Remote Research in Times of War: The Case of the Sahel

Aly Badara Samassekou, Fassory Sangare

University of Social Sciences and Management, Bamako, Mali

As the geopolitical context becomes increasingly complex, journalists and researchers face major challenges in conducting investigations in conflict zones. The Sahel, particularly the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), an African region particularly affected by instability and violence, is a perfect example. In order to overcome these difficulties, new remote investigation methods have been developed, enabling us to continue documenting and analyzing crisis situations despite restricted access to the field. This paper will focus on these new investigative techniques with a view to understanding and substantiating the facts.

Keywords: surveys, security, quality

Introduction

The ultimate goal of this study on the difficulties encountered by researchers and journalists in conducting field research in a context of insecurity in the Sahel is to contextualize the geopolitical and security issues that directly influence research methods and results in this part of Africa, which has been repeatedly confronted with insecurity in recent years.

The Sahel, which includes countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has for several years been the scene of multidimensional conflicts involving state governments, various militias, and extremist groups (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, Islamic State), which complicates any attempt to conduct research or report in the field.

Researchers and journalists face considerable challenges due to the precarious security situation. The consolidation of the States themselves are being challenging by terrorism (Saidou, 2023). This complexity is particularly evident in the fragmentation of terrorist actors in the region, accentuated by the emergence of groups such as the Islamic State in the Sahel (González, 2023, p. 1) and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM or GSIM), the latter having adopted pragmatic strategies to maximize its local influence (González, 2023, p. 8). These dynamics exacerbate inter-community tensions and encourage a resurgence of violence, which profoundly hinders field investigations.

Furthermore, international cooperation, while often essential, can also complicate data collection processes, as the interference of external forces, such as French military interventions or the presence of Russian mercenaries, further blurs the already blurred lines of loyalty and sovereignty in the region (Lyammouri, 2022, p. 12). These external actors can also influence the perceptions of local researchers and journalists, positioning them sometimes as allies and sometimes as antagonists depending on the geopolitical context.

Aly Badara Samassekou, Dr., researcher, Faculty of Economics, University of Social Sciences and Management, Bamako, Mali.
Fassory Sangare, Dr., researcher, Faculty of Economics, University of Social Sciences and Management, Bamako, Mali.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aly Badra Samassekou and Fassory Sangare, University of Social Sciences and Management, Bamako, Mali.

In this tumultuous security environment, researchers must navigate between various political and security allegiances while trying to maintain academic and ethical objectivity in their work. At the same time, the lack of resources and the climate of widespread mistrust pose serious obstacles to establishing trusting relationships with local communities, which are crucial for obtaining the first-hand data needed for rigorous and nuanced analyses of conflict situations. This research therefore aims to understand and shed light on these complexities by exploring the different strategies that researchers and journalists can adopt to overcome the challenges outlined above, while ensuring the safety of participants and their sources in the field.

Methodology

In a context marked by insecurity and conflict, the methodology of social science research in the Sahel requires considerable adaptation and careful consideration. Conducting field research in a region where political tensions, humanitarian crises, and armed violence prevail poses unique and complex challenges. These challenges are not only logistical, but also involve ethical, security, linguistic, and cultural considerations that require an interdisciplinary approach.

The choice of methodology thus becomes an act of scientific and pragmatic strategy, aimed at guaranteeing the integrity of the data collected while ensuring the safety of researchers and local participants. In this approach, collaboration with different disciplinary fields allows for the integration of varied perspectives, from anthropology to political science, sociology, and communication. This interdisciplinarity promotes a more holistic understanding of local dynamics, which is essential for adapting to the changing realities on the ground.

The challenges faced by researchers and journalists in this region are numerous, ranging from language barriers that complicate access to accurate information to cultural nuances that influence the perception and reception of researchers by local communities. Fluency and mastery of vernacular languages and local dialects become crucial in reducing misunderstandings and establishing the relationships of trust that are essential for qualitative investigations.

In addition, ethical and security considerations play a prominent role in any methodological planning. The unstable context of the Sahel pushes researchers to continually assess the risks involved and to put in place robust security protocols. This includes anticipating potential conflicts, prior training in crisis management, and establishing trusted partnerships with local actors who can facilitate access to difficult areas, while ensuring that they are not put at risk.

In short, the methodology adopted for conducting field investigations in the Sahel must be flexible, adaptive, and innovative, rooted in a deep respect for local dynamics and the complexity of the context. It must also engage in continuous criticism of its own biases and limitations, while constantly seeking to enrich understanding of the realities on the ground.

Interdisciplinary Approach

In the context of our study on the difficulties faced by researchers and journalists in conducting field research in the Sahel, an interdisciplinary approach is essential to overcoming the various obstacles linked to the context of insecurity. This approach allows for the combination of methods and perspectives from different disciplines in order to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play.

First, the integration of anthropological and historical perspectives is crucial. These disciplines offer an in-depth view of local social structures and cultural dynamics, which are essential for navigating complex and

dangerous environments (Gabriel II, 2022, p. 2). Understanding local history and social practices can help researchers anticipate interactions and adjust their methods accordingly, which is particularly relevant in conflict contexts where social norms may be altered.

Furthermore, political science plays a key role in analyzing power dynamics and governance structures in conflict-affected regions. These analyses help to decode the political influences that shape access to information and local collaboration (Marzo, & Gomez-Perez, 2020, p. 3). For example, understanding local political hierarchies can facilitate the development of strategies to gain the trust of informants.

Adding sociology to this approach is also beneficial for exploring the social impacts of conflict on local populations. Sociology offers tools for analyzing population displacement and the evolution of social networks, which are critical elements for fieldwork in war zones (Bene et al., 2022, p. 4).

Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods allows for a more flexible and contextual approach. Semi-structured interviews and participatory observations are methods often used to adapt to local variations and collect rich data, despite the prevailing uncertainty (Marzo, & Gomez-Perez, 2020, p. 6).

Finally, an interdisciplinary approach requires complementary knowledge among researchers from different backgrounds to foster methodological innovation. Integrating various disciplines not only enriches the analysis but also helps to overcome potential biases that may arise from a single-discipline approach. Thus, adopting an interdisciplinary perspective is not only desirable but necessary for conducting effective and ethical research in sensitive contexts such as the Sahel. This collaborative approach is a response to the complex challenges posed by research fields in conflict situations.

Linguistic and Cultural Challenges

Researchers and journalists operating in the Sahel encounter various linguistic and cultural challenges that significantly impact field investigations. The region is characterized by great linguistic diversity, with dozens of local languages, as demonstrated by the situation in the Far North of Cameroon, where more than 70 dialects complicate communication (Gabriel II, 2022, p. 5). This linguistic variety forces researchers to rely on interpreters, which can cause misunderstandings or inaccurate translations, thereby altering the reliability of the data collected (Gabriel II, 2022, p. 5).

In addition, cultural nuances add another layer of complexity. Researchers must navigate through varied traditions and customs, which often requires a deep understanding of local social dynamics in order to establish trust with informants. Communication with local informants is even more crucial during cultural events, such as dances or ceremonies, where dialogues can be enriched by local perceptions and narratives (Gabriel II, 2022, p. 6). This interaction requires methodological adjustments, as researchers must be flexible and sensitive to cultural diversity in order to obtain accurate data.

In addition, researchers are confronted with different cultural expectations regarding interactions and information exchanges. Often, interviewees may seek material incentives to share their knowledge, raising ethical concerns about the integrity of the information obtained (Gabriel II, 2022, p. 7). It is crucial to navigate these situations carefully, taking into account the potential impact on the authenticity of the narratives collected.

Ultimately, the linguistic and cultural challenges in the Sahel require an interdisciplinary approach in which researchers leverage a variety of methods and practices adapted to local contexts (Degorce et al., 2024). It is fundamental that research teams be prepared to operate in a complex multicultural environment, while respecting cultural and linguistic sensitivities. An integrated understanding of language and culture is essential to enrich

perceptions and the investigative process in such heterogeneous regions.

Ethical and Security Considerations

Ethical and security considerations are paramount when conducting investigations in conflict zones. The increasing complexity of the situation in the Sahel requires a cautious and thoughtful approach for researchers and journalists working in the field. Working in an insecure environment, where the risk of violence is ever-present, requires vigilance and careful planning of travel and interactions. Researchers must constantly assess local dynamics and adapt to rapid changes in the security context (Dioma, Apgar, Keita, & Hicks, 2024, p. 67).

One of the main ethical considerations concerns the protection of local sources and participants. In insecure contexts, the disclosure of sensitive information can have serious repercussions for the individuals involved. It is essential to establish robust confidentiality protocols to ensure the safety of these individuals. Furthermore, collaboration with local actors, while crucial to the success of a field investigation, can also introduce issues of bias and dependency (Hagberg, 2020, p. 13). Strategic alliances must be managed with particular care to maintain objectivity and avoid exploiting existing power dynamics.

Another major challenge is managing cultural and linguistic biases, which can affect the interpretation of data and understanding of local situations (Hagberg, 2020, p. 15). Researchers must be extremely sensitive to cultural contexts, respecting local customs while navigating potential language barriers. Inclusivity in conflict mediation, as discussed in some research, has proven to be an effective method for improving inter-community relations (Dioma et al., 2024, p. 60).

In addition, the difficult working conditions and psychological pressures inherent in a conflict environment require researchers and journalists to maintain a keen awareness of their own mental and physical safety. The use of stress management and well-being strategies is crucial to maintaining resilience in the field. Recognizing personal and professional limits is also a central aspect of ethics in journalism and research in conflict zones (Roussigné, 2021, p. 11). In short, ethical and security considerations require careful and constant reflection, integrating both respect for the individuals encountered and the preservation of the safety of the investigators themselves.

Results

The study of contexts of war and insecurity, particularly in the Sahel region, represents a significant challenge for researchers and journalists. The complexity of conducting field investigations in these areas is exacerbated by growing tensions, armed conflicts, and political instability. In this context, the chapter on results aims to elucidate the main repercussions of these conflicts on field research and to evaluate the dynamics of collaboration established with local actors, who often play a crucial role in collecting reliable and secure information.

The Sahel region, comprising countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, is particularly affected by armed insurgencies, acts of terrorism, and climate shocks, which combine to create an extremely fragile and dangerous environment for any fieldwork. Each field trip involves multiple risks, including not only direct threats to the physical safety of researchers but also substantial logistical and ethical challenges. In this complex scenario, the impact of conflicts on research is not limited to restricted travel or data collection; it also affects the very nature of the results obtained, calling into question their validity and reliability.

Furthermore, collaboration with local actors, whether they are guides, informants, or members of civil society, is often essential to overcome these challenges. Such collaborations not only offer enriched perspectives

and privileged access to certain data, but also raise questions of objectivity and impartiality, as the interests of local actors can influence results or even limit certain analyses. This chapter aims to examine these collaborations in detail, assessing their concrete contributions to research while identifying the limitations they inevitably impose.

Thus, by thoroughly analyzing the impact of conflicts on field research and scrutinizing the nature of collaborations with local actors, this chapter will establish a solid foundation of understanding, which is essential for overcoming certain obstacles encountered in the Sahel research context. This approach aims not only to strengthen the methodological robustness of the study but also to lay the foundations for more innovative and adaptive future research in similar environments.

Impact of Conflicts on Field Research

Armed conflicts in the Sahel region pose significant challenges for conducting field research. Researchers and journalists must navigate a context of insecurity that complicates access to study areas and integration into local communities. The deteriorating security situation often leads to population displacement, which has a direct impact on the ability to collect consistent and reliable data (Bene et al., 2022, pp. 1-3).

Conflicts disrupt essential infrastructure, including transportation and communication systems. This hinders the mobility of researchers and compromises the logistics necessary to undertake in-depth investigations. For example, the destruction of roads and bridges makes it difficult to access certain remote areas where vulnerable populations are often located, exacerbating logistical challenges for field researchers. In addition, growing insecurity necessitates the use of costly and restrictive security measures, which increases research costs (Yamba, 2023, pp. 1-2).

Political instability and armed conflict create a climate of mistrust among local populations, which can affect their willingness to participate in studies. This mistrust is often exacerbated by negative perceptions of foreign researchers, who are seen as intruders or as having political agendas (Degorce et al., 2024, p. 13). Researchers must therefore invest more time and effort in building trusting relationships with local communities, a process that often requires the involvement of mediators or local actors.

In addition, the results of field surveys may be biased by the volatility of the situation, as participants' perceptions may be influenced by recent or ongoing events, such as armed attacks or forced displacement (Bene et al., 2022, pp. 7-9). Researchers must therefore adapt their methodologies to incorporate these contextual variables, which may require special training or the adaptation of data collection tools to ensure their relevance and validity.

Finally, limited access to research areas can lead to over-reliance on secondary sources or third-party data, such as that provided by NGOs, which may themselves suffer from similar limitations in data collection. This raises questions about the completeness and reliability of the data obtained (Yamba, 2023, pp. 20-22). Thus, while conflicts in the Sahel pose considerable challenges for field research, they also force researchers to innovate and adapt their methodological approaches to overcome these obstacles.

Collaboration with Local Actors

In the context of field research in unstable regions of the Sahel, collaboration with local actors is of paramount importance in overcoming the many challenges posed. This cooperation is not limited to simple interaction but extends to building strong partnerships based on mutual trust and respect for local knowledge.

Local actors play a central role in facilitating research projects by acting as intermediaries between

researchers and communities. Their in-depth knowledge of social and cultural dynamics helps to guide and adapt research methods to better respond to local realities. For example, systemic action research initiatives in Mali have demonstrated how the integration of traditional leaders into action research groups (ARGs) has strengthened the legitimacy and effectiveness of interventions (Dioma et al., 2024, p. 31). These collaborations strengthen the trust of local communities, a crucial factor for collecting reliable data in conflict-affected environments.

In addition, the active participation of local community members in the research process contributes to a two-way exchange of knowledge, thereby promoting collective ownership of the research results. In the Djenné and Mopti region, the involvement of GRAs has been essential in facilitating the collection and participatory analysis of life stories, which has led to a better understanding of local conflict dynamics and mobilized communities around common solutions (Dioma et al., 2024, p. 63).

However, establishing these partnerships requires specific skills, particularly in intercultural communication and relationship management, as well as sensitivity to local issues such as inter-community rivalries and mistrust of authorities, which has been a recurring challenge observed in various projects across the Sahel (Sexauer, 2023, p. 5). The use of an inclusive and participatory methodology, which incorporates the narratives of local actors, has proven effective in mitigating tensions and promoting constructive dialogue (Dioma et al., 2024, p. 21).

In short, collaboration with local actors is essential for conducting effective and ethical field research in conflict contexts. It requires an adapted and sensitive approach that recognizes the value of local knowledge and promotes active community participation. Lessons learned from experiences in the Sahel show that such collaborations not only enrich research but also strengthen community resilience and promote long-term peace and social cohesion.

Discussion

Discussing the results of any research requires careful consideration of the methods used and their effectiveness in the particular context under study. In the case of field surveys conducted in the Sahel countries, a region marked by political instability and endemic conflict, this consideration takes on even greater importance. Here, we undertake to examine the unique complexities associated with data collection in an area where security risks and social dynamics are evident and changing.

Data collection methods used in conflict settings, such as the Sahel, pose particular challenges that go beyond the common issues encountered in more stable environments. Researchers and journalists operating in this region must navigate a complex landscape where issues of access to information are complicated by the ever-present danger and constant insecurity. Obtaining reliable data often requires the establishment of collaborative networks with local actors, whose intimate knowledge of the terrain and sociopolitical dynamics is indispensable.

However, this collaboration is not without its pitfalls. It raises questions about the interpretation of data and the potential bias induced by dependence on local sources, which may themselves be influenced by the conflictual context. It is imperative to consider how these relationships shape not only data collection, but also data analysis and interpretation.

Furthermore, instability in the Sahel affects the continuity and consistency of investigative efforts. Frequent displacement, changes in political affiliations, and territorial fragmentation undermine the long-term reliability of data. At this level, we discuss the implications that these challenges impose not only on the methodological processes adopted, but also on the evolution of future research practices. It is essential to continually reevaluate methodological strategies in order to adapt to rapid changes in the context and to ensure the relevance and

accuracy of the results obtained in such a fluctuating environment.

Analysis of Data Collection Methods

Analyzing data collection methods in insecure contexts, such as the Sahel, is crucial to understanding the challenges faced by researchers and journalists. Often, these professionals must navigate complex and dangerous socio-political environments, which requires a flexible and adaptive methodological approach. The use of local actors, such as fixers, is essential, as they provide detailed cultural and logistical knowledge. In conflict regions, fixers provide access to information and key individuals that would otherwise be inaccessible (Gauthier, & Bizimana, 2022, p. 9).

However, the involvement of fixers is not without risk or criticism. Researchers point out that fixers are often exposed to threats of violence because of their role as mediators between foreign journalists and local actors (Gauthier, & Bizimana, 2022, p. 6). They are methodological pivots, but they require adequate protection and recognition to mitigate potential impacts on their safety.

Another method often adopted in such field research is the interdisciplinary approach. Drawing on diverse perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and political science, researchers can approach sensitive topics with greater nuance and depth (Marzo, & Gomez-Perez, 2020, p. 3). This methodological plurality is particularly useful for managing cultural differences and power dynamics that may exist between researchers and local communities.

To optimize the effectiveness of data collection in such contexts, it is also essential to practice continuous reflexivity. This involves adapting research methods in response to changing dynamics in the field, taking into account the ethical and logistical considerations specific to each region studied (Marzo, & Gomez-Perez, 2020, p. 5). For example, when conducting research in red zones such as Burkina Faso and Mali, teamwork allows responsibilities to be shared and uncertainties to be better managed (Hagberg, 2020, p. 72).

Thus, data collection in the Sahel context requires methodological strategies that integrate both the security of information and the people involved and constant adaptability in the face of volatile political contexts. These methodological aspects are crucial to ensuring not only the quality of research but also its sustainability in such complex environments.

Implications for Future Research

The study of the implications for future research in the Sahel context must consider several factors that reveal the complexity of this region. First, the unpredictable and dangerous nature of research fields in conflict zones, such as the Sahel, requires the adaptation of data collection methodologies. Researchers often have to resort to innovative methods, such as the use of advanced technologies for remote data collection, in order to overcome security challenges. Cooperation between international and local researchers appears crucial for accessing reliable data, taking into account cultural sensitivities and security (Salzinger, & Desmidt, 2023, p. 9).

Furthermore, the involvement of local communities in the research process is essential to understanding internal dynamics and obtaining relevant results. This inclusion not only promotes the relevance of the data but also reinforces the legitimacy of the conclusions among local actors, which is crucial in an environment where external interventions are often viewed with suspicion (Ali, undated, p. 4).

With regard to the implications for future research, it is imperative to develop holistic approaches that encompass not only security aspects, but also socio-economic and cultural variables. Future studies should draw on interdisciplinary analyses to better understand the root causes of tensions in the region, such as poor

governance, economic marginalization, and climate change (González, 2023, p. 6). Furthermore, growing international attention to issues of resilience and climate security underscores the importance of integrating these elements into research agendas (Ali, undated, p. 7).

Finally, the evolution of terrorist dynamics, coupled with the interconnections between local and global actors, requires a reconsideration of traditional theoretical frameworks. The application of more adaptive and contextual models could be beneficial in offering new and more nuanced perspectives (González, 2023, p. 12). These approaches would not only improve responsiveness to emerging issues, but would also facilitate better communication between researchers and policymakers, thereby strengthening the practical application of the results obtained.

Conclusion

Overall, this work aims to synthesize the main lessons learned from studying the challenges encountered by researchers during field surveys in Sahel countries at war. By addressing the multiple obstacles, they had to overcome, such as inter-community conflicts and geopolitical complexity, this research highlights the importance of tailored research strategies and collaborations with local actors to improve understanding and the situation on the ground.

Analyses of the reality on the ground have highlighted the fragility of local peace agreements (the obvious case being the Dogon country in Mali, where agreements are volatile) in the face of increased tensions and ongoing violence, refuting the idea that current mediation initiatives alone can bring about a lasting solution (Lyammouri, 2022, p. 7). The role of local actors, often caught between the various forces at play and impacted by the failures of remaining colonial governance policies, is crucial but insufficient without sustained commitment from central authorities (Ali, p. 14).

This reflection also highlights the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the complexity of Sahelian dynamics. The socio-economic context, often colored by inadequate agropastoral policies and traditional conflict management mechanisms that are losing momentum, exacerbates tensions (Lyammouri, 2022, p. 13). Yes, the reality of insecurity in this region is partly the result of the failure of the judicial system and law enforcement agencies, which struggle to respond to modern security challenges while recognizing the ethnic and community dimensions of conflicts (Ali, p. 6).

Finally, this study invites broader reflection on the future of field research in conflict settings. It calls for a thorough review of research methods, which must be responsive and sensitive to local dynamics while ensuring adequate protection for researchers. In a region where the informal economy and customary structures coexist with modern forms of radicalization, adaptability and resilience appear to be essential traits for researchers wishing to produce meaningful and impactful analysis (Lyammouri, 2022, p. 9; Roussigné, 2021, p. 2). These reflections offer interesting perspectives for considering solutions that transcend simple security approaches, thereby encouraging a lasting and inclusive dialogue between all the actors involved.

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