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Pacific NGOs weighing up our research capacities

Manasa Duvaga^a, Malia Suliana Falemaka^b, Gerard Prinsen ^{c,d}, Cema Rokodredre^a, and Ioanna Taraia^e

^aSocial Empowerment Education Program (SEEP), Suva, Fiji; ^bDirector Caritas Tonga, Nuku'alofa, Tonga; ^cMassey University New Zealand; ^dCaritas Aotearoa New Zealand, Thorndon, Aotearoa New Zealand; ^eDirector Teitoingaina Catholic Women's Association, Tarawa, Kiribati

ABSTRACT

This article details basic findings from a stocktake by five Pacific NGOs into their research capacities, as part of their monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL). Based on a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews among ourselves, we explore how many of our staff are engaged in research activities and we find this number does not seem to increase as we grow as NGOs. We also illustrate the notable extent to which we depend on external consultants for our research, before we provide insights into the spheres, complexity, and character of research we undertake ourselves. Finally, we conclude that a critical reflection on research in NGOs can assist in charting more locally driven strategies.

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NGOs; Pacific Island countries; research capacities and experiences

Introduction

As authors, we are staff members of faith-based NGOs in Pacific Island states. Our organisations are members of various collaborative global or regional networks, often through co-funding arrangements with donor agencies in the Global North. One of these networks secured funding of about USD 6.1 million for the 2021–2026 period, with a 75 per cent contribution from the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and comprises ten NGOs throughout the region, focusing on rural development activities that range from sanitation to agricultural production.¹ Within this wider network, five NGOs decided to explore the possibilities to increase our organisations' capacities to do research, as part of our overall capacities for MERL: monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (INTRAC 2019). In preparation for this, we took stock of our current research capacities and research practices. With this practice note, we share some of the findings.

NGOs' research capacity as part of MERL

Generally speaking, NGOs focus their attention on providing a broad range of services to local communities in spheres as diverse as health, education, credit and saving schemes, and agriculture and, moreover, NGOs can also undertake advocacy for disempowered groups (Lewis, Kanji, and Themudo 2021). As NGOs grow with increased co-funding from donor agencies, they can expand their activities and the number of staff. They then also need to develop the capacities to monitor progress in their activities and evaluate the extent to which they are achieving objectives. This is important, not only to manage their activities, but also to demonstrate to donor agencies that the NGO is

CONTACT Gerard Prinsen  G.Prinsen@massey.ac.nz  Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand

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“delivering ... contracted outcomes” (Weir and Fouche 2016, 132). In fact, reporting about results to donors and other stakeholders is the principal reason for NGOs to engage in MERL (Brass et al. 2018). To report credibly, staff need to be able to undertake research, collect and analyse data, and learn from this to improve.

Method

One of the ten NGOs in our network coordinated the distribution of a questionnaire with 15 structured items among all members to ascertain each member’s existing research capacities and experiences, and to explore the interests and possibilities for joint action. Five members decided to provide and share their data as a starting point. As a second step, and in an opportunistic approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews among us in the course of 2023. In 2024 we analysed our findings for common patterns and related these to a review of relevant literature that we had access to. Some results were presented by us at the two-yearly Aotearoa New Zealand International Development Studies Network conference in December 2024 (DevNet 2024).

Findings on research capacities of our NGOs

The five Pacific NGOs in our stocktake have teams of paid staff members that vary from five to 24 persons (Table 1). While the questionnaire found that the number of staff that have tasks in research or MERL explicitly detailed in their job descriptions is mostly only one person, or no one, the semi-structured interviews revealed that despite the rather wide range of staff numbers, the number of staff members in each of the five NGOs that effectively undertake work associated with MERL is a common band of two to four persons. Although this is, of course, proportionally quite high in the two smaller NGOs with no more than five staff members, it is interesting to see that in the two NGOs with comparatively more staff – i.e. 20 and 24 staff – the number of staff members practically working on MERL tasks remains within the band of two to four persons, or 10–22% of total staff. This suggests, first, that the vast majority of NGOs’ staff has no research or MERL responsibilities and/or is dedicated solely to the NGO’s primary spheres of providing services and/or advocacy. This leaves the research capacity in terms of staff numbers and hours limited. Second, the combined finding that research or MERL is part of very few job descriptions and that the number of people having such responsibilities does not seem to increase, much as the total number of staff increases, may suggest that executive management of our NGOs places a cap on the importance of research and MERL.

The limited capacity in staff numbers to design and carry out research associated with the data we collect in our overall MERL activities is further underscored by the fact that four of the five NGOs have hired external consultants to carry out more complex MERL tasks such as designing overall results frameworks, surveys, or indicators for outcomes (Table 2). Moreover, in all cases where these external consultants were hired, these consultants were (pre-) selected by a third party, usually a principal donor agency. Aside from underscoring our limited number of staff to undertake research and MERL, the latter finding may also point to the significant influence donor agencies have on our research. At its simplest, research is posing a question, collecting data, analysing findings, and reporting answers. In our case, our research answers questions asked by donors on activities and impact, rather than questions posed by local stakeholders or ourselves.

When looking at the literature, it seems our limited capacity to undertake research and MERL activities is fairly typical. After reviewing more than fifteen hundred publications, Franzen, Chandler,

Table 1. Research as part of MERL capacity in staffing in five Pacific NGOs.

Item	NGO 1	NGO 2	NGO 3	NGO 4	NGO 5
a. Total staff	9	5	5	20	24
Staff with MERL tasks	2 (22%)	3 (60%)	4 (80%)	2 (10%)	4 (17%)
b. Staff who have MERL tasks in their job description (JD)	1	0	0	1	3

Table 2. Role of external consults in research and MERL in five NGOs in the Pacific (2021–2023).

Question	NGO 1	NGO 2	NGO 3	NGO 4	NGO 5
a. Have NGOs hired consultants to do MERL tasks?	Yes (twice since 2021)	Yes (once since 2021)	Yes (once since 2021)	No	Yes (once since 2021)
b. Specific MERL tasks done by consultants	Design results framework	Lead community consultation	Design baseline and surveys	N/A	Program design and indicators
c. Who selected the external consultant?	Donor	Donor	Another NGO in consortium	N/A	Donor gave shortlist; NGO chose

and Lang (2017) conclude that, across the board, “research capacity in Low- and Middle-Income Countries remains insufficient and ... fragmented” (1). Gooding, Newell, and Emmel (2018) reviewed nine research reports and concluded similarly: “Within reports on NGO involvement in research, limited capacity to conduct research is frequently noted” (2). Another review by Lokot and Wake (2021) into the research capacity of NGOs in the Global South confirmed these limitations, highlighting “there are often ‘pockets of capacity’, but these are over-utilised, resulting in people being stressed and not having time to contribute” (472).

Next, our questionnaire and semi-structured interviews explored the extent and character of training in research and MERL that was taking place in our NGOs in the preceding three years. We found training provided to our staff covered a very broad range of topics, from theory-of-change to cultural engagement processes, to simple data entry protocols. And while training delivery also included both online and in-person modalities, a common feature was that all training was rather limited in time, usually one or two days over the preceding three years (Table 3). We also noted that most of the content of training was determined by suppliers and not often based on a careful training needs assessment. In addition, none of the training (or other professional development methods such as mentoring) looked to enhance staff’s writing skills, either as the “scientific writing” that Voller et al. (2022, 524) referred to, or as the “descriptive studies” that Zachariah et al. (2010, 2) talked about.

Table 4 details the results of the stocktake regarding staff’s skills in specific research methods in our five NGOs. We checked staff members’ experiences in three principal research methods in social sciences: surveys, interviews, and observations (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2020). For each of these three methods, we differentiated staff’s skills in three spheres of, arguably, increasing complexity. This starts with data collection by conducting surveys and interviews or making observations; then moves to designing surveys, interview, or observation schemes that connect concepts to operational methods; and ends with the complex task of analysing the collected data. In checking staff experiences, we distinguished their “whole-of-career” experiences with each research method from their experiences in the last three years when working in our regional program for integral human development.

Acknowledging that our collection of five NGOs is not a random or representative selection and that our numbers are small, we see four patterns in our data when it comes to our staff’s research capacities. First, when looking at surveys, interviews, and observations, the data in Table 4 show

Table 3. Research and MERL capacity in staffing and training in five NGOs in the Pacific.

Item	NGO 1	NGO 2	NGO 3	NGO 4	NGO 5
a. MERL training courses and days (2021–2023)	Course 1 (2 days) Course 2 (2 days)	Course 1 (day)	Course 1 (1 d)	None	Course 1 (2 days)
b. Topics addressed in MERL training	Logic models, indicators, data analysis, cultural engagement	MERL key concepts and tools	surveys, data entry, enumeration	N/ A ^{1/2}	indicators, data sources, baselines

Table 4. Specific research methods and skills used by one or more staff in in five NGOs in the Pacific.

Methods / skills	NGO 1		NGO 2		NGO 3		NGO 4		NGO 5		Total	
	Prior 2021	2021–2023	Prior 2021	2021–2023	Prior 2021	2021–2023	Prior 2021	2021–2023	Prior 2021	2021–2023	Prior 2021	2021–2023
<i>Surveys</i>												
1. Conduct survey	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	4	4
2. Design survey	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	-	-	4	2
3. Analyse findings	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	3	3
<i>Interviews</i>												
4. Conduct interview	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5
5. Design interview questions	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	-	3	3
6. Analyse findings	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	3	2
<i>Observations</i>												
7. Make observations	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	5
8. Design observation scheme	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	2	2
9. Analyse findings	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	✓	✓	2	4
<i>Locality- or culture-based research methods</i>												
10. Dialogue (talanoa, others)	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	4
11. Song, dance	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	-	-	✓	✓	3	1
12. Photo-voice	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	1	0
<i>Use secondary data sources</i>												
13. Records of schools, clinics	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	2	2
14. Online data bases, census	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	3

that staff in virtually all five NGOs have experience in the least complex aspect of research: collecting data. Moreover, in about half of the five NGOs, some staff also have experience in participating in the design of surveys, interviews, and observations and analysing findings (varying from staff in two to four of the five NGOs). On balance, it appears there is breadth of experience among staff in our five NGOs with data collection in surveys, interviews, and observations. A second pattern emerges from the data in [Table 4](#) when comparing staff's experiences with more operational data collection with more complex data analysis prior to 2021 and after 2021. Our findings suggest there is no change in staff's experiences in the course of the years; they do not notably expand their research engagement from operational data collection to design or analysis.

Third, when zooming in on staff's experience with locality- or culture-based research methods, [Table 4](#) shows that staff in four of the five NGOs have consistently throughout the years, before and after 2021, used Pacific dialogue and relationship-based methods known as "talanoa" (Tecun et al. 2018), "tok stori" (Sanga et al. 2018), or "maroro" (Yates et al. 2023). This is evidence that these locality- or culture-based research methods have found a more permanent place in research processes throughout the Pacific region. On the other hand, we find it noteworthy that other locality- or culture-based research methods such as song and dance, or photo-voice, are mentioned only occasionally as research methods. Finally, and fourth, [Table 4](#) also shows that next to dialogue and relationship-based methods, staff in our five NGOs are also at ease using distinct research methods such as accessing secondary data sources like information kept in local schools and clinics or statistics from national census data that is available online.

Conclusions

In sum, our findings from five small and medium-sized NGOs in the Pacific suggest that we have a rather limited staff capacity in terms of staff numbers for research and MERL activities. Literature indicates this is in line with profiles of NGOs elsewhere in the Global South. Our findings also suggest that our NGOs' capacity for research and MERL does not seem to grow proportionally as our organisations grow in size; we do not know how we compare globally in this respect, and this would merit further research. Our NGOs' capacity is embodied in 2 to 4 staff members in each NGO and their experiences are mostly in the data collection part of research and include culturally appropriate data collection methods. These staff members do not seem to grow professionally in the course of the years by taking up more complex research responsibilities (design, analysis) or trying their hand at new data collection methods, or publishing findings. Overall, it seems management of the NGOs undertakes limited efforts to strengthening or expand its NGO's research capacities: these skills are seldom included in job descriptions, and training programs are limited to one- or two-day rather generic courses in the last three years.

In a wider and longer-term perspective, these findings would lead to two tentative conclusions. First, rather than organising a comprehensive training program in research and MERL for our staff, we now believe a conversation with the management of our NGOs is required to determine more explicitly the importance and place of research in our work as NGOs. A training program would then have to support the importance and place given to research. This would include an option to support some staff members developing more advanced research skills or to see more staff taking up research-related activities. Second, feeding into that conversation, we believe that growing our own capacity for MERL activities in general and research in particular is arguably a strategic necessity to enable us to also formulate and answer research questions from our local stakeholders or emerging from our own practices.

Note

1. This network comprises the following ten members: Association of Vocational and Rural Training Centres (SIAVRTCs) Solomon Islands; Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand; Caritas Fiji; Caritas Papua New Guinea; Caritas

Tonga; Development and Partnership in Action (DPA) Cambodia; Hamahon Feto Timor (HAFOTI) East Timor; Social Enterprise Education Programme (SEEP) Fiji; Teitoiningaina Catholic Women's Association Kiribati; and Tutu Rural Training Centre Fiji.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Manasa Duvaga:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Malia Suliana Falemaka:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Gerard Prinsen:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Cema Rokodredre:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Ioanna Taraia:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Author contributions

This study's conception and design were led by Prinsen. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by all authors: Duvaga, Falemaka, Prinsen, Rokodredre, and Taraia. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Prinsen and all authors commented on and contributed to the final version. All authors approved the final manuscript.

ORCID

Gerard Prinsen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1807-8565>

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