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ARTICLE

Researching governance in difficult times and places: Reflections from Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan

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Summary

Motivation: Fragility and closing civic space present significant challenges for research, making research processes more onerous and difficult, particularly on social and political issues. And yet these contexts may be those that may most need to be researched to understand the trend in democratic backsliding being witnessed in many parts of the world.

Purpose: How can researchers navigate difficult contexts characterized by fragility and closing space to conduct rigorous yet safe research? We contribute to a growing literature on this question by exploring researcher strategies in contexts characterized by both fragility and closing civic spaces, as well as the obstacles and challenges they face.

Methods and approach: We draw on the reflections and experiences of researchers directly engaged in managing and undertaking research on social and political action in four contexts affected by varying levels of conflict and violence over a five-year period. Their insights were gathered through observations, informal interviews and discussions over that time, and a focus group discussion.

Findings: Based on the experiences of these researchers we argue that fragile citizen–state relations make the research process and its associated relationships *themselves* more fragile, indeterminate, and tentative. We note challenges

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of access, both formal and informal, low trust, and ethical dilemmas. We then highlight four strategies that stand out as common in navigating these challenges and undertaking research successfully.

Policy implications: We argue that research in fragile contexts with closing civic spaces needs long-term collaboration with local partners that includes building the capacity of emerging researchers and maintaining close accompaniment to create relationships of equality and a community of practice. This requires such research to be more rather than less involved and engaged with participants and research partners located in these contexts, in contrast to suggestions elsewhere that more remote or virtual engagement is the answer. But this research needs to take account upfront of the inherent challenges and uncertainty of research process, and where findings can be safely shared.

KEYWORDS
civic space, conflict and violence, fragility, qualitative research methods

1 | INTRODUCTION

Doing research in difficult settings affected by conflict, violence, and fragility presents a great challenge alongside persistent dilemmas. In this article we look at some challenges that such contexts create, and how researchers can respond. These are important questions, certainly for methodological reasons but also for our interest in the governance of fragility. Looking at what is and is not possible within such contexts provides some understanding of puzzles concerning how states and citizens connect (or do not) in difficult and unpredictable settings. We draw on five years of doing research on such issues in four contexts affected by varying levels of conflict and violence at the sub-national level—Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan—as part of the Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme. Based on the direct experience of researchers in this programme we argue that fragile citizen–state relations imbue our research processes themselves with a great deal of fragility, uncertainty, and unpredictability, but that successful research strategies can still be developed.

Primary research has a few basic requirements—access to individuals, groups, or communities that have relevant insights and experiences; a basic level of trust within relationships built in the study location to enable the research; capacity for collecting good quality, reliable data; and the ability to do so ethically. Methodological literature points out that each of these considerations takes on a different meaning in fragile settings in which researchers face a multitude of challenges, including active conflict, increased state surveillance, poor infrastructure, communities and respondents hesitant to participate, or a generally hostile reception because of heightened tensions (Doyle & McCarthy-Jones, 2017; Hoogeveen & Pape, 2020a, 2020b; Wood, 2006). And yet, the imperatives of gaining access and building trust, collecting reliable information, and knowing how to stay safe in the process, require that researchers not just be in situ to build local relationships, but that they return repeatedly to the same location to deepen relationships and knowledge. Wood (2013, p. 5) points out, "Trust – that is, some degree of trust, a degree that often evolves – is earned by the researcher, often through returning to speak with the same subject again and again."

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Despite the many challenges it entails, numerous authors have called for more, not less, research in difficult settings to better understand conflict dynamics, the impact on the lives of those who live in these places, and the related governance challenges (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Isaqzadeh et al., 2020; Justino, 2019; Mazurana et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2019; Woolcock, 2014). Hoogeveen and Pape (2020b, p. 2) point out that,

> Data deprivation is a pressing problem in FCV [fragile, conflict-affected, and violent] settings for both decision makers and its citizens, and in particular, for the poor, who often lack voice and agency, and who may remain invisible unless data identify their existence and state of being. The need for reliable data on living conditions in fragile situations is even greater, and yet data deprivation tends to be worse in such contexts.

Accordingly, there is a rich literature that draws on researchers' experiences in different parts of the world to suggest ways for conducting research in fragile, violent, and conflict-affected settings (see, for example, recent contributions by Arjona et al., 2019, Bellin et al., 2019, Taylor et al., 2020, Dávila & Doyle, 2020). We contribute to this literature by looking at a particularly sticky aspect of fragility that researchers now encounter across the world—that of "autocratization" and the closing of civic spaces by governments in different parts of the world, including those that are formally democratic (Lührmann et al., 2020).

For purposes of this discussion, we define fragility as the "absence of a unifying social contract between states and citizens with common understandings of obligations and standards on the one hand, and expectations on the other" that leads to uncertainty and ambiguity in the interactions between people and public authorities. These are also contexts in which "deep rooted violent contestation around identities, history and resources leaves groups unable to resolve differences peacefully and forge solidarities" (Joshi, 2021). Countries may manifest different levels of fragility at the sub-national level, "the empirical possibility that government can remain effective (or achieve effectiveness in some respects) even in the midst of instability and violent disruption" (Taylor, 2014, p. 6). Increasing autocratization in parts of the world has meant that this fragile social contract is mixed with the deliberate closing of civic spaces, or the condition in which civil society is unable to "operate without fear of incurring official disapproval, hostility, violence or abuse, or without breaking laws or regulations" (Hossain & Khurana, 2019, p. 6). These practices include reduced rights of expression and association; arbitrary arrests and the detention of activists; and restrictions on media and increasing regulation of online spaces (Anderson et al., 2021). Specifically for our purposes here, closing civic space also brings restrictions on research activities, and opposition to or attempts to regulate independent research.

The two contextual conditions of fragility and closing civic spaces each present challenges in their own right. Brought together, they make the research process far more difficult and onerous in the very contexts that may most need to be researched. The mistrust of research and of researchers by state authorities and by research participants alike adds a whole other dimension to the challenges already presented by fragility, conflict, and violence. Researchers may find that many subjects and areas are off-limits even when access is not restricted by conflict and violence; that they may not be able to move about freely or conduct interviews even on seemingly innocuous topics; that they are not able to access state actors and records even when data is available; and that they may not find willing respondents because of fear and distrust. In addition, and a particular manifestation of closing civic spaces, they may not be able to safely disseminate the findings of their research without endangering everyone involved with it as researchers and participants.

These conditions make the research process and its attendant relationships *themselves* more fragile, indeterminate, and tentative. We define fragile research processes as those that are embedded in uncertainty and insecurity, where options and choices are limited by circumstance but also by active decision-making by actors outside the research process. We ask in this article how researchers have managed to navigate contexts in which their own work is essentially rendered unpredictable by circumstances outside their control—what works, and what are the ethical questions involved in such circumstances? Our answers focus on four strategies that stand out as common across

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teams in all four countries: (1) working with researchers that combine insider and outsider perspectives; (2) creating communities of practice that develop research capacities; (3) flexing and adapting strategies on the basis of risk; and (4) engaging over the long term to build trust. Together these enabled the research teams to navigate uncertain terrains to conduct rigorous yet safe research. Overall, we conclude that research in fragile contexts with closing civic spaces needs to be more and not less involved and engaged with participants and research partners located in these contexts.

While this article contributes to literature on revisiting research principles in difficult contexts, it draws essentially on the practical experiences of researchers across a number of inter-linked projects. These include: a qualitative panel study we refer to as the Governance Diaries project, based on monthly interviews with poor and marginalized households and local governance actors that took place over several years in Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan (Loureiro et al., 2020); research on the Bring Back Our Girls movement in Nigeria (Atela et al., 2021); two projects on women's movements and on women's political participation in Pakistan (Cheema et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Khan & Naqvi, 2018); and a study based on "observatory panels" of representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) exploring how civic space was shifting during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan (Anderson et al., 2021). We draw on the reflections and experiences of the researchers directly and actively engaged in this research, gathered through observations during the research process (both authors were involved in the programme and on some of these projects), informal discussions and interviews, and a focus group discussion (FGD), to explore how they navigated contexts that were already fragile but where the space for research, and the perceived value of independent research, are diminishing.

The article is organized as follows. In Section 2 we define our context, focusing on why the social contract can be considered particularly fragile in the four countries in which our research was located. Even though this often applies to sub-national contexts, we do not for obvious reasons name the exact study location—there are continuing concerns regarding the security of researchers and participants. In Section 3, we look at the main and common challenges that made research processes fragile in these contexts. In Section 4, we look at how researchers working on the various projects navigated these contexts to produce both ethical and rigorous research. We conclude in Section 5.

2 | CONTEXT OF FRAGILITY AND CLOSING CIVIC SPACES

Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan share several similarities on questions regarding social and political action aimed at increasing citizen empowerment and state accountability. During the research period, between 2015 and 2021, they all exhibited a range of social and political fragilities. Each of them experienced armed conflict between the state and various actors at a sub-national level, although not all the research we discuss here took place in these areas. Often these conflicts ran along ethno-regional lines and identities and were characterized by militant groups and other non-state actors contesting the state's right to govern and command resources.[1] All are considered to have either high or severe social fragility related to such tensions (OECD, 2020, p. 23). Although notionally democracies over the period of the research, democratic institutions and processes in each country are weakly consolidated, with all described as "electoral autocracies" in recent analysis (Lührmann et al., 2020, p. 31). Common measures of democracy and civil liberties show declines across the period.[2]

Significantly for our purpose in this article, civic space was curtailed in all four countries and has closed further in recent years. Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan are considered only "partly free," and Myanmar "not free" by Freedom House (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). Press freedom is curtailed in all four (Reporters without Borders, 2021). In

[1]For example, insurgencies based on religious identity were important in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Mozambique, while ethno-regional divides fuelled the civil war in Myanmar prior to the 2021 military coup.
[2]All four scored lower in The Economist Intelligence Unit's annual Democracy Index in 2020 than in 2016 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017, 2021). All four showed declines in fundamental freedoms in the same the period in V-Dem indices (Lührmann et al., 2020).

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Nigeria and Pakistan, state and non-state actors have increasingly used legislative and regulatory tools to close civic organizations critical of their actions, seeking to discredit and delegitimize CSOs and create a climate of fear for activists (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2020; Khan, 2020; Mohmand, 2019). Standing out as a critic of the government in these contexts can be a very risky move, with "disappearances" and malicious prosecution common (Anderson et al., 2021). As online activism became more important during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments moved to increase their surveillance and control of these spaces too (Anderson et al., 2021).

During the research we discuss here, political sensitivities increased and civic space contracted further in all four countries. In Myanmar, the optimistic outlook associated with the first democratically elected government taking power in 2016 was short-lived, with the new government continuing patterns of suppressing dissent and limiting civic freedoms (Brenner & Schulman, 2019), and ultimately a return to military rule in 2021. In Pakistan, a clampdown on rights-based and politically oriented CSOs aligned with attacks on freedom of expression from an emboldened religious right (Khan, 2020; Mohmand, 2019). In Mozambique, amid conflict in resource-rich regions and heightened sensitivity over the gains from new resource exploitation, attacks on government critics and critical media increased the stakes of activism (Pereira & Forquilha, 2021). In Nigeria, moves to regulate CSOs and suppress criticism went hand in hand with violent repression of protests and attacks on freedom of speech (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2020).

Against this backdrop, research on issues of politics and civic action became increasingly challenging. Experience of clampdowns on activity that raised state suspicions or might challenge authorities—including research processes, but also empowerment initiatives and civic organizing—were common across the research locations.[3] Heavy state surveillance and fear of authorities and their willingness to enact reprisals and suppress dissent was highly prevalent and forms the context in which we locate the discussion in the following sections. We look now at the challenges that these contexts presented for researchers.

3 | FRAGILE RESEARCH PROCESSES IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

In this section we present the reflections and experiences of our fellow researchers on the challenges they faced in conducting field research in the contexts defined above. Their reflections fall broadly within two areas: constrained access to research sites and respondents because of formal and informal gatekeeping; and, in some part as a result of this, issues arising from a fear of state authorities, low trust in outsiders, and shifting ethical considerations. A central point we make in this section is that these dynamics reinforce one another to create research processes that are themselves fragile.

3.1 | Access to research sites and respondents—formal and informal gatekeeping

Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) suggest that many non-Western research settings have less stringent ethical requirements that offer ease of access because of weak institutional frameworks. They present this as a concern for many researchers working in these settings, who must take extra measures to protect their research participants. Our experience of access was quite the opposite, though concerns with respect to protecting participants remain the same. In fragile and conflict-affected settings with closing civic spaces, access may be severely constrained because of active violence, heightened security protocols, and the risks that come with accessing communities considered off-limits by the state (Mazurana et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2019; Woodward et al., 2017). Outside geographical areas of conflict, access can be obstructed or constrained by formal and informal decisions about what is "off-limits," both in terms of what can be studied, and what questions answered (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Isaqzadeh et al., 2020). The inaccessibility

[3]One of our research partners, for example, operated with the knowledge that they had a government informant working in their office, so needed to protect information about the research even internally.

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of actors, institutions, and communities is a common feature of our contexts, and we look here at a few ways in which this may manifest.

3.1.1 | Formal processes of approval

A key feature of a constrained space for research are requirements for formal state approval of research projects and their specific instruments (Janenova, 2019; Moss et al., 2019). For example, in Pakistan government regulations require that researchers apply for No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from the district government before starting research. Researchers are required to submit details of the research process as well as the research instruments they intend to use. On the surface this may not be problematic but, depending on how the state views certain research subjects, permission can often be denied or simply withheld. This may be the case, for example, when the proposed research is focused on minorities, social movements, areas considered sensitive because of state interests or security, and, increasingly, also projects to do with women's rights and empowerment. Even where permission is granted, it may be withdrawn later, which makes the research process uncertain and fragile.

The situation was similar in pre-coup Myanmar. The previous government instituted new and convoluted research ethics processes as part of a general move to restrict inquiry into politically sensitive issues, especially by foreign organizations and researchers. Permission to conduct research was needed from three separate national-level ministries but without a clear process for how they interacted or made decisions. In their separate scrutiny of research proposals, they each asked for more information on methods and the subjects to be discussed with research respondents. Research teams had to push back against requests for detailed information on field sites and the identities of local enumerators. The team considered this to be very sensitive information that they could not submit for fear of surveillance and intimidation during the fieldwork.

Delays and uncertainty can also flow from inconsistency in state responses. In Myanmar, different central government departments responded differently to research permission requests, and local authorities subsequently also reacted differently to research plans. Similarly, in Pakistan district officers asked our team to withdraw an application for permission to study women's electoral participation in one of two selected districts, citing security as a concern. In the other district where the research was conducted, we formed a close partnership with the national Election Commission of Pakistan that greatly helped to facilitate and support the research project.

3.1.2 | Local and informal approvals

Regions within the same country may differ over whether formal "higher-level" authorization is seen as important, or even whether this will help gain local access. Gaining separate local approvals often proved important, especially when areas were controlled by informal or non-state authorities. Such negotiations have a different timbre to large institutional frameworks, but we found them just as restrictive in fragile contexts. Researchers faced various challenges, including the need to navigate carefully through local gatekeepers and significantly increased transaction costs, especially in terms of time, uncertainty, and the need to negotiate, build, and maintain multiple relationships.

In Myanmar, where non-state authorities in our selected study sites were in active conflict with the government, researchers soon realized that they needed multiple levels of approval from the multiple competing authorities—formal and informal—at the local level. This needed to be achieved carefully, relying on local leaders to have conversations with superiors and representatives of these groups, and leading to a chain of informal approvals that could be withdrawn at any point. Gaining access at the local level also required careful judgements as to who should approach local actors to seek approval. Researchers had to make astute and often very quick decisions on when their affiliation with a well-established international non-governmental organization (NGO) could gain them trust and legitimacy in local research sites, and when this became a liability, and their own personal networks were much more useful.

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Accordingly, local researchers held different types of "approval letters" or ID, depending on what best suited the circumstances.

Researchers in Mozambique and Pakistan working with very vulnerable populations found that they had to regularly explain to local power holders what they were doing, keenly aware at all times that if these local gatekeepers did not like what they heard, they might suddenly restrict access. They also had to maintain a careful balance between building trust with these local power holders and ensuring that they did not pass on any information from respondents to them, even when demanded outright. Researchers in Mozambique reported being followed by local leaders, increasing the risks that participating households might be identified. In Pakistan and Myanmar some gatekeepers expected to be present during interviews they had set up—requiring some tricky negotiations. These dynamics were considered particularly problematic in these contexts because local leaders were likely to have links to factions or political parties with a history of violent conflict, and the need to conceal and protect respondent identity was ever greater.

3.1.3 | Difficult and unpredictable access to field sites

Even where access to field sites is not mediated by formal or informal approval processes, the underlying causes of fragility or conflict may require researchers to make sudden and extensive changes (Doyle & McCarthy-Jones, 2017; Mazurana et al., 2013). Research may suddenly need to be halted, field sites changed, or methods constantly adapted when tensions flare up or intensify, or when topics need to be approached with greater care and sensitivity (Belousov et al., 2007; Chambers, 2020).

The team studying women's movements in Pakistan had to vary their strategies across different sites to ensure that they could spend the maximum amount of time in study locations. In some places, being part of a larger team was considered more secure, while in others the lead researcher felt it was safest when she worked alone because it attracted the least attention. When security forces would not allow researchers direct access to a conflict-affected setting, research activities were shifted to nearby cities and people were invited here to meet with researchers. However, this disengaged respondents from their spaces, and made the women respondents of the study uncomfortable about meeting with researchers individually.

In Myanmar, one part of our research was to be conducted in Rakhine state, but the intensification of conflict in this area meant that the team had to shift their focus to another region. Even here access was unreliable and subject to change. Whether and when sites could be reached relied on regular reviews of the local security situation, tensions levels, and where armed actors were active at any given time. One research site that was under the complete control of one of the many armed alternative authorities in Myanmar required researchers to travel through China to avoid conflict zones. Their ability to cross the international border and be granted access to the area, even as people with local connections, was always unreliable and in question.

Researchers in Nigeria studying the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) movement in Chibok found that contracting local private security services, vetted by the team, was vital to ensure the safety of research activities. "We followed their lead at all times," one Nigerian researcher said, "when they said move, we moved." There were some initial concerns that this may harm or at least limit engagement with research participants, but this was, fortunately, not the case. Although government security agents observed the team during the research process, they did not insist on receiving information on the study.

3.2 | Fear, trust, and ethics

A major challenge of doing research in conflict-affected settings is a trust deficit between researchers and participants (Doyle & McCarthy-Jones, 2017; Hoogeveen & Pape, 2020; Idris, 2019; Moss et al., 2019). Such contexts also produce particularly complicated research ethics challenges (Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018; Moss et al., 2019; Wood, 2006). We look now at the ways in which our research was constrained by an atmosphere of fear and

distrust, and the ethical dilemmas that are created because of heightened tensions and risks to both participants and researchers.

3.2.1 | Underlying fear and a lack of trust

The combination of conflict, fragility, and closing civic space meant that researchers encountered both fear of authorities and low trust in outsiders among respondents, often working in mutually reinforcing ways. A researcher in Myanmar pointed out that, “It is very difficult to build trust with respondents in such areas because they are afraid of the possible negative consequences of giving information to strangers.” They found that it was a challenge to find people who were willing to be part of the study, and even those who agreed remained nervous. As the researcher in Myanmar put it, “People are very wary of outsiders because they fear that they could be aligned to an armed group or be spies.” Ten respondents dropped out in the middle of the year-long research process—some withdrawing their consent and participation due to security concerns. When interviews started to be translated, one translator left because he thought the material was too sensitive.

This sense of fear was echoed by researchers in Pakistan. “We thought that if we kept our heads down, we would be fine. But respondents worried a lot about state authorities while speaking to us. In one visit to a village, we were asked to leave as soon as people realized we were doing research,” said one researcher in Pakistan. Another added, “We faced a lot of distrust driven by fear that we might be associated with the authorities. It was only by the third or fourth interview or visit that people started to open up.”

A researcher in Nigeria said, “We found that it was very difficult to get to the leader of the movement we were studying. She was an influential person, a former minister, but she had no fixed residential address. Where she lived was a closely guarded secret, she moved around a lot. This gave us an idea and feeling of insecurity immediately—a kind of fear. It was a fear of government and authorities. And it meant that they did not trust anyone, because they could not be sure if we were working for government, and they didn't trust that the information would not be shared even though we assured them confidentiality and anonymity.”

Low levels of trust meant that the Nigerian team's original plan to use online surveys to engage respondents safely and at a distance could not work. They invested time and resources in developing these instruments only to find a low response rate. This was even though the movement they were studying was operating largely online and its tactics included the use of social media. They realized that in a low trust and high fear setting in which people described themselves as being at “loggerheads” with the state, respondents could not trust an online survey. This also negatively affected the various teams' ability to move to online work during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a researcher in Pakistan working with people in more sensitive zones said, “We could not consider doing phone interviews because participants said ‘everything is bugged’ and they didn't trust any devices.”

Fear and a lack of trust change the salience of fundamental components of the research process. For example, assurances of anonymity and confidentiality lose their meaning when there is active fear of state agencies and a consequent lack of trust of outsiders—respondents have little reason to believe that the information they pass on will truly remain confidential rather than being reported to state and security agencies with their words linked to their names.

3.2.2 | Ethical considerations

The dynamics described above make ethical considerations more important given the sensitive nature of the research, the difficult lives of most research respondents within such contexts, and their exposure to risks of violence or reprisal (Wood, 2006). These contexts are also much harder to navigate because of unanticipated, on-the-spot decisions that researchers need to make. As observed by Doyle and McCarthy-Jones (2017) and Moss et al. (2019), we found that standard ethics processes in research, such as the pre-approval of strict controls, often do not take account of the dynamic ethical judgement researchers must make based on the situations and needs of individual participants. For example, researchers were not always able to get informed consent in writing—respondents in insecure contexts will rarely put their signatures to documents. Even oral consent may sometimes make them nervous because it can make

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them look “anti-state” to those observing the interviews in the communities. Besides such issues with the basics of ethics in the field, there are two other serious considerations that researchers must deal with.

First, in some contexts the simple act of becoming a research participant or respondent may carry undue risks. Some research teams experienced participants being pressured by authorities to reveal what they had discussed with researchers. The process of research was seen to increase the “visibility” of individuals or processes that could lead to knock-on risks for them outside of the research process, especially in the study sites in Pakistan and Myanmar. Sometimes interviews had to take place in front of the respondents' house or in a publicly visible place because researchers could not be invited inside. But this meant that respondents were more visible to curious onlookers. A researcher in Myanmar provided an example—telling us “family members of the respondent were often present, and they reminded the respondent to stay away from sensitive topics, such as their relationship with armed groups.” Researchers in Pakistan were often reminded by respondents that these interviews could make things harder for them.

Similar risks may of course affect those doing the research—from increased efforts required to keep data safe to keeping field teams safe and out of harm's way in fast-changing situations. Research team leaders in each setting pointed to the challenge of maintaining a balance between accessing good and complete information while ensuring a duty of care towards both respondents and field researchers. These issues became explicit, for example, when questions needed to be asked about armed actors in areas with active conflict, or when respondents were only accessible at home after nightfall in locations inaccessible to outsiders at that time.

Second, a whole other set of ethical issues are connected to the fact that the research process may raise expectations of those living in difficult circumstances. In some projects, working to gather stories and examples of marginalization with people who were not used to research processes led researchers to feel that they may have raised expectations among participants that they (the researchers) would be able to act on their behalf. In other places where people were more familiar with research, they complained that, in the words of a female participant in the Governance Diaries research in Pakistan, “Many researchers, NGOs and activists have interviewed me and remained in touch with me but they never helped me or anyone from this village.” Researchers were keenly aware of the need to explain clearly what participants could reasonably expect from the research process and found this to be a heart-breaking aspect of working with those whose lives were very difficult.

In this section, we have argued that operating in fragile contexts with closing civic space, and formal and informal gatekeeping, can lead to researchers finding themselves in low-trust settings in which people are fearful of state surveillance, and in which they must regularly contend with difficult ethical questions. This makes the research process itself fragile, uncertain, and unpredictable. We look next at how researchers navigated these fragile terrains.

4 | NAVIGATING DIFFICULT RESEARCH SETTINGS

How did our research teams adapt and respond to navigate difficult contexts, closing spaces for research, and the fragilities inherent in their research processes? Across the projects, four strategies stand out that enabled research to take place rigorously and safely and for research teams to navigate the uncertain terrain in which they worked. These worked in combination to address the reinforcing problems of access, trust, and ethics.

4.1 | Working with insider–outsider researchers

A common realization across all teams was the importance of working not just with local “enumerators” but through long-term relationships with researchers located in, or with close links to, the fragile sub-national contexts in which the research was being conducted—much like that argued by Dávila and Doyle (2020), Hossein (2016), Mazurana et al. (2013), Taptué and Hoogeveen (2020), Taylor et al. (2020), and Wood (2013). This strategy was effective in terms of gaining access to otherwise difficult sites, being better able to understand and manage the changing risks that

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came with doing the research, and in building more trusting and open relationships with respondents. It meant that, in terms of positionality, researchers often played both "insider" and "outsider" roles—maintaining dual identities as researchers and members of a community. One researcher described this in terms of research teams occupying a "liminality" (Thomassen, 2009) in which they were able to play both roles but also interpret between them.

Working with field researchers with existing connections to communities meant that the Governance Diaries project teams could gain access more easily both through local gatekeepers but also directly with residents. The team in Myanmar found that working through local NGOs associated with regional identities and known for their service provision was particularly advantageous. Even with researchers who understood the local dynamics of conflict and politics of ethnicity intimately, a great deal of time was needed to explain the research objectives and the ways in which the team planned to keep the information they would collect secure and confidential. In Mozambique, researchers were not originally from the areas being studied, but moved to live there for the duration of the project, taking significant time to establish networks and relationships to support the work before beginning interviews. In Pakistan, the research team were often from the regions on which the research focused. They also worked via several local gatekeepers whom they already had—or soon came to have—relationships with, and the fact that these gatekeepers were trusted increased the willingness of respondents to take part in the study.

Working in this way not only improved access but also increased the chances that respondents would trust researchers. The teams felt respondents opened up more as they came to recognize the researchers as people who understood their lived experiences, as "one of us." It also enabled the projects to work in local languages, "read" the signs to determine whether the team should access research sites on a particular day, and judge whether the activities of the research team were heightening risks. When families became nervous about their members speaking to the research teams about certain topics, local researchers spent time building trust, explaining the implications of the research, and dealing with their concerns. At other times, they also used their judgement to remove families from the study when they realized that it was too risky for them to continue to participate.

The Nigeria team studying the BBOG movement found that working carefully through local networks, a "snowball" sample could be achieved that provided much more access than was originally anticipated, as the researchers gradually gained the trust of movement and community members. Part of the work involved interviews with the parents of the abducted girls. Working with research assistants from that state, nearby communities, speaking local dialect, and understanding the local situation helped enormously. Initial interviews and relationship-building with people from Chibok living in Abuja enabled the team to make links with people in the community who would be willing to speak with them.

Positioning was also important in interpreting data. In Myanmar, where some research locations were governed by an armed non-state authority, the national researchers noticed that this body was not mentioned in research data. They initially assumed this was because of fear of speaking about an authority that was illegal in the eyes of the Myanmar state, but engaging with the field researchers realized that in fact references to "the government" pointed to them rather than the national government. The civic space observatories were made up of civil society leaders and activists from across conflict-affected spaces in each context. In their monthly engagements together, they worked to make sense of recent changes, based on their different experiences and vantage points. While researchers found their "insider" perspective to be essential, the "outsider" viewpoint was also needed; sometimes, according to one researcher in Pakistan, "field researchers often saw things that would be of great interest to others but would not record them because they were so usual for them."

4.2 | Creating communities of practice: Ongoing accompaniment and capacity building

Working in this way required intensive training and ongoing engagement with local researchers throughout the process. In some projects, field researchers were relatively inexperienced and new to research on politics and governance. The approach used for training in one Governance Diaries team borrowed on the concept of building

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a "conversational community" (Gudeman & Rivera, 1990) in which researchers at all levels in the team participated in formulating questions and worked iteratively between data collection and its analysis on an ongoing basis. This trained the team in the approaches used, made them more familiar with what was needed, and gave them greater confidence to make changes during fieldwork as and when required, building their capacity as researchers. This confidence was particularly important because field researchers needed to make on-the-spot decisions about how far they could probe certain sensitive issues safely, and where to draw the line. The training was set up as both dedicated sessions held at different points in the research process; as regular contact through the "conversational community"; and through online tools such as a live Facebook group for problem solving, answering questions as they emerged, and building connections across the researchers to construct communities of practice.

This kind of collective sense-making was important in the BBOG study. After the data was collected, the Nigeria team organized a three-day data analysis retreat that included the local field teams along with research leads who had not been part of the data-collection process. "This enabled us to not just analyse data but to also cross-check analysis and interpretations among ourselves. As knotty issues arose during analysis, we clarified them together," one of the researchers in Nigeria said, which included, for example, conducting spot-checks by telephone to confirm certain parts of the data.

This training and capacity-building work not only ensured the quality of the research but also empowered a larger community of researchers, making the role of local team members not only data collectors but also planners and decision-makers in the research process. We found such empowerment to be centrally important for researchers working on the ground in difficult contexts, who regularly need to make quick decisions about finding ways to continue the research without compromising on its quality. The commitment to supporting field researchers extended beyond the projects, with mentorship and support for their future research and academic careers.

4.3 | Flexibility and adaptability to changing understanding of risks

At the centre of many of our strategies to respond to the fragility of the research process was a commitment to flexibility and adaptation—a point also stressed by Doyle and McCarthy-Jones (2017), Mazurana et al. (2013), and Kovats-Bernat (2002). The research processes rarely took place in the way teams initially planned them, requiring restrategizing and alteration along the way to balance risks and take opportunities when they emerged. Research teams often took their lead from the logic of respondents, recognizing that they held different perceptions of what made interactions safer—for example whether interviews were better conducted in private or in the open. As Nilsson and González Marín (2020, p. 238) argue, "security is context specific."

Some adaptations, connected to the points above, were made through empowering research teams on the ground to respond to shifts in risks and their own readings of what was possible. One researcher reflected that "nothing was permanent" and that flexibility stretched from research design through to decisions about what to cover in individual interviews, and notably whether or not to make audio recordings of interviews. A research project manager in Myanmar noted that "all the pre-planning and protocols ultimately ended up in researchers making decisions themselves and doing things in ways that make sense"—adapting to fast-moving contexts to make decisions about security, safety, and ethics on the spot.

Other adaptations were based on learning how to enable open and honest participation in the research, addressing issues of access and trust. When researchers in Pakistan realized that women were not comfortable with individual interactions, they altered research instruments to conduct group-based study circles rather than individual interviews. In a project on women's political participation, researchers similarly realized that women engaged with political questions better in group situations, but that men refused to speak about women's political participation in groups and had to be interviewed individually on the subject. The team therefore developed different research strategies with women and men on the same subject. Similarly, when another team realized that a period of intense political instability (the overthrow of a prime minister) meant that planned interviews with women parliamentarians could not be conducted, they designed an online survey, and against expectations, received a high response rate.

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The Nigerian team researching the BBOG movement gradually developed their research strategy as they began to engage and learn more about what was necessary. They realized that because of the extremely sensitive nature of the issue and the fact that, in the words of a Nigeria researcher, they "were interviewing people that were hurting," they could not use pre-designed questionnaires before understanding in detail the ways in which questions would affect respondents and learning about how sensitive topics could be approached. As such, "We could not use a tool that was fixed, structured, and inflexible because that would not be the best for this situation. We needed a method that was context sensitive." This they built through more participant observation than originally envisaged, and by using online interactions by the movement as a primary source of data and for developing further research instruments.

Some adaptations related to changing understandings of the risks of working in particular areas or with particular respondents. The initial idea of the Governance Diaries approach was to have participating households keep their own "diaries." This soon adapted when the team realized that keeping these diaries at home may compromise the participants' safety if they were found by others. In Myanmar, even the idea that respondents might keep some type of "visual diaries" or mark calendars with symbols for particular events was considered to be too dangerous. What were anticipated to be "diaries" became panel interviews, with monthly visits to the same households or respondents by the same researchers. Further adaptations included the use of vignettes to deal with the potentially volatile nature of some questions in both group discussions and individual interviews. Research teams constructed these in each country, drawing from examples given by respondents, to avoid direct questions and allow people to speak about sensitive information in a hypothetical manner.

4.4 | Creating trust through open and long-term engagement

Researchers agreed that it is not possible to reduce the fear of state agencies, but it is possible to increase trust levels between researchers and respondents, and by doing so both get more rigorous data and build relationships where research centres the agency and perceptions of participants (as argued by Pearce & Abello Colak, 2021, among others).

Longitudinal approaches were one way to achieve this. In the Governance Diaries work there was a formal protocol with some questions to be repeated each month to explicitly identify changes. Researchers also had the space to add other questions as the need for them became obvious, and to construct more informal relationships and questions that highlighted what they already knew about each respondent from previous interactions. This approach, and the repeated interactions they had, were felt to create a "feeling of comfort" between researchers and respondents that allowed them to gain a deeper sense of dynamics as they played out. In some cases, it was only after several visits and interviews that respondents explained what was really behind issues—for example, one respondent revealed in a fifth interview that her household medical expenses were driven by her husband's drug addiction. In Myanmar, the regular nature of the research conversations with households and village leaders was crucial, with many insights coming from interviews that were deliberately informal, and more like catching up over a cup of tea. In the Navigating Civic Space observatory project, panels deepened their relationships and opened up further as their monthly sessions went on. In the words of one researcher in Pakistan, participants "began to feel it was a safe space under an otherwise quite dangerous situation."

A team member noted that showing empathy in their interactions—"feeling the pain"—was an important way of building trust. Also important were clear assurances of confidentiality. For example, in the Myanmar Governance Diaries researchers used tablets to record interview data, which was immediately uploaded and removed from the device. During first visits they demonstrated to household respondents that their data was not held on the device, so they could be more comfortable that it would not be intercepted.

Prioritizing face-to-face and personal interactions was an important part of creating (relatively) safer spaces. A natural response—and a frequently suggested solution—to the problems accessing conflict-affected areas in the

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midst of heavy surveillance is to use digital tools that allow remote access. For the most part we found this did not work, or only worked once face-to-face relationships had already been established. In Nigeria some interviewees in the BBOG study simply refused to engage online, saying that they needed to see who they are speaking to. In places where the Governance Diaries work needed to move to phone interviews because of COVID-19 risks, the researchers felt this only worked because of the relationships built up in person through repeated interactions.

Researchers often reported that the research process was cathartic for many respondents and noted their enthusiasm when it came to sharing their experiences. One researcher, engaging with women from the marginalized Hazara community in Pakistan, described this as women wanting to "give testimony," and a sense that engaging with the researcher had personal and political importance for them. Wood (2013), Longman (2013), and Isaqzadeh et al. (2020) have argued very similar points about people's willingness and need to speak out about their lives and struggles in difficult contexts. A researcher on another project noted that people's ability to give their story without it being censored by the state or media was also very important for some respondents. Others noted a sense of appreciation from respondents that "outsiders" or people in privileged positions or with higher status were taking an interest in their lives and what they were facing. When one Governance Diaries team had to miss one of the monthly interviews, they were greeted the following month by a family asking where they had been and saying that they had "so much to tell them." Another researcher talked about how interviewees used their regular conversations to "process" their experiences.

5 | CONCLUSIONS: SUSTAINING RESEARCH EFFORTS AMID CLOSING SPACES

The discussion we have outlined in this article, drawing on the field experiences of a group of researchers exploring similar questions, is important because it deals with the challenge of doing research in increasingly difficult contexts where the space for research is closing. Given the state and nature of politics in these and other similar countries, we can expect that this space will continue to shrink for some time, making such discussions ever more urgent.

The discussion is also important because some of our experiences and the conclusions of this article question received wisdom in this field. On some findings there is agreement. Much of the literature, such as Dávila and Doyle (2020) Mazurana et al. (2013), and Taylor et al. (2020), agrees that collaborations with local partners over the long term must be prioritized, and that this will need to include building the capacity of emerging researchers and maintaining close accompaniment to create relationships of equality and a community of practice. On other findings, our experiences run contrary to the received wisdom that research in difficult settings can be done remotely, an approach strengthened by the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Howlett, 2021; Lobe et al., 2020). Our experience suggests that personal interaction through familiar actors is central in low-trust settings, and that research in fragile contexts with closing civic spaces needs to be more involved rather than less.

This raises questions about how to operate in difficult settings, many of which are discussed above. But there are some other unanswered questions that emerge from this discussion. Despite our own (and widespread) belief that such research can put respondents at risk, we found that many respondents spoke to us to get their stories out from within these spaces in which they feel they may have become invisible to the world. How do we balance this duty to "bear witness" with the risks of attributing published stories to particular locations? What can researchers learn from the study of ethics in journalism, more accustomed perhaps to these dilemmas? Further, how do we better balance the necessity of maintaining research and respondent anonymity and safety with the importance of giving voice to their experiences in these locations? The thoughtful contributions of Arjona et al. (2019) and Bellin et al. (2019) on the challenges of maintaining research transparency in complex settings are helpful here.

Other concerns are related to the research dissemination process. For example, heightened political sensitivity has restricted what findings some research teams could put in the public domain, and when. This has been a major question for our Myanmar team and the local organizations with which they worked, in terms of protecting themselves from reprisals. More widely, there is a risk that publishing-focused academic incentives could pull us away from undertaking research in these contexts. Relatedly, if international spaces are safe for telling these stories and local

ones are not, one impact of closing spaces is that research feeds into the agendas and narratives of external actors and is unable to strengthen those of local ones. This may set back the decolonization of academia and development practice.

While we do not fully answer these questions here, our collective experience in the projects discussed in this article do clarify a few things. In summary, research in fragile and conflict-affected areas is enabled and strengthened by empowering and supporting researchers in these contexts; flexibility and contextualization are key, and an insistence on very rigid or externally determined frameworks may not work. Operationalizing this requires building the capacity of field researchers; a research design that involves field researchers and participants in sense-making and interpretation; and, connected to this, a need to balance rigour with safety, and to regularly recalibrate to reduce the risks that research brings to participants and researchers. These principles and approaches are very likely to be applicable in the many settings around the world where conflict, growing autocratization, and closing space militate against exploring crucial issues of power and politics.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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