Working with Local Researchers
by Ryann Manning, Field Research Coordinator, Sierra Leone
Based on reflections from field research & training conducted during January-March 2007

What is J4P?
Justice for the Poor (J4P) is a global research and development program aimed at informing, designing and supporting pro-poor approaches to justice reform. It is an approach to justice reform which:
- Sees justice from the perspective of the poor/marginalized
- Is grounded in social and cultural contexts
- Recognizes the importance of demand in building equitable justice systems
- Understands justice as a cross-sectoral issue

Introduction: Justice for the Poor and Building Local Capacity

Though not primarily a capacity-building project, J4P embraces the goal of building the capacity of local actors to undertake rigorous research, particularly qualitative research, to inform evidence-based policy reform. J4P’s programs in Indonesia and Cambodia have invested significant time and resources into building the capacity of a local team.

There are important lessons to be learned from these experiences--namely what this sort of capacity-building entails, and the challenges and opportunities involved.

Context: Local Research Capacity in a Poor, Post-Conflict State

Sierra Leone, once known for its educational achievements – among others, the oldest institution of higher education in West Africa, Fourah Bay College – has seen a dramatic reversal in recent decades. Civil war, poverty, and government mismanagement reduced access to education and eroded educational quality, while driving many skilled individuals to emigrate. (See text box for details.) As a result, the country now faces serious human capacity constraints, and high-caliber, trained individuals are relatively few and far between.

Skilled qualitative researchers are certainly not an exception to this rule, and if anything qualitative research skills have been under-emphasized in comparison to quantitative techniques. On the other hand, this means there is a great deal of unrealized potential that could be tapped with the help of intensive investments in training and capacity-building.
Getting Started: Classroom Lessons and Field-Based Practicals

In late 2006, CGG assembled a team of six researchers through a competitive hiring process; a seventh researcher was employed by the World Bank. All but one researcher held undergraduate degrees in the social sciences from Sierra Leonean universities, and many graduated with honors. The other researcher received his degree from a Liberian university. Several had worked professionally as researchers, primarily as enumerators or supervisors for quantitative surveys. A few had conducted semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and other qualitative research. None, however, had any experience with high-quality anthropological or sociological qualitative research.

CGG and the World Bank’s J4P team jointly planned and executed the initial classroom training, which covered relevant substantive information – such as background on governance and justice in Sierra Leone – as well as qualitative research techniques. Classroom training was followed by intensive practical training in qualitative field work. For both classroom and field training, the team built upon field guides developed by the Indonesia J4P***, adapting them to the Sierra Leonean context. Training included guest lectures from experts at local universities, NGOs, government institutions, and justice reform and decentralization projects, as well as field-based guidance from visiting J4P team members.

Some of the most interesting components of classroom training focused on how to translate the broader J4P agenda to the local context. This included the direct challenge of translating key terms from English into various local languages. One lively discussion centered on translating the word “grievance” – a key unit of analysis for the research – into three of Sierra Leone’s major languages. Temne-speaking team members identified a word they considered a direct translation, but Krio and Mende speakers engaged in a lengthy debate, eventually settling on a translation that meant, roughly, “things that make the heart burn.” This conversation helped researchers grapple more tangibly with what the research was really asking about, and why, and how, and thus to build an understanding that would carry them through the research itself.

Based on experiences in Cambodia and early indications of the Sierra Leonean team’s capacity, CGG and the World Bank narrowed the scope of the training agenda to focus on a few core research techniques, and extended the schedule to allow more time for field-based practice. The team was also adjusted to provide more intensive supervision and support of newer researchers. The coordinator of the Kenya J4P project, an experienced anthropologist, traveled to Sierra Leone during both the initial training period and the first phase of field work, and an additional anthropologist – a Sierra Leonean national trained in Europe – was later hired to join the team in a supervisory and training role.

Despite these adjustments, however it became clear that the training timetable was somewhat optimistic given Sierra Leone’s capacity constraints. Researchers needed training in skills that organizers had not anticipated, and also needed more time, as well as intensive support and supervision, to absorb and apply new skills and techniques.

* World Bank, Summary Education Profile, Sierra Leone.
Reflections: Successes, Shortfalls and Lessons Learned

Today, four months after the start of training, it is possible to reflect on the initial training process and to draw some lessons about what worked, what did not work, and what could be improved for the future.

First, our experience suggests that in places with similar capacity constraints to Sierra Leone, training programs should start with the basics in a step-by-step approach to building qualitative research skills. In four months, the best of the researchers are still working to develop their interviewing techniques, and have just begun to think about participant observation skills. More complex research techniques – focus group discussions, mapping techniques, and participatory methods – have still to be tackled.

Second, it seems a higher ratio of internationally-trained to locally-trained researchers, and greater time for one-to-one or one-to-two mentoring and support, is needed to produce better results both in terms of capacity-building and of producing high-quality data. The Sierra Leonean researchers were able to learn more in one afternoon of conducting interviews with a skilled researcher than in a week of classroom training and independent practice. A combination of the following seems to work well: 1) interviews conducted by the more experienced researcher, with the new researcher translating and/or taking notes; 2) interviews jointly conducted by the more- and less-skilled researchers, taking turns asking questions; and 3) interviews conducted by the less-skilled researcher with the more-skilled researcher observing and then giving direct, detailed feedback immediately after the conclusion of the interview.

Third, it is clear that the researchers would benefit from the opportunity to observe themselves conducting an interview, and to receive feedback from supervisors and fellow researchers on their technique. This would require a video camera (preferable) or high-quality voice recorder. Periodic observation and feedback of this sort could allow researchers to track their own progress. Sharing some of the best – and, if group dynamics are supportive, the worst – interview excerpts can allow researchers to learn from one another as well as from supervisors and trainers.

Finally, in our experience there is an equal (if not greater) need to develop researchers’ analytic and report-writing skills as their interview and data collection skills. Analytic and writing ability is often particularly weak when educational quality is low, and without these skills, researchers will not be able to participate fully in the research process. For the Sierra Leonean team, training in these areas has been somewhat ad-hoc thus far, with the field-based program coordinator facilitating group discussions about how to aggregate and analyze findings and giving feedback on iterative efforts to conduct such analysis. Much more work is needed, however – including, perhaps, the development of a more formal training module – before the team is ready to engage independently.

“The training program should have included more time for a step-by-step approach to building qualitative research skills.”

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Conducting interviews, Mopala Village
Conclusions: Challenges and Opportunities in Training Local Researchers

Training local researchers to conduct high-quality qualitative research in a country like Sierra Leone is both a time- and resource-intensive task. However, there are many benefits to partnering with a local organization which cannot be replicated or replaced by simply hiring ready-made international researchers.

First, the J4P project in Sierra Leone has received a great deal of appreciation locally for its decision to work closely with a national partner, and its commitment to building local research capacity. Sierra Leone has (perhaps more than) its fair share of donor-driven research conducted by individuals who write their reports and then move on to the next country. The country, however, is hungry for projects that recognize the potential contributions of Sierra Leoneans, and that leave something behind in terms of local capacity.

Second, and related to the first, it is quite possible that these local partnerships increase the likelihood that the research will have an impact on policy and programs here in Sierra Leone, particularly those instituted locally by government or civil society actors. A purely World Bank report written by a foreign expert may be highly-read in international and donor circles, but might be inaccesible to Sierra Leoneans, or perceived as less relevant than locally-produced research.

Third, this investment in local capacity creates a possible secondary impact of the project: to improve the quality of research locally, and to spur future follow-on projects in these areas. For instance, several of the researchers are thinking about pursuing advanced degrees, and could tackle questions that relate to and build upon the J4P research, using the methods they have learned from the project. If they do so, that would multiply J4P’s contribution to the body of knowledge on justice and governance in Sierra Leone.

Finally, there is much that local researchers themselves teach the project. They often provide a reality-check on research instruments and methods before they are field-tested. Similarly, they can do the same with findings and tentative conclusions. Their inside perspectives on Sierra Leonean society often provide a valuable counterpoint to the views of other J4P team members, and their knowledge - particularly of custom, tradition, and history - enriches the debates and descriptions otherwise found in literature on Sierra Leone. Robbing the project of those insights would be a significant loss, even if it made life easier on the “capacity-building” front.

Further Information

Visit our website: www.worldbank.org/justiceforthepoor

Questions?

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Justice for the Poor Briefing Notes provide up-to-date information on current topics, findings, and concerns of J4P’s multi-country research and development program. The views expressed in the notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the World Bank.