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Ethics for educational research in regions of protracted armed conflict and crisis: a participatory community project in the Lake Chad region

Margaret Ebubedike*, Tajudeen Akanji, Afu Isaiah Kunock and Alison Fox

Abstract This paper critically considers the ethics of conducting community-based participatory research, which engages community members, including young people, as active participants in research about them, in the context of the protracted armed conflict and crisis of the Lake Chad region. We highlight the intersection of cultural practices and religious belief systems prevalent in this context, which further deepens the complexities arising from researching populations experiencing protracted armed conflict and crisis. This raises the possibilities of understanding research ethics in such contexts via the lens of a postcolonial frame. Using participatory photography allowed engagement in face-to-face collaborative data collection. In doing so, the research team was able to pay attention to verbal and non-verbal dimensions arising from community engagement, which supported learning about the community's positions and needs as a resource for thinking about how these might need accommodation in the project. It is not straightforward to lead this kind of project as researchers based in the Global North in terms of deciding what is right and what research practices would be considered just, compassionate, and trustworthy in these contexts. The approach taken was to distribute leadership in the project to include local actors such as NGOs working at local levels, community leaders (traditional

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and religious), as well as to draw on in-country research teams and the members of each of the participating communities. We argue that a more nuanced understanding about how to mitigate identified ethical concerns has implications for enhancing community-based research, especially when researching similar populations.

Introduction

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has been increasingly used within the social sciences (Banks *et al.*, 2013). CBPR is a methodology that is heavily influenced by the theoretical bases of Lewin's (1948) theory of action, Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, and other scholarship from the Global South. It aims to develop 'revolutionary approaches to inquiry as a direct counter to the often "colonising" nature of research to which oppressed communities were subjected' (Minkler, 2004, p. 686). More recently, CBPR has been applied quite loosely across diverse fields. Hence, the importance of distinguishing between community-placed research (simply taking place in a specific community) and community-based research (involving community members as active participants in research about them) (Minkler, 2004).

It is also important that we talk and write about ethical concerns in any type of community focused research. This is even more so in the case of research for and with vulnerable communities. While there is a growing body of literature on, and concern about, ethics in CBPR (see Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019 for an overview), there still exists little evidence around ethical issues in research in areas of armed conflict.

The aim of this article is to critically consider the ethics around conducting CBPR, which engages communities experiencing protracted armed conflict and crisis in the context of the Lake Chad country region as active participants in research about them. This raises the possibilities of understanding research ethics in such contexts via the lens of a postcolonial frame (Tikly and Bond, 2013).

CBPR in the Lake Chad country region: jointly negotiating ethical practices with communities

A regional armed conflict and counter-insurgency efforts against non-state armed groups, such as Boko Haram, have triggered over 10 years of crisis in the Lake Chad region. The humanitarian crisis is one of the most severe and protracted in the region. The abduction of over 276 girls from their school in Chibok in April 2014 and the subsequent abduction of over 110

schoolgirls aged 11–19 years by the Boko Haram terrorist group from their school in Dapchi in 2018, are extreme illustrations of the violence against women and girls that occurs in this region and their implications for girls' education (Abayomi, 2018; Okafor, 2010). We highlight the intersection of cultural practices and religious belief systems prevalent in this context, that further deepen the complexities, which could arise from researching populations experiencing protracted conflict and crisis. The project explored how to generate valuable information that could help address the situation of a burgeoning out-of-school population in counties affected by the Boko-Haram crisis in the Lake Chad region: Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger Republic. The research is a collaboration between The Open University (UK), University of Ibadan (Nigeria) and other network partners from Cameroon, Niger and Chad to ensure the research design was co-designed with those bringing local, Global South perspectives and agendas.

The network partnership includes UK and non-UK-based Principal Investigators who are both academics with several years' experience working in the protracted armed conflict and crisis context of northeast Nigeria. The other network partners are academics based in each research context, specialising in researching the impact of armed conflict on young people's lives. The network core team also included one Nigerian project coordinator, and one staff member of a local non-governmental organization (NGO) with extensive experience of supporting young people and communities experiencing armed conflict and crisis in the Lake Chad country region. Whilst this project could not aim to address the structural causes of such conflict, it sought to acknowledge and address the disempowerment resulting from colonialism and post-colonial politics in its participatory design.

Our network partnership began in 2019, with a phone call introduction to the director of an NGO that supports young people's continued education in the armed conflict context of the Lake Chad country region, to discuss the possibility of developing an action research program to support girls' education uptake in Maiduguri, Nigeria. By 2020, the partnership extended to include two community leaders and two religious leaders and network partners. Initial scoping meetings included learning about the strengths and challenges of the communities, to understand their experiences with the situation of protracted crisis. Network partners discussed the various local communities' religious value systems, cultural beliefs and practices, historical and cultural factors and community identity. Most importantly, we tried to understand how all these intersect to influence how members of these communities experience their world, connect to others, and create a sense of self for themselves as a community and members of the community.

Overall, our intention was to understand how best data collection could be done in ways that are appropriate to local contexts and people's lived experiences, to prevent insensitive or even psychologically destructive research (Busher *et al.*, 2021) as part of recognising and respecting local ways of being and of knowing. We aimed to jointly negotiate ethical practices with communities at every phase of the research process (Fox and Busher, 2022), give voice to participants and enable 'commitment to accessing voice' whilst 'creating spaces for these voices to be heard' (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015, p. 162). To do this, we engaged with Photovoice—a form of participatory photography.

Our understanding is informed by the three main goals of Photovoice according to Wang (1999, p. 185), (1) record and reflect community's strengths and concerns, (2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers. Our approach is also informed by Ford *et al.*'s (2009) ethical framework for research in armed conflict settings, which encapsulates the importance of making the people the centre of the research (Freire, 1976; Nelson and Wright, 1995), through collaborative partnerships, community engagements and social value. This understanding aligns with our postcolonial framing of disrupting the power dynamics evidenced within the nexus of any colonial processes. It provides insights that highlight the potential of CBPR to foster social action and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice. This needs the process of knowledge building not merely set to privilege a Eurocentric agenda but to consciously consider the voices and lived experiences of the community members themselves.

Our theoretical framing

Our postcolonial framing in this article is informed by the understanding around disrupting the power dynamics evidenced within the nexus of any colonial processes (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020). This includes the commitment to ensure respect for the cultural norms and existing belief systems in our research contexts, and to establish and maintain relationships (Pratt, 1992; Trivedi, 1993), which are beneficial to both the researcher and the participating communities (Israel *et al.*, 2010).

Criticisms around postcolonial theory are linked to 'lack of consensus and clarity' (Slemon, 1995, p. 100). Other scholars ask: 'Why does the language of postcolonial criticism often seem so impenetrable?' (Young, 2001, p. 67). Postcolonialism is a fluid concept, and yet its fluidity is 'what is genuinely enabling about the field' (Slemon, 1995, p. 100). Understanding about post-colonial theory keeps evolving through 'new forms of social collectivity'

(Slemon, 1995, p. 105), rendering the conceptualisation of postcolonialism almost impossible to associate to any given form of colonial process or experiences. A postcolonial lens allows people emerging from all forms of colonial processes to reclaim their negotiating space for equity and to challenge the consequences of the past that are exploitative, to build a new society where liberty and equity prevail (Tikly and Bond, 2013).

This paper aims to reveal some of the complexity which explains colonialism's continuing effects on individuals and institutions within colonized contexts. Further, it intends to apply this knowledge as a contribution to challenging the structures and processes of colonialism which continue to effect exploitation, power imbalances and feelings of dependency and inadequacy on colonized communities.

Framing this article within a postcolonial lens is not intended to essentialize colonized populations as mere victims of their past colonial experiences. More than this, our intention is to highlight the growing sense of agency demonstrated by the locals in our project in their commitment to reclaim, reconstruct and revise their 'identities, cultures, societies, and institutions' (Brissett, 2018, p. 2). This subjective awareness becomes evident in the discussions about how we can plan our research activities to remain context-sensitive and accommodate the worldview of the participants. Our postcolonial frame provides a context for identifying the risks in relation to ethical concerns and understanding existing inequalities in the research process (Tikly and Bond, 2013).

This understanding situates itself within the collaborative approach of our CBPR design that equitably involves all partners in the research process, considering community needs and local experiences, whilst recognizing the unique strengths that each partner brings to the process of knowledge co-creation.

Our approach

Participatory photography was designed in collaboration with the project's networked partners to enable young people in armed conflict-settings to record and reflect on their concerns, and to promote critical dialogue and knowledge through small-group exhibitions of photo-stories used to reach policy makers. The network partners offered support and expertise throughout the process (Nelson and Wright, 1995; Healy, 2001; Kwan and Walsh, 2018). The rationale is for those who are directly affected by social inequalities and injustices resulting from armed conflict to construct their own stories and identities, to avoid 'a portrayal of the participants as they are constructed in dominant ideology' (Coy, 2006, p. 428).

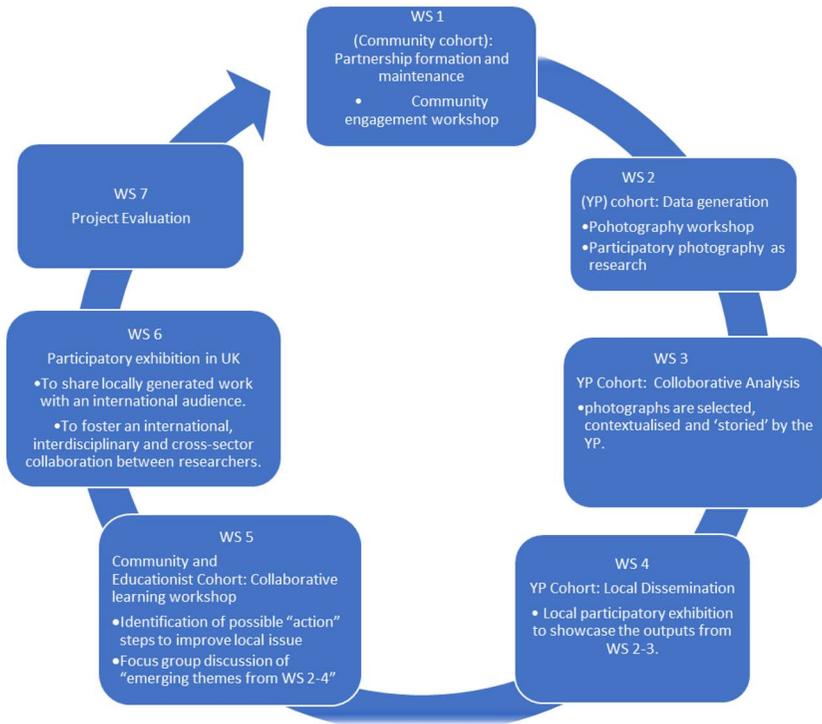


Figure 1 The project work strands (WS).

The ethical processes reported in this paper were from: work strands (WS) 1–5 (see [Figure 1](#)), held separately in Dikwa, Maiduguri (Nigeria), Kolofata (Cameroon), Liwa (Chad), and Diffa (Niger Republic) with different cohorts as shown in [Table 1](#).

We gave the participants a letter in context-specific languages (see [Table 2](#)) explaining the project and the method and their right to anonymity and to withdraw at any time. The in-country project team read this letter to people who were unable to read. Participants were asked to sign a consent form to give their consent to participate or not in the activities. The participants were trained to always ask for permission before they took photographs in private spaces. We also informed the community about the photography research. In addition, we received ethical clearance from the Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee and the relevant ethics approval from our local partners.

WS1 was with the community cohort (parents, community and religious leaders). We held a one-day introductory workshop to inform the community cohort about the kind of activities their children and wards would be

Table 1 Research cohort classification

Cohort	Category	Number of participants	Male	Female
YP	In school	10	5	5
	Never experienced education	10	5	5
	Discontinued education <i>N</i> = 10 (due to the on-going Boko-Haram crisis)	10	5	5
Community	Parents	2	1	1
	Religious leader	1	1	
	Community leader	1	1	
Educationist	Teachers	2	1	1
	School heads	2	1	1
	Staff of local education authority	2	1	1

Table 2 Research country, local region and languages spoken

Country	Local region	Language
Nigeria	Dikwa, Maiduguri	Hausa, Kanuri and Fulfulde
Chad	Liwa	Kanembu
Niger	Difa	Kanuri and Hausa
Cameroon	Kolofata	Mandara, Arab Shaw, Mousgoum and Fulfulde

engaged in. It was also an opportunity to share details about the series of activities that would be happening and the levels of engagement requested of different members of the community.

This enlightenment workshop offered us the opportunity to discuss the project's expectations and the potential benefits. The event was also an opportunity for us to collaboratively explore ways of engagement with the community to ensure that the project remains appropriate to the context. During this initial engagement, we identified potential risks and collaboratively explored ways of mitigating these risks. Scholars like *Afifi et al. (2020)* consider community engagement as a collaborative shared journey, which presents fewer rigid hierarchies than often exist when researching rural contexts.

WS2 was with the Young People (YP) (those in school, who never experienced education and/or have discontinued education due to the on-going Boko-Haram crisis). Our selection criteria were based on gender, age and language.

We began with a two-day intensive photography training workshop with the young people. Here, we discussed the use of camera and the ethics of photography. The training also covered topics such as ethics in requesting consent, respect and ethics concerning how participants interpret photographs taken by them. According to Wang (1999), researchers must be aware of their responsibility to participants' safety and well-being.

We asked participants to take photographs that represented their experiences with the crisis and the stories they wanted to tell. After the photographs were taken, participants were put in small groups facilitated by an in-country network partner and supported by the local Research Assistant (RA) to interpret and share the meaning they attached to each photograph (Wang, 1999).

The images and photographs were then used to engage key stakeholders in the community. We held a closed-door exhibition with key persons in the community to highlight outputs from the Photovoice activities with the young people. During this time, the young people engaged key people in the community 'to amplify' participants' messages through photographs and stories and make recommendations to key people in the community (Wang, 1999, p. 189). Outputs generated from Photovoice activities with the young people would be then used to inform the international exhibition and project evaluation project phases (see Figure 1).

Key principles in action

We discuss three strands for applying CBPR and reaping benefits: building trust through negotiating cultural practices and religious belief systems; supporting local economy; and sustainable life learning and skill development.

CBPR: building trust through negotiating cultural practices and religious belief systems

The engagement of local actors was central to the project's efforts to evaluate the risk and/or benefit of the project, providing an additional lens to review our ethics-approved recruitment strategies, consent forms and data gathering procedures and to facilitate research that remained sensitive to the experiences of communities experiencing protracted armed conflicts and crisis. This engagement enabled the network partners to rethink the research designs with the community actors to ensure that the networking activities were accommodating of the people's needs, traditional values and belief systems.

During the initial scoping meetings with the community leadership, suggestions were made about how the consent forms should be re-worded, tran-

scribed into the local languages and incorporate appropriate local salutations that are accorded to each group. For example, among Muslim Hausas, greeting is often shaped by religious or deep cultural beliefs and is linked to the separate roles males and females play in the traditional Hausa society. The Muslim greeting *As-Salamu-alaikum* meaning 'May peace be upon you', is referenced in several places in the Quran and the Ahadith (source of legislation for the Muslims) describes the importance of this kind of greeting. Hence, we added this greeting in the consent form to show we understood and accorded much respect to the belief system of the people. This endeared the project to the community and enhanced the process of trust building. We recognise that this is still enacting imposed ways of gaining consent which originate from the Global North.

In Cameroon, trust building was achieved through network partners immersing themselves in the culture and tradition of the people. Our network partner in Cameroon recalled that:

When we got to Kolofata, we got ourselves acquainted to the local food that is consumed there such as couscous mais (corn fufu) and couscous de mille (millet fufu) that is eaten with folere and okro soups, and garibous (corn and millet pap) and puffballs. Also, we began to dress like them in loincloths and Ngandura. This built the community's trust and confidence in us.

This project was founded on the work of scholars who evidence how trust in CBPR is formed and maintained when the process of knowledge co-creation takes account of community needs and contextual experiences, resources and expertise (Lucero *et al.*, 2020).

Often, Western researchers researching non-Western contexts approach their research designs from a deficit, problem-oriented model. The locals may also have expectations of the Western researcher. Thereby, both researcher and the participants tend to miss out the potential of drawing from their individual strengths and abilities. While the Western researcher misses the experiential knowledge inherent in local resources, the participant on the other hand misses an opportunity that could enhance their capacity building (Afifi *et al.*, 2020). This situation is compounded when researchers and the organizations sponsoring the research, as in this project, originate from colonizing nations in the Global North. There is a need to make themselves humble to the ways of being and knowing in the post colonial contexts and draw from these.

In our project, we identified that trust between community members and researchers was fundamental to the success of our networking activities. From our work, we saw that an outside researcher, without prior experience of conducting research in communities experiencing protracted armed

conflict and crisis, may not recognize the assumptions they make and the power imbalances implicit in their positionality, making it harder to be aware of the need for and appropriate ways of establishing trust. In most instances, members of these communities have been analyzed, stereotyped and exploited by researchers who are only out to use them to generate data that promotes their own work. Hence, members of communities experiencing armed conflict are often suspicious and unwelcoming to unfamiliar groups who come to their community for research purposes. In this project, we engaged trusted and well-known individuals in the community to work as our local research assistants (RAs). This was to enable the research team to earn the cooperation, and even the trust, of members of participating communities.

In Dikwa, network partners paid familiarity visits to some of the community and religious leaders prior to the commencement of the project. During this visit, their discussion was centred on the networking events. There was also the opportunity for both parties to discuss the risks and benefits of the research activities, and for the team to respond to questions raised by the community leaders, so responding to local agendas, rather than imposing. By partnering with a well-trusted local NGO, the project team experienced less resistance from the community.

The local NGO engagement with community leaders in Dikwa was cordial due to the impact of the teaching, mentoring, and coaching of the students in Dikwa Govt day secondary from the very day of their displacements to Maiduguri and their resettlements to Dikwa. The NGO also, in 2021, commissioned water projects in the cattle market and Kamceji area of Dikwa. We won the hearts of the locals when they knew the NGO was also engaged in the networking project (Network partner).

While in Liwa (Chad), network partners met with the Association of Kanem Province Youths. They also reached out to the Crown Prince of Kanem who was satisfied with the project particularly, when he realized that Kanembu dialect speakers would be engaged to work as RAs to support the networking activities in Liwa.

When the network partners met with community leaders in Diffa (Niger), who are mostly Kanuri speakers, they asked questions about the project. The community leaders were concerned about the project's sustainability and how it could be made culture friendly. They discussed aspects of household and community power dynamics. Once they were clear that these would be respected, they assured the team of their maximum cooperation and support, welcoming the project to their settings for mutual benefit.

Across all four communities, issues of access and the gendered aspects of the culture were raised by the community leaders. The practice of *purdah*

(female seclusion) is also common and acceptable among the Muslims in this context (VerEecke, 1993). Therefore, it was important to understand how several other factors such as religion, colonialism and culture influence the indigenous structures, and the implications these changes have on the gender relations and the social positioning of women in the Lake Chad country region.

The research team became aware of the need to respond to the local syncretistic complexity, in which religion and local cultural practices blend (Odok, 2019). To ensure equitable access and more inclusive research, the network team trained female peer researchers locally to engage in data collection with the females and the male peer researchers were trained to engage separately with the males. Additionally, these discussions gave us an idea of how to manage the time that was allocated to us so that our activities did not coincide with times for prayer, and to avoid conflict with and, hence seeming disrespect for, religious practices also shared by some of the research team.

These insights align with the work of Singh *et al.* (1999), in their study with mental health patients in the United States. They identified that language barrier had the potential to compromise their patients' access to quality health and mental health services. Therefore, they hired and trained people who were well known and trusted in the community. In their work, they referred to these people as cultural brokers, who understood the deep cultural nuances, challenges and strengths that are unique to the community.

CBPR: supporting local economy

Concerns around researchers' responsibility to the participants were discussed with the community cohort. Network partners and community partners explored community needs holistically. We looked at collective ways of creating social change and sustainable livelihoods, as a practical and a constructive approach to address power imbalances, empowering rather than imposing. During the initial scoping meetings with network partners and selected community members, we agreed that a proportion of the research funding should go directly to the local economy of these communities where we would be carrying out our network activities. Within these contexts of crisis, there exists socio-economic hardship due to the armed conflict and crisis, which is already exacerbating poverty in these communities. Engaging the community to discuss researchers' responsibility is consistent with our project aim to engage community members and to jointly negotiate ethical practices at every phase of the research process and to ensure that they remain active participants in research about them.

One of the ways we responded to this identified need, was to engage food suppliers in the local markets to supply lunch for the participants and

to engage the services of local bus drivers to transport participants. These activities not only enabled the network project to contribute to the income of some families in the community, but the project also supported local businesses. This approach enabled the team to integrate into the cultural milieu of the locals, as well as to gain their trust.

When asked if purchasing items from locals helped support local businesses, our network partner in Cameroon responds:

Most people on Kolofata are experiencing poverty. The purchasing power is low, locals react to the patronising of their local businesses with happiness, gratitude, and expectations for us to buy more. This was evident in questions they posed to us, "When next you are coming?". Personally, I tried to distribute the buying of items across different sellers to benefit many more people and as a means of integrating/interacting with the locals. Some expressions of gratefulness include "Thank you very much, I am still expecting you".

This insight suggests that researchers can build trust with communities in crisis and settings of distrust and socio-economic hardship. Informal discussions with community members to understand community needs holistically, and to explore collective ways the research process can benefit and contribute to the local economy where possible, should form part of the discussions during the initial scoping meetings with community members.

CBPR: sustainable life learning and skill development

Exploring ways to respond to issues, such as the burgeoning out-of-school populations of young people, requires a continuous on-going approach to achieving sustainable change. This is even more so, in the context of protracted armed conflict and crisis where around 28 million children of primary school age are out of school. With 18 percent of the world's primary school age population, armed conflict contexts account for 42 percent of the world's out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2011).

The situation of protracted armed conflict and crisis in the Lake Chad country region led to increased loss of lives, properties and livelihoods. Protracted crisis further disintegrates communities thereby threatening program sustainability. In contexts of crisis, such as those experiencing armed conflict, sustainability is further challenged by the reality of funding, as accessing funding for research is often easier than accessing funding for scaling up programs (Afifi *et al.*, 2020).

The networking team selected and trained peer researchers from the participating communities to co-facilitate the networking events and their time spent working on the project was paid for. These peer researchers are well known and trusted members of the community. By participating in this

project, the peer researchers from these communities developed new skills (Makhoul *et al.*, 2012), which could empower them to be more versatile to transition into other roles even when the research project ends.

During the mid-project assessment, the network team asked the peer researchers who were trained to support the networking activities to partake in an evaluation. When asked what they had gained from working on the network project, and how what they have gained will help them in future, one of the peer researchers offered the following response:

I have learned how to facilitate events of this nature and to support children. This project has opened my eyes to a skill I did not know I have. I am now looking at how I can train to be a teacher. Because by working on this project, I now know I will be a good teacher to my students.

Other researchers have identified that the capacity-building approach to CBPR that involves opportunities for community members to advance skills are crucial to a successful partnership (Li *et al.*, 2001), as well as beneficial for program sustainability in relation to research with communities affected by humanitarian crisis (Afifi *et al.*, 2020; Donnelly *et al.*, 2021). The sustainability can be reframed as contributing towards rectifying power imbalances in the region and creating the space for local-derived knowledge to be generated. In their CBPR with the Lewiston, Maine community—a resettled refugee community from Somalia affected by humanitarian crisis—Afifi *et al.* (2020) hired and trained research staff from the community such as research assistants, community health workers, fidelity monitors, a clinical supervisor and a local manager to support the project. The researchers argue that hiring and training research staff from the community creates new opportunities for community members to advance skills that would outlast the project life.

Information generated from the mid-project assessment with peer researchers is consistent with the gains also stated by the young people. When asked what they have gained from participating, and how what they have gained will help them in future, the young people offered the following response:

I felt like a leader especially when I spoke about the problems affecting all my peers. It was a rewarding exercise for me. I have become more confident participating in this project. It taught me how to express myself and how to negotiate with people to solve a problem. Violence is not the answer but peaceful dialogue with one another can help solve any problem. (YP1)

I am now a good photographer. I will keep improving my new skill because I know that photographs can be used to effect change even if it is small. (YP 2)

These insights are consistent with literature that proposes that participatory research successes be measured in terms of evidence of transformation in conditions of inequity and marginalization (Clever, 2001). Through our own work, we have also seen that the photography training, narrative workshops, local exhibition and the co-production of knowledge, supported a variety of transferable skills that was developed among young people and the peer researchers, thereby, contributing to the self-sustainability of the initiative.

Discussion

By utilizing Photovoice, the project enabled a reflexive self-definition (Holland *et al.*, 2010), allowing young people to become 'experts in their own lives' (Crivello, Camfield, and Woodhead, 2009, p. 52). We reflect on three strands for applying CBPR and reaping benefits of CBPR, which illustrate the importance for ethical research of building trust through negotiating cultural practices and religious belief systems, supporting the local economy, sustainable life learning and skill development.

Firstly, we identified that through the engagement of local actors, the research team was able to consider and take an inclusive and situated approach to evaluating the risks and benefits of the project. This involved negotiation with local leaders resulting in the team being welcomed into the region.

Secondly, we reflected on researchers' responsibility to participants and the recognition that communities experiencing protracted armed conflict and crisis suffer economic hardship due to loss of sources of livelihood. This is even more so, for communities already experiencing poverty before the crisis. Whilst being aware of but unable to counter the structural causes of this, in this project, we contributed to the local economy through supporting local businesses by purchasing project consumables from the locals. This gave the team opportunity to integrate into the local cultural milieu, to become alert to local values and ways of living and demonstrate attitudes of openness, which helped to gain trust.

Our third strand reflects on how our CBPR was potentially empowering for participants. Through development of new skills and knowledge in photography, participants had a feeling of belonging, enabling participants to have a voice and to make decisions about the things that affect their lives. Participants felt that they had committed to enhancing themselves, and this promoted positive feelings such as confidence, and raised aspirations. This was also evidenced in the peer researchers who were hired to work on this project. The elements of voice and raised aspirations remain important to our postcolonial frame. Recognizing the unique strengths that each partner

brings to the process of knowledge creation are important, especially in terms of agency and in contributing to the sustainability of the project gains beyond the project life.

Despite the positive aspects recorded, one of the major challenges we experienced carrying out this project was the ethical consideration of facilitating research that is sensitive to historic past experiences. We first began with engaging key members of the community in a reflective dialogue to explore ways in which the research would remain sensitive to the experiences and needs of the people. We identified that this initial engagement with key members of the community was not only useful in providing an additional lens to review our data collection approach as approved by our institutional review board but was also valuable in informing how we facilitated the networking activities and how outputs from these activities would be disseminated.

Community engagement, voice and co-creation of knowledge to affect societal change lies at the heart of CBPR and in this networking project our focus on forging partnerships with members of the research communities was central to our participatory approach. However, we also recognize how subalternity arising from historical pasts of these local communities, can combine to create further complexities to the participatory nature in this kind of research.

We recognize the importance of a postcolonial lens in international education research, particularly if we consider the counter-hegemonic possibilities raised by postcolonial scholars such as Tikly (2004) and Tikly and Bond (2013), to challenge the consequences of the historic past that were exploitative, to build a new society where liberty and equity prevail. Yet these things remain complex, especially if the funding and research design are from the West.

We argue that a postcolonial lens interrogates Western research dominance and ways of understanding the world. It challenges Euro-centric notions and beliefs, to enshrine the cosmology and beliefs of locals (McEwan, 2001). A postcolonial lens forces us to question the ways in which legacies of colonialism have played out in our understanding of how research should be done and highlights how they have continued to dominate international education research spaces. It also helps us to examine 'agency and resistance within/against' these dominant voices in the way we do research (Subedi and Daza, 2008, p. 2).

Conclusions

The identification of ethics for doing research in regions of protracted armed conflict and crisis is still a developing area. Although some theoretical

articles have been published regarding areas of ethical concern (Ford *et al.*, 2009; Afifi *et al.*, 2020), empirical investigations of these issues remain scant. Given the impact of armed conflict and protracted crisis in the lives and aspirations of young people in crisis contexts, and the burgeoning out-of-school population in counties affected by the Boko-Haram crisis in the Lake Chad region, future research needs to emphasize a better understanding of culturally sensitive practice in ethical terms. A growing body of research points to the benefits of CBPR methods in addressing research interactions with community members, recognizing both individual and community level risks and benefits, as well as recognizing the role of locals as active, indispensable agents in the research process. The practical experience gained through implementing the networking research activities further highlights the many ways in which community engagement remains critical to conducting ethical research within armed conflict contexts.

A postcolonial lens informed a deep understanding, aiming to disrupt power dynamics evidenced within the nexus of any colonial processes. This included a commitment for individual and collective unreserved respect for unfamiliar cultural norms. This paper evidences how this respect for peoples' cultures presents the potential to pave the way for relationships that can foster successful research projects which benefit both the researchers and the members of the community in the research setting. We have offered these insights so that other research practitioners can draw from the learning of this project, as they navigate their research within similar contexts.

However, we recognize that there is still a long way to go to de-colonize research in a much more radical sense, which would entail communities setting their own indigenous research agendas (Smith, 2012). Our approach to this research project was one step along the way to reflecting on how to 'de-colonize' some of the research processes, through attempting to develop culturally situated research practice within a UK-funded research partnership working with organisations in the Lake Chad region.

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Dr Margaret Ebubedike's research currently draws on the use of participatory and co-creative approaches to explore the educational needs of children and young people, particularly girls from marginalized contexts.

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