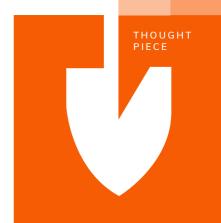Busara Groundwork

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Citizen ethnography:
co-producing evidence for development

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Acknowledgement

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Introduction

Global development research is changing. Alongside calls for better evidence about what is effective (Forscher & Schmidt, 2024), different stakeholders – from funders and research organizations to participants and beneficiaries – increasingly consider issues of equity and ethics. Questions about fair and just representation animate debates and inform innovations about how to do research, what it should aim at, and how to incorporate the insights of members of local communities who are first and foremost impacted by projects and interventions. Some of the longstanding issues that researchers grapple with include how to increase the relevance of local perspectives and voices in debates, and how to symmetrize and decolonize hierarchical knowledge production, which is too often still dominated by white funders and researchers making decisions about how to study and develop non-white communities.

Thankfully, the development sector, with Busara being a leading actor here, is aware of these challenges and looks for ways to incorporate local voices (Wambua, Owsley & Wein, 2023), engage with complex contexts (Jang, Wendel & Kabeer, 2024), democratise knowledge production (Too, 2024), and diversify the make-up of those who do research (Ngugi & Schomerus, 2024). Different initiatives earnestly aim to decolonise the sector and shift power. However, it isn't always clear what they involve, or how they create better development outcomes. Aiming to emancipate and empower people is not the same as achieving it. Existing political and economic hierarchies must be reflected on rather than ignored or circumvented by tokenistic signalling that just claims to "do better." We need to acknowledge the near ubiquity of incentive structures that work against the stated aims of participation, research, and even development itself.

While most research organizations in the Global South are heavily dependent on Global North funders, almost all of the participants studied by research organizations are in an economically, politically, and epistemologically less pow-

erful position than employees in these organizations. This creates incentives to act against better judgement by engaging in what one of the authors, Mario Schmidt, elsewhere has called "anticipatory obedience" (2022: 121): research specialists and project managers accept frameworks and methods because they need the funders' money, and research participants are skilled in finding out what answers they need to give to be kept within the loop of aid money.

This does not mean that local perspectives should not be of concern to us. On the contrary, because global development is premised on vast political, economic, social, and epistemic hierarchies and differences between stakeholders, the voice of those in more peripheral positions needs amplifying. However, incorporating "local" or "community" perspectives is not simple. The point is not that people understand or can describe their contexts better than anyone else possibly could. Subscribing to this assumption does not change existing power dynamics and epistemological hierarchies. Without actively nurturing an environment and methods that equip those people and communities with the necessary skills to refine and share their knowledge, development research risks serious misunderstandings. It may, for example, confuse subjective opinions and political claims made by members of the local community with knowledge grounded in their actual experiences. This confusion characterizes most participatory methods currently used in development, from co-design workshops to human-centered design initiatives.

All of these ultimately uphold a profound gulf between those who make, produce, and collect data – for example, by responding to questions in a survey, by working as a data collector, by giving feedback during a co-design workshop – and those who analyse, work with, and consume data. The gap between the provision of information, on the one hand, and the decision about what it means by converting it through analysis into an explanation, on the other, underpins the inequity of research processes felt by many. It alienates those who analyse data from the contexts of data production. One group answers (and asks) other people's questions. In contrast, citizen ethnography is a pioneering attempt to break down that distinction in the global development sector.

Anthropologists and ethnographers have long cultivated methods that benefit from closely aligning the processes of data collection and analysis. Traditionally, this alignment has been personified by the heroic white man (and sometimes woman) claiming unique insights into disadvantaged "others" by spending time with them and analysing their behavior. Citizen ethnography aims to emulate the strengths of ethnographic methods while breaking from past associations and blind spots of the disciplines in which they have developed. This destabilizes some of the most intractable hierarchies in development research. What does it involve? It recruits non-academic partners from communities where research is taking place to work as ethnographic researchers. We explain how in more detail below. One key aim is to tear down the distinction between data production and data analysis. We do not believe in a division of labor whereby enumerators collect qualitative data "on the ground" and project managers or research specialists analyse the data in the offices.

Furthermore, citizen ethnography incentivises critical thinking that avoids inducement to "say the right thing". Lastly, by describing our research partners as citizen ethnographers, we avoid treating members of communities as being defined by their membership in those communities. As citizens, they are not only members of multiple, often overlapping networks with complex relationships between each other, crisscrossing regional, national, and other divides. They also possess skills, interests, and experiences that exceed those of principal investigators and research specialists. Acknowledging this will constitute a step beyond listening to different voices towards an approach through which diverse voices can (and must) be amplified within a rigorous structure of knowledge production.

What is ethnography?

Ethnography can refer to at least three things. This sometimes confuses those without academic training in the discipline(s) in which ethnography emerged. Ethnography can be:

- **A set of techniques and tools** (chiefly participant observation, but also different types of interviews, life histories, fieldnotes, and diary studies).
- **A product** (a written text, film, or photographic output about a group of people or about a social process).
- **A disposition and set of values** (or beliefs about how knowledge should be produced, often associated with cultural relativism and attempts to centre people's beliefs in developing an understanding of their lives).

Ethnography emerged against the background of 19th-century "armchair anthropologists" who compiled and analyzed non-academics' reports, surveys, and observations (missionaries, colonial administrators, and others). Although a different era, this resembles the gap between those who collect and those who analyse data in global development today. In the early 20th century, anthropologists began to question this practice of exclusively relying on third-party observations, which seemed ill-suited for a social science that claimed to be interested in the complexities, intricacies, and uniqueness of the world's diverse cultures and societies.

A key text is Bronislaw Malinowski's Argonauts of the Western Pacific (2005 [1922]). For Malinowski and those influenced by him, understanding a society in its complexity depends on learning the local language and sharing one's life with members of the society for at least a year, preferably longer, while cutting off contact with one's familiar surroundings. Deliberately exposed to wholly unfamiliar contexts for an extended period, the anthropologist would, step by step, understand local customs, political structures, kinship networks, and religious beliefs. Malinowski called for attention to three kinds of data, which we believe are still crucial for citizen ethnography as well:

- A broad range of concrete information and data (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: 18), such as "maps, plans, genealogies, lists of possessions, accounts of inheritance, censuses of village communities" (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: 357). Here, it is wise to distinguish between directly observed and reported information.
- Small details of everyday life must be collected through detailed observations in ongoing ethnographic diaries (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: 18-19). Malinowski gives examples including "the routine of a man's working day, the details of his care of the body, [...], the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires, the existence of strong friendship or hostilities, [...], the subtle yet unmistakable manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected in the behavior of the individual and in the emotional reactions of those who surround him" (Malinoswki 2005 [1922]: 14). Malinowski adds that "it is good for the ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on" (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: 16).
- Everyday speech which would include "characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folklore and magical formulae" (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: 19). Such a focus would help to understand the gap between what people say and what they do, and to grasp research participants' view of their world.

Hanging out with respondents, following them during their daily routines, and informally talking to them about various topics while doing so is the foundation of what we call "participant observation," which forces ethnographers to oscillate between an insider and an outsider perspective constantly. This is where anthropologists' obsession with the diary and fieldnotes comes into play: while ethnographers hang out with, observe and interview research participants during the day, trying to immerse themselves into the local context as much as possible, they retreat to their chambers in the evening and write down notes, trying to make sense of their observations, connecting dots by comparing new insights to what has happened before, and planning their next methodological steps.

Engaging in participant observation thus never meant abandoning qualitative and quantitative methods, such as interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions. Instead, the holistic and reflexive nature of ethnographic research allows us to ask questions that complement non-ethnographic methods: What do participants say when the survey has finished that does not get recorded? What are the political and personal factors that decide who counts as a "community representative" within a focus group discussion? What are the incentives at play for key informants during interviews? Such questions also apply to participant observation, but an ethnographic approach foregrounds these challenging questions within analysis.

Indeed, participant observation is emblematic of what constitutes successful ethnographic fieldwork. This is not only the case because participant observation can produce unique portrayals of complex lifeworlds and the lived experiences of our interlocutors that are iteratively refined throughout fieldwork. Participating intimately in other people's lives also calls for and produces an ethical disposition characterized by heightened humility, curiosity, and reflexivity about one's position. Learning to live in a different way upsets hierarchical relations (between the researcher and the researched) that underpin both qualitative and quantitative research. This encourages deep, humble, and self-critical reflections about the research question. A less hierarchical relationship between researchers and those they research also enables an open and honest exchange of ideas, resulting in the discovery of details, observations, and thoughts that would probably not have been detected through surveys or interviews because of fears about how responses might be viewed. People often say one thing and do another for various reasons. Ethnography is well suited to explore this gap because, over time, people "become bored" by the research process – and the researcher – and lapse into more typical behaviour. Once the ethnographer is no longer seen as an outside researcher, incentives to behave in specific ways to impress the ethnographer become inoperative.

Commissioning "ethnographic research" in development

The qualities of ethnographic research have long made it attractive to development institutions looking to engage in more equitable or participatory practice. Many agencies commissioning research explicitly state an interest in ethnography. However, they often associate ethnography with key informant interviews and focus group discussions. These methods are entirely different from ethnography and should not be confused (see table below). They do not produce insights through building trust and exchanging ideas. Neither do they encourage critical self-reflection. In other cases, requests for proposals that include ethnographic methods call for research covering vast numbers of countries or taking place in a few days. Such demands are not compatible with ethnographic research. It would be better to avoid making claims of deep contextual insight by describing such research as "ethnographic". In contrast to tokenistic claims, citizen ethnography proves that it is possible to commission ethnographic research from a growing number of research professionals with relevant skills and experience working beyond the limitations of academic timelines, budgets, and inflexibilities.

Table 1. Key differences between various research methods in development

Method	Description	The relation between data collection and analysis	Analytic reflexivity	Cost scaling	Time required	Opportunity for unexpected insights
Survey	Highly structured way of eliciting quantitative data from respondents using a detailed questionnaire	Disconnected	Low	Participants	Low	Low
Key informant interviews	Structured way of gathering qualitative data from key people within a specific context, often using detailed interview guides	Often disconnected in development	Low to medium	Informants	Low	Medium
Focus group discussion	Structured way of eliciting qualitative data via group discussions about a selected topic, usually using detailed protocols	Often disconnected in development	Low to medium	Focus groups	Low	Medium
Ethnography	Highly open-ended way of gathering qualitative data in a specific context; relies on trusting relationships and often uses a combination of participant observation and interviews	Unified in the individual ethnographer	High	Field time	Medium to high	High
Citizen ethnography	Participatory method that recruits citizens, often from the target setting, and trains them as ethnographers who gather and analyze qualitative data	Unified in the team of CEs	High	Ethnographers, time in the field	Low to high	High

Ethnographic fieldwork remains a challenging endeavor. Ethnographers observe while they participate, and try to understand foreign culture while writing about it in their language. They often leave the field site never to return. This produces new and challenging ethical questions. Non-western and feminist scholars have, for instance, criticized that ethnographic fieldwork often glorifies the brave and lonely white man enduring the conditions of non-modern contexts. In reality, most anthropologists relied on colonial infrastructures (Asad 1973) and key informants, as well as research assistants who are nowadays almost completely forgotten (Casagrande 1960). Questions about who can write about whom with legitimacy are equally important (Behar & Gordon, 1995).

A different critique emerged from scholars who privileged quantitative data. They questioned the method's ability to produce representative results. Busy development professionals have also criticized ethnographic methods for being too time-consuming. This is a challenge for agencies that want quick results. Increasingly, however, leading development agencies have re-considered the actionable insights that ethnography affords. Precisely because ethnographic methods embrace complexity, they generate actionable and robust insights into local contexts that methods that artificially ignore complexity would be unable to produce.

What is citizen ethnography?

Citizen ethnography employs teams of people who have, to different degrees, lived experiences of the respective research topics. Their different perspectives (reflecting different gender, geography, language, ethnicity, education, and class) make the ideal foundation for research because they help to stress-test assumptions, challenge blind spots, and triangulate observations. Coming together, people who have worked as construction workers, market traders, journalists, security staff, and myriad other jobs become teams of ethnographic researchers who collect and analyze data through participant observation. This involves them deciding what to observe, whom to hang out with, what questions to ask, and which tools and methods to use to analyze findings. This cannot be achieved by simply giving them a contract and sending them out to the field after a day or two of training. It requires structured training sessions in ethnographic methods and a cultivation of critical and reflective capacities throughout the project. What does this look like in practice?

As part of a recent British Academy-funded project on how enumerators' lived and professional experience impacts data quality in survey work ("Enumerating Development"), we trained our first cohort of citizen ethnographers in September 2024. The training was organized around two weeks of practical sessions – observing social spaces like a mall or a sports ground, conducting life history interviews, and taking detailed and self-reflective notes. This approach allowed us to tackle key methods and principles in practice, not just in theory. During the training, nine Kenyans learned together with nine counterparts from Uganda, who brought experience of ethnographic methods from prior work with Ben Eyre and our colleague Ben Jones (also from the University of East Anglia). After the two-week-long training, our citizen ethnographers conducted fieldwork and participant observation for almost two months across three field-sites: western Kenya, Nairobi, and the area around Lira in Uganda.

Our eighteen citizen ethnographers hung out with field officers, accompanied them daily, shadowed them during surveys, and conducted long life histories and ethnographic interviews with them. They avoided direct questions about "problems with data quality" and turned away from interrogation of "cooking data," although the phrase is ubiquitous in development research, because they quickly realized that it closed discussions and put research participants on edge. Instead, immersion helped to build trusting relationships between our ethnographers and their respondents over time. This was valuable when, after several weeks, we came to probe more about our project's interest in malpractices and work-related challenges.

By that point, research participants were confident they were not under suspicion and discussed the topics openly and with interest, providing us with uniquely detailed insights. Alongside participant observation, our three teams also met daily with a research supervisor (one of the project co-investigators) to discuss the day's events and their written notes and emerging observations. Each day ended with a reflection on the results achieved to that point and a discussion of new ways to continue the research in terms of what to do and whom to involve, exemplifying citizen ethnography's flexibility and adaptability to a wide variety of research contexts. Throughout the project, we collected over 500,000 words of ethnographic notes and transcripts of more than one hundred interviews.

Allowing citizen ethnographers to make their own methodological and analytical decisions helped us to refine the research process throughout the project. It was, for instance, interesting that several of our citizen ethnographers suggested from the beginning that focus group discussions could be problematic. They proposed that the (semi)public setting of focus group discussions, shot through with hierarchies, made it highly unlikely that participants could speak freely. Ethical challenges were also discussed. It was, for example, not impossible that enumerators would accidentally admit to malpractice in the presence of other field officers or potential future employers. Although the mi-

cro-dynamics of who can say what are not always evident to outsiders who commission research, they thus directly affect the data that is produced.

Our team also had concerns about key informant interviews during the study because senior research staff were heavily incentivised to distinguish between well-known issues with data quality in the industry and their own organisation's data collection practices. It was challenging to get an answer from people who felt they had to represent their organisations and, therefore, did everything to present them in a good light. Such insights are not useless, but citizen ethnography went beyond them by engaging with people who wanted to reveal questionable practices they had witnessed or even undertaken. Engaging with people over weeks and months helped to build the trust necessary to elicit such accurate accounts of survey enumerators' working conditions and lived experiences. Some of the emerging findings, which we believe could be important for the sector, include the following:

- What proportion of survey data is "cooked"? Our team uncovered estimates from 5% to 80% when they asked enumerators, research managers, and PIs about how many surveys are done fraudulently. Interestingly, those who had experience as enumerators consistently offered the highest estimates. We also learned that a few experienced enumerators encouraged new colleagues to "cook data". When it comes to the different justifications offered, some reported that they felt they were helping stretched PIs or research managers, while others told us that they had to fabricate data due to physical threats or geographical distances.
- Enumerators consider themselves precariously employed (rather than poorly paid in terms of day rates). They often do not know when or from where the next job will come. Despite this, many are dedicated to producing "good data". They have enormous professional pride and feel their scientific contributions should be better recognised.
- There are deep structural challenges in research relations. Enumerators often feel unable to voice difficulties. They have to negotiate steep hierarchies, usually involving idiosyncratic or ambiguous decisions about who

gets work or who is kept on projects. This creates perverse incentives and even room for abuse.

- Perhaps linked to their precariousness, many enumerators view research work as highly transactional. Many don't think their PIs or employers care about them (this also applies to some of those cases where PIs or employers claimed that they do care). Others seek to maximise short-term financial gain at every opportunity because they cannot rely on long-term promises.

These findings are diverse and, in several cases, incompatible. However, diversity, complexity, and sometimes contradiction are part of the point of citizen ethnography. Participatory methods, and those that aim to give communities a voice, typically seek to represent a consensus or several compatible findings. Trying to achieve this in our case would risk losing the rich picture of complexity more characteristic of the actual working conditions of enumerators. Although simple conclusions seem more conducive to action, they tend to rely on too many convenient assumptions or obscure essential details to such an extent that the potential for unintended consequences becomes enormous. In this case, for example, it is necessary to acknowledge the challenges presented by transactional research relationships because many enumerators do not feel recognised and rewarded for good work. A rush to increase pay seems to be an obvious fix to recognise good performance. But the potential for negative effects on research of this approach were clear to all members of our team, many of whom shared with us the concern that new monetary incentives, especially if tied to "good performance", might increase attempts to "cook" data to get closer to the assumed or actual ideal. Acknowledging complexity is thus essential to any action plan that aims to survive contact with real life. Citizen ethnography is a particularly valuable addition to rigorous quantitative methods when the quality of decision-making rests on contextual factors and when "common sense" assumptions seem to be a stumbling block.

We call our approach "citizen ethnography" for several reasons. Our trainees did not possess academic qualifications in anthropology or prior train-

ing in ethnographic methods. Some had worked as field officers or assistants before; others had not. They included market traders, bouncers, tailors, and farmers. All had experience of being researched. Citizen ethnography is thus not merely a euphemism for a certain level of education or work experience. We use the term to signal our hope and belief that people who possess both contextual and linguistic knowledge and a personal stake in research questions, belong to research teams as invaluable members. They are not easily replaceable data gatherers but analysts and experts. This calls for a position that acknowledges their contributions, and an institutional framework that affords opportunities for them to benefit from.

Citizen science

Large-scale research projects increasingly rely on citizens to help collect data at various locations and for continuous periods. For instance, during the 2024 North and Middle American solar eclipse, NASA asked citizens to contribute to scientific progress by taking photographs and noting their experiences across different areas affected by the eclipse. While such projects rely on citizens due to the impossibility of generating large data-sets with limited resources and workforce, citizen ethnography in the development sector relies on citizens to create data characterized by levels of detail, palpability, and context sensitivity difficult to achieve with other methods.

Citizen ethnography is not yet another initiative to document local voices or a technique to ensure community participation. This is because it destabilizes hierarchies within the research process. By enabling the entire research team to shape interviews and observations, decide what to explore next, and interpret findings themselves, citizen ethnography gives all of those who do it an

integral role. For our team, this reduced the "robotic" nature of work some were used to as field officers. This change was liberating and empowering. It required an acknowledgement from all that academics often do not know best.

Citizen ethnography – is it too time-consuming and expensive?
Citizen ethnography is a flexible method that can be adapted to various financial limitations and temporal constraints, as the ultimate goal is sufficient exposure to the local context, depending on the project requirements, and not to reach a specific sample size or to cover a vast diversity of areas. Depending on the level of complexity, exposure, and detail required, the number of citizen ethnographers and the time spent in the field can be altered. For example, citizen ethnography can be applied during preliminary project phases to help map out a problem in more detail by sending a small group of citizen ethnographers to a field for a few weeks. If tight feedback loops to local communities are required in a project that faces political, logistical, or ethical challenges, a small group of citizen ethnographers, maybe just one or two, could be employed for the entire project duration. Lastly, citizen ethnography can also use a larger number of citizen ethnographers who are hired for a more extended period (six months or even a year) to capture and explore a complex topic fully. Due to the method's reliance on well-trained researchers who are fully immersed in the local context and already begin to analyse data, citizen ethnography saves costs on some fronts. It will most likely not require more money than any other robust qualitative study component based on interviews and focus group discussions.

Citizen ethnography furthermore avoids three potential pitfalls that we observe when looking at rather tokenistic approaches to participatory research:

- **The idea of "local knowledge" devoid of context and interconnections with multiple overlapping systems.**
- **The myth of coherent and apolitical "communities".**
- **The illusion that good intentions can sweep away structural limitations on what people can imagine and how they can act.**

Deep contextual insight is not something that can be extracted like fossil fuel. It benefits from careful nurturing through robust methods, encouragement of dialogue that upsets established hierarchies and incentive structures, and (sometimes painful) reflection on one's positionality, i.e., reflections about how one's gender, race, professional background, ethnicity, and experiences shape how data is collected and analyzed. Inviting "local actors" to participatory workshops without cultivating a niche for their perspectives will result in unintended consequences that likely increase the gap between how people act and what they say, solidifying notions about homogenous "communities" that speak with one voice and perpetuating a perverse system of misaligned incentives.

Citizen ethnography works differently by acknowledging structural conditions and how they manifest in real life, economically, politically, and socially. What appears as an awkward, complicated, or inconvenient context for other methods contributes to the rich insight of citizen ethnography because the approach nurtures critical thinking and reflection on that complex context. Working overtime with a new group, we have seen how their notes become more reflexive, acute, and creative over time. The open-ended and iterative nature of ethnographic work and the discursive structure of citizen ethnography foster a methodological movement in and out of the context. By shifting between, on the one hand, an interested and affected position, and, on the other, a disinterested and critical one, citizen ethnographers become real research innovators. They produce original insights and re-examine their own and our assumptions in unique ways.

Why you might want to consider incorporating citizen ethnography in your next project

Citizen ethnography offers at least five benefits that are an essential component of equitable and effective research in the development sector:

- Citizen ethnography disrupts prevailing incentive structures to give the "right answer" by relying on symmetrical and trusting research relationships between researchers and citizen ethnographers and between citizen ethnographers and research participants. Our citizen ethnographer Euphamia Osman poignantly brings that out when reflecting upon her experience in the "Enumerating Development" project, where only spending time with enumerators allowed our citizen ethnographers to get firsthand information about practices of "data cooking" and grievances held by enumerators:

"With ethnography, I realized that trust is very important. It won't be easy for your respondent to trust you for the very first time, but with the continued interaction over time, you will get used to each other. Ethnography is all about blending and participating in whatever your respondent does. Lowering yourself or getting blended into the respondent's culture, for example by putting on the same clothes they put on and doing what they do, will help build the trust between a researcher and a respondent. Using your own life experience during the interviews or participant observation as a researcher will also make the respondents be open to you about some things that maybe would have been left unsaid. All this will create rapport with your respondents more quickly. Being more of friends than co-workers with your respondents will also lead to getting a lot of information because you'll be able to pick important information out of the stories you make."

- Citizen ethnography builds capacity for critical thinking by training citizen ethnographers in analyzing data and equipping them with the necessary conceptual and rhetorical skills that cannot be assumed to be universally available to our interlocutors. Both Deborah Oluoko, a trained journalist, and Osborn Otieno Abiero, an experienced enumerator – both members of the Kenyan citizen ethnographer team – reflect on how citizen ethnography has changed their way of seeing research and feeling empowered as active participants in the research process:

"Citizen ethnography has taught me the art of reflexivity. I have learnt to examine my own assumptions, beliefs, and judgment systems and think carefully and broadly about how these influence the research process. This practice of reflexivity confronts and questions who we are as researchers and how this guides our work. Reflexivity is a form of critical thinking that prompts us to consider the whys and hows of research, critically questioning the utilities, ethics, and values of what, who, and how we study. Being too entrenched in a professional context makes it difficult to achieve the depth of introspection required for flexibility. Introspection does not come easily to me without a structured approach; my efforts of reflexivity risks lacking the necessary depth and richness required for rigorous research."

"As I write these notes today, I keep wondering if any other person apart from the very former employers are aware of my contributions to the many studies that I participated in collecting the data. The many research reports compiled by the PIs that I have so far read only acknowledge a few individuals limited to field managers, but leaving out the very people who reach out to the respondents directly and are burdened with the field challenges, plus rejections. The three months of ethnographic expertise that I received have left me higher than where I remained after twelve years in survey research. I am empowered enough that, even on my own, I feel I am capable of identifying an interesting ethnographic study for a follow-up."

- Citizen ethnography offers actionable insights grounded in understanding complex and changing contexts rather than pretending they do not exist due to the method's innate flexibility and adaptability, a crucial difference from the rigid nature of many quantitative approaches and semi-structured interviews. One of our Ugandan citizen ethnographers, Joel Hannington Ekaun, remembers how he felt paralyzed by the lack of flexibility of a survey approach in a prior project he was involved in:

"In our survey questions, we had questions that demanded to explore the livelihoods of the respondents, especially on the side of property ownership, i.e. the number of pieces of land that they owned, cattle, goats, houses for rent in town, children at the university or private schools, those working in NGOs and government offices to mention but a few. However, a majority of the respondents acknowledged that they did not own any property at all, no land, cattle, and houses in town for rent. From our observation at the time administering the survey questions, we were able to see goats, and cattle just being tethered around most of the respondents' compounds, and others had good permanent houses in their homes, though they claimed that they had nothing. In that scenario, our hands were tied because we could not ask follow-up questions to know whose animals were tethered around their compounds and verandahs. So if we had used ethnographic methods in that case, we were going to apply the principle of participant observation to see around the responses being given by the respondents and explore them in detail to make sense out of their responses. With frequent visits as one of the elements in ethnographic methods of data collection, we were going to discover who were the rightful owners of the cattle, goats and other properties through gossiping with community people in different events such as during burial ceremonies, church services, or clan meetings to mention but a few."

- Citizen ethnography relies upon the contradictory and complex perspectives of people with lived experience. It provides a structure within which, on the one hand, the diversity of their experiences truly matters to good research and, on the other hand, our respondents' dignity as individuals is ethically recognized. These unique benefits of ethnographic methods were particularly remarked upon by those of our citizen ethnographers who had worked as enumerators in survey work or who had applied semi-structured interviews before. Osborn Otieno Abiero, who started being an enumerator in the age of "pen & paper" surveys, succinctly summarizes the different levels of immersive involvement with research participants:

"As the researcher mingles freely within the community, it becomes easy to learn about religious and cultural beliefs, economic activities, and even hidden secrets that influence the study subject. A community that would have been interviewed by a van full of enumerators can easily be captured with only one or two ethnographers, making the approach cost-effective to the research developers."

- Citizen ethnography complements other methods in behavioral science by generating better quality data through triangulation, long-term involvement in the research site, hypothesis testing, and short feedback loops. Our Ugandan citizen ethnographer, James Opolo, reflects on this advantage when he recalls his experiences in a project in 2021:

"I realized that the structured questionnaire approach often restricts researchers from capturing nuanced and unexpected responses. In citizen ethnography, I am often immersed in the daily lives of participants, collaborating with them as co-researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives and practices. For example, while a survey might ask participants to rate their responses on a scale of 1 to 5 or 1 to 10, citizen ethnography explores how communities experience shared rituals, storytelling, or real-time local events. The use of a scale, such as

1 to 5, or others like the Likert scale, where researchers provide options such as Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree for respondents to choose from, still limits participants from giving a more detailed narrative of their feelings or stories because complex experiences are always reduced to measurable data as representing the participant's full opinion. For the purpose of saving time, options like the Likert scale can be applied because analyzing data using designed software or apps can be easier than the ethnographic approach. In this context, surveys tend to capture only a snapshot of a particular moment, often missing how experiences evolve over time for the respondents. This makes ethnographic research more reliable, as it involves real-time engagement, making it particularly suitable for studying ongoing social and cultural processes."

As a team of two academically trained anthropologists and ten citizen ethnographers with different degrees of experience who came together to write this groundwork, we firmly believe that, if implemented thoughtfully, citizen ethnography can help to fulfill the promise of truly participatory, contextualized, and rigorous qualitative approaches in global development. By turning citizen ethnography into one of Busara's signature behavioral science methods, we hope to build closer working relationships with local communities and create long-lasting and robust feedback loops between the citizens of the places we conduct research in and Busara itself. Hopefully, this groundwork can help set off an "ethnographic turn" in development, a turn towards more contextualized and deeper insights generated by people "on the ground," which will improve interventions and help us reach development goals.

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About Busara

Busara is a research and advisory organization, working with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Busara pursues a future where global human development activities respond to people's lived experience; value knowledge generated in the context it is applied; and promote culturally appropriate and inclusive practices. To accomplish this, we practice and promote behavioral science in ways that center and value the perspectives of respondents; expand the practice of research where it is applied; and build networks, processes, and tools that increase the competence of practitioners and researchers.

About Busara Groundwork

Busara Groundwork lays the groundwork for future research and program design. As think pieces, they examine the current state of knowledge and what is needed to advance it, frame important issues with a behavioral perspective, or put forward background information on a specific context.

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