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RESEARCH NOTE

Conducting fieldwork in Rwanda

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ABSTRACT Despite the plethora of studies critiquing the political climate in post-genocide Rwanda, it is possible for researchers to conduct fieldwork in Rwanda. However, all aspects of the fieldwork being conducted must be sensitive to the highly politicised research setting and must satisfy criteria established by the government of Rwanda. This research note is intended as a guide for foreign researchers who, due to the difficulties associated with getting current information from outside Rwanda on official requirements, often have a limited understanding of what will be expected of them upon their arrival.

RÉSUMÉ En dépit de nombreuses études critiquant le climat politique au Rwanda suivant le génocide, il est toujours possible pour des chercheurs de mener des travaux de terrain. Cela dit, les travaux doivent être sensibles à un environnement de recherche extrêmement politisé et doivent satisfaire les critères établis par le gouvernement du Rwanda. Cette note de recherche est visée comme un guide pour des chercheurs étrangers qui, à cause d'un accès limité à des informations actuelles sur les critères de recherche officiels, ont une compréhension limitée des attentes qui les attendent.

Keywords: Rwanda; ethics; methodology; politicised research setting

Introduction

Modern Rwanda is the site of much foreign research on a range of topics, from qualitative studies of the 1994 genocide and its aftermath to quantitative studies of particular development initiatives and their impact, to scientific investigations of natural phenomena and wildlife. Yet, the majority of foreign researchers – particularly those who are conducting fieldwork independent of non-governmental organisations (NGO) or community-based organisations (CBO) – are currently pursuing their research in Rwanda without going through the proper government channels for securing permission. This emerges from ignorance, miscommunication with Rwandan partner organisations (a relationship that is required in order to conduct research in Rwanda), lack of familiarity with Rwandan protocol or an unwillingness to dedicate the time and money necessary to navigate the bureaucratic process.

This note argues that foreign researchers are ethically obliged to apply for formal research approval from the Government of Rwanda (GOR) – ideally before arriving in Rwanda and starting their fieldwork – and provides an overview of the specific institutions and procedures that are involved. The process of gaining formal research approval, culminating in the receipt of a research permit from the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), can be lengthy and should be initiated at least four to six months before the researcher plans to arrive in Rwanda. It is also a

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costly process. Assessment by the Rwandan National Ethics Committee (RNEC) costs as much as 1,500 USD, and so this cost should be included in any budgets for fieldwork. Finally, to facilitate research approval, researchers should familiarise themselves not only with best practices for ethics when working with human subjects and so-called vulnerable populations, but also with the political climate presently affecting Rwanda. This is particularly relevant if the project focuses on the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis and its aftermath. Following the controversial 2010 elections, Rwanda has been subject to intense international scrutiny – most recently highlighted in the comments made by Susan Rice, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, during her visit in late November 2011 (Rice 2011). Thus, all fieldwork undertaken by foreign researchers will need to demonstrate that it is not influenced by the negative representations of the GOR common in international media today.

The protocol and accompanying recommendations outlined in this note are based upon several months of meetings and email communications with GOR officials in Rwanda and Canada, as well as additional meetings, email communications and telephone conversations with staff at the Embassy of the United States and Office of the Canadian High Commission in Kigali, Rwanda. However, it must be noted that these recommendations are based on one researcher's experiences pursuing formal permission to conduct fieldwork in Rwanda, rather than a comprehensive survey of foreign researchers' activities in Rwanda. In addition, this protocol can be changed by the GOR at any time. As such, researchers should always check with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health (MOH), as well as any foreign researchers who have current on-the-ground experience with applying for research permits and related documentation and, more generally, conducting fieldwork in Rwanda.

Research design: navigating the current political climate

For North America-based researchers, the process of developing a research design is often a practical exercise that aids researchers in thinking through the basic phases of their research project, acquiring ethics approval from their university or organisation's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and securing funding to proceed. In creating a research design for fieldwork that will be conducted in Rwanda, however, it is important to take certain unique features of the political landscape into account to ensure success.

There are several key points of tension in Rwanda with which researchers should familiarise themselves to avoid inadvertently causing offense or harm or having their research proposals rejected. First, researchers should be aware that they must not conceptualise the Rwandan people according to past labels for ethnicity. It is no longer appropriate (nor is it legal) to refer to people as Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa, unless the researcher is studying the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis.¹

Instead, researchers are expected to refer to the local population only as Rwandans to avoid maintaining and promoting divisive terminology reminiscent of pre-genocide Rwanda. It is still acceptable to talk about and explore differences in economic classes, for example, but past labels related to ethnicity are no longer part of the official discourse in Rwanda and using them, particularly in public, will often make Rwandans uncomfortable and bring negative attention to your work.

Second, researchers must be aware that the Rwandan government is committed to protecting its people from poorly designed and unethical research, particularly when the research will involve survivors of the 1994 genocide. A large percentage of Rwanda's civilian population has directly experienced a variety of harms as a result of the genocide. Therefore, GOR officials will consider it to be high risk, since asking individuals to speak about their experiences may inflict emotional distress or trauma. For this reason, it is important for researchers to demonstrate

that they will proceed with the utmost sensitivity when working with survivors. In instances where researchers lack formal training in counseling or related disciplines, a possible solution might be to work with a Rwanda-based organisation that is able to provide counseling services or to hire research assistants with the necessary skills to provide culturally appropriate forms of support to survivors.

When working with Rwandans who are at low risk of experiencing emotional distress or when studying subjects who do not relate to the 1994 genocide, the researcher must still demonstrate that they have considered other possible kinds of harm their participants might experience from participating in research activities – be it biomedical, statistical, or social in nature. A careful reading of the *Standard operating procedures* issued by RNEC (2009), which will be discussed in greater detail below, can be useful for navigating these issues.

These recommendations only briefly touch on the main tensions capable of negatively affecting foreign researchers' efforts to gain government approval for their research. For a more detailed explanation of these social and political phenomena, and to learn of options for avoiding political pitfalls and minimising harm to themselves or to fieldwork participants, it is recommended that researchers consult both with colleagues who have recent experience working in Rwanda and with embassy and diplomatic staff who are currently on site. This field note includes a listing of relevant government websites and links to key documents (see Appendix 1).

Step 1: obtaining approval from Rwanda's National Ethics Committee for biomedical and social scientific research projects

The first step in gaining permission to conduct fieldwork in Rwanda should be to contact the RNEC to initiate a formal application for ethics approval.² The RNEC was established in 2003 with the aim of introducing international standards for ethical research to Rwanda. It has primary jurisdiction over biomedical research conducted within the country, which it defines as "research on pharmaceuticals, medical devices, medical radiation and imaging, surgical procedures, medical records, and biological samples, as well as epidemiological, social and psychological investigations" (RNEC 2009, p. 5). In doing so, the RNEC establishes its right to evaluate social scientific research in addition to those projects that are biomedical in scope.

RNEC's seven-member multidisciplinary committee – consisting of a community representative and experts from the fields of law, biomedical research, clinical research, public health and philosophy or theology – meets once a month around the 15th to discuss proposals (RNEC 2009, p. 6). It is important to note – and this is likely due to the RNEC being modeled on Western institutional review boards – that there is little, if any, social scientific expertise among committee members (Schrag 2010). The impact that this has on the approval process for social scientific studies cannot be determined at this point. However, the possibility exists that the committee's bias may – as it frequently does in the US and Canada – prevent social scientists from pursuing their research without first spending a lot of time justifying their intended project to committee members with little knowledge of specific disciplinary norms for ethics (Hemming 2009, Schrag 2010, Thomson 2013).

To apply for ethics approval, researchers are required to submit an array of documents for evaluation by the committee. These include:

- (1) a cover letter (10 copies);
- (2) a research protocol and summary (10 copies);
- (3) a sample consent form or patient information sheet, in English *and* Kinyarwanda (10 copies);
- (4) a financial agreement with researcher assistants and co-investigators (10 copies);

- (5) a placebo usage justification, if necessary (10 copies);
- (6) a brochure for clinical trials, if necessary (10 copies);
- (7) the primary investigator's CV (10 copies); and
- (8) an insurance certificate, if required (10 copies).³

The RNEC requires that researchers collate these documents, creating 10 bound sets. The sets then can be mailed or taken in person to RNEC's office, located at the Ministry of Health in Kigali. In addition, RNEC requires that researchers pay a fee of 850,000 Rwandan francs (approximately 1,500 USD), while graduate students who are funding their own research pay 100,000 Rwandan francs (approximately 170 USD). Finally, when it comes time for the RNEC to review the application materials, the primary investigator must be prepared for the possibility that he/she will be called upon to make a formal, 15–20-minute presentation on the research protocol to the committee (RNEC 2009, p. 13).

The research protocol is arguably the most important part of the application (see Appendix 2). In brief, researchers are required to provide a summary of their intended project, followed by more detailed explanations of their project's main objectives, methodology, study population, procedures for data analysis, ethical considerations and logistics which include a detailed budget. Finally, references from the researcher's affiliated university, supervisory committee and funding agency are required. The resulting volume should be thorough, written in plain English or Kinyarwanda, and must demonstrate a nuanced awareness of the particular ethical challenges related to the proposed research and the measures necessary to minimise harm for participants, research assistants and the primary investigator.

The RNEC requires researchers to submit their completed applications at least 15 days before the committee is to conduct scheduled. Applications are evaluated for: the relevance of their objectives; the scientific and methodological rigour of the fieldwork process; the project's inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation; the validity of their process for establishing the informed consent of their participants; the qualifications of the primary investigator; the researcher's plans to minimise harm and maintain confidentiality for the project's participants, particularly those people from vulnerable communities; and finally the researcher's plans to consult with and maintain good communication with the local community (RNEC 2009, pp. 11–12, pp. 16–17).

It is important to note that for research projects that are considered minimal risk – meaning those that are unlikely to cause psychological or physical damage to participants – an expedited review process is in place. Expedited reviews are conducted by one of RNEC's chairpersons – usually an individual with the most experience working in the fields relevant to the proposed research. From there, the chairperson drafts a summary report containing his or her recommendations for the committee and a vote is held based on these recommendations (RNEC 2009, pp. 20–21).

The committee members strive for a consensus when determining whether to approve, give conditional approval, or reject each application. However, when a consensus is impossible, a majority vote can also lead to an approval (RNEC 2009, p. 12). Technically speaking, a decision regarding whether a research proposal has been approved occurs during the meeting. However, there may be a delay of several weeks between the decision being made and its communication to the primary investigator, as the RNEC's secretary must then write a report containing the committee's recommendations for the proposed research.

In addition to evaluating new research proposals, the RNEC committee is also responsible for evaluating progress reports and final outcomes prior to their publication or release to the public in formal settings. As a result, researchers should be in regular contact with the RNEC as their research progresses, so as to stay informed of any changes made or final conclusions that are drawn from the fieldwork.

Step 2: acquiring a research permit from the Ministry of Education

Assuming the primary investigator is able successfully to navigate the RNEC, the next step in the process of gaining permission to conduct fieldwork in Rwanda is to apply to the Ministry of Education for a formal research permit. This is a multi-stage process that involves compiling and submitting the following documents for internal review by the agency in charge of science, technology and research:

- (1) a formal letter of request for a research permit;
- (2) a project proposal;
- (3) a letter of support from a Rwanda-based research partner;
- (4) a letter of recommendation from the researcher's host university or organisation; and
- (5) a certificate of ethics approval from RNEC.

First, researchers should address their letter of request for a research permit to the Director General of Science, Technology, and Research. The letter should be no more than one page, and include a concise outline of the project, its methodology, the location(s) where fieldwork will occur and the proposed timeline for completion. In addition, researchers should include a sentence or two that highlights the relevance of their proposed research project for the GOR.

Second, the Ministry of Education requests that researchers submit a more thorough project proposal that provides more detail on the main points addressed in the letter of request. The proposal must include the title of the proposed research project, the contact information for the primary researcher and his or her supervisor, and a summary of the project's objectives, methodology, and timeline for completion. Once again, any links established by the researcher between their proposed project and the GOR's own programs for development will be helpful for demonstrating the project's relevance for Rwandans.

Third, researchers must identify a Rwanda-based research partner committed to facilitating their fieldwork and dissemination of findings. This process can be daunting for researchers who lack previous experience and contacts in Rwanda. While there is a host of Rwanda-based organisations currently working on a range of research projects across the nation, it can be difficult to elicit a response from these organisations via email or telephone, particularly if you have not had any prior contact with them. However, the primary investigator is required to establish a research relationship with a Rwanda-based organisation, preferably one with expertise in the region or with the specific research themes being investigated. The purpose of this relationship is to ensure dissemination of skills and information within Rwanda, as well as to the international community, which is usually the primary audience for foreign research. To this end, the researcher's ability to forge sustainable relationships with Rwandan organisations can be enhanced by offering to provide language or discipline-specific training to their members, assist their efforts to identify and apply for funding opportunities and organise workshops aimed at disseminating any preliminary findings to the organisation responsible for hosting the fieldwork. In recent years, it has become unacceptable to engage in one-sided research that does not somehow benefit the people of Rwanda, as well as the international community.

Once a relationship with a Rwanda-based organisation has been established, the primary investigator must obtain a letter of support from the head of the organisation that clearly states that they believe the proposed research project is of relevance to their objectives and that they are willing to facilitate the project. Once again, this letter of support should be directed to the Director General of Science, Technology, and Research. In addition, it should express the organisation's familiarity with the objectives, methodology, timeline for completion and expected outcomes, as explained in the project proposal.

Fourth, primary investigators must arrange for a letter of recommendation to be written by their supervisor at their university or organisation. The letter of recommendation should once again be addressed to the Director General of Science, Technology, and Research. In this instance, however, the primary purpose of the letter is to speak to the primary investigator's qualifications and ability to complete the proposed research in a timely and ethically informed manner, as well as state the validity of the proposed project for the GOR and the international community.

The last document required by the MINEDUC is a certificate or formal letter from the RNEC stating that the proposed project has received ethics clearance (see Step 1, above). It is important to note that while most foreign researchers are now required to submit their projects to university-based IRBs prior to embarking on a new research project, the resulting certificate of ethics approval is not an acceptable substitute for clearance from RNEC. For this reason, only documents demonstrating formal ethical clearance from the RNEC will be accepted.

Once these documents have been compiled, the primary investigator must submit them to MINEDUC, either in person or via email. From the date of receipt, the application materials may take anywhere from two weeks to several months to be evaluated, depending on the workload of the individuals responsible for evaluating the application materials. Once a positive response has been received, however, the researcher will be free to begin his or her fieldwork in Rwanda.

Step 3: gaining entry to Rwanda

A final point worth noting is that citizens of several states now require visas in order to visit Rwanda. A comprehensive list of nationalities that do not require visas (for a maximum stay of 90 days) can be found online at the Rwanda Directorate General of Immigration and Emigration website.⁴ Researchers from all other states are required to apply for a visa, normally a single or multiple-entry tourist visa. This process involves submitting a formal letter of request to the Rwandan commission in the researcher's country of citizenship, which details the reason for the visit and its duration. Visitors are also required to submit their passport, along with a single passport sized photo, certificate of yellow fever vaccination and a money order for the visa processing fee.

Under normal circumstances, the process of acquiring a tourist visa takes five to seven business days. However, researchers should expect delays. Because there is no obvious process to apply for a research visa, researchers who apply for tourist visas are often a point of confusion. The best practice is to be as transparent as possible when writing the cover letter requesting a visa. The authorities responsible for processing the request will inform the researcher if they decide there is a need to apply for another category of visa. In such instances, researchers may be requested to provide copies of their letter of support from the Rwanda-based partner organisation, certificate of approval from RNEC and research permit from MINEDUC as evidence of their status as researchers who are welcome in Rwanda.

Conclusion

Conducting fieldwork in Rwanda is a daunting prospect for several reasons, most notably the current political climate in the country and the extensive (and expensive) bureaucratic processes that must be navigated in order to acquire formal permission for the proposed research. Researchers whose projects touch upon sensitive issues such as the 1994 genocide or the evaluation of government development and reconciliation initiatives should expect to encounter difficulties when dealing with Rwanda-based gatekeepers. These difficulties range from identifying in-country partners and establishing a working relationship to receiving final clearance from

MINEDUC. However, it is crucial that researchers continue to engage with Rwandan civilians and officials through fieldwork. Rwanda at present is in the midst of an important transition to an “independent, sovereign, democratic, social and secular Republic” (GOR 2003, Article 1). The presence of independent researchers capable of offering constructive and informed feedback on the successes and failures of government policy will be essential in facilitating this transition.

Biographical note

Erin Jessee is the current Human Security Postdoctoral Fellow with the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. She works primarily in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, using qualitative methods to elicit a ‘view from below’ of rural life in the aftermath of genocide and related mass atrocities. She is writing a manuscript on the political uses of history surrounding the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995. In addition, she has recently launched a new research program that assesses domestic and international efforts to locate, identify, and repatriate the victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Notes

1. The label ‘the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis’ is widely used to refer to the genocide of Tutsi civilians by Hutu extremists in 1994. From 6 April until the end of July 1994, Hutu extremists, mobilised by the inner circle of then-President Juvénal Habyarimana, orchestrated a genocide of Rwanda’s minority Tutsi population. The Rwandan government estimates that approximately one million Tutsis were murdered during this three-month period. For more information on the official narrative surrounding the genocide in Rwanda’s history, see the work of Josias Semujanga (2003) and Stephen Kinzer (2008). For more information on the law prohibiting the dissemination of genocide ideology, see Ministry of Justice (2008). For a critique of this law, see Amnesty International (2010).
2. It is important to note that while most foreign researchers are now required to submit their projects to university-based IRBs prior to embarking on a new research project, the resulting certificate of ethics approval is not an acceptable substitute for clearance from RNEC. Thus, most researchers will be applying to two separate institutions for ethics approval – their university IRB and RNEC.
3. Adapted from an email communication with RNEC official, 16 December 2011.
4. <http://www.migration.gov.rw/Visa.html>

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Appendix 1. Relevant government websites and links to key documents

- Directorate General of Immigration and Emigration: <http://www.migration.gov.rw/Welcome-to-Rwanda.html>.
- Embassy of the United States, Kigali, Rwanda: <http://rwanda.usembassy.gov/>.
- Ministry of Health (MOH): http://www.moh.gov.rw/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=28.
- Office of the Canadian High Commission in Kigali: <http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/kenya/offices-bureaux/contact-rwanda-contactez.aspx?view=d>.
- Rwanda National Ethics Committee (RNEC): http://moh.gov.rw/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=95&Itemid=84.
- RNEC Standard Operating Procedures: http://moh.gov.rw/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=126&Itemid=81.
- Rwanda Ministry of Education (MINEDUC): <http://www.mineduc.gov.rw/>.
- Rwanda Research Registration System: <http://www.rrrs.gov.rw:8080/ResearchProject/>.
- Science, Technology and Research Agency (MINEDUC): <http://www.mineduc.gov.rw/spip.php?article81>.

Appendix 2. RNEC outline for research protocol

(Adapted from an email communication with Rwandan National Ethics Committee official, 16 December 2011. An older version is also available in RNEC [2009, p. 48]).

- 1.0 Research overview
- 2.0 Aim and objectives
 - 2.1 Aims
 - 2.2 Objectives
- 3.0 Methods
 - 3.1 Study description
 - 3.2 Study design
 - 3.3 Study site
 - 3.4 Study population
 - 3.5 Proposed intervention if interventions study
 - 3.6 Main exposures and/or confounders and/or outcomes to be measured
- 4.0 Selection of study population
 - 4.1. Inclusion criteria
 - 4.2 Exclusion criteria
 - 4.3 Sampling
 - 4.4 Randomization if randomized trial
- 5.0 Study procedures
 - 5.1 Procedures at enrolment
 - 5.2 Follow-up if cohorts study or trial
 - 5.3 Measurement of exposures and confounders
 - 5.4 Measurement of outcomes
 - 5.5 Laboratory methods if the study has a lab component
 - 5.6 Sample size
 - 5.7 Data management
 - 5.8 Proposed analysis

6.0 Ethical considerations

6.1 Confidentiality

6.2 Informed consent

6.3 Ethical approval

7.0 Logistics

7.1 Distribution of responsibilities

7.2 Timetable

7.3 Detailed study budget

8.0 References

9.0 Appendices