



Researching Empowerment, or Empowerment through Research?

Promoting participatory, girl-driven learning in the Democratic Republic of Congo | OCTOBER 2015

Research is critical to developing new and better approaches for delivering effective and impactful humanitarian interventions. It provides important opportunities for testing innovative ideas and generating new evidence for taking programs to scale. Yet, too often, the humanitarian community has not prioritized rigorous research, or when it has, has done so without properly engaging beneficiaries in the design and implementation of studies. However, an IRC program working to empower adolescent girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has used participatory methods and girl-driven research design within a rigorous impact evaluation. This is a strong example of how research itself can be empowering for participants, thus contributing to wider programmatic goals as well as generating reliable data for program improvement.

Research Considerations:

There is an increasing emphasis within the humanitarian and development sectors on measuring the impact of interventions. In particular, the focus has been on quantitative methods of demonstrating impact, with a growing prioritization by donors of rigorous, scientific measurement of change. This has led to an increasing number of randomized controlled trials (RCTs)¹ being used to measure the effectiveness of these interventions, traditionally using quantitative methods. Many models, however, have recognized the value of mixed method approaches within rigorous impact evaluations, to provide context and depth to the research questions, and in some cases, to inform the research design and instruments.

While donors and implementing organizations are increasing their reliance on RCTs and experimental evaluation designs, there are often challenges in generating the resources and expertise to conduct such impact evaluations in the field. There is also a risk that human and material resources are diverted from delivery of programming and services to support research activities and large-scale impact evaluations. In addition, the demands of rigorous research are often underestimated, taking longer than anticipated and requiring higher levels of staffing – causing data collection to affect program timelines and budgets. Yet, research and programming are interdependent, and prioritizing one at the cost of the other can be harmful to the quality of services, or hinder the generation of accurate and meaningful results that directly inform and feed into service delivery.

In addition, impact evaluations tend to be based on rigorous research designs which help with in-depth, high-quality analysis in response to specific questions. Given the significant expertise required to develop and implement such designs, RCTs and other rigorous evaluations often require the involvement of academic partners. This allows for a more scientific approach and a greater degree of independence in data collection and evaluation. At the same time, importance must be put on developing a strong partnership between academics and implementing NGOs in order to balance the external expertise of academics with the insight and participation of NGO program teams. These program teams bring a

¹ RCTs test hypotheses of change by comparing the results of an intervention group with a control group that does not receive the intervention, whereby participants are randomized to either group such that characteristics that may impact effectiveness are evenly distributed between groups. RCTs are considered the gold standard of scientific—and particularly health—research as they remove many potential biases.

particular level of expertise that academic partners may not possess including an understanding of communities, systems, cultures and behaviors that can give insight into the complexities that exist in the field. They can also ensure that participants—whose lives are most affected by the program being measured—have significant and meaningful input into research questions, methodologies or design and implementation plans, all of which improves the quality of the research but also the interpretation of the results. As such, collaborations between academic institutions and NGOs are critically important to designing and implementing strong program evaluations.

The IRC's Adolescent Girl Research in the DRC:

The IRC believes that rigorous research including RCTs, if conducted in a way that involves and engages its subjects, can be an empowering and impactful experience for participants. An impact evaluation currently underway in the DRC demonstrates some innovative approaches to researching effectiveness. The study, conducted in partnership with Columbia University and with support from the Department for International Development (DFID), is a mixed method, two-arm randomized evaluation of the COMPASS² (Creating Opportunities through Mentorship, Parent Involvement and Safe Spaces) program. COMPASS focuses on providing opportunities for adolescent girls to gain life skills and build assets to protect themselves from and respond to incidents of violence, combined with capacity-building activities that improve the ability of service providers and caregivers to address their specific needs. The study seeks to determine whether a structured intervention with girls' parents and caregivers has an additive effect on girls' safety and well-being. As such, the study is unpacking the program to determine which components, or combination of components, have the most impact on violence-related outcomes.



Girls conduct a body-mapping activity. In this picture, the girl narrates her personal story by drawing images representing her desires and needs as well as things that make her feel safe and unsafe.

In preparation for this study, the IRC used participatory research methods to promote the engagement of girls and to provide opportunities to learn about the community before conducting research. Prior to formal data collection, formative research was conducted using qualitative approaches, such as community risk mapping, focus group discussions, and the use of art, to generate learning on complex topics such as the girls' lives and the risks they face. The following describes the participatory methodologies that were utilized during the formative research phase and the research questions that were answered:

² Research under the COMPASS program is also being implemented in Ethiopia and Pakistan with slightly different research designs.

- **A day in the life** – *What types of risks or violence do adolescent girls face within their communities?* Girls took turns filling in a 24-hour timeline on a large poster paper with activities that they carry out in a typical day. Then, going back through the timeline and list of activities, participants identified moments where a typical girl might feel unsafe and why. For example, in some focus groups, participants cited that girls can be harassed when they go out to collect firewood.
- **Community mapping** – *Where within the community are girls at risk of violence? Where do girls feel safe?* Girls took turns drawing key reference points within their community on a large poster paper, and then marked where they felt safe and unsafe using colored stickers and provided explanation for why they felt that way.

- **Animal parade** – *Which groups of girls are particularly vulnerable or at risk of violence within the community?* The facilitator assembled 6-10 different stuffed animals and asked participants to choose an animal that represented a particularly vulnerable group of girls within their community. For example, girls in one focus group chose a stuffed snake to represent girls with physical disabilities because snakes cannot walk. The characteristics of the animals chosen helped girls to identify and explain the vulnerabilities that they perceive as the most important. The information about which girls or groups of girls in the community are the most vulnerable also informed targeted outreach to those girls to ensure they could participate in program activities.



Girls use animal figurines to represent particularly vulnerable girls in their community

- **Collective drawing** – *What is a safe space according to girls? What are its characteristics? With whom would girls feel comfortable sharing their safe space?* Girls took turns drawing elements of a safe space on large poster paper, including the physical characteristics, location, and people and things inside of the space.
- **Body mapping** - *Who do girls trust with sensitive topics? What do girls believe are the characteristics of a good mentor?* One girl laid on a large piece of poster paper and the others traced an outline of her body. Girls then took turns drawing and listing the characteristics of someone they would trust to support and teach them.
- **Force-field** – *What are potential obstacles that might prevent girls from participating regularly in discussion groups?* The facilitator drew a girl in the middle of the larger poster paper, walking toward her support group. On one side of the girl, participants then drew elements that would facilitate her participation in the group, and on the other side they drew elements that might block her from attending the group, such as schoolwork, chores or poor health.

Such girl-driven activities allowed the IRC to gather a wealth of information about how adolescent girls see the world and their place in it. This information has also been used to inform the design of the impact evaluation and the intervention itself, including shaping the quantitative surveys and tools to reflect the priorities of girls.

Lessons Learned:

During the qualitative activities at baseline, the IRC found that, when discussing beliefs around the role of girls in society as well as risks and incidents of violence, both girls and caregivers/parents provided more nuanced information in group discussion activities than in individual interviews. In group settings, girls were eager to add to one another's comments and augment the discussion with their own experiences and observations related to these topics. Participants were also more likely to open up and relax when the interviewer could sit among them rather than in front of them; this helped to address the power dynamic within the questioner/respondent relationship where the respondents felt they were sharing *with* the questioner rather than reporting *to* the questioner, as is more often the case in impact evaluations. It also proved more effective at gathering the data required, despite the intimacy and direct approach that is typically associated with one-on-one interviews.

Many girls reported that methods involving games and activities while generating information were fun and worthwhile. These participatory and innovative methods often had positive impacts beyond general

engagement. During the research, girls shared that, for many, these exercises were the first time anyone had ever asked them their opinion; a finding that is striking but not surprising, given girls' low status in the DRC. It also helped to balance the time and interest required of research participants with the need for quantitative data.

Important new information was gathered through formative research that was in some cases unexpected. For example, the IRC had thought that in-school and out-of-school girls may want to have separate discussion groups because they are considered to have different statuses within their community. However, when asked if in-school and out-of-school girls could be in the same discussion groups, one girl responded:

"I would rather share my group with girls of my age even if they're not in school, because I learn a lot at school and the other girls could also benefit from that."

In this study, encouraging girls to input into research processes meant that the research better reflected their views and, importantly, led to empowering experiences, enthusiasm, and interest. Providing opportunities for participants to offer feedback and be engaged throughout the process resulted in improvements in the research design and implementation; it has also led to increased confidence and involvement on the part of the girls and their caregivers/parents. Participants' enthusiasm to share their experiences demonstrates that research

can be additive rather than extractive, if the expectations are clearly laid out and the activities are appropriate, enjoyable and engaging for girls. Providing opportunities at the beginning of a study for girls and communities to share their ideas through participatory approaches, or better still lead the discussion, can ensure that research design is adapted and tailored to the local context, which can generate stronger and more reliable results.

Importantly, the IRC also learned that participatory, empowering research can be time-consuming, and require a significant investment of staff time in both training and carrying out formative research activities to ensure that they are of high quality and allow for full and inclusive participation. However, given the additional value derived from beginning with these activities, the IRC believes the investment is worthwhile and necessary.

Recommendations:

Research offers tremendous potential to understand the most effective—and cost-effective—programs, inform practice, and lead to important innovations. If done well, it can also provide benefits far beyond empirical data and program design alone. IRC's experience in the DRC demonstrates that engaging girls through participatory methods and girl-driven design can make research itself more empowering, to the girls as well as to caregivers/parents and communities. In order to achieve these results, the IRC offers several recommendations for relevant stakeholders planning to conduct these kinds of evaluations, particularly with women and girls.

Donors should:

- **Invest in innovative and complementary research methods.** Participatory and qualitative methods, particularly in the formative period before a baseline survey is launched, allows participants to be more involved in methodology and research development, leading to more tailored approaches that produce better results and empower participants. Such an investment can also generate further evidence for donors, practitioners and academic institutions of the value of these approaches.
- **Allocate dedicated resources and time to research.** In order to achieve gains in both research and programming, funding for one cannot come at the expense of the other, but should be additional and coordinated. Moreover, funding for the formative and implementation phases of research requires sufficient time to facilitate and support feedback from study participants into the design and in advance of research activities.

Researchers, academic partners and implementing organizations should:

- **Design research to empower.** Research methodologies should be chosen with an eye toward their empowerment capabilities, particularly in humanitarian settings. This includes prioritizing consultations with communities prior to conducting research so that their voices are included from the beginning in the design rather than as an afterthought. Where adolescent girls are concerned, such involvement can both develop and validate their beliefs, as well as their self-confidence, serving as an important growth opportunity.
- **Use participatory methods.** There are clear benefits to utilizing innovative and engaging ways to solicit participation, and establishing plans for continuous feedback to adapt and improve upon approaches; both for the quality of research itself and for the empowerment of the community. Engaging girls—and allowing them to drive research processes is an iterative process requiring a significant investment of time and resources. This commitment is central to ensuring that research is additive rather than extractive for girls.

- **Explore opportunities to innovate.** Using participatory and qualitative research methodologies is just one step on the path of empowerment through research. As new evidence emerges about the value and impact of participatory evaluations, new insight and ideas for innovation also arise. Researchers, academic partners, and implementing organizations should seize these opportunities to consider other approaches to research—moving beyond facilitating the active *participation* of communities and stakeholders from the global south in designing studies, to their actual *leadership* in conducting focus group discussions and analyzing research results.