Researching subsidised housing: The challenge of getting the community on board

Community entry is the starting point when conducting research in urban dwellings. HSRC researchers encountered some interesting challenges with community entry while researching beneficiary satisfaction with subsidised housing in Gauteng. *Catherine Ndinda, Konosoang Sobane, Charles Hongoro* and *Tholang Mokhele* report.

Despite being trained to conduct fieldwork, most researchers often experience challenges in accessing targeted communities for data collection at grassroots level.

These challenges include being denied access because someone associated the colour of a fieldwork uniform with a certain political party, because of their race or because of an association with foreigners or a language group that is not dominant in the study area. Some have been denied access on suspicion of being criminals or mistaken for officials of departments considered not to be delivering services to the communities, and threatened with violence. The challenges experienced often result in refusal to collect data and costly delays, which affect research timelines and delivery to the clients.

Understanding the community

The challenges of accessing communities for research, are varied and complex. Gaining community entry depends on a range of factors. A key factor is understanding the language of the targeted population, not just in terms of the linguistics but also the political dynamics and cultural elements. Cultural competence is critical in accessing communities. While community entry remains a challenge in the studies conducted, the constraints are rarely shared with stakeholders.

From June to August 2017, the HSRC's Economic Performance and Development unit conducted the Gauteng Human Settlements Satisfaction Survey to collect baseline data to establish the levels of satisfaction with subsidised housing among beneficiaries in five regions of Gauteng – the City of Johannesburg, the City of Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Sedibeng and the West Rand.

Community entry

The first week of fieldwork was set aside for community entry to ensure that when the research team returned for data collection, there would be no obstacles.

Prior to visiting the study sites, the Gauteng Department of Human Settlements (GDHS) disseminated details of the study to the five regions to ensure that the regional departments of human settlements were aware of the study. The research team also designed a community entry strategy to access key stakeholders (Figure 1).

A step-by-step community entry strategy

The first step of the strategy entailed visiting the nearest municipal offices and introducing the study to the municipal manager and the local department of human settlements. This courtesy call is important as it provides access to details of councillors in the specific wards in the sampled sites. It was important for the local human settlements department to know about the study, as they implemented the subsidised housing projects.

The second phase entailed reporting to the police station and informing the commander of the presence of the study team. The research team leaves a copy of the ethics approval letter and gets another copy endorsed with a stamp of the police station. Anyone in the community interested in knowing why a field team is in their community is shown this letter and given a copy of the study information sheet or introduction letter.
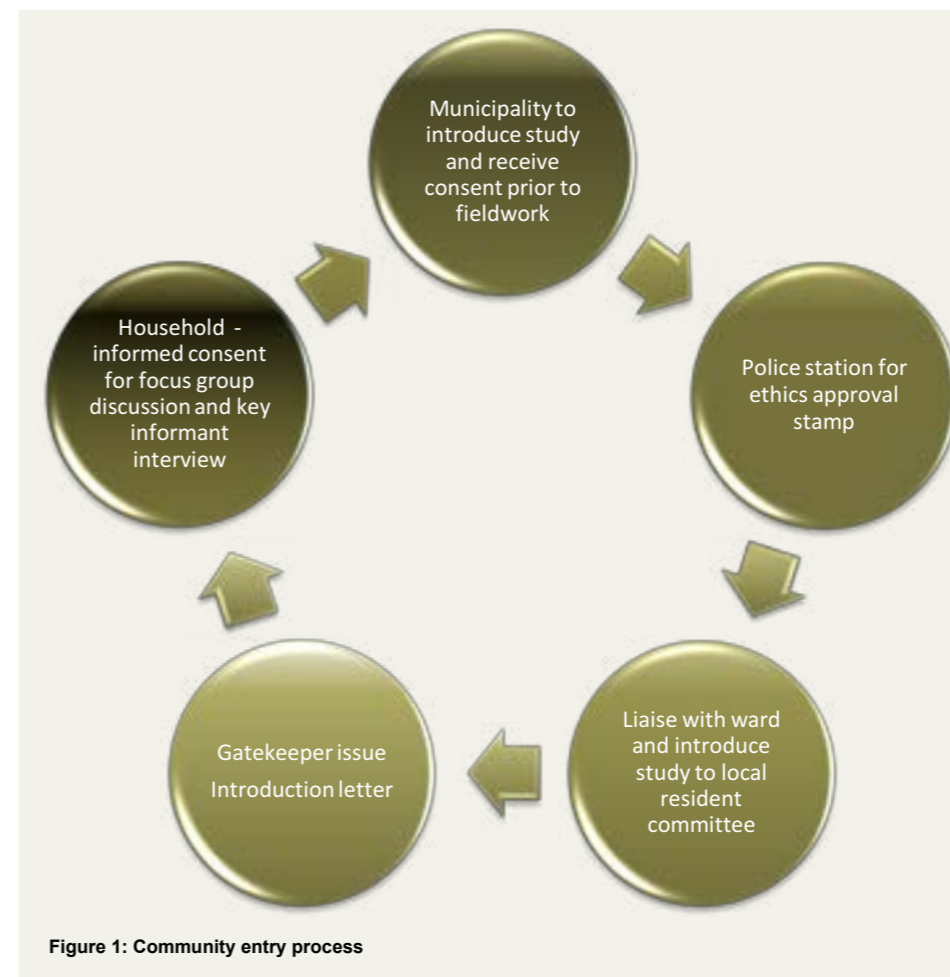

Figure 1: Community entry process

In the third phase, the research team meets with the councillor of the specific research site to introduce the study. The councillor can either consent or ask the research team to introduce the study to the community. Depending on the decision, the research team also requests for a community member who can serve as a gatekeeper with the research team and introduce the team to the sampled households. The role of the gatekeeper is also to help identify participants for the interviews and focus group discussions based on specific criteria provided by the research team.

Findings – the value of MMC support

In Sedibeng, the team began by making a courtesy call to the regional Department of Human Settlements. The officials had already received communication from their provincial counterparts. They advised the research team to make a courtesy visit to the offices of the Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) where the team was invited to present the objectives of the study at a meeting attended by the councillors.

Presenting the study to all the councillors at a single venue reduced the amount of time the field team would have spent re-introducing the study to each councillor. The field team was able to respond to questions and to get the buy-in of the councillors. At the meeting, the researchers got the contact details of the councillors in the different wards. The MMC's office also provided a team that took the researchers to the sampled areas.

Service delivery protests

The field team in Sedibeng came across service delivery protests and could not access all of the sampled research sites. However, they gained insights into the issues that led to the protests and the precautionary measures to take during the actual fieldwork. With the community entry process stalled, visits to the police station and gatekeepers were conducted during the fieldwork.

In Ekurhuleni, field teams also encountered service delivery protests about the housing allocation process. The protesters attributed the long waiting period for subsidised housing to corruption and bribery.

Hesitant individuals

The Tshwane regional department of human settlements was aware of the study. Earlier, the researchers had tested their data collection instruments (household questionnaires, focus group discussion guides, key informant interview guides) there. The MMC facilitated dialogue with the councillors of the different areas, but the councillors were hesitant to participate until they confirmed that the study indeed had the endorsement of the MMC.

In one instance, the management of a social housing development refused to grant consent for the researchers to access the site. They required the study team to write letters to their board and then wait until the next board meeting in a month. Time for fieldwork was limited and the study team therefore replaced this development with another project.

At most of the sites in Tshwane, the gatekeepers wanted to be paid a day's wage for taking the research team around. Such wages had not been budgeted for and the field team then opted to use the gatekeepers only for introduction to

the community and then moved on without them.

In Ekurhuleni, gaining community entry meant driving long distances to find ward councillors. Some councillors did not honour their appointments and the field team would drive all the way and return to Pretoria without consent. Gaining access to communities was therefore, done during the actual fieldwork. As the team completed data collection at one site, the team leader would proceed to negotiate entry into the next study site.

The taxi strike

In the City of Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni, the provincial taxi strike that occurred in June 2017 disrupted the field team's work. On the first visit to the Ekurhuleni, they had to turn back to avoid being caught up in the violence. After the strike, they visited the regional offices in Ekurhuleni to introduce the study to the MMC who was not available. The assistant of the MMC, however, helped the field team with the contact details of the relevant ward councillors. In addition, the Ekurhuleni team also visited the customer care centres in the region and got details of ward councillors.

Lessons for practice

The researchers found that community entry is dictated by context and the field teams have to adapt to that, hence the variations in entry and consent in each region. Where a field team encounters a service delivery protest, it is best to turn back and visit when calm has returned to the community. Taxi strikes also endanger field teams and when these occur, teams are required to keep away from fieldwork and use the day organising field materials. The unavailability of councillors might signal a potential refusal.
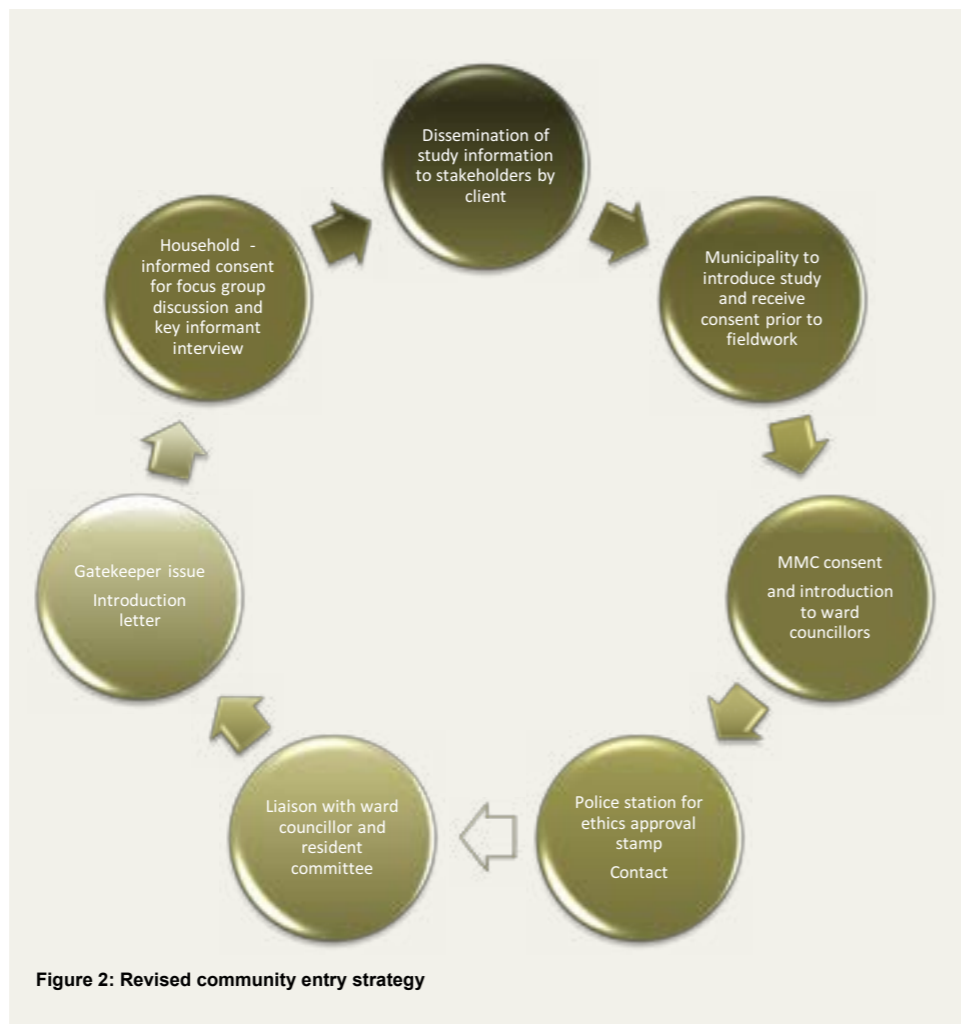

Figure 2: Revised community entry strategy

When councillors are always unavailable to meet the field team to gain consent, it is best to move on to other sampled sites. In the meantime, the field team needs to request an alternative study site while, continuing to attempt to reach the unavailable councillor.

After working in the field, the researchers redesigned the initial community entry strategy by building in two extra steps of consultation (Figure 2). Before visiting and introducing the study at the municipal offices, the team recommends that the client – in this case the GDHS – first disseminates information about the study to the stakeholders. After introducing the study at the municipality, the

team should first meet with the MMC to be introduced to the ward councillors, before proceeding to the police station.

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School climate and mathematics achievement:
Can the children learn?

Recently, the media covered high levels of violence and bullying in schools highlighting safety concerns in schools. Learners need to be in an environment where they feel safe for effective teaching and learning to take place. *Lolita Winnaar* examines the school climate in secondary schools in South Africa based on data from the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

The safety of learners at school plays an important role in their achievement. However, many South African schools are plagued by issues of ill-discipline, disorderly conduct of learners and teachers, and varying degrees of violence, all of which have a devastating impact on learners' ability to learn and to live healthy and productive lives.

To some extent, the school that learners attend is a reflection of the surrounding community; hence, they are susceptible to the same risk factors. There is also a clear relationship between poverty and high levels of violence in schools, which in turn have adverse effects on learner academic success.

School climate has been defined in a number of different ways but, simply put, it is the heart and soul of a school. Ill-discipline, bullying and violence occurring in schools are the results of a poor school climate within schools that are often located in high poverty areas.

Data from the TIMSS formed the basis for analysis in this piece. The TIMSS assesses learners in mathematics and science but it

also collects information from schools, teachers and learners so we can look at whether there are relationships between the learning environment and academic achievement. According to the TIMSS framework, a school with a positive climate tends to place a high emphasis on academic success. Its teachers face few challenges, there are very few or no problems with bullying and discipline, and learners and teachers feel safe there.

These results focus on school climate in relation to mathematics achievement within South Africa compared to the international scenario at the grade 9 level.

Emphasis on academic success

Principals responded to a set of statements relating to the extent to which their schools emphasise academic success. Only 1% of South African Grade 9 learners attended schools that placed a very high emphasis on academic success, compared to 7% internationally. There is an achievement gap in mathematics of 179 points on average between learners attending schools that place a very high

emphasis on academic success and those that do not.

Challenges faced by teachers

Teachers were asked to respond to several statements related to challenges that they face. Some of these included statements related to class size, curriculum coverage and implementation, time to prepare for lessons as well as pressures from parents.

There was an association between the challenges that teachers face, and learners' mathematics achievement. Learners attending schools where teachers face fewer challenges obtained higher mathematics scores on average than learners attending schools where teachers faced many challenges. Sixty percent of South African learners attended schools where teachers faced some challenges. The percentage of schools facing many challenges in South Africa is double the international average.

Bullying

Learners were asked to respond to nine statements related to bullying