

# Negotiating Access for Participatory Research with Armed Actors

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**Abstract** Carrying out research in areas controlled by armed actors requires an ongoing process of negotiation along a series of different axes. Permission from these non-state groups is essential in order to have access to the communities they dominate, yet independence from them is also fundamental to the integrity of the research. External research engages in negotiations which mirror the compromises that residents make on a daily basis. This briefing note traces the process of negotiating access with militias and drug dealers for research to take place in Rio's *favelas*. The challenge throughout these negotiations was demonstrating enough flexibility to appear not to be a threat, while at the same time maintaining the neutrality of the research. Militias and drug dealers each set different 'terms' for allowing the research to go ahead in relation to their specific concerns.

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## 1 Briefing note

In the case of Rio de Janeiro (Wheeler, this *IDS Bulletin*) negotiating permission with the drug traffickers or militias was a prerequisite for carrying out research. Their permission was essential for securing physical access to the communities, and for the research to occur. Without it, anyone involved in the research process would incur great risk. On the other hand, it was also important to protect the independence of the research from these same groups. Community leaders and residents are constantly faced with the question of the degree to which they associate themselves with armed groups. This presents a dilemma: in many cases, a closer association with the dominant group leads to specific benefits, financial and otherwise. However, they are precarious benefits, because if the power structure shifts and another group takes control, those who were most closely associated are most exposed.

For many, the solution has been to maintain as much distance and neutrality as possible in relation to the different factions. But for community leaders, this is not a realistic option, since any activities they may try to undertake at the local level must involve negotiation with the dominant group, as demonstrated by the

research project itself. The implications of this system for the research project were clear: it was crucial that residents and participants in the research process did not perceive the community researchers to be affiliated with the militia or drug trafficking mafias, yet these violent actors needed to give their consent for the research to happen. In the end, this resulted in a complex process of maintaining neutrality while negotiating to gain access. Neutrality is a particularly important feature of researching violence in cases where paramilitary or parapolice forces have control (Feenan 2002).

In Quitungo and Guapore, where the militia is in control, the first negotiations were held indirectly. The community coordinator of the research approached the mother of the leader of the militia to tell her about the research project and ask her opinions. The assumption was that she would discuss this with her son and any objections would be raised via her. This protected the community coordinator from direct contact with the militia. However, once the research began, the community researchers felt that more direct contact was necessary. I went to meet with the leader of the militia, accompanied by two of the community researchers. He agreed to the research project going forward.

Approximately two weeks later, a meeting of the community researchers to plan some of the upcoming participatory discussion groups was invaded by five armed members of the militia. The brother of the head of the militia began an argument with one of the community researchers in the street and then the group of men followed her to the meeting. During this meeting, the militia members accused the researchers of having political motivations and forming cliques that did not work for the benefit of the community. The tone of the confrontation was aggressive on the part of the militia members, and a clear attempt at intimidation. Eventually, the head of the militia appeared and agreed that the research could continue, but under the auspices of the militia. This meant holding meetings in a militia-controlled building and including people chosen by the militia in the team of community researchers. When the militia members left the meeting, they sent a young woman who worked for them to sit at the meeting and take notes.

The community researchers were angry at this treatment, and felt that the militia were threatening the entire research project through an abuse of power. In the end, I met again with the head of the militia and his lieutenant and refused to agree to his demands. I emphasised the external connections of the research project, as well as interest from the national media in the project, as a means of increasing the safety of the researchers. The head of the militia wanted me to remove two of the researchers with whom he had previous disagreements about unrelated issues. This was a clear example of how the micro-politics of the community, shaped by the context of violence, had an impact on the research project. I refused to make any changes to the team of community researchers. He reluctantly agreed, because he did not perceive the research as a threat. When the meeting ended, he offered the community coordinator and me a ride in his car, and we both refused. As we left the building, the coordinator said 'I'd rather be dead than be seen in his car'. Being in his car in the middle of the day in the *favela* would have been interpreted as a clear statement that we were working with the militia.

The difficulty through all these negotiations was demonstrating enough flexibility to the militia to appear not to be a threat, while at the same time

maintaining the neutrality of the research. If the research was seen by community participants to be affiliated with the militia, this would have a significant impact on who would attend meetings and what would be discussed. Also, there was a high degree of interest by the national media in the militia, with stories appearing on an almost daily basis about their activities. The militia leader was cautious about this because he did not want any disruption to their operations and may have feared further media attention.

The power of the militia, despite their connections with the police and access to sophisticated weapons, has not brought them uniform legitimacy in the community. The aspirations of those involved in the militia extend beyond the current arrangement of extortion and 'protection' of the community. The leaders of the militia have political aims. It was in relation to these political aims that they were most threatened by the research project, which they perceived as a possibly politically-motivated organisation, and which could threaten their attempts to capture control of the votes of the community. Because the militia has taken control of the residents' association, which is the official arm of the community in dealing with the government, it has been able to take advantage of existing client/patron arrangements in the community. It can promise to deliver services to supporters, including access to water, electricity and government programmes. However, where this arrangement diverges from the typical client/patron arrangement is that anyone who tries to avoid this relationship faces violent reprisals. In order to bolster their legitimacy, the militia has tried to force other community leaders to associate their work with that of the militia. In relation to the research project, both the perceived threat to the militia's political aims and the possibility of external funds passing into the community beyond militia control were contentious issues.

In Santa Teresa, the process of negotiation with the drug traffickers was more straightforward. The primary concern of the traffickers was to maintain a suitable environment for the drug trade, where state vigilance does not reach and where they can carry out transactions unhindered. In order for this to be the case, they need either sufficient legitimacy or sufficient levels of fear within the *favela* to maintain silence

on the part of the residents. Research meetings were held in the middle class neighbourhood, and this small geographical distance meant that the traffickers did not need to give direct permission for the research to go ahead. During filming for the participatory video, the community researchers needed to ask permission from the traffickers for the filming. Certain shots and angles were not allowed because they could reveal details of the trafficking operations or show the identities of individual traffickers. Holding the research meetings outside of the *favelas* was an important indicator of our neutrality towards the traffickers, and also diminished any threat that the research might inadvertently or deliberately reveal information about the drug trade. However, it also meant that the research was more removed from the *favelas*, and that meetings were less well attended.

There were some interesting differences between militia and drug traffickers in their approach to negotiation about the research. Neither the militia nor the traffickers were concerned with legal legitimacy. The main issue for both was social legitimacy, albeit for different purposes. In the case of the militia, social legitimacy is necessary for them to consolidate control over communities and exploit this for political purposes. For the drug traffickers, either social

legitimacy or fear is necessary to ensure suitable conditions for the drug trade. Each set different 'terms' for allowing the research to go ahead in relation to their specific concerns.

In the case of the militia, their primary concerns were the legitimacy of the militia as leaders of the community, with specific political ambitions. Any sense that the research process might threaten this was a problem. In addition, the militia saw the research project as a potential means of increasing their legitimacy. They tried to force other social projects in the community to be organised under their auspices for the same reason. They were generally not interested in the actual content of the research and what was actually discussed in the research sessions, which I had anticipated would be a problem. In contrast, the drug trafficking groups were not concerned about how the research project might affect their legitimacy within the *favela*. Their primary concern was about how information inadvertently or deliberately gathered through the research process might pose a threat to actual operations. In both cases, the involvement of the community researchers in negotiating the terms for the research was essential. The research needed both permission from the controlling armed group, and independence from them. In the end, there was a delicate balance between the two.

## Reference

Feenan, D. (2002) 'Researching Paramilitary Violence in Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 5.2: 147–63