Section 2. Challenges of Data Collection

Fundizwi Sikhondze

Chapter 5. Research in a hostile political environment

Research may often be a component in building solidarity against authoritarianism, whether inside and outside an affected country. Such attempts to broaden and deepen understanding of people's experience must traverse via the agonising but necessary task of conducting field work to collect data. Collecting data, from afar, may seem a simple, routine task in a normal environment, to the extent that no-one bothers to factor in the fact that there could be a civil unrest, war and other disturbances in the area from which the data needs to be collected when they craft their research and data collection strategy.

Perhaps the exception to the rule may be specialist researchers conducting research on the very subject of civil unrest or war. Researchers such as Wood (2006) have gone to the extent of producing academic work directing researcher practitioners how to go about conducting research in such environments. Such researchers would more often than not be highly experienced, or be adequately supported by international institutions to handle awkward or generally unsafe situations that may arise in their journey.

In the case of institutions such as the Swiss Centre for Scientific Research, Bonfoh et al. (2011) opined that they had operated in the Ivory Coast for more than 60 years and have continued operating through wars and civil strife and have also gathered and expressed advice to the international research community as far as continuing to carry out research work during the rough war or unrest periods. Their secret has been to keep an apolitical line and to use local leadership who may understand better how to avert danger when needs arise.

For individual researchers conducting post-graduate research, such as this researcher, things may be somewhat different for reasons that include that such researchers are often all alone during the data collection. The year 2021 was a research data collection year for this researcher and by coincidence was also a year when eSwatini went through an unprecedented winter of discontent, from around the month of May. Data needed to be collected in eSwatini, primarily through interviewing informal sector workers. Even now, at the beginning of June 2022, there are remnants of the civil unrest and worse conditions are emerging where there has been rampant burning

of properties of members of the ruling government, as well as those of the pro-democracy activists.

At first, the discontent could be characterised as a mass protest movement of young people delivering petitions to constituency Members of Parliament (MPs). The petitions captured grievances ranging from social challenges facing the community to the creation of employment opportunities to the introduction of a new political system in which government is elected, different from the appointment that currently takes place.

By the middle of June the protest movement had grown bigger in numbers and in geographical spread, threatening to cover each and every inch of the country. The regime started to press panic buttons and immediately moved to contain it by firstly using the Covid-19 pandemic as an excuse to ban all manner of protests and violently breaking up protests that were convened thereafter.

In the aftermath of the ensuing standoff the country descended into a mass protest movement (others called it a civil unrest) which unfortunately had several violent streaks. The first violent strand emerged in the form of banditry elements who seem to have taken advantage of the situation to install check points along the major travel routes into and out of the urban areas. At these impromptu check points, the public was forced to pay in order to be allowed to pass. To ensure compliance the protesters would at times threaten to burn the vehicles with the occupants inside.

Another related strand of the protest movement involved the extensive destruction of retail commercial property worth over $150 million, according to the Eswatini government, countrywide. Retail outlets were looted, ransacked and in many cases burnt down, perhaps to conceal evidence.

In the state of confusion that ensued, where uncertainty reigned supreme, the government implemented devastating mobile network shutdowns, perhaps to control the flow of information in the hope that the tide of protests could be broken. The government also went on a murder spree, in the process killing more than 80 citizens, according to Amnesty International.

For informal workers who ply their trade in urban spaces, the situation could have been an extra traumatic experience because they were just emerging from the period where Covid-19 health regulations had adversely affected their operations, during which, for instance, informal workers would be instructed to keep away from their urban trading spaces. When they would eventually resume operations they would be given strict regulations that reduced the number of days on which they could trade. They also had to go through trading in cities that had a reduced number of potential customers

because, for a while, the public was also discouraged from entering urban spaces, to control Covid-19.

Swarna et al. (2022) write that, globally, informal workers lost around 60% of their income due to the safety measures taken to restrain the spread of the Covid-19 virus but also due to the reduced income of potential customers resulting from job losses or layoffs that took place due to mainly small businesses losing business during the pandemic. The conditions of uncertainty, lack of safety, lack of public transport, and no public allowed in urban cities all meant a lack of earnings for informal workers.

The civil unrest continued in moments of upturn of activities and then downturns where an uneasy calm would return. For instance, on 14 July, King Mswati III called a big national meeting to discuss the unfolding situation in the country. The pro-democracy movement in turn called for protest action in Manzini city to counter the occasion of the king. The state unleashed violence to disperse the crowds in Manzini on the day and there were battles all over the city, with police breaking up small groups of pro-democracy protesters, preventing them from holding their peaceful protest. There were also other significant protests such as the public transport workers in early October and the public sector protest that was also violently put down by the state.

In the specific case of conducting post-graduate research on informal sector workers in Manzini, the most populous city in eSwatini in the aforementioned period, these were some of the background issues that informed the state of mind of informal workers.

One of the realities that faced the researcher was the fact that, given the civil unrest, it became quite difficult to move around the country freely because threats of violence lingered in the air even during quieter periods and because of sporadic operations of public transport. Further, informal workers are usually in front row seats as witnesses to state violence when such takes place in urban spaces, because they trade on the sidewalks and pavements all over the city. Their point of reference for events is to relay what they saw on the day in question. Given their exposure to the events of the period, and despite their risk of reduced earnings and pressure from the state for everyone to resume normal activities, informal workers somewhat consciously reduced their frequency in coming to the cities during the period.

When faced with the continuous absence of potential research interviewees, a researcher is likely to switch their data collection method or strategy. In this case data collection from a personally administered, face-to-face questionnaire would have to be changed to another strategy, such as using mobile phones. However, other challenges emerged that limited the

implementation of these changes because the regime switched the mobile cellphone network on and off as a strategy to curtail free flow of information amongst the citizens.

Thirdly, there may have been anxiety issues amongst informal workers related to their survival and lack of it; therefore in that period, they would not be enthusiastic about taking part in research work. The researcher would be kept waiting, given a short period in which to conduct the interview and given vague and therefore unhelpful answers to the questions as a result.

In conclusion, the conduct of research can be an exciting learning journey for emerging researchers in non-authoritarian regimes, but the political environment can have a strong effect on how research would be conducted and how the outcomes of the research will unfold. The case of eSwatini in the late-2021 season of discontent was a good case study of this situation. Researchers wishing to bring depth to the understanding of labour under authoritarian regimes face a difficult task without institutional support. While research is undoubtedly important and valuable, international allies need to understand that quality research is not easy in such conditions, and may have to rely on less formal ways of knowledge production, especially the experience, networking and reports of those organising under those conditions.

References

Amnesty International (2021) Eswatini, the system is broken, *www.amnesty.org*.

Bonfoh, B., Dao, D., Inza, K. and Rasso, G. (2011) Research in a warzone, *Nature* 474(7353), June.

Swarna, N.R., Anjum I., Hamid, N.N., Rabbi, G.A., Islam, T., Evana, E.T., et al (2022), Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the informal Sector workers in Bangladesh, *PLoS ONE* 17(3).

Wood, E.J. (2009) *Ethical challenges to conducting research in conflict zones*, *Qual Social* 29.