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Implementing independent academic research projects in post-conflict environments can pose methodological challenges to scholars and students alike. Forging associations with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is often necessary to overcome these hurdles. Such relationships may be beneficial to a researcher for many reasons, including obtainment of visas and permits, access to remote regions, logistical support, and evacuation in emergencies. However, these connections have theoretical and ethical complications that require further attention. This paper seeks to fill the gap on these critical issues by framing the question in two ways.

First, I examine the impact on research of being associated with an INGO. Even if an organization declares that its work is neutral, it may not be perceived as such on the ground, particularly in politically charged post-conflict areas. If people assume a researcher is employed by the organization, he or she needs to consider how the politics of the organization and its headquarters country may impact the findings. Moreover, this association may transform into a security concern if the INGO is targeted with violence. Another major consideration is whether participants believe their cooperation with an academic study will increase the benefits they receive from the INGO; in turn, this may influence answers to surveys and interview questions. A final set of issues for research that is associated with an INGO relates to organizational expectations; a researcher must understand what the INGO expects in return for its support and consider whether this will bias the project.

Second, I explore the impact on the INGO of being associated with academic research. If research is negatively perceived by community members, there may be ethical ramifications if the work of the organization is compromised. The compensation of research subjects or enumerators may further complicate this issue, as could efforts by the researcher to contribute back to the community in exchange for its participation. This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in post-conflict southern Sudan. I draw upon individual interviews and surveys of Sudanese in Central Equatoria State. I complement this data with personal experiences from that trip in 2007 and from an exploratory 2005 stay in Eastern Equatoria. These two states suffered violence related to the civil war between north and south as well as to its proximity to northern Uganda. The goal is to explore and reflect upon the implications of academic researchers associating with INGOs in post-conflict environments.