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Qualitative Research in the Politically Hostile Environment of Zimbabwe: A Practical Guide

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Qualitative Research in the Politically Hostile Environment of Zimbabwe: A Practical Guide

Abstract

Globally, qualitative researchers in the academic or non-academic fields are constantly faced with the complexity of fieldwork in conducting their research in a specific environment. Despite the understanding that researchers have of the techniques to use in their research approach, a gap remains on obtaining data in different, unique contexts of society: the cultural, economic and political. The purpose of this paper is to provide a practical guide for researchers who intend to conduct qualitative research in the politically hostile environment of Zimbabwe based on the experiences of the author during the fieldwork for a PhD study. The main focus of this paper was on understanding the ethics, gatekeeping, policies and protocols to follow in conducting qualitative research among various stakeholders, namely the government, non-governmental organisations and communities. The research techniques used were both face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. The paper argues that Zimbabwe is a country where everything is politicised or rather assumed to be politically connected, but with structures in place for researchers to follow. This paper serves as a guide or road map for academic and non-academic researchers intending to do research in Zimbabwe.

Keywords

qualitative research, political environment, politics, qualitative data, focus groups, interviews

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Qualitative Research in the Politically Hostile Environment of Zimbabwe: A Practical Guide

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Globally, qualitative researchers in the academic or non-academic fields are constantly faced with the complexity of fieldwork in conducting their research in a specific environment. Despite the understanding that researchers have of the techniques to use in their research approach, a gap remains on obtaining data in different, unique contexts of society: the cultural, economic and political. The purpose of this paper is to provide a practical guide for researchers who intend to conduct qualitative research in the politically hostile environment of Zimbabwe based on the experiences of the author during the fieldwork for a PhD study. The main focus of this paper was on understanding the ethics, gatekeeping, policies and protocols to follow in conducting qualitative research among various stakeholders, namely the government, non-governmental organisations and communities. The research techniques used were both face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. The paper argues that Zimbabwe is a country where everything is politicised or rather assumed to be politically connected, but with structures in place for researchers to follow. This paper serves as a guide or road map for academic and non-academic researchers intending to do research in Zimbabwe.

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Introduction

Globally, qualitative researchers in the academic or non-academic fields are constantly faced with the complexity of obtaining data in the field during research in a specific environment. Despite the understanding that researchers have of the techniques to use in their research approach, a gap remains on how to obtain data in different, unique contexts of society, namely the, cultural, economic and political, particularly in Zimbabwe. As a researcher, the author has often met students and senior academics who were perplexed, distressed, and sometimes clueless on how they would collect data using their structured or unstructured interview guides as research instruments. As a result, the author was motivated to share experiences in studying a contested and controversial phenomenon, namely the Indigenisation and economic empowerment programme of Zimbabwe, to serve as a guide to present and future researchers in the country. Zimbabwe is a country where everything is politicised or rather assumed to be politically connected, to the extent that one would think it impossible to carry out a successful qualitative study. The body of literature written by scholars discussing ways in which one could obtain information and to reach intended participants is limited, particularly with reference to Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Philippines, Venezuela, Gambia and Cuba. These countries have bureaucratic institutions and reforms that

are politicised and debilitated, with a culture of patronage (dela Rama, 2017; Robinson & Acemoglu, 2012).

Background

The researcher conducted a research project entitled: “The Politics of Indigenisation and Participatory Development in Zimbabwe: The case of the indigenisation and empowerment policy” under the auspices of the Department of Development Studies at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa. It took approximately two months to collect data, from 19 July 2017 to 13 September 2017, which the author termed the “57 days journey.” Depending on the nature of the research at the PhD level, one can obtain data in two months or more. The main question of the study was, “Can the indigenisation programme be a viable sustainable intervention for poverty reduction and participatory development, given its narrow focus on the modern sector and the unfriendly internal macroeconomic conditions?” The sub-question this study sought to answer was whether social justice could take place in Zimbabwe through participation in the indigenisation and economic empowerment programme. The primary objective of the study was to analyse the indigenisation programme of 2007 (refined in 2010) and its outcomes on the participation of indigenous people in terms of increasing indigenous economic empowerment and transforming the economy. The study used a qualitative approach on the basis that participation and empowerment through the indigenisation phenomena could best be understood in the context of interpretation and construction of reality as experienced by individuals and communities as they interact in the world. Economists view indigenisation as a concept that is influenced by economic, political, social, psychological and ideological factors (Balabkins, 1980). For this reason, a simple mathematical model or quantification of analysing such a policy is not valid or reliable. Therefore, it is important to get the perspective of the arguments on participation and empowerment in this policy context from academics, government ministries, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society or beneficiaries, namely farmers and informal traders.

The case study design was taken as the best design to address the main research question of the study, thus it is case-based. The Zimbabwean indigenisation and economic empowerment programme was the case in point. Personally, I am a passionate pracademic who has great interest in teaching and learning research methodology, particularly qualitative research and supervision of student research. I was motivated to write this paper after my fieldwork experience, which contradicted my assumptions, as well as that of my promoter, on obtaining in-depth information on the indigenisation phenomenon in Zimbabwe. The assumption was premised on the notion that the phenomenon under study was politically sensitive and heavily contested within the political faction of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front. It would therefore be difficult for the researcher to conduct an in-depth study owing to possible resistance based on suspicion and scepticism about the researcher’s disposition. However, as a citizen of Zimbabwe, accessibility to information was made possible by the ability to communicate in the local language and understanding of the socio-politico-economic diversities and context that enabled me to appreciate and share the processes and procedures researchers need to follow in such environments.

The Methods

Three data collection methods were employed, namely face-to-face interviews, joint interviews and focus group interviews. Sixteen face-to-face interviews were conducted among local and international NGO representatives, academics and government ministries and a total of four focus group discussions was administered in each province among beneficiaries of the

programme, mainly farmers and informal business owners. The study was carried out in two provinces, the richest and the poorest in the national economic rating, in order to meet the assessment objectives of the study, which added extra value of contrast in terms of the socioeconomic conditions of implementation of the policy programme. Of the 16 interviews, five represented government ministries, two international NGOs, four local NGOs, five academics, two focus groups with farmers and two focus groups with informal traders. This distribution is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Actual Interviews Done			
	Province A- Harare Central	Province B- Matebelelend South	Total
Face-face interviews	11	5	16
Focus group Discussion	2	2	4
		Grand total interviews	20
Composition of interviews			
	Province A- Harare Central	Province B- Matebelelend South	Total
Government Ministries	5	0	5
NGOz (International)	1	1	2
NGOz (Local)	2	2	4
Academics (policy analyst)	3	2	5
Focus Groups (Farmers)	1	1	2
Focus Groups (Informal businesses)	1	1	2
Grand Total	13	7	20

Researcher's Preparedness

Student supervision or mentor consultation is critical at this stage, particularly to determine the sample of participants to be engaged in the study in the context of the research undertaken. In qualitative research, it is argued that what is important is to ensure credibility and transferability of the methods and sample rather than reliability and validity concepts common to quantitative researchers (Gray, 2014; Lichtman, 2013). The promoter or supervisor will be able to guide and assist the student to determine whether the sample is sufficient to meet the level or standard of the qualification level outcome. It is expected that the depth of research will differ with the academic level of the student from honours, master's and PhD level. In the study the author conducted, which was a policy analysis, it was decided to talk to policy analysts in government, academics, both international and national NGOs and the beneficiaries of the policy programme, namely women, youth and the disabled.

A number of research methodology scholars discuss the importance of preparation of the researcher prior to engaging in fieldwork (Creswell, 2014; Gray, 2014; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Based on the author's experience, it is critical to develop a fieldwork schedule, which in this case was developed using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program to profile prospective participants. This basic database may include, among others, the name of the organisation and/or ministry, the physical address, the contact email, telephone or mobile number if possible, the contact person in the organisation and the prospective date

and time for an appointment. Below is a list of other preparatory issues a researcher should consider:

- Train the research assistant.
- Familiarise assistants with the interview guide.
- Do a mock interview.
- Discuss expectations with research assistants – do's and don'ts.
- Agree on service and payment.
- Develop a participant contact list.
- Print copies of required documentation.
- Buy stationery (A4 counter books, A5 to do list book, A5 journal, paperclips, pens).
- Make technology available - recording device of phones x2, online storage facility, for example, mail or dropbox, power bank, flash drive/ memory card for extensive recording of data (for sharing information).

Process and Procedures of Doing Research in Zimbabwe

Government Ministries

Most qualitative researchers use a purposive sampling technique, which is also known as targeted sampling or judgmental sampling, in selecting participants for their research (King & Horrocks, 2010; Kumar, 2005). This sampling technique allows researchers to use personal judgement in relation to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study (Silverman, 2011). Thus, selected participants can purposefully contribute to understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007). Although qualitative researchers deal with different types of participants, for this paper the author refers to expert informants and beneficiaries of a government programme. A researcher needs to profile potential expert informants from the perspective of their knowledge, occupation and experience. This may require doing some kind of research using search engines or approaching an organisation with a profile description of a potential participant. Any individual at that organisation may use the referral techniques to identify a person who fits the profile of the required participant. For instance, if a study is a policy analysis, the researcher needs a policy analyst to be a participant, be it in government or the academic field.

One of the major questions with which students are faced is how a researcher will obtain information from a government authority or ministry in Zimbabwe. Research methodology books are limited in giving an intrinsic explanation of how information can be obtained from government ministries, mainly because of the differences in information management in each country in general, and government organisation in particular. As a result, it is left to the researcher to explore such knowledge and to find ways of doing so. However, this paper points out that in Zimbabwe there are structures in place that a researcher needs to follow to obtain information from the government and to get permission to collect data in the country. All government ministries in Zimbabwe have offices that manage researchers intending to carry out surveys or fieldwork, which the author found to be either the human resources department or the department of public relations. From a student perspective certain documents are required that one needs to produce in order to get approval from the minister or permanent secretary to conduct research. These documents are as follows:

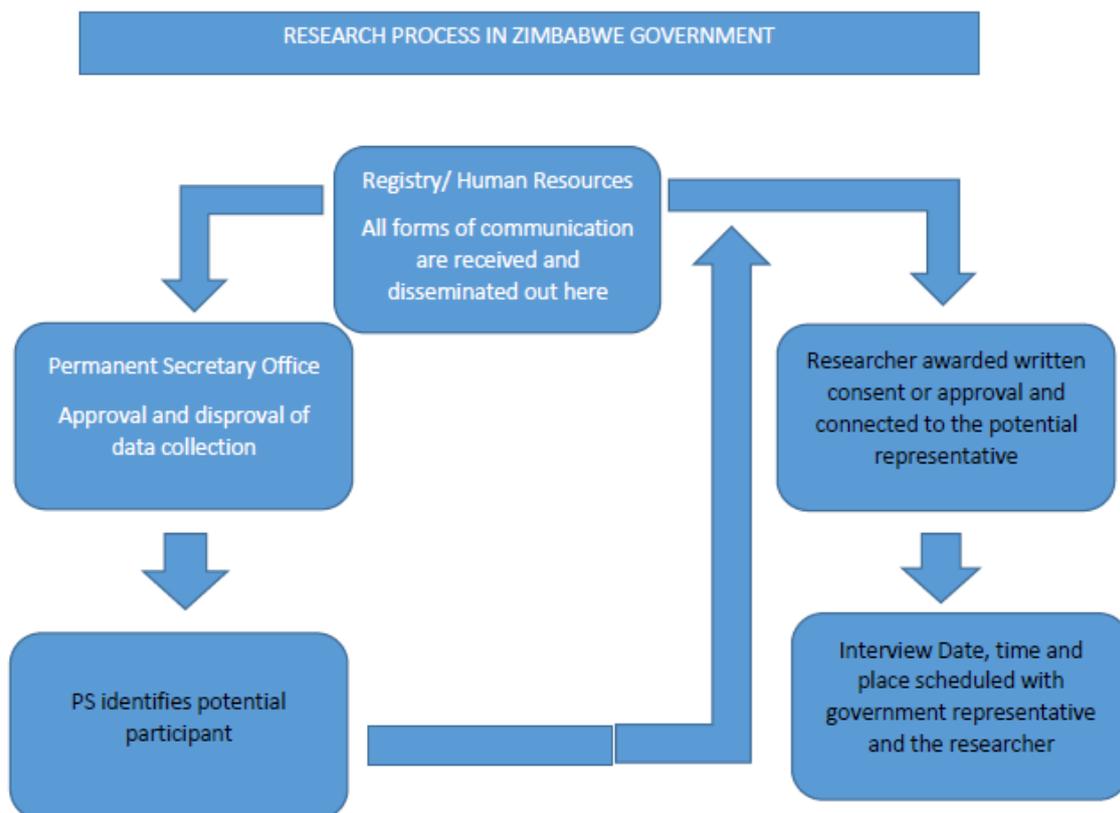
- The researcher's own letter requesting permission to do research

- The university's letter of support
- An ethical clearance letter from the institution of affiliation
- The research instrument (i.e., interview guide or questionnaire)
- Proof of affiliation (e.g., a student card or proof of registration)
- Contact details of the researcher for the sake of feedback.

The process of getting a response or permission is often long because of the bureaucratic nature of the government processes and the busy schedules of the signatories. There is no direct timeline for approval of requests, but in the author's experience the process can take a minimum of four working days but may involve up to three weeks' waiting time. However, it is important for the researcher to diarise dates for check-up for feedback; the waiting period can be stressful. A letter of approval will be issued, giving most of the details one has provided in the required documentation. Normally, the ministry chooses the relevant person to interview in the case of face-to-face interviewing, or one may be asked what type of person one needs to speak to, who is usually an expert informant. The figure below shows the entire process of collecting data in government.

Figure 1

The data collection process in government ministries of Zimbabwe (own source)



Government ministries have gate keepers and the permanent secretary of each ministry is the gatekeeper, meaning he or she is the only person who grants or denies permission to contact potential participants. In this regard, the permanent secretaries will nominate a participant to represent the ministry or participate in the study whom he or she feels is knowledgeable and able to participate, based on the researcher's request for permission to collect data.

The government is also responsible for granting authority to researchers to conduct research in communities, through the Ministry of Local Government, involving the district and provincial administrators. The same documents mentioned before as being required by the ministry need to be submitted to get approval for collecting data in communities. The process of collecting information is short in urban areas and long in rural areas because of the different social structures in the areas.

Communities and Individuals

In urban areas in Zimbabwe the researcher needs to be aware of legislation that prohibits researchers from conducting focus group studies in public spaces, namely the Public Order and Security Act. This Act restricts outside gatherings of more than five people without the permission of the local authorities or police. This applies to all circumstances in which a public gathering is taking place or likely to take place (Public Order and Security Act Chapter 11:17, 2002). This Act was enacted in response to the political unrest and demonstrations related to electoral reform for national elections in 2002. It is argued to be a law that seeks to suppress anti-government resistance by opposition politicians (Zhou & Zvoushe, 2012).

In rural areas, the process of reaching communities may be longer owing to the socio-cultural structures in place. In order to get permission to collect data in rural areas, one needs to get clearance from the district administrator in a particular province, who will give the researcher a letter of consent and referral to the chief of the area where the intended study is to take place. The chief will also write an approval letter notifying the ward councillors and the councillors will confirm consent with reference to the village headman. It is important for the researcher to be sensitised to customs and traditions, and to show respect for the local people's traditions, customs, norms and values, as well as the meaning of privacy in the area of study, with the assistance of the village police officers. For instance, in the Shona culture, as experienced in the Masvingo district, a researcher is not allowed to speak directly to the village head but has to convey his/her message or conduct the conversation through a third party. These are some of the protocols in one culture, but there may be other cultures with different approaches to their leaders, which the researcher needs to learn or determine, since this study did not cover all cultures in Zimbabwe.

In some instances where one needs to talk to a particular group of people in rural communities, the procedure given above may be too long and unnecessary. For example, when dealing with farmers in rural communities, the local government authorities advise researchers to work with a government organisation called the Agriculture, Technical and Extension Services (AGRITEX) of Zimbabwe, as this is an organisation that works closely with the farmers and its officials know how to bring them together. During the author's study, the personnel at AGRITEX were the ones who advised that the only way to gain access to the farmers in the area was to go to their farmers' group centres accompanied by an officer. In Zimbabwe, providing food after a focus group interview in rural areas is mandatory. There is no consensus in literature on providing incentives, but it is advised to deal with such an ethical dilemma through negotiation, using the contextual and situational approach (Ritchie et al, 2013). Some people in rural areas do not understand the research process and view such meetings as a workshop in which food is expected as part of the bargain or deal of convening. Thus, it is crucial to explain in detail the purpose and end result of the group interviewing. After engaging with them the researcher is expected to provide food and the extension officers normally offer advice on buying simple basic foodstuff such as bread, juice, butter and jam.

Non-Governmental Organisations

When dealing with NGOs, the informed consent approach is slightly different from government ministries. Similar documents as those submitted to the government are needed and these have to be submitted to the communications department of the organisation. The organisation will select an appropriate person with whom the researcher will have to liaise in terms of voluntary participation and agreeing on an appointment date. NGOs do not necessarily give written permission but acknowledge the request verbally and sometimes through email or phone text messages. However, researchers should minimise using emails to contact the organisations, as they do not normally attend to them owing to the high levels of email traffic, as well as the likelihood of email getting into the spam folder, particularly for international organisations such as the United Nations. Thus, the researcher should physically visit an organisation's office for quick responses.

Challenges in the Field

Qualitative researchers prefer to record interviews and many research methodology books have pointed it out as essential for accuracy and easy referral (Creswell, 2014; Gray, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Recording interviews digitally is best because the researcher can then be sure of not missing anything and can easily refer back to the interview, whereas manual recording using pen and paper is hard and time-consuming. However, in Zimbabwe a researcher must expect participants to refuse to be recorded, particularly if the study is connected to politics or government. A researcher may need to assure them of confidentiality at the onset of the interview and clearly state the ways in which this will be maintained and identity will be protected. If these assurances of confidentiality are not convincing, the researcher may not get responses to questions relating to criticism of the government and politics or the whole interview process itself. Therefore, researchers should have manual recording tools and an assistant ready at all times to take interview notes. Some participants may be generally media shy and may need encouragement and enlightenment on the importance of recording. However, if recording fails, the researcher and research assistant should take notes of the interview separately and compare the documents afterwards to consolidate or collaborate responses.

Time is of the essence when dealing with government and NGO personnel. The researcher must ensure that sufficient time is allowed for each interview process to allow the interviewee's responses to be explored in depth. Many scholars have discussed the amount of time a researcher should take in conducting face-to-face interviews, which is approximately between 30 minutes and an hour (Gray, 2014; Rowley, 2012). The paper advises that in Zimbabwe an interview involving these organisations should not exceed an hour. Thus, it is critical for the researcher to focus on the key, core questions if the interview is not to exceed this time. This will assist in avoiding intrusiveness in terms of time, space or the personal lives of research participants (Lichtman, 2013). However, if time permits, it is critical to summarise the responses with the interviewee.

Lessons Learnt

Focus Groups

The composition of a focus group is always unique to each individual researcher, depending on what type of information he/she is looking for and from whom. The paper has discussed how to reach potential participants for the focus group. However, it is also important

to make provision for incentives for focus groups in Zimbabwe. In some instances, as mentioned about farmers in the rural areas, it is mandatory, but in urban areas one needs to negotiate for time and space, as most unemployed people are entrepreneurs, which challenges setting up groups. However, the researcher should practise good ethics when faced with such moral dilemmas and apply the utilitarian approach to research ethics (Ritchie et al., 2013).

The researcher should never expect to conduct interviews in a few days after submission of any documentation, particularly in ministries, as it may take weeks because of the busy schedules of the minister or permanent secretary of the ministry or government organisation. One should therefore always follow up applications or requests for data collection by establishing when one can call again or check the application status.

Research Cost

Research is an expensive endeavour for which a researcher has to have a financial plan. Most universities in South Africa now oblige students to obtain ethical clearance for the proposed research and part of the requirements prior to the ethics clearance certificate being awarded is the submission of a research budget. The research budget is a mandatory document, as it reflects that the researcher is aware that there is cost involved in doing research. The table below show the total cost of activities that the author incurred during fieldwork in Zimbabwe in 2017. The values of money in Table 2 are in US dollar and may need to be inflated if one needs to use the table for personal use.

Table 2

Total Cost of Gabriel Musasa PHD Research		
Item/Category	Province A	Province B
Research Assistant Stipends	\$ 127.00	\$ 44.00
Focus group Refreshments/venue/stipend	\$ 42.50	\$ 29.75
Stationery purchases	\$ 6.00	\$ 3.20
Photocopy/printing/scanning	\$ 4.30	\$ 6.05
Transport for researcher&Assistant/ car hire	\$ 99.00	\$ 91.75
Food and Drink Researcher and Assistants	\$ 34.96	\$ 20.28
Accommodation/Groceries	\$ 48.00	\$ 47.38
Airtime, data bundles,sms bundles,social media	\$ 56.50	\$ 11.00
questionnaire translation (shona & ndebele)	\$ 15.00	\$ 10.00
Medication (researcher and Assistant)	\$ 1.00	\$ -
Laundry/ Dry cleaner/ Haircut	\$ 8.00	\$ 1.00
Token of Appreciation/ Tip (Taxi/Restaurant)	\$ 1.00	\$ 3.00
Other (purchases e.g wallet)	\$ 4.00	\$ 8.40
Total Cost of Research/province	\$ 447.26	\$ 275.81
Total Cost of Research	\$ 723.07	
Converted @R13.29 on the 16th Oct 2017	R 9 612.20	

Being organised is critical for research; therefore, a successful researcher needs a fieldwork schedule, a daily to do list diary and a daily experience journal. A detailed report of what transpired in the field and decisions made by the researcher are critical for establishing validity and reliability. Maxwell (2002) posited that qualitative researchers are concerned about the factual accuracy of their account for determining validity rather than data and methods as in the quantitative method, referring to this as descriptive validity. Descriptive

validity is what the researcher reports having seen or heard or touched, smelled, and otherwise experienced (Maxwell, 2002). Moreover, a transcription-recording template, especially for the research assistants, and a daily back-up system for recorded data are critical in the field, especially through software programs such as Dropbox, Google mail, Google drive and an external hard drive.

Conclusion

This paper has gone some way towards devising a roadmap for potential researchers who are novices, as well as experts, giving critical information on how to conduct qualitative research in the politically hostile environment of Zimbabwe. Questions on how a researcher can obtain data, what process or procedure to follow to get permission to collect data from the government, NGOs and communities, resources and documentation required, and the expectations of potential participants have been answered. The discussions were mainly based on the experiences of the author, who carried out a qualitative study of the highly politicised phenomenon of indigenisation and economic empowerment in Zimbabwe. Qualitative researchers in regions and areas that seem to have a militarised or repressive form of governance and politicised bureaucratic institutions and reforms in places such as the DRC, Venezuela, the Philippines, Gambia and Cuba should not be intimidated by the socio-political-economic environments in these areas. Thus, qualitative researchers should understand the contexts in their specific research areas to navigate through the data collection processes. Experiences shared in this paper can be customised in environments similar to the Zimbabwean context. There are great possibilities to gather quality in-depth information in such environments if a researcher knows the processes and procedures in that area. However, qualitative researchers in these aforementioned contexts need to share their experiences and context in order to close the knowledge gap about conducting qualitative research in such areas.

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