, Sanders, and Steinert 2012), “human-centered” design (IDEO 2012), co-design (Sanders and Stappers 2008), and co-creation approaches (Hussain, Sanders, and Steinert 2012), as well as from participatory action research (PAR) (Fals Borda 2001; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2008),<sup>7</sup> this approach places its emphasis on how the humans involved in research experience the research process.

This focus on the human experience is reflected in the four foundational principles. Applied research should be (1) *respectful* toward participants, data collectors, implementing partners, and all others engaged in the research process; (2) *relevant* to research participants, decision-makers, and other key stakeholders; (3) *right-sized* in terms of the footprint of the data collection activities; and (4) *rigorous*, consistent with the standards and best practices of the disciplines, methodologies, and methods in question.

We recognize that, at times, various actors in the research ecosystem treat some of these principles (e.g., rigor) as more important than others. In our approach, these principles are not hierarchical; rather, they co-exist and shape one another. That is, research that is relevant to and respectful of those being researched, and which does not inconvenience them with burdensome protocols, is more likely to generate accurate data and, therefore, be more rigorous. While the principles reinforce each other, they also sometimes exist in tension with one another, requiring researchers to commit to intentionally weighing trade-offs and make

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tween research leads, implementers, and participants. To that end, since the initial workshop, scholar-practitioners have experimented with this approach in the fields of financial inclusion, refugee response and forced migration studies, nutrition and food security, agriculture, market research, public health, transitional justice, energy, gender and development, technology, entrepreneurship, and NGO leadership.

<sup>6</sup>We acknowledge the limits of these terms, particularly when framed as a binary. Following Eriksson Baaz and Utas (2019, 161), “while North–South inequalities in knowledge production are indeed strong, [...] imagining the researcher–broker relationship simply as reflecting a North/South divide problematically downplays the research conducted by scholars from ‘the Global South,’ in turn reflecting the problematic turn of Northern white navel-gazing mark much of post-colonial studies.”

<sup>7</sup>This approach echoes some of the principles of PAR, including integrating the concepts of action and reflection throughout the process. We also draw upon the ideas of co-designing the research questions and activities with community members, recognizing and respecting the skills, knowledge, and value that the community members add, identifying and addressing power imbalances, working with the community to generate benefits for the participants, and ensuring that the research generates actionable findings that can lead to positive changes in the communities. That said, a key pillar of PAR is to emphasize community liberation and emancipation through the research process, which is not always observable in the mandate, goals, or practices of organizations conducting applied research (Fals Borda 2001; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2008).

<sup>3</sup>Our thanks to the editors and peer reviewers for helping us draw out this point.

<sup>4</sup>In the first seven years of co-developing and implementing this approach, we have termed it “lean research.” In response to feedback from editors, peer reviewers, and collaborators, we recognize that the name does not necessarily best reflect the principles or goals of the approach and we have chosen not to use it here.

<sup>5</sup>The approach we discuss is rooted in the experiences of researchers situated broadly within international development practice. It can be adapted to many other sectors and contexts in which there are power discrepancies be-



explicit choices regarding what to prioritize, informed by their knowledge of the contextual nuances of their research sites.

### Respect

First, workshop participants reported that some data collection activities were unwittingly disrespectful of the research participants' time, agency, dignity, preferred modes of storytelling, and experiences. This concern also encompassed acts of extraction and disrespect on the part of lead researchers toward members of operational research teams and, in particular, enumerators and interpreters/translators located in the area in which the data collection took place (Dijkzeul and Wakenge 2010; Bouka 2018; Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019).

Respectful research attends to the dignity of the humans involved in it. Echoing Elisabeth Wood (2013, 299), this involves treating research participants "as *persons*, not merely as sources of data." In terms of research participants, the principle of respect manifests at every stage of the process, from how the question is developed to how the informed consent process is implemented and how data are collected, analyzed, validated, and disseminated. In terms of research partners, implementers, and brokers, respectful treatment involves being mindful of the dynamics of extraction that have characterized much research in settings of power inequality (Bouka 2018; Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to a dignified research process. Ensuring one requires input from various stakeholders, creativity, empathy, and an honest assessment of the effects of the research process on the daily lives of participants and implementers alike.

### Relevance

Second, workshop participants stated that applied research was frequently inaccessible or irrelevant to fellow practitioners, decision-makers, and other key stakeholders, including the research participants themselves.<sup>8</sup> This is an issue not only for the smaller entities involved in applied research, but also for large international organizations with potentially wide reach. According to a World Bank study, "over 31 percent of policy reports are never downloaded" and "87 percent of policy reports were never cited" (Doemeland and Trevino 2014, 12). These concerns about relevance are particularly urgent for practitioners, compared to research that unfolds exclusively within the academic domain, given the mandates of many development organizations to influence decision-makers and effect change in development policy and practice.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, both practitioners implementing development interventions and decision-makers face time pressures

<sup>8</sup>Martin Ravallion, former director of research at the World Bank, writes of a "trade-off between publishability and relevance," recognizing that "the set of research questions that are most relevant to development policy overlap only partially with the set of questions that are seen to be in vogue by the editors of the professional journals" (Ravallion 2008, 27). A 2014 survey by the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* found that most practitioner respondents "believe that accessing articles is too expensive and that the findings do not reflect their particular situation or context" (Seelos and Mair 2014).

<sup>9</sup>We are not arguing that academics do not have a public impact mandate, or that some academics do not exercise that mandate and interest in influencing policy, practice, and decision-making. We simply acknowledge that "the audience expectations of NGO research are different from academia" and that "donors, policymakers, like-minded organizations and those implementing projects on the ground" tend to have different preferences for operational research outputs than scholars primarily based in universities (Myrntinen and Mastonshoeva 2019, 235).

that make engaging with lengthy academic research (often found behind paywalls) more challenging.<sup>10</sup> Applied research is relevant when it is accessible, legible, and useful to key stakeholders, including research participants themselves, study communities, practitioners, policymakers, and other decision-makers. These audiences are heterogeneous, and their needs and priorities may vary. That said, a number of considerations can improve the ways in which applied research reckons with its legibility, accessibility, and use. Peek et al. (2014, 448) have argued that "perceived lack of relevance is cited as the primary reason practitioners do not use research," a view echoed across fields and disciplines (Panda and Gupta 2014). Similarly, from the point of view of research participants themselves, much applied research is designed with little consideration of their experiences, needs, or priorities. As one respondent to the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* survey on the role of research in social innovation stated:

The most useful thing would be if researchers actually talked and met with [...] grassroots, community-based civil society groups and learned about the challenges they face, and asked them what information or knowledge they could use—if more research could serve those needs, that would go a long way towards making research more relevant (Seelos and Mair 2014).

To be sure, many operational researchers already employ participatory, consultative models in their work (Thiele et al. 2007; Paz-Ybarnegaray and Douthwaite 2017; Faure et al. 2020). Building on this work, the framework in the next section offers some ways of reflecting on relevance at the design, analysis, write-up, and dissemination phases.

### Right-sizing

Third, workshop participants expressed concerns around the footprint of their data collection activities. They shared stories of survey and interview protocols that included hundreds of questions and take hours to administer (Leith and McCreless 2018, 12), and of research participants finding that engaging in the data collection activities of development NGOs was at times at odds with meaningfully pursuing their livelihoods (McCreless 2015, 24). In many instances, the extent of the intervention that applied research represented in the lives of development interlocutors was not positively correlated with the value or relevance of that research to the lives of people participating in it.

The starting point for right-sized research is defining the scope of data collection in relation to the problem or need to which the data collection responds, and the extent of use and potential impact of the resulting findings. This requires determining whether data collection is needed at all (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018), or whether the question is answerable with already existing data and available sources, acknowledging that "knowledge does not always need to be reimaged with new data" (Wilson in Armstrong et al. 2015, 11). Particularly for applied research, right-sizing requires organizations to consider whether and how they will use any additional data they collect to inform their programming. "If nothing is going to change in the way you do what you're doing," Dean Karlan (2013) argues, "then don't spend money collecting data just to keep doing the same thing."

Right-sizing goes beyond the costs of research to determine the magnitude of it, the type and length of instru-

<sup>10</sup>Our thanks to peer reviewers who encouraged us to draw this point out.

ments, and the ways in which data collection activities fit in with other dimensions of the research team and participants' lives. In this sense, right-sizing is linked to both relevance and respect, highlighting the ways in which the four principles echo and reinforce each other. To be clear, right-sized research is not necessarily always lighter and briefer than other forms of data collection; at times, right-sizing may mean creating *more* time and space for engagement with research participants in ways that make the experience meaningful for them. We acknowledge that, just as the research process can be burdensome or harmful, it can also be enjoyable and agentive. Right-sizing invites researchers to consider how to balance these considerations.

### *Rigor*

Fourth, echoing the preceding considerations, workshop participants were concerned that the above issues not only are ethical and methodological, but also affect the quality of the research findings and the rigor of the overall research process—that is, the ethics, methods, and analytical rigor of operational research are inseparable from each other (Krystalli 2021, 127).

Rigorous research adheres to the best practices and highest standards of the discipline(s) and fields of practice in which it is situated. Those practices and standards govern methods, instrument design, sampling strategies, data analysis, and write-up. What counts as “best practice” or “highest standard” is itself a matter of contestation and interpretation within and across disciplines. It is not our intention to create a hierarchy of research designs, methodologies, or methods, as their suitability will depend on the specific context of operational research. Rather, the goal of embracing a principle of rigor is two-fold: First, taking rigor seriously requires practitioners to spell out among themselves the assumptions about best practice and standards that shape their data collection within their field. Second, rigorous research requires transparency about these assumptions in any published outputs that emerge, so that readers can properly assess the findings. In both academic and operational contexts, such discussions—about methodological assumptions, methods, and ethics—are very brief or lacking altogether (Parkinson and Wood 2015). We argue that research must not only *be rigorous*, but also *be transparent about its interpretations and practices of rigor*.

No research approach is a panacea. To declare our approach applicable to each type of applied research in every possible context would be antithetical to the sensitivity and flexibility that we value. Similarly, this approach cannot be a substitute for (though it can complement) basic training in the principles, conventions, and best practices of the respective field, discipline, or sector in which organizations are conducting applied research. Finally, this approach is not a replacement for institutional processes of ethical review. Within universities, such processes are often known as ethics boards or institutional review boards, tasked with approving research protocols in accordance with national, institutional, and local laws and norms on human subjects research (Bhattacharya 2014). Increasingly, academic-practitioner partnerships have come under the purview of such boards, with some practitioner organizations having created similar institutional processes for purely operational research as well (Schopper et al. 2009). Approval from these boards (where they exist) is a necessary but not sufficient step for fully and meaningfully reckoning with the ethical and methodological dilemmas of research in practice (Fujii 2012). As such, the approach we discuss is not intended as

a compliance-oriented approach, or as a way to obtain a “checkbox” and a green light to move forward with applied research. Instead, it is a framework that invites practitioners to reflect on the questions related to the process of research that emerge throughout the research cycle.

### **From Principles to Action: An Inquiry-Based Framework**

The framework below (table 1) was first developed in 2015 in response to requests from operational researchers for guidance on how to translate the above principles into action within their respective organizations (Hoffecker, Leith, and Wilson 2015). The framework is deliberately articulated in terms of questions for practitioners to consider throughout the research cycle because it aims to invite inquiry and reflection, rather than being prescriptive or singular in its guidance. We have updated the questions in the framework presented in this article to reflect insights that emerged from both our own and our collaborators' applications of the approach since its inception.

Not all questions will be equally relevant to all types of applied research, nor will all questions be answerable in every context. The goal is to have researchers take them into account and discuss them when they design, conduct, analyze, and disseminate their data collection activities. Given the fact that much applied research, particularly within the NGO context, takes place in environments in which there is limited training for the teams carrying it out (Myrntinen and Mastonshoeva 2019, 235), this framework can also serve as a guiding document for organizational conversations on operational research practice and the dilemmas that accompany it.

### **Using the Framework in Practice: Tensions and Insights**

Over the past seven years, we have presented these principles and framework to applied research organizations through trainings, workshops, conferences, collaborative partnerships, and online as well as in-person courses. We have also shared this approach with graduate students in various disciplines aiming to pursue a professional path in international development, monitoring and evaluation, and/or applied research. This section of the article addresses the question that most commonly recurs in response to these presentations: What does one actually *do* to apply these principles and framework?

This is a question we understand and have deliberately refrained from answering prescriptively. The value and usefulness of this approach lie in large part in its explicit invitation to adapt operational research interventions to the specific contexts in which they are situated. The question of “what do I do?” can be a shortcut, a way to *not* fully engage with the complicated, layered questions that the framework poses throughout the research cycle. At the same time, reflexivity is not merely a theoretical commitment; it is a practice of inquiry and reflection that shapes action. Knowing how others have implemented this approach can spark ideas and inspire conversations. Crucially, insights from practice can be useful for those who seek to convince other stakeholders involved in the research process—including, but not limited to, supervisors, donors, and implementing partners—of the value and salience of this approach.

In that vein, we draw from our experiences of implementing these principles and framework to offer an illustration of this work in practice. We have opted for a single illustration here, rather than a range of examples, in order to allow for a more in-depth analysis of the dilemmas and tensions

**Table 1.** Framework for relevant, respectful, right-sized, and rigorous research**Is our research rigorous?**

1. How do we know that our research adheres to the highest standards and best practices of our discipline(s) or field of practice with regard to research and instrument design, data collection, analysis, and write-up? Which resources and/or people have we consulted to obtain input on our research design?
2. What steps are we taking to ensure the internal validity of the research, if applicable?
3. What steps are we taking to ensure the external validity of the research, if applicable?
4. How are we designing our research process to ensure that our research is reproducible, if applicable to the methodology/method? If reproducibility/replicability are not key goals, is the research process documented in sufficient detail for readers to transparently understand it and meaningfully interpret the findings?
5. Will the research be reproduced or verified by an independent party? If there are no current plans for this, is the research conducted in a way that it can be easily verified?
6. What steps are we taking to clearly, accurately, and transparently report all relevant research processes and results to stakeholders?
7. How are we protecting the data of the people who participate in the research during data collection? How are we safely storing these data during analysis and write-up? How are we planning to protect the data after the research concludes?
8. If the research is an impact evaluation or trial, is it registered with AEA's social science registry? If the research is a randomized control trial, is it registered with 3ie's RIDIE?
9. Do our published outputs accurately represent the main ethical and methodological dilemmas we faced and decisions we made in the design and conduct of this research?

**Is our research respectful?**

10. What are we doing to engage the research participants and/or members of their communities (where appropriate) in the design of our research and our informed consent process?
11. How are we designing the informed consent process to ensure that research participants receive all the information that they need in a way that is understandable to them, so they can decide whether they wish to participate in the research or not?
12. What actions are we taking to ensure that the participant feels truly free to reject participation in the research or to drop out of research once it has started without fearing or experiencing negative consequences?
13. What actions are we taking to create an environment in which research participants feel comfortable and can enjoy and/or find meaning in the experience of participating in research?
14. Are we appropriately and adequately relying on existing information, data, and knowledge that local host institutions may have?
15. How are we helping local host institutions to obtain the information they need about the proposed research and determine whether it is to their benefit to participate?
16. Have we determined contextually appropriate forms of acknowledging and/or compensating participants and host/partner institutions for their time and any expenses associated with this research? Have we consulted key stakeholders in making this determination?
17. How are we training and preparing members of the research team to collect the data?
18. How do we plan to compensate enumerators, and have we consulted relevant stakeholders to determine the levels of compensation?
19. In addition to fair compensation, how else are we ensuring that enumerators, interpreters/translators, assistants, and other research team members experience the research process as respectful, meaningful, and enjoyable?
20. Have we agreed with enumerators, translators/interpreters, and other research brokers on a strategy for acknowledging their labor in any published outputs, including a clear policy on authorship?
21. Have we included all relevant enumerators, translators/interpreters, and other research brokers in our plans for taking care of the research team (physically and mentally) during the research process? What steps are we taking to ensure that we can take care of the research team (physically and mentally)? Have we designed our budget and logistics plans with this in mind?
22. What specific steps are we taking to provide research participants with opportunities to review and refute (if applicable) the findings? Have we planned our analysis and writing process to account for revisions based on reactions to or refutations of our original research findings?

**Is our research relevant?**

23. What secondary research have we done to ensure that primary research on the topic we are proposing is actually needed?
24. What process are we using to identify the research priorities of the research participants and, if relevant, their communities? What criteria are we using to determine to what extent these priorities should be included in our research?
25. What steps are we taking to understand what aspects of the research local institutions find most relevant, and how are we factoring that into our research design and dissemination strategy?
26. Have we identified stakeholders in advance of the research project who have given input into how they would like to receive and use research findings? How are we incorporating this input into our research design, analysis, write-up, and dissemination strategy?
27. Are the research participants and any institutions or partners (if applicable) able to clearly articulate the value of the proposed research?
28. What steps are we taking to communicate and share the research findings in ways that are understandable and accessible to all stakeholders, including research participants? If public dissemination of the research findings in the community of research is inadvisable, unsafe, or otherwise not feasible, how/what are we communicating with research participants about the findings, results, and potential impacts of this research?
29. If appropriate, have we allocated time and budget to disseminate research results to stakeholders and decision-makers at various levels?
30. Have decision-makers expressed interest in using research findings in advance of the research? After completion of the research, how are we tracking whether decisions have been made based on the findings? How are we tracking and documenting other ways in which the research may have been used or been influential?
31. Are we planning to share de-identified study data, if appropriate? With whom will we share it and how will we identify additional opportunities for the data to be used? What steps are we taking to de-identify these data meaningfully and appropriately in advance of sharing in order to safeguard the safety, privacy, and confidentiality of research participants?
32. What approach are we using to understand the impact that the research has had (for example, on the decision, debate, issue, or audience of interest)? Have we agreed on a time horizon over which our team will actively track potential research impacts?

Table 1. Continued

**Is the research right-sized?**

33. What criteria are we using to assess how large (in terms of people or households involved) and costly it is reasonable for the research to be? Are we considering the relevance of the research question(s) to key stakeholders, the research activities of other actors in the proposed area of our own research, and the type of decisions that will be informed by research results in making that assessment?
34. If the research involves sampling, how are we selecting our sample to ensure that it is large enough to meaningfully answer our question, but not too large?
35. How are we assessing which activities and questions are essential to the research objectives and which ones we can eliminate? How are we engaging collaborators, enumerators, translators/interpreters, and other research brokers in that process?
36. Have we eliminated all non-essential protocols and questions?
37. Does our plan of analysis accurately reflect the data we are collecting? If there are data that we are collecting but do not currently plan to analyze, can we adjust our data collection process to be more right-sized?
38. With input from various stakeholders, have we determined the length of time that is acceptable for an interview (or other research intervention) from the perspective of research participants? How are we designing our research protocols and instruments to ensure that interviews (or other research interventions) do not exceed this length of time?

that arise in the process of implementing this framework.<sup>11</sup> This illustration draws from the work of Wilson and Krystalli in partnership with humanitarian and development NGOs to document the financial journey of refugees in Greece, Jordan, and Turkey in 2016–2017 (Krystalli, Hawkins, and Wilson 2018) exploring how money and socioeconomic class shaped the experiences of people on the move and their interactions with formal and informal authorities along the way. The numbers in parentheses below refer to specific questions in the framework in table 1.

We begin by reflecting on moments in which we decided *not* to pursue certain research questions in particular settings. Having reviewed the extensive scholarly and practitioner literature related to our topic (Q23), and having paid attention to the ecosystem of journalists, humanitarian practitioners, and academics asking questions to refugees at the time of our own applied research (Q14), we opted not to ask refugees to re-narrate the experience of flight from their homes (Q35). While those stories are moving, powerful, and important for some actors in the applied research ecosystem to document, they were less central to our academic/practitioner inquiry on how money and socioeconomic class shape the experience of being on the move. In light of the recognition that those stories represented much of the journalistic and humanitarian interest in the refugee experience, we did not want to contribute to the burden of (re-)narration and its associated research fatigue. Second and relatedly, we chose not to collect data in official refugee camps, such as Zaatari in Jordan or Moria in Greece, due to the same concerns about research saturation and fatigue (Q33). Instead, we directed our inquiry at informal and unofficial refugee settlements, where refugees' encounters with an ecosystem of data collection and inquiry were less frequent at the time.

These commitments meant that our training involved a lot of unlearning for team members, including academics, development/humanitarian organization practitioners, and translators/interpreters (Q17). Other than the academics, most team members had no formal research training, but many had previously supported humanitarian data collection efforts and/or translated asylum requests for refugees. These are processes that often rely on the kind of narration we were explicitly not pursuing as part of this project. This process of educating one another on what (not) to

ask and which avenues and settings of research (not) to pursue due to research saturation, fatigue, and other ethical/methodological concerns was reciprocal, rather than hierarchical. At numerous points, our interpreters told us “refugees are sick of talking about this” or “everybody is asking this question.” Treating our interpreters as knowledge holders and creators, rather than as “mere” fixers and enablers of applied research (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019), enhanced the relevance and rigor of this work, while also ensuring a more respectful, meaningful process for those engaged in it.

Our attempts to right-size our data collection did not necessarily mean that our interactions with research participants were brief. A recurrent question we have received from practitioners and students alike when discussing the framework in table 1 has been, “what does ‘right-sizing’ my research mean in terms of the duration and intensity of engagement with research participants?” More specifically, “how long should my survey/impact assessment/evaluation/interview protocol be?” In our first conversations with refugees as part of this project, we found that they wanted to discuss their journeys of forced migration more broadly than our preliminary interview protocol allowed. Many refugees were interested in recounting at length their experiences of fleeing, including narrating harms they suffered along the way, despite our explicit commitment to not directly ask about them. This preference was partly context-dependent: Unlike other settings, in which research participants are expected to work and data collection is an unwelcome intervention or interruption into the rhythms of the day, many refugee research participants in informal settlements expressed that they were seeking opportunities for more interaction and storytelling (Q10).

In response to feedback from team members about these interactions, we decided to revise our process to accommodate a wider scope of storytelling. The revised process began with an open question (“tell us how you got here”), allowing participants to tell as much (or as little) of their migration story as they preferred. Team members collecting data were encouraged to neither rush participants toward the more focused research questions nor probe in-depth beyond the scope of those questions if their interlocutors did not seem interested in discussing other aspects of their experience.

These adjustments resulted in a research process that was sometimes longer than the team members had envisioned. This length, however, appropriately reflected the preferences of research participants. To account for the needs of

<sup>11</sup> Those interested, instead, in the breadth of applicability and the creativity of various implementers (beyond the authorial team) in putting these principles and framework into practice can consult Leith and McCreless (2018).



the research team as well (Q19, Q21), the co-investigators in Greece held team meals, during which everyone could relax, debrief, and socialize. They also instituted “no research” days during the data collection phase to allow for rest.

What felt like a respectful and right-sized research process during the data collection, however, created real dilemmas during the analysis and writing stages. To illustrate, just within two months of data collection in 2016, our team had generated over 1,000 pages of fieldnotes, as well as interview transcripts, maps of refugee journeys, and dozens of documents to analyze. Distilling the main findings in these data and connecting them to relevant insights in academic and practitioner literature was a daunting task (Q37).

These tensions became even more apparent when considering the audiences of our applied research outputs (Q6, Q25–Q28). A key stakeholder and audience for this work—practitioners engaged in the refugee response in the countries of study—barely had the time or bandwidth to read research, even if that research was conducted with that audience in mind and unfolded in partnership with these same practitioners. What, then, can “relevance,” “dissemination of findings,” and “research uptake” mean in this context?

Our answers are both promising and limited. Addressing the questions on relevance in the framework in this applied research context required imagining outputs that went beyond long-form writing (Q26). Members of the team created short (10 min or less) videos, did social media “live” events, wrote briefing papers distilling the key findings, published blog posts, held webinars, and delivered in-person briefings for decision-makers and donors affecting refugee-related practice, as well as for practitioners themselves. The in-person briefings, in particular, were important for bringing the key insights of this work directly to main stakeholders in a conversational format, and for engaging these stakeholders in reacting to—and sometimes refuting—preliminary findings (Q22).

Yet, these outputs had other limitations that highlight the tensions between the principles of rigor, relevance, respect, and right-sizing. What makes briefing papers appealing to decision-makers and practitioners is that, in addition to being written in more accessible, less theoretical language, they are, as the name suggests, brief. In practice, this brevity often means jumping straight to the findings, without adequate reflections on the ethics, methods, and dilemmas of applied research. Those reflections did make their way into the full-length report and academic journal articles that resulted from this applied research—but the outputs that had most relevance and reach for key stakeholders in the project did not fully meet the standard of explicit reflection expressed in Q9.

Different commissioning and structural pressures also affected the outputs of this applied research, their rigor, and their relevance. Simply put, without a full-length practitioner report and accompanying journal articles outlining the full methodology and evidence in detail and drawing connections to the literature, we would not have been able to demonstrate the rigor of this research to some stakeholders, crucially including funders/donors, policymakers, and academic colleagues working on this topic. As one team member said, reflecting both donor expectations and her own experiences, “a project is not really done until there is a report.” That is, a long-form written output that demonstrates and confirms the rigor of the work may be less relevant and accessible to key stakeholders, but is still a necessary complement for the outputs more conducive to dissemination and uptake. These tensions between principles may feel less pressing for academic–practitioner partnerships,

wherein academic colleagues can take the lead on developing the more scholarly, long-form outputs (which also conform more readily to academic expectations of knowledge creation), but they are particularly felt among practitioners conducting applied research, who have limited time, effort, and resources to dedicate to developing an array of outputs.

A final tension of the analysis, write-up, and dissemination process related to engaging with refugees as not only sources of, but also stakeholders in and audiences of knowledge. In this respect, we fell short of upholding the practices to which we aspire (Q6, Q28). Our written outputs were all in English, aimed at English-speaking decision-makers and practitioners working on refugee issues.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to our multilingual team of academics, practitioners, and interpreters, some in-person briefings took place in other languages, but again, decision-makers and practitioners, not refugees, were the key audiences. Our dissemination of findings among refugee communities was further hampered by the realities of forced migration, whereby refugees moved between the data collection and publication phases. Neither did our approved ethics protocol allow team members to collect refugee phone numbers, nor did most refugees retain the same phone number while moving across countries. These factors highlight the tensions of prioritizing different audiences and forms of knowledge creation.

The framework we present is unabashedly aspirational; yet, having these principles with questions to ask oneself leads to practical decisions and pivots we would otherwise have been less likely to consider. Even the moments in which it is not possible to implement a principle in the way we initially envisioned are instructive, as they illustrate practical constraints and make trade-offs visible. The questions were facilitators of conversations among team members about our priorities and practices. These moments of tension also motivate future reflections and choices: When Wilson (2019) expanded this applied research partnership to Central America in 2018–2019, the limitations of our earlier work in Greece, Jordan, and Turkey prompted her to think about budgeting (time, effort, and resources) for translation of outputs, as well as potential engagement with diaspora communities. This opportunity to iteratively address dilemmas is hopeful when we consider these questions on a longer horizon than an individual applied research project, particularly for scholars/practitioners committed to an area of work over several years of their lives.

### Concluding Reflections: Toward an Applied Research Future

This article was born from shared observations and concerns among development scholar/practitioners about the effects our applied research activities were having on the individuals and communities participating in them. These concerns were not only about the substance, content, and findings of these activities, but also about the effects of the *research experience as a process*. In this concluding section, we identify areas that our future work aims to address.

While many of the experiences that informed the development of this approach have unfolded in the context of international research—that is, research that takes place in a different country than the one in which the lead researchers and their associated institutions are based—the approach

<sup>12</sup>In recognition of this limitation, the research team later released a compendium of refugee stories told in the first person, lightly edited for clarity and de-identification. This is a practice members of the research team have carried forward in working with refugee populations in subsequent projects.



can be equally relevant to research in one's local context. The principles apply wherever power inequalities persist between operational researchers and the participants in their activities. These questions have salience beyond "international research" and we are determined to reflect this dimension of the work more explicitly in our language, illustrations, and workshops going forward.

Further, research dilemmas do not unfold solely on the level of the individual researcher or organization. On the contrary, they shed light on structural and systemic considerations. Meaningfully engaging with the questions in our framework may require flexibility from a number of actors and processes, such as ethics committees and institutional review boards, donors and funding agencies, budget offices, and more. While representatives from ethics committees and donor agencies have participated in workshops and capacity-building opportunities related to this approach to date, we can and must do more to engage with the ecosystem that determines the mechanics of applied research.

Our intention to engage with ecosystems of research is further informed by a realization that it is not enough for research to be *human-centered*. As discussed throughout, our work to date has focused on improving how humans experience the research process. Yet, the impacts of applied research extend beyond humans to affect land, environment, and resources. Our framework and tools to date have not sufficiently addressed these non-human aspects of the research footprint. Future iterations of the framework will engage with questions related to the environmental sustainability of research practices, the role that digital research methods can play in facilitating research, and the ways this approach can inform reflection in these directions.

Finally, a key issue we have reflected on is the importance of documenting and reflecting on one's research *as a process*. This is an essential component of reflexivity and it is the only way for us to meaningfully answer the question of how we would know whether our own activities are unfolding according to the principles we outline. If one does not collect reflexive data not only on the subject matter of applied research, but also on the ways in which it is carried out, it becomes challenging to determine whether and how they have engaged with the principles and framework discussed herein. We recognize the constraints that organizational mandates and resources place on the documentation of the processes of practitioners' research (Myrntinen and Mastonshoeva 2019, 235), and, as we look to the future, acknowledge the importance of developing strategies and practical tools that enable applied researchers to better document their practices of data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Beyond encouraging uptake of an evolving set of practices, we see this approach as offering an invitation—to reflect on and improve our own research practice in an intentional and principled way, to share those reflections and lessons learned with a growing community of similarly oriented colleagues, and to advocate for changes that can improve the practice of applied research.

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