Doing development research "at home"

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The inspiration and social relevance of many 'development studies' courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level frequently encourage students to think about 'doing' their dissertations on related topics. This is particularly so when they have also had the opportunity to participate in a field course overseas, and have come to learn at first hand about the problems of development and some of the issues that poor people face on a daily basis. However, the costs of travelling overseas and undertaking a sustained period of research in a foreign country, let alone the difficulties of learning a new language or the practicalities associated with living in a strange place, often make many such students reluctant to embark on this path. This chapter is specifically written for such people, to encourage them to explore the plethora of research that can be done 'at home', and to offer some insights into the challenges that they may encounter in so doing. Doing research 'at home' is no better or worse than doing research overseas. It is simply different, and to do it well one needs to be aware of the relative advantages and disadvantages that such work can confer.

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH 'AT HOME': ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For many people who are enticed by the excitement of overseas development research, the thought of doing a dissertation based 'at home' can often be seen as a second best solution. However, this need not be the case, and there are many highly pertinent issues that can be addressed in both undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations without the need to travel. Indeed 'doing development research "at home"' can be equally relevant and ethically sound as undertaking research overseas (for a brief review of ethical considerations in student research see Unwin, 2003). The important issue is to recognise that different types of research on development have their own challenges that need to be identified and explored in advance.

With increased questioning about the very nature of 'development studies' over the last decade, following the publication of works such as Arturo Escobar's (1995) *Encountering Development* and the emergence of post-development and post-colonial critiques (Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997), the entire notion of undertaking research in 'another place' and 'on other people' has rightly come into question (Page, 2003). Clare Madge (1997) has written about the ethical difficulties of doing research overseas, and in particular about the argument that the only way of not violating professional ethics in some way is to cease undertaking research altogether. In response, she comments that "When I returned from The Gambia I had much sympathy with this argument, particularly with specific reference to research in the Third World by people from the First World (and I still do some/much of the time). I thought perhaps the 'solution' was to do research 'at home', studying the society of which I am a part" (Madge, 1997: 120). This is a common reaction for many sensitive people, who think deeply about the types of research that they do. In the end, she argues that undertaking research 'at home' is also problematic, and that what really matters is the use that is made of the knowledge that is produced. However, by doing research 'at home' it is indeed possible to overcome some of the difficult, and often largely ignored, dilemmas faced by those 'doing development research overseas'. By 'visiting' or 'working in' a community in a 'developing country' researchers can have an impact far beyond what they might at first think (these issues are explored in more detail in Chapter 3). In a short period of overseas research, it is thus almost impossible to understand the complexities of the issues being addressed, and in practice most researchers take out far more from such research trips than they give back to the people in whose communities they have been visitors.

How one addresses such issues depends in large part on the reasons why one chooses to undertake research. For students, this question is in one sense already answered, because an independent dissertation is often a required component of their degrees! However, all researchers have an opportunity to choose *what* they do their research on, and *why* they do it. For many critical

theorists (see Habermas, 1974, 1978), the intention is that their research should be used to make the world a better place, and this motive is often central to those undertaking research in the broad field of 'development'. Within this context, it is increasingly being accepted that the problems faced by 'developing countries' have more to do with the policies and practices of people living in the richer countries of the world than they do with the conditions prevailing in the 'developing world' itself. If we are really going to make a difference to the lives of poor people it is therefore crucial that we should seek to understand more clearly the reasons for poverty, that we should disseminate our research findings well beyond the confines of traditional academic journals, and that we should actively seek to shape and deliver policies and practices that will indeed make a difference to the world in which we live (Unwin, 1999). For those who accept such an agenda, there is a very clear justification for doing development research 'at home'.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF DOING RESEARCH 'AT HOME'

There are not only sound moral grounds for doing development research 'at home', but there are also five clear practical advantages in so doing. First, the taken-for-granted knowledge that the researcher has of *their own society and culture* makes the practice of research very much easier. When there is pressure to complete a piece of research in a limited amount of time, it is very much more efficient to work in a known place, without having to take time to get to know the mundane necessities of where to live or shop for food, let alone the more complex requirements of undertaking the actual research. Second, working in one's own *language* confers considerable advantages, not only in terms of the time saved in not having to become fluent in a new language, but also in terms of understanding the complex nuances of an interview discussion or textual analysis. Third, being an '*insider*' confers specific benefits, although it does need to be recognised that there are occasions where 'outsiders' can also contribute very valuable new insights into research understanding from their external perspectives. As an 'insider' one can gain privileged access into particular social situations that would remain closed to outsiders, and one can thereby gain sophisticated understandings that an outsider

might never be able to achieve. Fourth, it is often easier for students to undertake research of *practical value* to those that they are researching with if they do so in their own social and cultural contexts. This is based on the assumption that research should have value over and beyond merely the gaining of a qualification or academic status, but if this is indeed deemed to be desirable then research done 'at home' can often contribute more readily to the needs of others, because the researcher will already be much more aware of what those needs actually are. Finally, working at home provides an opportunity to spread the *temporal scale* of research in ways that a single short overseas visit cannot achieve. Not only is it possible 'at home' to return to a place to gain more data, or repeat an experiment, but it is also possible to gain insights into processes operating at different seasons and over longer time periods.

In making these broad generalisations, it must be stressed that fascinating and important research is indeed also undertaken overseas, as illustrated in the many other chapters of this book. Attention here has nevertheless focused on the positive benefits that can be found in doing research on development 'at home', for those who have a passion for 'development' but for whatever reason are unable to travel abroad. Moreover, there are increasing numbers of students for whom 'home' is actually overseas, and who will therefore be facing a completely different set of cross-cultural issues as they seek to bring the research practices that they have learnt about to bear on problems 'back home' in their own countries. Given that the majority of chapters in this book address issues associated with doing 'development' research overseas, it is important to stress that there are actually some practical advantages as well as moral differences in doing development research 'at home'

TOPICS FOR DOING DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH 'AT HOME'
Among the many development issues that students have addressed in their dissertations undertaken 'at home', there are five areas where this research can be particularly interesting, relevant and rewarding. These include research on development policy, working with Civil Society or Non-Governmental Organisations

(NGOs), interpreting the imagery of development, understanding the historical construction of development, and using the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to contribute to development practices. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the types of topic that can be tackled, but exemplification thereof provides insight into the differing challenges and opportunities offered by various types of development research 'at home'.

<u>Development policy</u>

With the increasingly critical stance taken by many academics towards the practice of 'development' as exemplified in the work of donors and international funding agencies, opportunities arise for students to undertake a wealth of detailed analyses of the activities of particular agencies in specific fields of development practice. Among the most strident recent critiques have been those of the Structural Adjustment programmes fuelled by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the 1990s (see, for example, Mohan *et al.*, 1999). Research on the implications of these programmes for the economic, social and political fortunes of individual countries can readily be undertaken 'at home' through analyses of economic and social data produced by national statistical offices, and international agencies such as the IMF (www.imf.org) and the World Bank (www.worldbank.org/data/). Unless they are carefully constrained, such large-scale studies can nevertheless easily degenerate into overly descriptive accounts, and it is often better to focus on more specific aspects of development policy.

In this context donors have recently become very much more transparent about their activities, and the mass of publications and accounts that they are now generating can provide the basis for a range of policy-related research projects. The key thing in designing such research is to ensure once again that it is not simply descriptive, and that it seeks to interrogate donor policy through particular theoretical lenses. Among the more open and accessible of donors is the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), which now makes a surprisingly comprehensive range of information available in the public domain. By so doing, DFID seeks to help people in the UK gain a more balanced view of development issues, thereby helping

to change their practices and thus make it more likely that the Millennium Development Goals (http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/) may be achieved. Details of DFID's Management Board meetings, for example, are readily accessible through its website (http://www.dfid.gov.uk), and these provide interesting insight into the ways in which the Department seeks to deliver on its Public Service Agreement targets and thereby the Millennium Development Goals. The DFID website's search facility also enables researchers to explore specific aspects of the Department's policies and practices, and it provides access to many internal briefing papers that give a very different perspective on its activities than that which can be obtained from the published literature. Other donors also provide varying amounts of information about their activities, and links to all of the OECD's Development Co-Operation Directorate (DAC) members' sites can be found at http://www.oecd.org/linklist/.

Working with Civil Society Organisations

Some undergraduate and postgraduate research projects are done in collaboration with development oriented civil society organisations (see also Chapter 12). These cover a very wide variety of issues, from the piloting of new games about development in schools, to surveys of people's attitudes to specific development agendas, and comparative studies of changes in the funding policies of civil society organisations. Very often such research can be done whilst working on a voluntary basis with an organisation, and such experiences can be extremely valuable for subsequent career progression. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that civil society organisations are inundated with requests for such work, and that only the strongest cases are likely to elicit support. It is therefore essential for researchers to do a considerable amount of background research before approaching an organisation, and they must be willing to adapt their initial ideas to suit the needs of that organisation as the proposal develops. In some circumstances, researchers in higher education institutions may already have developed good collaborative relations with particular civil society organisations, and this can facilitate the development of further small-scale collaborative projects that might be suitable for undergraduate or Master's research.

In approaching civil society organisations working in the field of development, it is essential to know as much as possible about them beforehand. The Development Education Association (DEA) provides a good summary of the areas of activity of all of its 220 members, and it is well worth accessing their website (http://www.dea.org.uk/dea/a_to_z_of_members.html) to see which organisations are working on issues in which you are also interested. This site also provides links to the websites of all of the member organisations, and is an excellent source of wider information. Once you have identified a group of organisations in which you are interested, it is then important to think about the ways in which the research you want to do might actually benefit them, and how you can create a win-win situation. Often civil society organisation have a strong interest in helping people, and especially school children, understand the world in which they live so that they can become active global citizens. Research linked to themes such as this can therefore be particularly popular. Having identified a theme, draw up a short outline research proposal of between 500 and 1000 words, and then send a copy together with a well-crafted covering letter seeing whether they would be interested in letting you work on this with them. Always be open to their suggestions as well, because it is often the case that the organisation to which you are writing might actually want some research doing on something a little different from that which you had initially intended. Depending on your own interests and competences, this can provide valuable opportunities to do something really worthwhile for them.

Images of development

One topic of particular interest to those from a cultural studies and media background is the way in which 'development' is portrayed visually in magazines, documentaries and posters. All too often, shocking images of poor or sick people are used to grab the headlines, and to maximise fundraising by civil society organisations for particular causes. Such issues are discussed in much more detail in Chapter 24, but it is important to recognise that there is no need to travel abroad to gain access to such material. Excellent research projects can be undertaken using materials readily available 'at home'. Visual images of development, both positive and negative, are all around us, and the difficulty is often to decide on which

actual images one wishes to study. A good starting point is to take one particular theoretical argument, and then to try to find images through which this viewpoint can be interrogated. Mirzzoeff's (2002) *Visual Culture Reader*, for example, offers a range of key writings covering visual forms such as photography, painting, advertising, fashion, television and digital culture, many of which can act as a catalyst for a detailed and rigorous consideration of the interface between images and development.

Interests in transculturalism and globalisation can also provide a fascinating field of enquiry for those exploring the imagery of development in their own societies, be it South-East Asian influences in the Netherlands, Mexican influences in the USA or the role of Islam in contemporary British society. Exciting research can be undertaken 'at home' on subjects as diverse as the effects of globalisation on different culinary cultures, on fashion design, and on architecture, all of which have implications for the ways in which we construct and understand the concept of 'development' (see Canclini, 2001). Interviews with international architects can, for example, provide detailed insight into the processes whereby they have helped to shape the processes of urban change in the poorer countries of the world (see Serageldin, 1982).

Historical constructions of development

Archives across the world are full of documents relating to 'development' processes in the past (see Chapter 25). Among the most accessible of these are accounts by travellers of the places that they visited, and of the processes that they witnessed as European cultures came to dominate the continents of Africa and America. This is not a recent phenomenon, and greater attention, for example, to the early 16th century Spanish writings by missionaries such as Fray Toribio de Benavente, known as Motolinía, would emphasise that the processes associated with 'globalisation' have very much older roots than is often credited. For those who cannot read foreign languages, many of the better known of these early texts are in translation (see Motolinía, 1950), and increasing amounts of archival material can now be accessed on the web (see, for example, British History Online, http://www.british-

history.ac.uk/, or the Multilaterals Project, http://fletcher.tufts.edu/multilaterals.html).
Such resources provide much evidence that can be used to examine and assess
generalisations made about colonialism and imperialism (Driver, 2001), as well as
more recent changes that have occurred through the independence struggles of the
mid-20th century. Historical dissertations on development issues can readily be
undertaken 'at home', and although under-represented in the array of subjects
chosen by those 'doing development' research, they most certainly warrant greater
attention.

ICT-based research

A final area that has in recent years opened up a wealth of opportunities for
undergraduate and postgraduate research has been the use of new information and
communication technologies (ICTs). Not only do these provide on-line access to
data, but they have also created a mechanism whereby entirely new kinds of
research can be undertaken (see also Chapter 28). At the most basic level, e-mail
can enable questionnaire formats to be sent to respondents across the world, but
video-conferencing facilities can also permit face-to-face interviews to be undertaken
without the researcher having to travel anywhere. This can be very advantageous
when a researcher wishes to gain a comparative understanding of development
issues, but does not have the time or the funding to undertake journeys across
several continents. More innovatively, it is relatively easy to host virtual conferences
and discussions, the interactions from which can provide valuable material for a
dissertation (for a recent example of successful virtual conferences, see the
Commonwealth of Learning's Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning
http://www.col.org/programmes/conferences/virtual_conferences.htm). The potential
for students to engage in software development as part of their research has also
been enhanced through the increased amount of Open Source work fostered across
Africa (see for example the Free and Open Source Software Foundation for Africa at
http://www.fossfa.net).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined some of the ethical and practical considerations associated with 'doing development research "at home"', and has provided illustrations of the types of exciting and challenging projects that can be undertaken (for general research methods, see Laws *et al.*, 2003; Flowerdew and Martin, 1997; Hoskin *et al.*, 2003). In the increasingly inter-connected world in which we live, the actual place where we do our research is becoming less important. Many of the conclusions drawn in other chapters of this book apply when we do research on development issues based 'at home', but doing so also provides novel opportunities to shape dialogues and influence people in innovative ways. If we are to make a real difference to the lives of poor people across the world, we may be able to do so much more effectively by starting at home and influencing those nearest to us.

Acknowledgements

Further Reading

Laws, S., with Caroline Harper and Rachel Marcus (2003) *Research for Development: a Practical Guide*, London: Sage, with Save the Children Fund. A quick reference manual and learning tool for all practitioners, researchers and students doing development work.

Robson, E. and Willis, K. (eds) (1997) *Postgraduate Fieldwork in Developing Areas: a Rough Guide*, 2nd edition, London: Developing Areas Research Group, Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers). This is a good practical guide to undertaking fieldwork in 'developing areas', but it also includes a wealth of sensible material about researching development, and is therefore also relevant to those researching 'at home'.

Rogers, A. and Viles, H. (eds) (2003) *The Student's Companion to Geography*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Blackwell. An excellent guide to all aspects of undertaking a Geography degree, including good chapters on 'development', research design, interviewing, ethics and ethnographic research.

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Serageldin, I. and El-Sadek, S. (eds) (1982) *The Arab City: its Character and Islamic Cultural Heritage*, Riyadh: Arab Urban Development Institute.

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Unwin, T. (2003) Geographical ethics: reflections on the moral and ethical issues involved in debate and enquiry, in: Rogers, A. and Viles, H. (eds) *The Student's Companion to Geography*, Oxford: Blackwell, 266-271

Web-sites

http://www.dea.org.uk. The Development Education Association's website. It includes useful links to all of the Associations members at http://www.dea.org.uk/dea/a_to_z_of_members.html

http://www.dfid.gov.uk. The Department for International Development's web-site, providing a wealth of information about DFID's work, publications, and development education

http://www.ict4d.org.uk. A portal designed to provide information to, and links about, all aspects of the use of ICT for Development (ICT4D).

http://www.imf.org. The International Monetary Fund's website. This has useful sections containing information on all the countries of the world where the IMF is active (see http://www.imf.org/external/country/index.htm).

http://www.worldbank.org/data/ The World Bank's data and statistical site, providing a wealth of 'official' statistical data relating to development.

Questions for discussion

1. *Who is your research going to benefit?* This chapter has implicitly argued for a critical approach to research, that seeks to move it beyond merely self-gratification on behalf of the researcher. In undertaking your dissertation, think hard about who will benefit from it, and what you can do to ensure that the time spent on your research will have wider benefits than simply contributing to your degree!

2. *What data do you have access to 'at home'?* With the availability of increasing amounts of information on-line, it is increasingly possible to gain access to a wealth of data and other empirical material relating to development issues.

3. *How can you turn working 'at home' into a distinct advantage?* Far too often, doing research 'at home' is seen as a disadvantage for those working on development issues. Instead, this chapter has illustrated the wealth of benefits and opportunities that such research offers. Think about your own circumstances, and how you can turn them into positive assets!

About the author

Tim Unwin is Professor of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. From 2001-2004 he led *Imfundo: Partnership for IT in Education*, the UK Prime Minister's initiative designed to create partnerships to deliver ICT-based educational activities in Africa. He directs an Information and Communication Technologies for Development Collective, about which information can be found at www.ict4d.org.uk.