

## INTRODUCTION

We've created this case study for training activities. The intent is a realistic but fictional study protocol useful for reflection and discussion around the ethical dimensions of a humanitarian research study. You can use it as part of a simulated Research Ethics Committee deliberation: Examine the protocol to identify any concerns or questions on humanitarian research ethics. Or you can put it to other training uses.

## Objectives & Research Question

The primary objective of this study is to ***better understand psychological distress and trauma amongst people who have been forcibly displaced from a country in Central Africa that has experienced a protracted crisis and intermittent fighting among armed groups.***

Secondary objectives include performing a needs assessment and to map the routes that displaced persons follow to reach refugee camps.

## Background

In 2016, an estimated 65.6 million people were forcibly displaced due to situations of persecution, disaster and war, with 93% of these individuals located in low or middle income countries.<sup>1</sup> There are gaps in understanding the psychological burden of this kind of forced displacement. Local and international organizations aim to respond to the needs of populations displaced by armed conflict in various settings but have little information on how best to attend to these needs, and how to help populations and individuals manage the trauma and psychological distress that accompanies such experiences.

In the region of study, 78% of households have been affected by an ongoing violent conflict lasting 36+ months. Violence, infrastructure breakdown, and food insecurity in the region have led to famine and high risks of outbreaks of cholera and other infectious disease. Raids on local villages have forced families to flee and follow precarious routes to the borders to make overnight border crossings in order to avoid violent clashes, and the possibility of kidnapping or death.

Men, women and children forced to flee may experience different forms and degrees of trauma, and need a range of types of support. For instance, those who have been forced from their homes suffer loss, lack of support and insecurity, while those persons who have also experienced violence and torture will have distinct additional needs. Findings from this study can help guide RefugeeASSIST's interventions in the refugee camps and inform operations in other settings, as well as the activities of other non-governmental organizations. In addition, the study findings may also be valuable for the organization's advocacy work on behalf of refugee rights.

**RefugeeASSIST** is a *fictional* international non-governmental organization. Here they provide healthcare for displaced persons living in three refugee camps. The camps are situated in a country in Central Africa which borders an area of protracted crisis. The proposed study is intended to improve RefugeeASSIST's efforts in this area.

**Research Team:** RefugeeASSIST has hired an experienced social scientist from Europe to lead the research. She has experience conducting research in several African countries. The local RefugeeASSIST team will provide logistical support for the research project, and assist with data collection. They will not be involved in data analysis.

**Funding:** The project is funded by RefugeeASSIST and by a small grant from a charitable foundation.

## Methods

This is a mixed methods study with two components:

- *Standardized quantitative questionnaires*: Questionnaires will be used to assess urgent needs in terms of shelter, food, water, sanitation, and non-food items. Before beginning the study, the questionnaires will be translated into the primary language spoken by the refugees, and verified using back translation techniques.
- *In-depth interviews*: A translator, hired from amongst the camp inhabitants, will be employed to assist with the interviews. The interview guide will include questions about the events leading up to the participant's displacement from their country of origin, and about their journey to the refugee camp. Interviews will be recorded with a digital recorder. Interviews will then be transcribed, translated, and anonymized. Interviews are expected to last between 20 and 60 minutes.

## Recruitment

Participants will be drawn from inhabitants of the refugee camps who have arrived in the previous three months.

Quantitative questionnaires: A 30 by 30 two-stage cluster sampling will be used following standard WHO procedures ([http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/70184/7/WHO\\_IVB\\_08.07\\_eng.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/70184/7/WHO_IVB_08.07_eng.pdf)). RefugeeASSIST field staff will assist with recruitment and invite camp inhabitants to participate. 200 participants (total) will be recruited to complete the standardized questionnaire.

In-depth qualitative interviews: Ten inhabitants from each of the three camps will be invited to take part in an in-depth interview (total 30). Recruitment of participants for the interviews will aim for diversity amongst participants (e.g. of age, gender), and a range of experiences of displacement.

## Risks

A primary risk for participants is that they may experience anxiety or distress when recounting difficult experiences that occurred before or during their displacement. Participants will have the option to not answer any question or end the interview at any point. They may also speak to one of the RefugeeASSIST nurses after the interview if they wish. The researchers will endeavour to protect participants' confidentiality. Interviews and administration of the standardized questionnaires will take place in the tent of the health clinic in each camp. This location was chosen to create a private space for the interview. Once translated and transcribed, transcriptions will be anonymized. Digital recordings and transcriptions will be kept on encrypted computers. When access to the Internet is possible, the researcher will back up these files to an encrypted cloud-based storage. Questionnaires will be administered by the researcher or one of the RefugeeASSIST nurses directly on an encrypted tablet. This information will also be backed-up to the cloud whenever feasible.

The nature of the information collected in this study is sensitive. The movement of refugees into the country, as well as the situation in their country of origin, is politically fraught. In addition, information about the migration routes of refugees could be misused, for example by those who wish to block the movement of refugees.

Some risks also exist for the researcher and other team members due to the possibility of violence in the camp or political instability in the country. RefugeeASSIST has security protocols in place. The researcher would be evacuated along with RefugeeASSIST staff members if the security situation deteriorated.

## Benefits

Participants will receive a bag of rice as compensation for participating in either the interview or questionnaire component of the study. Those who participate in both components will receive two bags of rice. Individual participants will not directly benefit in other ways from their participation in the research. However, study findings may help RefugeeASSIST and other non-governmental organizations improve their programming in the refugee camps and their advocacy efforts on behalf of refugee rights.

## Community engagement

Before initiating interviews or administering questionnaires, the researcher and the project manager for RefugeeASSIST will meet with informal leaders at the three camps. The leaders will be asked to provide feedback on the study plans, to endorse the project publicly, and to help identify individuals who can assist with the data collection.

## Informed Consent

Given the high levels of illiteracy amongst the camp population, as well as the sensitive nature of the information being collected, only verbal consent will be sought. The verbal consent process will be audio recorded.

## Dissemination and restitution of study findings

The research findings will be published in an academic article and presented at academic conferences. A report will be produced for RefugeeASSIST and made available on their website. Community meetings will be held at each of the refugee camps to share the outcome of the research with camp residents.