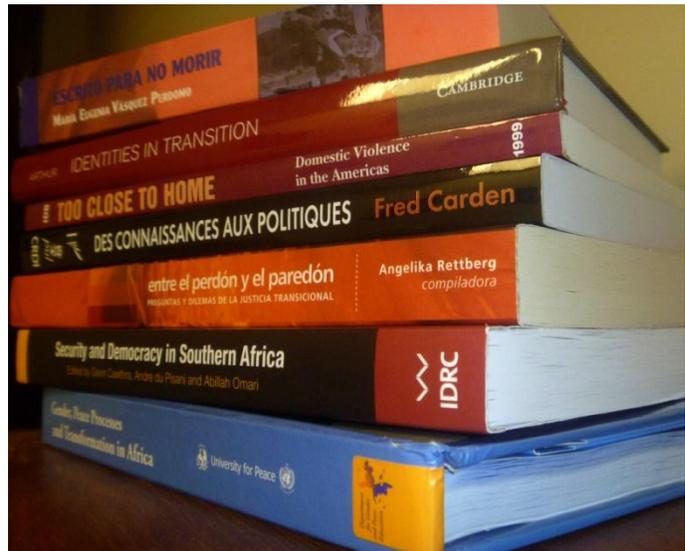


Evaluation in the Extreme: Research and Violently Divided Societies

A collaborative project between International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE)/University of Ulster and the International Development Research Centre

Research is essential for understanding and responding to those economic, social and political problems which, if left unaddressed, can create or aggravate societal tensions, divisions, and violence. Such conflicts may be militarized, or they may be less visible forms of social, economic, and cultural violence. Typically, as such conflicts interact and escalate, the knowledge infrastructure is targeted directly and indirectly -- for example, in attacks on schools and libraries, and in the harassment of university staff, researchers, and journalists. The result is the creation of knowledge-depleted environments at a time when research is essential for generating evidence base that can



inform larger development goals. Under these conditions, research is often conceived and conducted from the outside, creating a divide between the economic, social or political solutions being proposed, realities on the ground and the applicability and uptake of research.

Over the last two decades, there has been an increase in the funding of research *on* and *in* violently divided societies (VDS). The systematic evaluation of such research - its reach and impacts - is both pressing and challenging. Yet evaluation in violently divided societies is more complicated than in non-violent settings. The interplay between context, knowledge production, and research utilization is not easily untangled, let alone measured. It is essential to understand not only the impact that extreme violence has on research, but also *the impact that research has on violence*. The most obvious positive impact research may have on a violently divided society is an increase to the practical knowledge base of development stakeholders through analysis characterized by methodological rigor, timeliness, relevance, and utility. However, research (even methodologically sound research) may also *exacerbate* tensions, if its implications or conclusions are perceived to be threatening to the interests of one or more groups. As such, we need to understand the political and societal contexts within which research is embedded. We need to ask, for example, how individuals and institutions appropriate (or misappropriate) research, and apply (or mis-apply) it, especially for the purposes of influencing policy and practice for social change.

There is also a growing interest among research funders to monitor and evaluate research in and on VDS -- its outputs, outcomes and, most importantly, its impacts. The evaluation of this research faces a number of challenges. **First**, conventional approaches to program evaluation, including the evaluation of research programs, are largely linear. While such approaches are the mainstay of many funders, they are not designed to be applied to research, much less to research (or any other type of intervention) in violence-prone contexts. To the extent that evaluations are undertaken on initiatives in VDS, they focus on development, humanitarian and peacebuilding programs rather than research *per se*; and they are most often funded by international development and humanitarian aid agencies, rather than research funders. **Second**, in general terms, the accountability imperative of evaluation tends to overshadow the learning function. This tendency places acute limitations on prospects for generating knowledge in contexts in which new thinking and ideas are most needed. Standard approaches to evaluation also place more emphasis on the tangible, short-term, outputs of program activities, rather than on the more subtle -- and less easily measured -- outcomes and impacts of research. **Third**, conventional approaches to the evaluation of research outputs and processes are of limited utility when applied to research for social change. The standard bibliometric and peer-review approaches to evaluation - commonly used within universities and accepted among researchers as the gold standard - are problematic enough within the academic setting. They are even less applicable in VDS, settings where the social change objectives of research are inextricably linked to and influenced by politics and the dynamics of violence.

This project is an exploratory initiative whose goal is to map out some of the most vexing challenges and promising avenues facing the evaluation of research in and on violently divided societies. The central problem being addressed is the following: **How can we improve evaluation practice to better understand the difference that research makes in violently divided societies?** The myriad issues that unfold from this question will be discussed in a collected volume that targets multiple stakeholders: applied researchers and research organizations; students preparing for applied research or evaluation careers; scholars and teachers of evaluation; evaluators and associations of evaluators; and research funders. Consequently, the scope of the project encompasses: the field of evaluation; research methods and practice; peace and conflict studies; ethnographic field studies; political sociology; gender studies; ethics; institutional politics; and development and humanitarian theory and practice.

The project brings together three groups who share many of the same concerns, and who seek improvements in the evaluation of research: those who undertake research of different types (researchers); those who evaluate research and who contribute as researchers to the field of evaluation research (evaluators); and those who commission both research and evaluation (funders or donors). These groups are not mutually exclusive. For example: researchers often serve as evaluators; evaluators often undertake research; and funders may be active or former researchers. By bringing these groups together, we draw on and harness the experience and expertise needed to develop a more self-conscious and systematic understanding of, and approach to, the evaluation of research on and in violently divided societies.

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