

Editorial

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Importance of Field Research

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It has now been over 10 years that I started my journey as a researcher in Bangladesh. Coming from a Medical and a Public health background, I thought I was prepared for how research should work. Ten years later, I admit that my academic knowledge would have remained sorely limited had I not been a part of this exciting journey of field research. Through my exposure in the field – I realised how much one fails to absorb, see and understand if they are not close to the field. I would like to share what I learned with you in this editorial.

Frequently researchers like to get others to collect data and work with these inanimate numbers to come up with theories and prove hypotheses. What we fail to comprehend is that each faceless number represents one human being who has given the time to respond to our questions with some hope that his response may provide an answer to their suffering. Giving these numbers a human face instills the true meaning of being a researcher.

There is great enthusiasm for community participation among scientist and policy makers with regard to action research. How often do we consider what participation actually means to those for whom we conduct our research? Do we actually value their opinion enough to create an enabling environment for them to voice their opinion in a manner that enables actual participation? I bring up the topic of community mobilization because this is one area of research where one needs to understand ones participants and let them guide the research agenda to a certain extent. I began to work in this area about three years back. Through my work I observed that community knowledge, while ill-defined, gave insights into complex areas of societal hierarchy that would be impossible to appreciate through the eyes of an external observer.

Another example I would like to cite is the Public Health students that we take to the field for conducting research who come to Bangladesh from a wide range of countries across the world. Their first exposure of working in the field amidst language difficulties is one of curiosity and amazement. I relish the expressions on their face as they go through the stages of realization of what their research questions actually mean to the lives of their respondents. I then see them working not to find an answer for that one research question which they thought up by toiling many hours over literature but working for those people who shared with them their problems, their thoughts and their sufferings.

In conclusion, I may have spoken little about the importance of Meta-analysis and review papers; but my aim was to suggest the importance of field exposure in research and not to suggest that one is necessarily better than the other. There may well be differences of opinion, but I strongly believe that my research agendas are many a times shaped by what I observe and see in the field.