An MSP Approach to Research - ‘Partners in Peace’

Mathijs van Leeuwen, Disaster Studies, Wageningen UR

1. Context

In 2002 researchers Thea Hilhorst and Mathijs van Leeuwen of Disaster Studies, Wageningen UR contacted Dutch co-financing agency Cordaid to start an interactive research on peacebuilding. Desk officers responsible for the integration of the peacebuilding theme in the work of Cordaid had an interest to learn together and create research outcomes that could be used in practice by the local partners. Over the course of time, several of Cordaid’s partners became also partners in the research.

The programme, ‘Beyond Conflict’, looked into the daily practices of peacebuilding, how Cordaid and its partner organizations learned from their experiences, and how policies within Cordaid developed in dialogue with partners. The research was interactive in nature, and a major tenet was that Cordaid staff and partners would participate in the formulation of questions and the analysis of findings. The research process was partly planned and partly open-ended, building in flexibility and the possibility to adjust objectives on the way. Also local research institutes and communities took part in the programme.

The emphasis on interactive research was a logical consequence of the theoretical orientation towards complexity adopted in the research programme. Such an orientation urges one to take into account not only how knowledge from research can be made more useful for participants, but also how knowledge takes shape in the interaction between researchers and researched. Knowledge production is about negotiating the accuracy and correctness of the common-sense knowledge of the researched, in which the competence of the researched parties is as essential as that of the researcher. Knowledge production then does not so much depend on applying rules of logic, as on establishing dialogue with researched. Further, interactive research acknowledges the ‘double hermeneutics’ of researcher-researched interactions, in which both continuously interpret each other’s behaviour, and change their own behaviour accordingly. Moreover, dealing with complexity requires (peacebuilding) organizations to simultaneously formulate perspectives, to change perspectives and to question continuously one’s interventions. To understand how organizations deal with this requires a flexible and iterative research processes. In such research, where research development, data collection, analysis and dissemination are parallel to policy making and intervention, the strict separation between researchers and researched cannot be maintained.

2. MSP Process

To facilitate the interactive character of the research a steering committee was established including Cordaid desk officers and researchers from Wageningen Disaster Studies. These people regularly met to define the direction the research was taking. The research was composed of a sequence of steps. After each step, findings were discussed with Cordaid and its partners, the general aims of the research were reviewed and new research issues identified.

1. Step one was a desk study on learning processes of Cordaid staff in the context of peacebuilding, focusing on partnership and mainstreaming of the themes of peace and conflict.

2. Step two was to gain more insight in the possibilities, perceptions and dilemmas involved in peacebuilding activities of local NGOs and networks for peace. For this field research was conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi in 2003. The latter research resulted in a workshop in Burundi with partners from the region and a workshop within Cordaid to discuss findings and draft recommendations for its peacebuilding policies.

3. Step three in the ‘Beyond Conflict’ research programme was a PhD-research, conducted by Mathijs van Leeuwen on international discourses of peacebuilding and
how those acquire meaning in the practices of international and local development organizations.

The remainder of this case highlights the experiences of this third step.

The interactive character the PhD ‘Partners in Peace’ was to be ensured through various strategies. In the proposal, there was emphasis on the participation of local partners, local grassroots groups and communities in drafting questions, interpretation of findings, and the discussion of the practical and policy implications of this research. In addition to the steering group in the Netherlands, similar groups would be formed in the countries of research, including local scientists, and organization representatives. In those country steering-groups it was intended to identify research questions of particular relevance to the partners involved on the basis of the more general research themes already identified by Cordaid and the researcher. In this way the research would also contribute to organizational learning within the partner organizations. To further enhance learning, staff of partner organizations were intended to participate in data gathering.

The interactive research process included getting stakeholders to agree on the research agenda, contribute to the research process and translate research outcomes into activities of partners. The focus of the interactive research was less on ‘social change’ (an important element of action research’) but more on doing better research with stakeholders owning the research results.

3. Results

The forms of collaboration that developed and the participation of partners in the PhD-research varied largely. While in some cases the collaboration approached the ideal of interactive research, in others it was more of an exchange of services. In practice the researcher entered into a variety of ‘deals’ with different research partners, as can be seen in table (1.1).

Table 1.1 – Agreements reached with different partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research partners</th>
<th>Their part of the deal</th>
<th>Researcher’s part of the deal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cordaid the Hague (international NGO)</td>
<td>Identification of main research questions and themes for the regions Establishing contacts with local partners</td>
<td>Presentations in several workshops Providing inputs to the further development of the ‘Peace and Conflict’ theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cordaid Bujumbura (country office of the above)</td>
<td>Facilitation of researcher’s stay in Burundi (security, travel)</td>
<td>Presentation on opportunities to mainstream attention for peace in their medical programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CED-Caritas (country-wide development organization of the Catholic Church)</td>
<td>Facilitation of field work Participation in workshops in the communities and conducting part of the interviews Diffusion of findings Co-organization of an international conference</td>
<td>Field research and report on local dispute resolving mechanisms, and the role the Catholic Church could have in strengthening those</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSM (development organization of the Catholic Diocese of San Marcos)</td>
<td>Facilitation of field work Co-organization of workshops in the communities to discuss findings Publication of findings and feedback of findings to PTSM partners</td>
<td>Field research, workshops and report on how their strategies to assist peasants with land disputes worked out Contribution to day to day activities</td>
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activities of the organization, including field visits, meetings with partners and authorities

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<th>SERJUS (development organization)</th>
<th>Full organization of fieldwork</th>
<th>Field research and workshop on the influence of party politics on local development practices</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Publication of findings</td>
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Cordaid’s steering committee was closely involved in the development of the overall research questions, while a series of consultations with the regional desks resulted in specific research themes for the regions. These included two themes finally researched – civil society regional peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region and organizational development ten years after the Guatemala peace agreements. Involvement of Cordaid staff in data gathering was limited to participation in interviews in The Hague and encounters in the field. During field work, some staff from the regional desks in The Hague also provided inputs. In between and after field work, various Cordaid staff reflected on the findings, by commenting on reports and on the presentations given in workshops they organized.

Local partners had less influence on the initial conceptualization but participated all the more in defining research themes and questions, and contributing to field work. The interactive research led to some interesting research outcomes that have been used by local peacebuilding organizations.

4. **Learning**

It was challenging to always find a balance between the interest of research partners and the researcher. For instance, research partners were often interested in research on the effectiveness of particular interventions, due to donor pressure to show results. This would also interest the researcher, but more from a reflective point of view (where did the interventions come from? Why they want to measure effectiveness?) hence research questions had to be a win-win situation. Interestingly, by to some extent giving research out of hands, and by not being too concerned about the ‘relevance’ of his activities, the researcher’s insights were enhanced.

For doing research on humanitarian interventions in situations of disasters and conflicts –the core interest of Wageningen Disaster Studies– interactive research has added value. It guarantees the relevance of research to the field. It creates interest and involvement from agency staff and contributes to the depth of analysis, as practitioners are motivated to reflect on their own practices and to tap their vast experience and knowledge. Not unimportantly, close collaboration with organizations makes research on the volatile contexts of disaster and conflict practically possible. Interactive research creates reciprocity, and mutual commitment. Finally, responsiveness to the needs and interests of partner organizations and local communities involved in the research is also seen as an ethical obligation.

What stands out is that rather than a research methodology, the interactive character of research should be seen as a research intention. The extent to which it becomes truly interactive –being useful to and owned by the different partners involved– is not entirely in the hands of the researcher. The interactive character of research cannot be planned, but develops in the process of collaboration.