
The Collaborative Research Network *Violent Conflict* kindly invites you to the following workshop:

“Conducting fieldwork in African conflict areas: Methodological questions on Proximity”



07-02-2013, hosted by the Conflict Research Group, Ghent University, Belgium

Conducting both qualitative and quantitative academic research on conflict dynamics in Africa often involves direct engagement ‘in the field’ and data collecting on the spot. The security conditions encountered while conducting fieldwork in African conflict settings, confront us with important methodological challenges. A context of violence, fragility and instability often challenges the researcher with a dilemma: to be present yourself on the spot or to coordinate locally conducted fieldwork from abroad; to conduct the fieldwork ‘in the heat of the battle’ or to do so once that battle is over. In other words, the researcher is faced with a dilemma of proximity or distance. It is well worth expanding these notions of proximity and distance, by using them as a window for a broader reflection on the relationship between the researcher and his/her research topic and on methodological flexibility in unstable research contexts. In this workshop we will investigate several questions regarding proximity in time and place: What can be the value of so called ‘remote control’ research on conflict-related topics in Africa? Is a 100% proximity with local reality an illusion? To what extent can we rely on local informant networks? How reliable are more ‘distant’ sources of information such as the new media (blogs, twitter, skype...)? How do we increase proximity by strategies of local ‘embeddedness’ (in networks of armed groups, for example)?

The Collaborative Research Network *Violent Conflict* is comprised of European scholars focusing on African conflict and post-conflict areas and dynamics. This workshop aims to invites its members to collectively engage in current academic debates on violent conflict in Africa by a multidisciplinary approach. This workshop is an opportunity to strengthen intra-network connections and collaboration and to enhance the visibility of this topical cluster on violent conflict within the European African Studies landscape.

We invite participants to prepare a short discussion note on one of the following topics that will run as the main red lines through the workshop:

- i) *Proximity in time*: When is the best ‘moment’ to collect data on dynamics of violent conflict in the field; should we operate at moments of intensified violence or should we wait for pauses of stability? How do these choices impact our fieldwork methods? How do we keep

updated at distance, on fast changing events (for example through new hyper-fast social media) and how do we handle a situation of events outrunning the data?

- ii) *Proximity in place*: What is the value of 'remote control' research methods when the researcher has limited access to his/her research area? How significant can local networks of partners and informants in the field decrease the distance between the researcher and local reality?
- iii) *Proximity and embeddedness*: How far can we go as researchers by integrating ourselves in local networks of actors in our pursuit of proximity? The discussion should not be limited our embeddedness within armed groups, but should also look at our connections to political parties or associations and social integration in civil society organizations, pressure groups, NGO's etc. Or on the other hand, what are the advantages of operating in a complete independent way?
- iv) *Proximity and engagement*: To what extend may researchers engage in activism as ultimate proximity? Is academic research compatible with activism and vice versa? Linked to the former topic, this discussion is about a situation where social embeddedness shifts to involvement. This theme involves questions on participation, commitments and reciprocity.

The workshop will take place on **7/02/13 in Ghent (Belgium)** and will be hosted by the *Conflict Research Group* at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies, Ghent University. During the workshop, lunch and dinner will be provided by the organisers; participants are expected to cover their own travel and accommodation costs.

To register for this workshop, please contact Karen Büscher before **January 5, 2013**, by sending an email to: Karen.buscher@ugent.be with your name, institution, and the topic on which you want to prepare and present a short introductory note.

