

# Everyday Peace Indicators: Capturing local voices through surveys

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Much academic and practitioner literature has placed an emphasis on the need to capture ‘local voices’ in societies experiencing conflict and transitions out of conflict<sup>1</sup>. The rationale behind this is that ‘local voices’ will be authentic and truly reflect the needs and aspirations of local populations. Listening to these voices, the thinking goes, will result in better and more sustainable peacebuilding and conflict-transformation policy. There has been something of a rediscovery of all things local among many peacebuilding donors, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non governmental organizations (NGOs) who share the belief that ‘local ownership’ and ‘local participation’ provide the key to sensitive programming.

But capturing local voices, as part of a wider process of monitoring peace and conflict, is easier said than done. It throws up a number of methodological problems that will be discussed in this brief chapter. In particular, we will focus on how we can square the desire to capture local voices with the demands of scientific rigour that are often imposed by academia and donors. To put the matter in somewhat blunt terms, capturing local voices often demands semi-anthropological approaches to research that are time-consuming, people-centric and possibly ‘woolly’. On the other hand, the demands for rigour might point us in the direction of scientific and possibly quantitative methodologies. Is it possible to reconcile these demands?

This chapter will seek to answer that question with reference to the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) project, an ongoing research project that seeks to capture people’s own measures of social change<sup>2</sup>.

## **THE EVERYDAY PEACE INDICATORS PROJECT**

The EPI project is interested in identifying bottom-up community-sourced indicators of peace, safety and social change. It is participatory action research<sup>3</sup> that seeks to find out people’s perceptions of their own conflict rather than impose narratives on them. Rather than a research team developing a set

of indicators in a university in the global north and then taking these to ‘the field’, the research asks local people, through focus groups, to develop their own set of indicators. So the research questions are identified and designed by local people. The research is designed and administered by local researchers and communities as a way of encouraging the identification of issues that are relevant to communities at the neighbourhood or village level. The aim is to pilot a civic epistemology that moves away from imposed research methodologies and to address the barriers between the researched and the researchers<sup>4</sup>. The project is interested in local knowledge and perspectives, and is anxious not to impose terminology and narratives on communities, thus further stripping away their agency.

Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the EPI project operates in communities in South Africa, Uganda, South Sudan and Zimbabwe<sup>5</sup>. Locations for the research were chosen so as to include a mix of context variables: urban/rural, experiencing much/little peacebuilding intervention, and violent conflict ending recently/some time ago. The Everyday Peace Indicators project is experimental research. It recognises that conflict-affected societies do not constitute a laboratory and thus we cannot expect scientific purism. Yet the research seeks to be broadly representative of the communities in which it operates. Although the focus is on local, bottom-up opinions, the project also covers substantial areas and cannot physically speak to everyone and convey their opinions in a comprehensible manner. As a result, after identifying the indicators through crowd-sourcing, the project uses surveys to gather information and, ultimately, track community views on peace in their own community. The project uses mixed modes through which to conduct the survey: a combination of Interactive Voice Response Surveys (IVR) and Mobile Application Surveys.

## **RECONCILING SURVEYS WITH LOCAL VOICES**

The use of surveys presents two issues that are worth discussing in the context of this chapter:

- How can surveys remain true to the aim of reflecting local voices?
- Once a survey method is chosen, how can we ensure that it is organized in such a way to best capture local voices?

The notion of capturing and reflecting local voices suggests anthropological research that is based on people-to-people conflict. This might include in-depth interviews or gathering personal histories so as to be able to capture

detail and nuance. Such methods might also help develop a rapport between the researched and the researcher. This is especially useful in contexts in which sensitivity is required. Survey research (and there are many different forms of it) brings a number of advantages, but it also brings compromises in terms of the anthropological ambition of the research. The principal advantages of a survey lie in economy: it allows the researchers to conduct research that is representative of a population without having to involve everyone in that population. As a result, it offers a potentially manageable and cost effective way of conducting research.

The downside of survey research, in terms of attempting to access local voices and opinions on political change, is that the survey risks placing a barrier between the researched and the researcher<sup>6</sup>. Surveys amount to templates that attempt to summarise research questions into a standardized format. The advantage of asking the same question to many people is that direct comparisons can be made. The disadvantage, however, is that much depends on the question. The danger is that a standardized question strips agency away from the researched and forces them to respond to a question over which they have no control. In more discursive and reflexive forms of research, such as a semi-structured interview, the respondent may have a greater chance to steer the research. For example, through the conversational nature of an interview, respondents may be able to change the language that questioners use. In the case of a survey, for example a questionnaire, the questions are usually set at the beginning without reference to the researched. Moreover, because of the demands for comparison over time, survey questions – once set – often do not change.

So how did the Everyday Peace Indicators project seek to reconcile the desire to hear local voices with the demands of survey research? An initial point to make is to underline the necessity of survey research in this case. While the survey target areas are specific communities and localities, these are often attended by issues of access. For example, the rural settlements chosen in Uganda tend to be quite difficult to access because of issues of distance and poor roads. Some areas in South Africa are experiencing gang-related violence during the survey period and we are anxious to avoid any danger to researchers or the researched. Ethnographic research usually depends on the researcher spending extended periods of time in the ‘field’, something that simply was not possible in a very insecure area.

A second point is that the survey questions, or the issues identified as comprising the indicators, were chosen by communities themselves. This was done through focus groups that were held in the communities using participatory

action research. It was not a case of researchers arriving in a location with pre-formed questions. Instead, the issues affecting communities emerged during focus group discussions, mediated by local mobilisers and NGOs. The focus groups were divided into men, women and youth focus groups and then the groups came together in a 'verification focus group' to decide on a joint list. The key point is that the approach to the research sought to use people's own voices in identifying the issues to be researched and the terminology in which those issues were expressed. All of the interactions were in local languages so that local inhabitants could access the research process.

A third point, and one already alluded to, is that the research is conducted by locally-based NGOs. In line with Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies, it was recognized that issues of positionality and power can have a serious impact on both the research process and any research results. It is clear that all research is a form of intervention and that it is naive to think that research can leave no trace at all. But the EPI project sought to leave as light a footprint as possible and was conscious of the 'optics' of external researchers, with no prior relationship with communities, coming in, conducting research, and leaving. It tried to reconcile this by using locally-based partners to help EPI access and work in the communities and therefore make the operation of the surveys as sensitive as possible.

Thus far, the EPI project seems vindicated in the research design that it has constructed. The aim was to 'hear' local voices without the channelling mediation of party political, NGO or INGO actors. One fear was that focus groups tasked with identifying indicators of peace and social change would reflect indicators favoured by governments, donors, NGOs and INGOs. Many reports have noted how communities have become 'savvy' in playing the donor game and using terminology that might enhance their chances of funding, or adopting a vernacular that seems straight out of the annual report of an INGO. The inductive and bottom-up approach used by the Everyday Peace Indicators Project seems to have allowed Project participants the freedom to mention the issues that they deem important to their communities, and to identify the indicators that they feel are germane. In northern Uganda and South Africa, for instance, the issue of crime and insecurity dominated localized definitions of peace and security. It was remarkable how few references there were to the main conflicts and authoritarianism that had resulted in mass displacements, killings and indignities in earlier decades. Instead, focus group members localized peace to their own communities and often with reference to criminality and a related lack of employment opportunities. The indicators that focus group participants chose tended to reflect everyday concerns. For example, in the South African township of Atlantic City a lack of barking dogs at night was

regarded as an indicator that there were no thieves prowling in the vicinity.

To the best of our knowledge, no government, international organization or INGO has a ‘barking dog’ indicator that records canine noise as an indicator of criminality and community safety. Yet, this was an indicator chosen by community members. While it may be written off by scientific purists as ‘unscientific’ or ‘anecdotal’, it had a resonance with community members and was adopted by the survey. This example illustrates the need for a plurality of methods in our approach to research. It also illustrates how bottom-up community perceptions can be incorporated into serious research on peace to war transitions.

## **CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

The focus on everyday and bottom up indicators of peace and change should not be read as a dismissal of standard types of indicators that are top-down or rely on ‘expertise’. Instead, they can be seen as complementary or something that can be placed alongside a suite of indicators to try to gauge a spectrum of opinion. Indicators of peace often do need ‘top down’ views from experts and specialists. For example, ceasefire monitoring, or the observation of the conduct by state forces, can require technical expertise from those with military or human rights training. The key point is that multiple sources of information can provide a fuller picture. Moreover, by including bottom-up and crowd-sourced information and, pertinently in the case of the Everyday Peace Indicators, locally-designed indicators, we can access what peace actually means to people on the ground.

This notion of the so-called beneficiaries of peace having an opinion on the nature and quality of peace is important. It helps move peace away from being the preserve of national and international elites. This has been the orthodoxy in which ‘peace’ is something that is ‘done to’ populations through the ministrations of political and military leaders. Everyday peace indicators, or bottom-up indicators, are in tune with more emancipatory versions of peace that see peace as a process that can have the meaningful and continuous buy-in of the inhabitants of the area moving out of violent conflict. Terms such as ‘local ownership’ and ‘local participation’ have been used with such frequency in the INGO, NGO and donor literature that they risk losing purchase. Moreover, in some cases the rhetoric of ‘the local’ has turned out to be just that: rhetoric. The accusation is made that western states simply want conformity or local agreement to imposed notions of peace, governance and statebuilding, rather than a meaningful dialogue in which locally legitimized versions of peace are embedded.

Moreover, the notion of everyday peace indicators helps break down barriers between the researcher and the researched. On the one hand are the so-called experts, technicians, statisticians, social scientists and others. On the other are the people (or peoples) whose lived reality is a war-to-peace transition. Both groups (by no means homogenous) contain different skills sets. The first group may have the technical expertise and resources to operationalize survey research. The second group may have the cultural insights, and common-sense, required to effect access to a community. By making the researched part of the research process ('stakeholders' in the deadening new public management parlance) then some of the mystique of the research process may be broken down. Academia and bureaucracies are often noted for their gatekeeping mechanisms (whether peer review or official secrets), yet many of these gatekeeping mechanisms actually stand in the way of accessing research topics in a way that allows the researched to speak for themselves. Arguably, gatekeeping mechanisms may make for 'purer' research, though it is not clear if this is better research.

It is appropriate to conclude by revisiting the term 'indicator'. The term suggests scientific certainty and rigour. Yet our particular interest, in transitions from war to peace, does not naturally lend itself to certainty. Such transitions are often attended by ambiguity and contested 'realities'. This is especially the case where political actors seek to blame opponents of bad faith or not respecting a peace accord or new constitution. Given the contested landscape of societies emerging from violent conflict, it may be too much to expect the certainty that scientific indicators promise. It may be more prudent to think in terms of signals rather than indicators. While indicators hold the promise of precisely measured change, signals bring us towards a fuzzier territory in which we may know the direction of travel but cannot make scientifically precise measurements. The ambiguity and fuzziness of transitions towards peace suggests that it might be useful if we operate in a world of signals.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Roberts 2011; Conciliation Resources 2012; Khan and Nyborg 2013

<sup>2</sup> further details can be found at [everydaypeaceindicators.org](http://everydaypeaceindicators.org)

<sup>3</sup> Chambers 1997; Kapoor 2002

<sup>4</sup> Kreutzmann 2001

<sup>5</sup> further details can be found at <http://carnegie.org/grants/grants-database/grant/10610/> and [everydaypeaceindicators.org](http://everydaypeaceindicators.org)

<sup>6</sup> Pearce 2002

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