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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on my journey from working in NGOs and evaluation to academic research on conflict and peace. Drawing on experiences in Myanmar and the Philippines, I discuss how working in conflict-affected settings has changed the way I approach research. In Myanmar, I learned that involving local researchers does not necessarily mean sharing control over the research process. In Mindanao, restrictions on travel led us to develop a different approach to fieldwork, one that relied on local researchers and challenged my assumptions about the importance of international researchers being physically present. These experiences also raised questions about what research and evaluation can reasonably claim, particularly in peacebuilding and efforts to prevent violent extremism. I argue that good research depends on understanding the context, recognising the different contributions of researchers, and being willing to adapt methods when circumstances demand it. Throughout, I show how practice continues to shape my research questions, while academic work helps me think more carefully about the problems I encounter in practice.

KEYWORDS

peacebuilding; evaluation; research methods; locally led research; conflict-affected settings

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INTRODUCTION

I did not set out to become a conflict researcher. I came to academia through practice and, more specifically, through evaluation. Over time, the practical problems I kept encountering—how to collect useful evidence with limited access, who should ask sensitive questions, and how much a program could reasonably claim—became research questions.

Those questions became particularly important in my work in conflict-affected parts of Asia. Myanmar first forced me to think seriously about adaptation, local participation, and who controls an evaluation. Later work in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao, pushed me to rethink who needs to be physically present to conduct rigorous research and what locally led and remote research can look like.

This paper follows that journey from practice into academia and back into practice. Its focus is methodological: how working in conflict-affected settings changed the way I think about access, risk, local knowledge, research relationships, and what evidence can reasonably show.

From practitioner to evaluator to researcher

My pathway began in practice. I worked as a social housing case manager in Northern Ireland in the mid-2000s, with communities shaped by long-running conflict. I was introduced to evaluation because a donor required it, not because I had trained for it or planned an evaluation career. My first evaluation involved travelling across communities, documenting experiences, and comparing patterns across cases. After the report was sent to the donor, I was struck by how little the findings were used to improve practice inside the organisation. That stayed with me and later became the central question of my doctoral research.

I carried that interest into later work in NGOs, where evaluation became a large part of my role. Over the following years, I conducted more than 100 evaluations in organisations working on domestic violence, child rights, addiction, trauma, peacebuilding, disaster preparedness, and recovery, predominantly in Australia but also in Myanmar, India, and Pakistan. After about a decade, I began doctoral research on whether and how small community development NGOs use evaluation findings (Kelly, 2019). I found that organisations often used information from informal, everyday evaluation more readily than findings from formal external evaluations. That finding reinforced something I had already begun to learn in practice: evidence is only useful if it can fit the way organisations actually work.

Conflict was present in some of this work, but it was not yet the main focus of my research. That began to change when I started working with a peacebuilding-centred organisation in Rakhine State, Myanmar, in 2016. It changed further in 2018 through academic-NGO collaborations and an Australian Research Council project examining how development and humanitarian NGOs respond when violent and hateful extremism is part of the context in which they work. I came to that project through NGOs and community development rather than through a prior interest in radicalisation theory. Living and working in Northern Ireland gave me a good foundation of

understanding that also left me wary of simple explanations of conflict and extremism.

The violent and hateful extremism project eventually took me into sustained work with colleagues in the Philippines, particularly at Mindanao State University–Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU–IIT). The substantive question was what development and humanitarian organisations encounter when extremism is present and what they can realistically do about it (Sonrexa et al., 2023; Ware et al., 2023). For me, however, the project also became methodological. It required us to work across different types of organisations, languages, locations, security conditions, and understandings of the problem.

What practice taught me about research

Practice taught me to start with the problem rather than with a preferred method. In NGOs, the first questions were usually practical: what do we need to know, what decision will the information inform, and what can we realistically collect? I later recognised the same approach in pragmatism in social research (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020) and in utilisation-focused evaluation (Patton, 2012), but I learned it first through practice.

It also made feasibility part of the method rather than an afterthought. NGO staff often work with small budgets, few staff, short funding cycles, and limited time. A method can be technically strong and still be a poor choice if an organisation cannot implement or sustain it. Working as an internal evaluator taught me to take complicated environments, vague concepts, and difficult problems and make them understandable and measurable for people who may have very little time or money. That knowledge has been invaluable and still shapes the tools and frameworks I develop.

Evaluation also made me aware of the gap between what donors may expect programs to demonstrate and what organisations can realistically know with the time, resources, access, and data available to them. This is especially apparent in programs for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). A community-level program may reasonably strengthen relationships, participation, local problem-solving, access to opportunities, or institutional practice. Showing that those changes reduced the risk of violent extremism is a much larger causal claim. I now separate three questions that are often collapsed in evaluation: what changed, whether there is reasonable evidence that the program contributed to that change, and why that change should matter for the larger problem the program is meant to address. My more recent research on primary-level P/CVE evaluation grew directly from that practical problem.

Conflict-affected settings added another complication. Who asks a question, where it is asked, what language is used, and who is present can affect both safety and the quality of the data. Access is therefore part of research design, not just a logistical problem. Myanmar was the first setting in which I had to confront this repeatedly.

Myanmar: adapting methods and questioning control

I led, then co-led, and later advised on a three-year evaluation of a community development peacebuilding program across 24 Rohingya and Rakhine villages in Rakhine State, Myanmar, starting in 2019. In the first year I conducted the evaluation myself. In the second year I worked with an emerging Burmese/Rakhine researcher Dr Sophia Htwe. In the third year, Dr Htwe led the work while I remained involved as an adviser. Across those years, the evaluation had to adapt to restrictions on movement, COVID-19, and Myanmar's military coup. Data collection included interviews with NGO staff and village leaders and focus groups with village residents conducted by local community data collectors.

At the time, I regarded some of these changes as movement towards a more decolonised evaluation. Materials were translated, a Burmese/Rakhine evaluator was brought into the team, local people were trained to collect data, and responsibility for fieldwork increasingly shifted away from me. Reflection with Dr Htwe later helped us see the limits of that interpretation. These changes did not necessarily alter who set the questions, defined what counted as good evidence, chose the methods, interpreted the data, or controlled the final products (Kelly & Htwe, 2024).

That distinction between participation in research and control over research has stayed with me. Local data collection is not the same thing as locally led research. The methodological question is not whether local researchers are involved, but what decisions they are able to make and at what stages. I became more cautious about describing methodological changes as decolonising when funding, institutional authority, and final decision-making remained largely external.

Myanmar also taught me that adaptation is not a sign that a design has failed. In difficult settings, the ability to alter a method without losing sight of the research question is part of doing good research. This became especially important later in the Philippines, where restricted access initially looked like a major limitation but ultimately pushed us towards a fieldwork model that I now see as one of the strongest parts of the research.

The Philippines: when access changed the method

My work in Mindanao brought these earlier lessons together. By the time we began the Lanao del Sur fieldwork in 2024, I was already more alert to the difference between involving local people in data collection and sharing responsibility for the research process. Travel restrictions meant that the Australian members of the team could not conduct village-level fieldwork. With colleagues at MSU-IIT, we therefore designed a model in which locally recruited young researchers undertook the community research while MSU–IIT academics provided local supervision and the Deakin team supported the process from the nearby city of Cagayan de Oro.

We recruited and trained 24 young researchers as facilitators and documenters. After a one-day face-to-face workshop, they conducted 36 community focus groups across 12 barangays in three municipalities near Marawi, with separate groups for youth, women, and household heads. Five

additional focus groups with the young researchers during training and debriefing brought the total to 41. The community fieldwork ran over six days. MSU–IIT academics supervised the teams locally and remained in daily contact with the Deakin researchers in Cagayan de Oro. We then held a full-day in-person debrief (Kelly et al., 2026).

At first, this arrangement was simply a response to restricted access. We could not conduct the fieldwork in the way we had originally imagined, so we found another way to answer the research questions. The alternative had advantages we might not have had if the Australian team had entered the communities ourselves. The local academic team and young researchers had language skills, contextual knowledge, relationships, and forms of access that we did not. They could see when wording needed to change, recognise when a response required more context, and interpret discussions in ways that were not available from a transcript alone. The debriefing day with the researchers in particular helped interpret the findings with invaluable depth and local knowledge.

The Australian researchers brought something different. Distance could be a limitation, but it could also bring locally familiar practices or assumptions to the surface because we asked clarifying questions that local colleagues might not have thought needed explanation. Comparative experience from other countries and projects also helped us see what might be locally distinctive and what resembled patterns elsewhere. The point was not that one perspective was better. Different team members could access, notice, and question different things, and the design worked because those differences were built into the research.

This changed how I think about remote research. I had previously tended to see remote or hybrid fieldwork as a second-best response to access problems. The Mindanao project made that harder to sustain. Physical presence by an international researcher is not automatically a marker of methodological quality. In some contexts, it may add little and can create additional barriers or risks. A locally led or hybrid design can be stronger when local partners have genuine roles in adapting questions, supervising fieldwork, debriefing, interpretation, and writing, rather than being treated primarily as data collectors. It also made positionality more concrete: there was no ideal researcher outside these dynamics, only different people bringing different access, knowledge, relationships, assumptions, and constraints. We later wrote about the fieldwork model because it had changed our understanding of what remote research could look like in conflict-affected settings (Kelly et al., 2026).

What academia added

Academic work gave me language and time to examine practical experiences that had first seemed specific to one organisation or field site. Pragmatism helped explain why I start with the problem and intended use rather than with a preferred method (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Work on decolonising evaluation made me look more carefully at who controls different stages of a study, not just who collects the data (Kelly & Htwe, 2024). Writing about the Mindanao fieldwork let us examine why the remote model worked rather than treating it as a temporary compromise (Kelly et al., 2026).

The time and space for academic thinking has also made me more demanding about causal claims. The P/CVE research repeatedly brought me back to the gap between what a program can influence directly and the much larger prevention claim sometimes attached to it. Reviewing theories of change, outcomes, indicators, and empirical evidence gave me a more systematic way to examine that gap. I am less interested in creating another evaluation method than in helping organisations make those links explicit and decide what they can reasonably claim. Practice keeps this work grounded because it helps me keep real-world limitations in mind and always reminds me to consider intended use and intended users of my contributions.

CONCLUSION

I first encountered evaluation in Northern Ireland because a donor required it. I did not expect it to become the route through which I moved into academia or into research on conflict in Asia. A large part of what keeps me moving between evaluation and research is my love of methodology. The two have much in common, and both give me opportunities to keep working on wicked problems: to think carefully about how we can understand them, what evidence we can reasonably produce, and, I hope, how that evidence might contribute to addressing them.

Myanmar made me more attentive to adaptation, local participation, and the difference between participation and control. The Philippines pushed those questions further. Restrictions on access in Mindanao forced us to design research differently, but the resulting approach showed me that international researchers do not need to be physically present at every stage for research to be rigorous. What matters more is how expertise, access, risk, interpretation, and decision-making are distributed across the team.

I have therefore never experienced the move into academia as leaving practice behind. The problems I most want to understand still come from evaluations, partnerships, and fieldwork. Academic work gives me time and tools to examine them more systematically, and the next project tests whether that thinking is useful. That movement between the two now shapes both the questions I ask and how I design the research.

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