



AHEEN Research Statement

Refugee learners and research

When Alima, a refugee learner studying with an AHEEN member university, and her fellow students were recently invited to reflect on the contribution refugees make to urban sustainable development in Nairobi as part of the ESDA (Education for Sustainable Development in Africa, a United Nations University initiative) research project, their brainstorming led them to identify specific areas based on their own lived experience as refugees. They then asked themselves whether these specific areas would hold for all refugees in Nairobi irrespective of their ethnic origins – would Somali refugees make the same contributions as those from Burundi, Rwanda or Ethiopia? Would the neighborhoods they gather in and the social relations with other members of their ethnic community make a difference? And would host-country neighbors react similarly if the contribution was made by a Somali refugee or one from South Sudan? And speaking of sustainable urban development, was that a concept refugees would be familiar with and if not, how could they as researchers take it apart and communicate some of its different dimensions to urban refugees in the languages they would understand?

Alima and her peers bring unmatched skills to research projects: expert local knowledge that can help us define research problems and identify knowledge gaps; they are able to identify with the very communities whose problems we try to understand and where the research results are to support the change the community wants and needs.

Alima* and her colleagues are non-professional researchers, higher education students setting out to use their critical thinking skills and basic research training to identify problems, dig into the epistemological heritage of their communities, and engaged in joint learning with and for their communities. They know that too many interventions, whether evidence-based or not, do not meet the needs of their communities because they were designed without empowering community members to co-develop the project and thus failed in system development and were almost always short-lived.

Freire (1970) provides an outline of the social construction of knowledge and the critical value of emancipatory learning. He pushed for including communities in the research process, not merely as enumerators and research assistants, but in ways that would enable them to change policy and secure funding. Because ultimately it is local communities that need to study and understand their own social condition to then act and try to implement change.



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AHEEN’s research focus

Consistent with AHEEN’s outcomes of post-secondary education leading to employment in the very contexts in which refugees and IDPs live, our research efforts focus on these very communities.

We subscribe to Macaulay’s (2017:256) principles of participatory research as “equitable co-ownership and co-decision making with full partnership engagement with academic researchers, locating power and ownership at every stage of the research process”. We engage with academic researchers from AHEEN’s membership in Africa and ensure local/regional/continental ownership of the process. We understand knowledge as socially created, and influenced by social, historical and cultural contexts. In short, we promote multiple ways of knowing and participating researchers contribute epistemologies appropriate to the context and the knowledge gaps they try to fill. This allows us to search for knowledges that have traditionally been excluded and ensure that all participating researchers share power and funding in an equitable way.

While we do not have a specific set of themes we pursue, our focus is on participatory knowledge creation that benefits the very communities whose problems the research is trying to address: as our students live in refugee and IDP contexts, the communities are either refugee/IDP camp or urban refugee communities. We promote a scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching. As these are the focus of considerable attention from international actors and their solutions, building capacity and systems that are local and adopt local and decolonized approaches, is essential to our vision of research for social change.

Does participatory action research (PAR) use different methodologies from traditional research?

While PAR tools will often resemble those in traditional research, the methods chosen will be those that best fit the research questions and contexts. In a PAR approach, all participants decide on optimal methods together. Participation as a concept is often invoked in research, but can run the whole gamut of participation as data collector to participation as research designer. AHEEN strives to engage all participants as co-designers; this is consistent with our mission of empowering refugees and IDPs through higher education, and with our considering gender, ethnicity, tribal membership, and cultural heritage as significantly influencing knowledge construction.

Who benefits from PAR and how?

PAR is all about research for social change. This approach supports the development of skills and makes refugees and IDPs more employable; communities benefit as the knowledge created collaboratively helps solve their own problems, and the solutions generated will be more



African Higher Education in Emergencies Network – AHEEN

readily adopted broadly as the community has worked on identifying and creating them. Communities gain control over their own livelihoods, they see their values accepted and their voices not merely heard, but actively included to inform the knowledge that is being collaboratively constructed. PAR can even lead to communities designing their own social change agendas; having been empowered to lead on the process of knowledge production, change is likely going to be sustainable.

Why choose AHEEN as research partner?

- ⇒ We work in remote contexts and on issues affecting fragile communities
- ⇒ We work with community members throughout the research process, from problem definition to returning evidence to the communities so they can implement the change
- ⇒ We work across multiple languages and cultures and have trained capacity in translation and interpretation to ensure quality communication throughout the research process
- ⇒ We take a long-term systemic view of problems in fragile contexts and work with a multitude of stakeholders to ensure that change resulting from the research is sustainable beyond traditional short-term project cycles
- ⇒ We ensure that refugee researchers develop research skills that are appropriate to the contexts in which they live, that they are empowered to apply these skills and that funding shifts to locally-led projects
- ⇒ We have rigorous research ethics guidelines for fragile contexts – you can download them here.

References

- Freire, P. (1970). *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Macaulay, A, (2017). Participatory research: what is the history? Has the purpose changed? *Family Practice*, 34(3): 256-8.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O., Wood, L., & Louw, I. (2015). *A participatory paradigm for an engaged scholarship in higher education*. Leiden: Brill.

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