PLACE OF POSITIONALITY, VALUES, ETHICS AND REFLEXIVITY IN QUALITATIVE URBAN FIELD WORK RESEARCH

Abstract
This paper details my field work experiences during my doctoral research in Nairobi rural-urban fringe, Kenya. The field work was conducted before, during and after a period of election related violence. The paper details the choice of my methodology and also enumerates various decisions that I had to take during the field work when the situation was visibly bleak. The paper provides lessons and insights on how to negotiate different fields and positions in situations of instability and uncertainty during field work.

Keywords: Reflexivity, ethics, rural-urban fringe, qualitative research, field work.

INTRODUCTION
The process of urbanization is one of the most important drivers of economic, social and physical change in developing countries such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa (Pieterse 2008). Rapid urban population growth has led not only to an increasing demand for urban land, particularly for housing, but also for other various urban uses. And that in many countries, the increasing demand for land is affecting rural-urban fringes, where urban expansion is already encroaching into the agricultural lands and small villages (Maconachie 2007). Maconachie (2007) further indicates that the conversion of agricultural land to urban uses is leading to rapid transformations in agricultural production, spatial structure, social structure, land ownership and land markets in the rural-urban fringe.

My research focused on the responses/actions of the community within the Nairobi rural-urban fringe and how they manoeuvre through environmental consequences of changes occasioned by urbanisation. This paper details my field work experiences during my doctoral research in Nairobi rural-urban fringe, Kenya. It is based experiences from a field work which was inductive, in-depth and qualitative.

This paper reflects on the choice of the methodology adopted in enhancing access, continued participation of my research participant/informants. The paper details the role of researcher’s reflexivity, positionality and ethics in enhancing trust and confidence among the participants, especially in situations of conflicts and political uncertainties.
THE CHOICE OF MY METHODOLOGY

The choice of my methodological approach was influenced by recognition of knowledge as being situated and partial. Specifically, the major influence was from Marshall and Rossman (1989, 11), who describe qualitative research as a process of designing research that entails entering into the everyday life of the social setting, where informants' perspectives are valued in their own worlds and attempts are made to discover those perspectives. Therefore I did not set out to search for a universal truth but to uncover perceptions, aspirations and opinions from multiple sources/voices to provide one of many possible accounts/explanations concerning land use conversions in the Nairobi rural-urban fringe.

The approach adopted allowed me to go beyond empirical descriptions and penetrate the appearances of social life to unearth normalised but often unequal relations and hegemonic interests in land ownership and use. Madge et al., (1997, 92) argue qualitative approaches “offer interpretations of causal processes that have wide conceptual relevance.” Additionally, face-to-face methods common in qualitative methodologies allow the researcher to draw on empathy and to validate informants’ knowledge and experiences. I therefore realised (in the process of my research) that other than providing data for this research, using a qualitative approach served as an emancipatory tool for improving society through creating understanding about issues affecting it or part of it, through various discussions with informants during field work.

An inquiry of this kind is thus seen as an interactive process between the researcher and the informants. It is primarily descriptive and relies on people's words as the primary data. However, I did not take qualitative research as simply quantitative research without numbers. I took it as a methodology that can stand on its own and which allows the researcher to get into underlying aspects on different issues being studied.

Bryman (1989) reported several strengths of using a qualitative approach: First, it allows for the adoption of an insider's stance to the study issues and settings. After multiple visits to the sites where I was conducting my research, I started to have a feeling of an insider. I started to share in the concern of the participants (though to a limited extent). I started to commune in some of their local discourses. In short, qualitative methods with an emphasis on multiple visits and on in-depth interviews allowed me to have some insider perspective to land use problems and issues.

Secondly, a qualitative approach creates a strong sense of contextualization of research issues and data. Meeting participants in their life setting allowed me to see ‘things’ in their natural settings. For example, during interviews with local government officials, I managed to observe ways in which they were dealing with members of the public who came to their offices in need of various services. Also while meeting informants in their villages I was able to observe how various issues are manifested or are affecting them in their respective localities. In this regard I had a first-hand experience of some of the issues and I better understood how different views and perceptions held by informants came to vary from one place to the other. This added richness to the data I got from such settings.

Thirdly, a qualitative research methodology emphasizes the process more than the outcome. The way research is conducted is crucial for the outcome of that research. The focus on the process rather than the outcome is what gives legitimacy to qualitative research. Rather than following blueprints on how field work is done or should be done, I thought deeply about the circumstances and situations at hand. I however ensured that I documented the prevailing circumstances during various interview encounters and how that had the likelihood of influencing/affecting the responses I was getting from my participants.

Fourthly, a qualitative approach allows for the adoption of the unstructured approach where the researcher had little prior practical and/or theoretical orientation and no presupposed hypotheses. Though I had a rough idea of my study setting and themes, my ideas were still formative and my theoretical orientation/conceptualization was still rudimental. This is due to inadequate past studies done on my research topic and particularly on that specific area of the Nairobi rural-urban fringe. The chosen approach allowed me to develop concepts and themes during the research process. These concepts and themes were incrementally developed as I advanced day by day in the field. This was further strengthened by adoption of multiple interviews and field visits.

Fifthly, a qualitative approach allows for the generation and consideration of a variety of data sources such as field notes, photographs, newspapers, interview transcripts and documents. This, as has already been explained, was made possible by my adoption of various dimensions of triangulation. This allowed me to make connections and cross-validate on various issues and cases as they unfolded in the field.
Another case for the use qualitative approach is its ability to obtain and retain close proximity to the phenomenon under study. I tried to emphasize data authorizing\(^1\) with the participants rather than data collection. I made the participants feel part and parcel of the study rather than adapting a client-master/client-server stance. At times however, I expressed empathy on some of the issues affecting the participants, sometimes feeling like I should adopt the status of an agent of change which social researchers sometimes are. All the same, due to the ethical requirements/considerations in my study I tried to suppress emotions and activism aspects of my life during the entire research process.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. The validity and authenticity of the qualitative research approach thus needs to be examined. Validity here is used to mean truthfulness in research activities. Validity in qualitative methods, hinges largely on the skill, competence and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork. Authenticity and validity entail giving an honest and balanced account of events and phenomena from the perspective of those who experience it every day. This search for validity has led to a range of innovations in research methodology. Qualitative research methodologies have adopted diverse approaches such as reflexivity, multiple voicing and verbatim representations. Reflexivity entails a researcher historically, culturally and personally situating himself/herself within their research and letting their informants and audience know it. In doing so, subjectivity is accommodated in trying to explain and justify truth. Regarding embracement of multiple voices, I made attempts to relativize the voices in this research by incorporating multiple voices. A mixed methodology allowed me to use different methods to gather data so as to look at research issues from different angles.

Within the practice of qualitative research certain metaphors have been used to describe a qualitative researcher. Denzin and Lincoln (2007, 5-6) described the researchers as “a bricoleur, as a maker of quilts, or as in film making, a person who assembles images into montages,” among others. A researcher is further portrayed as one drawing materials from many elements and in different forms using different methods and paradigms in an iterative and interpretive process to construct a representation of a complex social situation. Adoption of a bricoleur standpoint allowed me to keep my research options open (although the open-approach was more applicable during initial stages of the field work) and thus gave me more chances not only to discover a few isolated facts but also some more profound ‘truths.’ At the beginning, adoption of different sources and perspectives, seemed to blur, but as I continued with my study these diverse genres began to “interbreed” into a storyline. As a bricoleur, I was also able to make on the spot decisions and to employ a range of strategies, techniques and methods to obtain empirical material.

As will be explained later, the metaphor of a bricoleur became handy during my fieldwork for this research. The realities on the ground defied the anticipated research protocol/processes and focus. This was because issues under study were not as clear-cut as originally imagined and also due to other issues (violent conflict after disputed Kenya’s presidential election) that emerged and which warranted a shift in the original fieldwork plan.

Adopting a bricoleur approach in research requires that one should move from one method to another depending on the nature of encounters. I tried different techniques in developing different lines of enquiry, identifying the participants or organisations to approach and further refining ways of conducting the fieldwork and getting information. This approach is advantageous for research on issues such as land use phenomena in the peri-urban areas due to their complex nature. Furthermore, it enables the researcher to remain open to drawing upon new research methodologies if new and unexpected scenarios arise.

**Selection of Research Participants for In-Depth Interviews**

At the start of my field work I was guided by de Vries (1992, 47-84) who gave various considerations which are pertinent for a successful fieldwork research. These considerations were not rules in the real sense but throughout my fieldwork they served as a guide. First, these encompassed issues of negotiating access into the life world of my research participants or informants. This was a bit tricky given the central theme of my research revolved around land, which is a most controversial and hotly contested aspect of life in Kenya.

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\(^1\) During my field work, I valued my informants capacity to teach me about their reality, I also believed in my capacity to break into that reality, reflect on it, make it my own, and ultimately share my lived experiences as a researcher and rural-urban fringe resident. I took into account the ability of the informant to explain his/her activities as well as my ability to understand and translate those explanations. This accords with Giddens (1984) that the discursive consciousness is the level at which humans express their thoughts, emotions and reasons for action.
As such 'getting in’ to the participants called for a lot of sensitivity and caution; failure to do so had the potential of generating bad feelings and subsequent backlash to my field work. To avoid this backlash I took time to explain to my participants what my research entailed and the purpose of my study. I tried all means to assure them that my research was purely academic and was not meant to adjudicate over land grievances that had beset many community members for a long time.

Participants were not selected through random sampling, they were referred via snowballing. I also done some ‘homework’, during the initial days of my field work, to know the individuals who serve as opinion leaders and shapers within the community in the study area. This information about opinion leaders and shapers was obtained from public officers working in the area, who I first reported to after acquiring the research permit. I made some informal contacts with individuals whom I had known before the study began but were still living in the study area. I was thus referred to the “gatekeepers” of various study sites/areas (these sites/areas were chosen after a reconnaissance visits. I chose them as critical cases to answer my research questions) and through their contacts I gained acceptance from members of those respective villages. However, to avoid bias, after the first days of introduction I tried to disentangle from such “gatekeepers.” All the same I found it hard to completely avoid them as I had to keep referring to their names whenever I met new people from whom I needed to get information. Such reference was framed in the following manner: “I have talked to so and so [gatekeeper] and they are aware about what I am doing in this area.” This introductory statement kept coming up in my frequent encounters with new people who could recognise ‘a stranger’ within their locality.

I would, however, say that opportunism also played a key role by the end of each day during my field work. I had to make on-the-spot decisions when I was confronted by some issues or opportunity for interview. I was influenced by Bresnen’s (1988, 47) argument that most methods used in getting data, in some cases, rely upon some degree of slyness, artfulness, opportunism and perseverance on the part of the researcher. Although I tried to be open as possible about the true purpose of my study, I never let any opportunity be wasted, even if the situation was not initially set for the interview. For example, I attended a friend’s party which was meant as the preparation for his wedding. I met several people from the area with whom I informally discussed several aspects of my research. Since these people were both born and still residing in the area, I had a good opportunity to get much information in a relaxed atmosphere. From these people I selected some for further interviews in the following days.

Secondly, I considered aspects of social relationships between myself and research participants as equally important for ‘getting on' with the research process. I made it my goal to allow research participants to understand in detail the goals and aim of my field work. In doing so, I developed some sense of feeling of trustworthy to the participants. I tried not to portray any characteristics of elitism. However, I tried to show a sincere curiosity to my informants by showing interest in their issues and the locality. I did this by showing that I had a prior understanding of their area such as knowing various names of villages, natural features (e.g. Rivers) and various locations. This showed my participants that I was ‘one of them’ and that I had them ‘in my heart’ (in the words of some of the informants). I also exercised my interpersonal skills and ‘good’ public relation in all circumstances. Challenges were high especially where interviews took place at the residence of participants. Here, food or drinks were offered. It could not have been practical to accept food or drinks in every residence I visited, on the basis of my capacity. What I did was to politely appreciate the offer and use the opportunity to state and promise that I will take something next time thus getting myself an opportunity for further interviews or to get clarification on issues that were not well captured in the previous interviews. I also promised to share my preliminary findings with participants, which I did where the time and situations allowed.

Thirdly, I considered the aspect of exiting or withdrawal from the interview site. I had to devise a strategy to withdraw from the interview set up without jeopardising chances of my return to the participants for further interviews. Cotterill (1992, 599) advises that a "...close friends do not usually arrive with a tape-recorder, listen carefully and sympathetically to what you have to say and then disappear." In my case therefore, I tried not to appear extractive in my approach and thus exploitative during my field work. I tried to promote a feeling ‘we are together all the time.’ This was to be useful even after the field work (that is, during transcription, data sorting and analysis), in that I kept in touch with my participants through telephone in cases where some issues needed further clarification.

Personal relations trust building and informal networks were used in the selection and confirmation of participants rather than consent forms. Once trust and confidence was built, each participant had his/her
unique way of participating. In this way, I interacted with them as individuals who deserved respect and not as ‘homogenised’ groups or categories. In entering the field, therefore, I used a more personalized approach through reference and informal networks that I had earlier established while in Kenya. I was further guided by the research protocols stipulated in the Kenyan government Research Authorisation Permit and The University of Waikato, New Zealand (where I was PhD student) Social Sciences Research Ethics Guidelines. These protocols required me not to harm the participants, or perpetuate extractive research practices.

Rather than sending letters or making phone calls to book an interview (as the University of Waikato, Social Sciences research ethics guidelines recommends), I tried to establish more face-to-face contacts and rapport with participants. Since I wanted in-depth contacts with my participants, I chose to concentrate on the few whom I believed, from first encounters and reference, held essential information and had a good recollection of local history on land use in the Nairobi peri-urban areas. This afforded me more time to establish rapport and thus building interest in my participants beyond the mere one-off extraction of data through a questionnaire. Where appropriate I reciprocated my participants’ gestures by also participating in their social activities (such as weddings and other community gatherings), where I also got opportunities for informal discussions and participant observations. I attempted to avoid causing much discomfort to my participants or disregard/undermine them in any way. This meant being restricted to their selection of interaction time and place, and of relatively few participants.

I assured my participants that their confidentiality would be protected and their names or any other description that could lead to their identification in my thesis would not be included. Many participants had no problem having their names included in my thesis. However, some of the information provided by some of them incriminated others within their locality (especially among community members) or departments (especially with officers in central or local government). Information and views critical of others were also given against community members and their leaders by officers in central or local government, and vice versa. In ensuring consistency I adopted a coding system for all interview responses even those which were deemed mild. All codes as given below identify a group the participants represented or belonged to.

Community members were contacted in their homes while government, NGO and local authority officers, local leaders, planning practitioner/academicians and real estate/land dealers were interviewed in their offices. Multiple visits to the participants helped in maintaining our relationships beyond the initial contact. These I presumed made the informants feel involved and that their contributions in my study had the likelihood of being used for some good purposes, and that their usefulness had not expired once they had given the initial information. This approach enabled me to build long lasting connections even while I was through with my field work.

All the time I tried my best to let the participants understand my position and intent at the initiation of every contact, and I also let them know that they were not under strict obligation to continue participating in my interviews.

**PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

Participant observation\(^2\) can be defined as a method that involves “…living and working within a community, in an effort to understand people’s everyday lived experiences” (Dowler 2001, 153). It therefore requires some form of immersion into the social or life world of participants. This immersion, as already mentioned, allowed me to hear, see and experience some realities in the same manner that participants do. For example, I was able to see and note frustrations that officers experience in their day to day activities while on duty and also conflicts and tensions that residents undergo in their pursuit of daily life.

The level of participation may not be clearly defined since even during interviews I was still making some observations. However, multiple visits allowed me to establish familiarity with participants and their social settings. The level of participation notwithstanding, during formal and informal encounters, I tried to systematically observe and record my observations. My participation was guided by the variations, whereby researchers may be full participant observers, partial observers, and complete onlookers as outsiders.

Several issues might arise from participant observation: First, it is unethical to observe people and record

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\(^2\)Observations serve three purposes in research: Counting; complementing existing evidence and contextualizing. Counting played a minimal role during my field work; therefore the purpose of my observations was to complement other sources of evidence and contextualizing the data.
their conversations without seeking their permission; Secondly, the researcher’s/observer’s presence influences ‘the way of doing things’ of the researched, and; thirdly there is an issue of interference with an otherwise unproblematic setting and unsuspecting citizens during the researcher’s observations. In considering ethical concerns and respect for my participants I took careful precautions by being open to them and letting them know that I was a researcher. However, at times I played the role of a partial observer by being an onlooker with an ‘interest’.

Participant observation allows for subjectivity in observation and as such every observation made is unique in its own way. It was through observation and reflection that I was able to unify the fragmented data gathered from other sources. Furthermore, since participant observation defies any predetermined guidelines on how to conduct research, I depended less on the strict application of rules but on judgement and decision on my part. This method was particularly important to my study for several reasons especially during the period Kenya experienced violence. At times I became a partial observer while visiting some of the research areas though on missions unrelated to my research but ended up observing issues that later became part of my data.

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)**

Focus group discussion involves a small group of people discussing a topic or issues defined by a researcher, who also moderate and structures the discussion. While this technique was initially used primarily as a data-gathering tool by those in marketing research, over the years, it has been employed in applied research in social sciences.

In using this technique I sought to obtain knowledge on urbanisation in the peri-urban areas, based on participants’ experiences and perceptions. The strength of this technique was that it places individuals in a group context. In groups I was able to note various streams of conversation developing in the same way as in commonplace social settings and this allowed participants to explore different points of view, to formulate and reconsider their own ideas and understandings. During FGD session I watched participants agreeing, differing, misunderstanding and trying to persuade each other until they could come to a consensus or to a complete disagreement. This gave me room to access a multiplicity of meanings that different participants attributed to places, relationships, processes and events, as they were being expressed and negotiated, and thereby providing important insights into the practice of knowledge production.

Further, the dialogic characteristic of the FGD enabled me to access multiple and transpersonal understandings that characterize social behaviour. With time I also observed that during discussions participants too were simultaneously gaining insights and understanding of their environment, the Nairobi peri-urban area. Dynamism and energy, which characterised our discussions, triggered a chain of surprise responses and comments, and this afforded me ‘synergistic’ benefits not available in other research techniques. I achieved those benefits by allowing participants to exercise freedom of choice with regard to the direction of the discussion, leaving my role to moderation, facilitation, promotion, and ultimately focusing discussion on topics or issues. Getting participants together for such a discussion was a nightmare but when opportunities arose for FGDs, they were exciting, enjoyable, and productive exercises in terms of the information I obtained.

**REFLECTIONS ON THE FIELD WORK PROCESS**

This section is meant to highlight the challenges, struggles and complexity I encountered during my fieldwork. I realized it is essential to expose personal difficulties I encountered in research as well as debunking the mythology that fieldwork is free from doubt, personal despair and chaos. In adopting a reflexive stance as central to our practice, we build up an enormously valuable collective resource upon which novice and experienced researchers can draw. I reflect on my fieldwork process under various sub-headings below.

**Research Ethics Requirements**

Accessing Government officers was not a problem since I had a Kenyan government research permit. However, before interviews and other encounters during fieldwork, I took time to explain to my participants about the University of Waikato research ethics requirements. It was unusual for the most people whom I contacted to be requested to give a written consent for participation in research. Many thought it was awkward, and they commented in the form of “If I do not want to talk to you I could have said so at the beginning”.

The signing of consent forms was met with resistance by the officers at both local and central government
levels. I tried persuading them about the need to have a written consent but I realized this was creating antagonism, despite the assurance on confidentiality that I gave them. I interpreted this to mean that officers did not want any paper track of their participation in case problems were to arise later from the output of my research and therefore they wanted their participation to remain anonymous with no written contract.

Initial contacts with local leaders (councillor and assistant chief) revealed that most land is held under (neo) customary ownership and as such ownership\(^3\) was not officially registered with the government’s Land Office. This revelation together with the information that there are considerable numbers of semi-literate landholders, alerted me to the idea that signing a consent form could probably have been seen as signing away their parcels of land ‘the same way their great-grandparents’ did when they put their *kirore*\(^4\) (thumb-prints) on documents the contents of which they didn’t know.

In this case I relied on their goodwill and I continuously kept on building rapport with them, and this allowed me to enrol the participation of several officers and community members. Most officers were willing to participate in the research after establishing enough trust that my research was not meant to pass judgment on their performance or intellectual capabilities. A clause/statement indicating that the participant can withdraw from interview/participation any time they wish was also not well received by many. It was thought of as an insult to some especially those whose participation was gained through an informal introduction/reference by a friend or another officer.

In accessing participants from community members, personal reference played a key role. In two of the five villages from which I chose participants, an introduction by the assistant chief provided a good opportunity for accessing community members. However, after first encounters, I tried to cast off ‘the shadow’ of the assistant chief as I did not want the villagers to mistake my research to be part of government projects. This worked in some instances but the image of the first introduction did not fade way as most villagers continued to regard me as ‘the young man who was brought by the headman’\(^5\). The effect of this on the information given cannot be discounted but attempts were made to cross check the information from other forums such as focus group discussions.

Despite the goodwill and trust I was afforded by community members, I treated them with a lot of respect while knowing they had other more pressing needs of life that they needed to fulfil. This solidified our rapport, which I have maintained even now the field work is over.

**Post Election/Polls Violence in Kenya**

I embarked on my field work at the beginning of November 2007. The purpose of beginning my research at this time was to allow me to obtain a research permit\(^6\), gather government documents, make contacts and have preliminary interviews with central and local government officers before the Christmas holiday break. Timing was important too, because of the impending civic, parliamentary and presidential elections. I needed these documents to get information on the area so that I could start focusing my research issues and to select a case study. However even at this time of document gathering and preliminary introductions with officers, I was able to meet community members and leaders (though informally) for discussions on my research and to obtain the support I needed from them.

After the Christmas holiday there were the national elections of 27th December 2007. The campaign period was violent and ethnicity formed the basis of election propaganda. After the elections there was a dispute about the winner of the presidential election. This I attributed to the ethnically charged campaigns that incited ethnic groups against each other. Violence broke out in many parts of the country and most targeted were the ethnic groups who were thought as having voted for the candidate who was declared a winner in the

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3This meant that the community member had no legal document to prove ownership of the land. Also, as a result of this awareness I have tried throughout my research not to refer to the community members as ‘landowners’ and instead I refer to them as ‘landholder.’ I did not wish to be seen as determining who owns what and who doesn’t.

4People who cannot read and write use their thumb-print in place of signature. In these areas stories are still fresh on how the colonial pioneering groups tricked community leaders to put thumb-prints on documents which came to be interpreted later as their willingness to cede away their land to the Crown.

5This local name used to refer to an assistant chief, and has a root in colonial description of a village leader. Post independent Kenyan government scrapped that post though there are still elders who took over that role. The assistant chief referred to here has responsibility of a wider area constituted of so many villages.

6Today I doubt if I could have been given the research permit to study on issues touching on land especially now that the government is still resettling people and trying to build peace among different communities.
presidential election. Due to its multi-ethnic composition, Nairobi City was affected by the violence, mainly in low-income neighbourhoods but it also affected many activities in the City and its surroundings. My study area was located some 15 kilometres from the City centre and the effects of the violence were immediately felt. A majority of the people from the case study area had bought land in the Rift Valley Province\(^7\) and had some relatives living there. The migrants living in Rift Valley were evicted en-masse from their villages, their properties destroyed and a good number lost their lives.

Before the outbreak of the violence I had scheduled interviews for mid-January and February 2008, with officers in both central and local governments. I had also made contacts with community members and leaders concerning my intention to conduct interviews in their areas. When violence broke I had to cancel all interviews scheduled for January and February 2008 indefinitely. It was not possible to continue with the field work since insecurity\(^8\) especially in rural-urban fringe was on the rise; movements were limited due to shortages of fuel and fear of attacks by criminals was widespread. Therefore I concentrated on reviewing the documents I had gathered before the Christmas break.

When violence subsided at the beginning of February 2008, life slowly returned to normal. However, many parts of the country were not accessible without a police escort and this affected many government officers in my study area, who were yet to return to their work stations from homes (it is a Kenya tradition for people to travel to their rural homes where they were born during major holidays such as Christmas). Even those who had returned were yet to report for work especially if they were from an ‘enemy’ ethnic groups, other than the majority ethnic group living in the case study area. Where officers had returned to their work stations, ethnically driven feelings and behaviours were evident especially while I was conducting a Focus Group Discussion with a divisional planning team. Officers from the majority local ethnic group were insistent on using their local vernacular language during the FGD. This I could sense was making officers from other ethnic groups uncomfortable but unable to complain given the situation the country had gone through. This disturbed the flow of discussions as ethnic contests of superiority were sometimes evident in the articulation of some national issues.

**Use of Technology**

In my initial interviews I tried to record all the conversations with permission from the people being interviewed. Before and after the violence I noticed that central and local government officers were uncomfortable about being recorded. I also sensed lack of interest in my research. In some instances interviews become like question-answer sessions against my desired free flowing discussions. I decided not to use the recorder when I realized it was affecting the responses I was getting from participants.

In the recent past, information obtained through undercover recording had been used to implicate some government officers in unethical work practices. On the side of the community members, most settings could not allow recording of the interviews. For example, many interviews were done while I was being shown around compounds and the surroundings. I also never wanted to make it too formal to prevent participants from opening up on some of the issues; I wanted them to feel that ‘I was one of them’.

**Positionality**

Other than being a University of Waikato (UoW) student, I have been an assistant lecturer at Kenyatta University (KU) since 2003. The KU attachment kept on popping up during my field work due to my previous interaction I have had with officers from both central and local government, and with some community members. During my field work I found it hard for these informants to see me as a student doing research for a higher degree at UoW and not as a KU staff doing some consultancy for Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) or for the local government. This image could not be overcome however much I tried. For most of them I was a KU staff, and they introduced and regarded me as such.

I found myself negotiating these positions and in some instances silencing part of it depending on circumstances. For instance, to the central and local government officers I became more of KU than UoW.

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\(^7\)This was one of the provinces where many people were killed and displaced from their farms on the grounds that they were considered outsiders who had voted for the ‘wrong’ presidential candidate.

\(^8\)This is also as consequence of urbanisation of the rural-urban fringe without corresponding infrastructure and therefore it worsened during the post poll violence.
This allowed me to enact the previous relations my KU department had with central and local government departments especially on urban planning. In doing so I was able to obtain documents (especially to make photocopies outside offices), which I think could not have been possible without such KU affiliation. KU affiliation provided an element of trust and probably some future imagined reciprocal gestures from the institution. To the community members I became more of UoW than of KU, this was meant to even the power balance and not to appear to community members as though I am part of the government bureaucracy known to go to villages only when enforcing ‘unfavourable’ regulations (e.g. Public Health Officers). However in all instances (both at officials’ and community members’ levels) I tried to make my position clear during and before ending the interview.

Research Versus Development

Many people, especially the community members, could not differentiate the purpose of my research from NGOs or government development efforts. I imagined they were thinking that there would be immediate ‘development’ benefits by participating in my research. This was manifested from the frustration clearly portrayed by some neighbours of the initial participants to whom I was introduced by the assistant chief. They seemed to envy those who were chosen for interviews, probably due to the perception that they were to be the initial beneficiaries of ‘development.’ I tried to explain, to the people I came across that the purpose of my research was for academic purposes. In this case, I discovered that silencing my KU affiliation and maintaining that I was a student doing a higher degree at UoW would serve the purpose of removing the ‘development’ tag. However, I let them know that my findings may form a basis for any organisation interested in addressed some of the problems they were encountering at that time.

Proposed Nairobi Metropolitan Development Authority (NMDA)

Just before the beginning of my field work, government proposed the establishment of NMDA. During my field work (after violence subsided and a coalition government formed) a full Ministry was established to deal with Nairobi Metropolitan Development. Most people including central and local government officers therefore thought that there was a link in my research to the proposed NMDA which I kept hiding from them. I tried to explain that my research is unrelated to the government proposal but I did let them know that I will present a copy of my thesis to the NMDA once my research is complete. In some instances the government proposal worked for the good of my field work as it was a current topic under discussion and more so because the theme and area (the rural-urban fringe) of my research had no corresponding local name to describe it.

Interview Fatigue

Nairobi hosts many of the regional, national and international organisations, and also has a significant number of universities and research organisations more than any other part of Kenya. Due to its proximity to the City, and with the combined rural and urban aspects, the Nairobi rural-urban fringe (I was made to understand during my field work) has been a target for many researchers piloting their research instruments. Most people were ‘tired of this questioning’ and have got used to researchers whose missions and organisations they don’t understand. Multiple visits assured most participants that I had a keen interest in them and their area. One of the officers at local government once asked “are you still interested in us? I thought you got all that you needed and which we gave you.” This was in reference to the multiple visits I made to their offices for interviews with Town Clerk, against one-off survey interviews they had been subjected to by previous researchers.

Questionnaire

My research design did not have a survey as one of its methodological components and, therefore, I didn’t have a ‘proper’ questionnaire. I realized that most people who have had encounters with researchers before are used to question-answer interactions and have had no previous experience with research based on in-depth multiple visit interviews/interactions. At first people especially the central and local government officers were uncertain of how the interview would proceed since they are used to researchers distributing questionnaires which they later pick after the officers have filled them in. However, I realized that most informants appreciated that they were also contributing to the direction of interviews by introducing new dimensions which I followed keenly.

This ‘questionnaire syndrome’ was also evident with academics and other researchers whom I interviewed.
They kept on asking me “to bring the questionnaire and we will fill it in for you.” I explained to all that my research was based on qualitative design and sought to get into in-depth understandings of issues on urbanisation in the Nairobi rural-urban fringe. All the same, being a budding qualitative researcher, I almost started doubting my approach and even thought of developing questionnaires to conduct a survey. However, given the situation resulting from post election violence and land issues being one of the underlying causes of the violence, it was impossible for any meaningful survey using questionnaires and I abandoned the thought.

CONCLUSION

When one thinks of urbanisation and specifically in the context of the peri-urban area, a question arises on the type of knowledge to be used in explanations. There is tendency to rely overly on quantitative data found in census figures and land use statistics. However, using qualitative methodologies in the urban studies/planning presents many possibilities for in-depth understandings. This is due to complex layers of difference that must be appreciated and sensitively accommodated in reviewing change in rural-urban fringes such as Nairobi and planning/policy issues associated with it. Despite the widely acknowledged potential inherent in qualitative methodology, there is still hesitation in adopting and accepting it as a mode of urban planning knowledge production.

This use of qualitative research methodology allows for an adoption of social, interactive and political process to gathering information from participants. Such an approach allows for bridging of the divide between the ‘objective’ researcher and the ‘subjects’ of research. It provides an avenue to understand with reference to interpretive ‘frames’ which are embedded in local cultures and histories of a place. In my study I was able to access an alternative form of knowledge that was unlikely to be captured if I used surveys or other quantitative-based methods.

The ‘alternative way of knowing’ thus enables an understanding of ‘on the ground dynamics which are driving urbanisations and its effects in the Nairobi rural-urban fringe. Such understanding enabled me to tap the taken-for-granted aspects of the community which in most cases are not included in planning programmes which rely on ‘expert’ knowledge. These taken-for-granted aspects have powerful roles in organising thoughts, perception and actions of the community. Furthermore, rather than retreating into professional rigidity in the face of situations of complexity among communities, urban researchers/planners should adopt approaches that allow processes of social learning to take place. This learning can be achieved through social interaction with different groups so that their values and visions are incorporated into the planning in situations as in the Nairobi rural-urban fringe. Incorporating such aspects in planning has a potential for emancipating community members by formulating programmes which are sensitive to their ‘lifeworlds’ thus removing mistrust and suspicion that abound between them and the government (central and local).

There is a need for planning (theory and practice) to evolve toward an understanding and incorporation of distinct ethnographies of everyday life among different socio-cultural groups so as to reveal different sets of needs and aspirations. The adoption of a qualitative methodology thus provided an alternative way of knowing how the urbanization process is taking in the context of postcolonial cities such as Nairobi City. This was possible due to the capacity of qualitative approaches to penetrate into the subaltern world in order to access aspects which are subjugated by the dominant urban planning narratives. These narratives are framed from Western Europe and North America experiences but have been used uncritically to analyse urban land issues in situations such as the Nairobi rural-urban fringe.

The implication of the foregoing discussion is that urban planning endeavours should attempt to incorporate people’s daily negotiations and practices that recognise urbanisation as both material and symbolic resource. In so doing, chances of acceptance and success of such endeavours will be higher than the one that is based on the use of quantitative surveys and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to classify urban growth and development. This study does not deny the importance of such quantitative tools, but in situations such as the Nairobi rural-urban fringe, they should be part of the process that builds on in-depth studies of diverse social norms and practices of the people. In addition, this may allow for incorporation of notions of political judgement, moral vision and emotional sensitivity and therefore this will provide a way to act reasonably rather than attempt the impossible tasks of meeting the normative planning criteria. In doing so, such approaches should draw on common sense, instinct and reasonable sentiment or emotions of the communities in question.
REFERENCES


