

Report on ethnographic methods in 3 informal settlements in Philippi¹

May to December 2010

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Description of method

The main theme for my research is how informal settlements deal with flooding hazards and other related issues. Carrying out ethnographic research² by regularly visiting the informal settlements over time has contributed significantly to understanding these areas. During August to December 2010, I visited the three informal settlements average once a week to carry out informal interviews, plan other activities, observe or just to have a chat. Additionally, I stayed over in two of the settlement for three days each. This report is a short preliminary evaluation of the usefulness of this method in this on-going fieldwork, pointing examples of empirical indications that will be further assessed.

The main purposes of this strategy are:

1. To access data on developments of the settlements by capturing cases as they happen, instead of back-casting. This gives a better understanding processes and how change happens.
2. To gain trust and to make sure that the research focus is as valid as possible. This is because people often present issues differently after a period of trust building.
3. To enable inhabitants in the informal settlements to inform the research and give suggestions on topics they find important.



I will now shortly go through how these purposes have been fulfilled during the research so far:

¹ This is meant as a preliminary report of the research process and findings, not as an academic paper.

²For references see e.g. Hammersly M. and P Atkinson. 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. Taylor & Francis

Purpose 1: Understanding developments:

When collecting data (through e.g. interviews or surveys) over a limited time, there is always the possibility that the answers you get might be co-incidental, depending on what is currently happening. Therefore, observing and re-visiting residents several times seemed to enhance the understanding complexities and fluidity of processes, has revealed interesting cases of developments. Here are some examples of developments in each of the settlements that I have been following:

Settlement 1:

At the first encounters, this settlement seemed to be more unified than other settlements. However several incidents changed this impression, as accusations between residents escalated on several issues. In November, at the time when electricity theft was nationally debated, some residents explained that that they have been stealing electricity for a long time, but that now someone within the settlement had snitched to the police about this. Further, it was claimed that the people that snitched were collaborating with the owner of the land that wanted to evict the settlement.

The fact that this settlement is on private land causes the constant threat of eviction. During the visits, the community leaders had to go to court cases several times. Following them throughout this period gives me a sense about what such a dragged-out and frustrating process can do to the whole feeling in the settlement - and therefore also affect how other issues are dealt with. Getting into the difficult context of this settlement has made me realise that when such serious issues are a stake, it is difficult to keep other issues like flooding and waste problems in mind. It is also not right for me as a researcher to not listen to the main concerns of the participants of the research, and it is relevant to understand how such problems affect the internal state of the settlement.



Picture: There was some flooding this winter, and it seems to especially affect the children that play in the paths.

Settlement 2:

After evaluating the survey, some issues that were insufficiently covered in the survey came out by revisiting the settlement and observing adaptation processes. The problem is that surveys are not inclined to explain processes of complexities of situations. The survey question on adaptation techniques to flooding only provided few options, however observations show however that most people combine methods and often try new strategies. I observed that one person first tried to dig trenches around the shack, but the water did not go away. After some weeks, he raised the outside of the shack.

Further, some unexpected effects seemed to emerge due to the field visits. In December, one community leaders told that various ‘outsiders’ had visited the settlement. He claimed that this was because people had noticed our (the researchers) presence here. Reporters from a newspaper had visited the settlement and made reportage about the toilet problem, in addition to that both a NGO and political party representatives had approached the settlement to see if they could work out a toilet and tap water system.



Picture: As a last resort, a woman moved her whole shack away due to the problems of water beneath her shack. Now there is only a dam left. The neighbours also have this problem, but they have just put some wood on the floor to cover the water that flows beneath.

Settlement 3:

When I visited one of the community leaders in November, it had been several weeks since my last visit. She was eager to tell me about the recent problem they were experiencing regarding garbage management, particularly on the employment: Every year, new people from within the settlement are employed to clean the garbage in the streets and the dumping area. Cleaning the garbage is very important due to hygienic reasons, but also is also related to flooding problems because garbage tends to block the drains and make them overflow. This year however, the new cleaner employment was not done properly, many residents claimed. The local leaders affiliated to ANC accused the process for being corrupt, and argued that only DA people were employed. The suspicions was based accusations that the

selection of the employees did not happen transparently in front of everyone, like been agreed upon. This resulted in a toy-toy, and the new employees where scared to work. For weeks, the settlement was floating over with garbage, until some residents decided to burn this garage. Following this, the new cleaners were in place, but this time there were no questions on their employments, although there also this time was not 'public election'.



Picture: This is the area where the garbage is collected. In this picture new drains have just been places and people are cleaning the area.



Picture: Same area as above (taken from opposite direction): Just some weeks later this area overflowed with garbage due to the internal fight, and the drains got blocked.

Purpose 2: Trust and valid information

In order to present the informal settlement as valid as possible, it is important that I gain trust with the participants. Especially when working with people in difficult situations, their might only focus on the despair of their situation in the hope that this might bring help. Another problem is that when addressing strangers, many residents seemed to feel a bit intimidated, and therefore answered questions very shortly and inconsistent. As some of the stories in the previous section shows, there has been instances where people not really have told the whole story in the beginning. Social science can never be objective, but trying to give a reliable account of participants perceptions must be a main goal. Following the participants over time did seem to increase their trust, and stories got more complicated after several conversations.

Additionally, there are some things are controversial to ask about in the first encounters, and moving cautiously letting the participants tell the stories when they are ready is important. Particularly, rumours and accusations around corruption cannot simply be asked about directly. In one of the settlements, residents from another settlement had told me that there is a corrupt leader which the residents were scared of. I did not ask about this in the beginning, and only after several conversations some explanations were randomly mentioned. It was mentioned that they had been 'under' a leader from another area which had oppressed them, but that they however had dealt with this problem and formed an own committee.

Purpose 3: Enabling bottom-up influence

Generally, the main reason for doing qualitative research like this is that instead of the researcher deciding on pre-established variables that the people encountered must answer to, individuals can express what they find important and thereby shape the research focus. This strategy has worked very well so far. Some of the participants constantly keep me informed about what happens, and they even call sometimes when something has happened that they think I should know about. The people that I talk to in the informal settlements seem to be happy that I let them talk about their own main concerns, and the information that they have shared with me have learnt me a lot about how the informal settlements actually work. I also feel that the people I communicate with appreciate that I follow up on them, as some of the community leaders have pointed out that they are happy that I care about the settlement.

In addition, residents are part of steering the research as they are given responsibilities and research tasks as 'research assistants' or translators. Due to recommendations from NGOs, they are sometimes paid a small amount, depending on the length and duty. If it is just a short friendly visit they are not paid, because they should relate my presence to money. My impression is that they seem to be proud to be employed, and inspire them to take initiative and discuss several issues of the settlements.

Through this kind of open engagements, the thesis topic changed slightly. I realized, you cannot just talk about flooding, and not care about the related issues, especially waste problems, toilet conditions and health issues. Moreover, politics and problems of cross-scale interaction and collaboration are highlighted by many as the residents a particularly problematic, and further research will focus on the role of informal leaders in this picture.

Conclusion and challenges

As the points above elaborated on, this methodology for gathering data has given some very interesting indications. I would say it fulfils the purposes of gaining trust and getting valid data, and getting data on developments to a high degree. Combined with other methods, this will provide additional qualitative data that enhances the deeper content of the cases; therefore more ethnographic research will be carried out for this project.

I further think this approach is important to get a deeper understanding of processes within the informal settlements, as it seems to that there are many problematic and insufficient assumptions and generalizations made by externals which visit shortly.

The main challenge lies in how to process the amount of information that will emerge through this research. Both selecting and interpreting such insights is a complex process that needs much reflection. Additionally, this kind of research in the harsh setting of informal settlements is emotionally draining.