

Research for Advocacy & Systemic Change

A Ridiculously Simplified
Guide to Intersectional
& Decolonial Research
+ examples



Hello!

Thank you for your interest in this short guide. If you're reading it, you're probably an international cooperation or development professional focusing on program development, advocacy, or public policy. You also understand the importance of addressing protection issues through an intersectional lens, working collaboratively instead of in operational silos. You recognize the value of contextual knowledge and sharing power and resources with national and local organizations. You understand the need to incorporate these groups' proven practices and insights to strengthen and inform programs and policies so that they respond to their needs and are effective and transformative.

Over the past decade, I've conducted research to offer technical advisory and produce **guides, needs assessments, and recommendations** for national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and UN agencies advocating for systemic change. I aim for these organizations to understand the protection issues they work with from an intersectional perspective and find solutions informed by localization and decolonization. My research and evaluations in

the Americas and Europe for UNICEF, the University of Edinburgh, Georgetown University, International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), Refugees International, the Center for Democracy in the Americas, and others have produced or contributed to **25+ reports, handbooks, and short articles, [available here](#)**.

I'm happy to share this guide with an extremely summarized account of the steps and lessons learned in conducting **qualitative policy and advocacy research** from a participatory, intersectional, and decolonization approach. Given my expertise in forced displacement within and from Latin America and my focus on protection services, policies, and programs for displaced populations, including children, LGTBQ+ individuals, and survivors of GBV, this guide will be particularly beneficial for professionals engaged in these fields.

I hope you find it helpful, and if you have any comments or questions, feel free to **message me through my [website](#) or [LinkedIn](#)**.



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1 - What is Research for Advocacy and Systemic Change?

This guide focuses on **qualitative practice-oriented research used by NGOs, INGOs, and UN agencies to advance systemic change**, which has been my focus over the past decade. I've applied qualitative methods (fieldwork/country visits, literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, and surveys) to inform programs, policy, and advocacy efforts. In my experience, in its extremely simplified version, the research process for policy and advocacy looks like this...

1 / 7 - Deciding on what research is necessary and useful

Practice-oriented research addresses policy, advocacy, and programmatic needs. We aim to practically implement our research findings in advocacy initiatives, policy reform, and/or policy, program, or project design.

Unlike academic research, in practice-oriented (policy and advocacy) research our research questions and study design address practical gaps in contextual or programmatic knowledge essential for advancing our work. Research needs vary greatly because they depend on organizational goals/focus and the broader 'ecosystem' within which each of us work. In general terms, we can use this type of research to:

- Identify unmet human rights and determine what subset of the population is most severely affected by these, how, and why (commonly known as 'needs assessment');
- Enhance our understanding of the local or country context to plan new projects, programs, or policies;
- Analyze the effectiveness of existing policies, programs, or projects to identify gaps and propose changes for improved outcomes;



- Compare the effectiveness of policies, programs, or projects implemented in different countries/contexts;
- Explore if and how policies, projects, or programs implemented in one region/country/context could be applied in new ones;
- Gather evidence of the success of a program, project, approach, or policy to advocate for further support from governments/donors.

For more on the use and value of research in international cooperation, see the Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies' course '[Operational Research for Humanitarians](#)' and SVRI's [Pathways to Research Impact](#) course.

2 / 7 - Initiation and planning phase

Careful planning of the research process, including developing a detailed written research plan agreed upon with research partners, is crucial. This can help us anticipate risks associated with changing contexts and avoid (most, hopefully, all) misunderstandings and delays.

1. Co-design the research project: Hold a meeting with all the partners involved to define or confirm the aim and target audience of the final research outputs and the research methodology;
2. Draft a short contingency plan identifying risks divided into different areas, such as the research process and the external context. This can be done by creating a table where each potential setback is classified as red, amber, or green, and a few mitigation measures are provided for each scenario;
3. Create a simple but detailed research plan outlining the research phases and steps, the specific duties assigned to the partners, deadlines, and a timeline.



3 / 7 - Desk review & Stakeholder mapping phase

The more in-depth knowledge we have of the cultural, social, and historical factors influencing social justice and human rights issues, the more we can contribute to the development of contextually relevant solutions.

1. Conduct a desk review of publicly available secondary sources (i.e., academic articles, reports, databases, dashboards, communication pieces by UN agencies, specialized NGOs, etc.). As an example, here's my "🌍 [Database - Migration in the Americas](#)". When not many secondary analyses are available, we review relevant primary sources (i.e., official communication pieces, laws, policy documents, etc.);
2. Understand the political context in the broader sense. This entails being aware of various factors such as the prevailing public opinion on the issue we're researching, media influences, the economic situation, the operational setting for non-governmental organizations, and anything else we need to know (for more on this, see SVRI's course [Pathways to Research Impact](#); for examples, see [ACAPS country situation reports](#));
3. Identify the main stakeholders involved: Government bodies, nonprofit entities, INGOs, UN agencies, grassroots and people's

movements, national networks, women-led, LGBTQI+-led, refugee-led, or diaspora-led organizations, etc.;

4. Try to better understand the power dynamics among these stakeholders by undertaking a power analysis with the help of our local/national partners. This involves asking questions such as: What are the sources of power in the context we're researching? Who possesses more or less power in this situation? Where do we observe the effects of power imbalances? How does power manifest? Why does it manifest this way? and so on. For more on this, see FNM Advising's [Decolonizing Development: Program Design and Management](#) course;
5. Based on this knowledge, we can understand the historical processes and underlying social, economic, political, and cultural factors that shape the social justice and human rights issues we're researching ([context analysis](#)) a little bit better. Additionally, we can identify the populations most adversely affected and the specific ways in which they are affected, commonly known as '[needs assessment](#)'. Hooray.



4 / 7 - Data collection phase

Our interviews and focus groups must involve people with multiple vulnerabilities or who belong to commonly marginalized social groups (e.g., children, LGBTQI+ individuals, irregularized migrants, and Indigenous peoples, among others).

6. Create an Excel or Google sheet matrix to classify the potential interviewees in categories (e.g., government bodies, NGOs, INGOs, etc.) and track our conversations with them;
7. Create interview guides by incorporating insights from the desk review, that help us address gaps in knowledge necessary for policy or advocacy;
8. If we're working in a large team or with different partners, it's helpful to draft common scripts for communications with the potential interviewees and for everyone to revise the interview guides;
9. Conduct fieldwork in-country and online. Methods can include participant observation, structured, semi-structured, or in-depth interviews with (international, national, and local) stakeholders, focus groups, participatory approaches, surveys, etc. It has to

include focus groups and/or interviews with the people directly impacted by the particular social justice and human rights issue(s) or directly benefiting from the program/policy we're analyzing. We can share online qualitative surveys or do online interviews with those who may not be available for in-person interviews;

10. It's crucial fieldwork involves individuals who belong to commonly marginalized social groups, such as children, LGBTQI+ individuals, *irregularized* migrants, refugees, Indigenous peoples, Black peoples, girls and women survivors of Gender-Based Violence, among others.



5 / 7 - Data analysis and report writing phase

Close collaboration with local and national partners is essential to ensure that our research's final output (e.g., a report, guide, handbook, advocacy brief, etc.) accurately mirrors the reality and interests of the populations they serve.

11. Analyze the interviews and survey findings using qualitative content analysis methods, combining deductive and inductive coding (aka, an Excel matrix). This combination helps identify themes and patterns in the information gathered during the interviews and through the surveys;
12. Examine the evidence and insights gathered from interviews, surveys, and/or focus groups alongside the information obtained in the desk review process (triangulation of sources) to formulate conclusions regarding the human rights issue's description and recommendations;
13. Facilitate participatory consultations to get feedback on the issue's description and recommendations from all partner organizations and research partners;
14. Draft the final output of the research process: a report, a guide, a handbook, an advocacy brief, a set of recommendations, etc.

6 / 7 - Evaluation and Feedback phase

15. If possible, conduct a short final evaluation of the research process and outcomes with all the partners involved. This can be a 45-minute to 1-hour meeting to provide feedback and reflect on what worked well, lessons learned, and what could be improved in the future. There are a myriad of tools we can use for these final evaluations, among them the 'End of the Project Review', the 'After Action Review', and the 'Fishbone Diagram' ([see a summary here](#)).

7 / 7 - Implementation phase

16. As mentioned, our research findings and insights will mainly contribute to advocacy efforts or inform programs and policies. Because this phase heavily relies on local or national organizations and governments (or directly impacts them), active participation from these organizations in every stage of the research process is crucial. This brings us to our next point on participatory methods, cooperation, and collaboration.





2 - Why Are Participatory Methods and Collaboration Crucial?

Creating context-specific solutions to human rights and social justice challenges that align with national/local realities and interests is necessarily a collective, participatory process. Besides this, **participatory and democratic knowledge-creation processes** are crucial in rectifying the international cooperation system's systemic injustices. These include inequitable power relations between global and local NGOs; white saviorism; racism; and the exclusion of the local organized civil society from decision-making processes. Western-based (so-called 'international') expertise and solutions have traditionally been valued over local expertise and experiential knowledge. They have frequently been seen as universally applicable despite significant differences in the social, cultural, and political contexts where they have been implemented.

Online and offline methods that promote collaboration with communities and local or national research partners allow researchers to conduct research and evaluations alongside the individuals affected by human rights violations and directly involved in addressing them. Inclusive approaches can help ensure that marginalized communities' diverse needs and perspectives are considered. Participatory methods can also help challenge dominant narratives and solutions to human rights challenges whenever needed.



In recent years, a movement has emerged from within the humanitarian aid and international cooperation sectors that pushes for **localization**, notably the redirection of funds by donors to national, smaller NGOs and increased engagement and leadership by these organizations. As we work to fulfill the '**localization**' agenda, we must also push for the **decolonization** and democratization of **knowledge-creation processes**. This means prioritizing more equitable and participatory research and evaluation processes, actively involving the communities targeted by international cooperation programs/projects, and giving them opportunities for **meaningful participation** and influence in international policy debates.

As an example, in the field of forced displacement and migration, the international community has made broad commitments to enable the political participation and engagement of migrants and refugees in international cooperation spheres. However, participation is not always meaningful. Democratic **knowledge-creation processes** would systematically involve them as protagonists in a conversation that looks more like a two-way dialogue than an exercise in extracting knowledge from them. They would also try to reflect, to the extent possible, the enormous ethnic, cultural, racial, and intersectional diversity of people on the move (see point 5). They would welcome a variety of viewpoints, even if they disagree

with Global North partners' or donors' priorities and interests. Finally, fairer **knowledge-creation processes** that seek **meaningful participation** would truly include the contributions of people on the move in advocacy planning, policy documents, and standards.

Another key aspect to **meaningful participation** is the need for more equitable and adaptable funding approaches. Besides providing direct and **flexible funding**, large international agencies and other donors are well-positioned to make room for local and national NGOs' leadership, including in the design of participation mechanisms that put intersectionality into practice to accommodate the needs of **marginalized groups**. This can involve building the capacity of these organizations to do policy advocacy in high-level policy spheres; helping to create community with other organizations already involved in policy communication or advocacy efforts; and improving access to collective mental health wellness programs, among others.





3 - What is Intersectional Feminist Analysis, and Why Do We Need It?

In its extremely summarized definition, **intersectional feminism** is a framework that examines the systems (racism, colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism) that have, over time, produced oppression, inequality, and unjust social, economic, and political hierarchies. In international cooperation, we usually focus on the forms of oppression experienced by **marginalized groups** and individuals, but we're all affected by these dynamics in one way

or another. **'Intersectional feminism'** is not just a buzzword aimed at identifying individual 'differences' or forms of oppression. Its ultimate goal is to analyze structural power dynamics and use this knowledge as a tool to challenge racism, sexism, classism, and other unjust social hierarchies. Its ultimate goal is liberation and social justice for all, based on freedom, equality, social justice, and participatory democracy ([Mara Viveros Vigoya](#), [Ochi Curiel](#), [Patricia Hill Collins](#)).

Black Feminist scholars and activists started developing this paradigm in the 70s. In the 1990s, [Patricia Hills Collins](#) coined the term 'matrix of domination' and Kimberlé Crenshaw that of 'intersectionality' to describe and attempt to change such social injustices. Latin American and Caribbean decolonial Black scholars added a decolonial perspective, that is, the idea that these systems of oppression result from historical processes and power dynamics stemming from Latin America's economic dependence, colonialism, and the transatlantic slave trade ([Lélia González](#)).

One of the key contributions of Black feminism to our role as researchers and advocates is its emphasis on prioritizing the lived experiences and perspectives of historically **marginalized groups** in our analysis and responses to the human rights challenges we aim to address. In brief, knowledge isn't 'neutral' or 'universal' because everyone views the world and writes based



on their specific cultural, social, and individual baggage ([Djamila Ribeiro's 'place of speech'](#)). The problem is that, throughout history, the perspectives of very narrowly defined social groups have been deemed legitimate and considered the 'universal truth.' Conversely, commonly **marginalized groups** like Black women and Indigenous peoples have often been relegated to the status of 'others' who produce knowledge seen as illegitimate, 'biased,' and 'unscientific' ([Feminismos Plurais](#)).

This situation means we must proactively work to promote marginalized groups' views, knowledge, and intellectual contributions. For this, we need to recognize and acknowledge our 'place of speech' (the standpoint from which we speak and write) and its influences. We must also create room in research, at conferences, policy forums, etc., to listen to and learn from perspectives that have historically been marginalized ([Djamila Ribeiro](#)). By treating these perspectives as legitimate and embracing them as part of our work, we can foster a more inclusive, democratic, and equitable approach to social change.

Intersectional feminism has also addressed a significant issue that anyone in our field should consider: Research often neglects or shows substantial gaps in data and analysis of issues that solely or predominantly impact **marginalized groups**, which leads to reduced awareness and insufficient policy responses ([Djamila](#)

[Ribeiro](#)). Priorities are, of course, driven by national and/or geopolitical interests. In the realm of international cooperation, this tendency frequently leads to decreased interest from INGOs, governments, and/or donors in tackling social justice and human rights issues or responding to humanitarian situations that impact specific populations or countries.

We can see examples of this problem in the Norwegian Refugee Council's yearly 'The world's most neglected displacement crises' reports. Certain displacement situations receive minimal media coverage, limited political attention by the international community, and are systematically neglected and forgotten, leading to reduced funding. In sum, due to its interest in the 'unspoken' and the invisible, an intersectional approach can be crucial in analyzing human rights issues that generally go unnoticed, allowing for identifying and developing solutions.

To learn more about Latin American and Caribbean **intersectional feminism** in English, see the free book "Feminisms in Movement. Theories and Practices from the Americas", edited by Livia De Souza Lima, Edith Otero Quezada, and Julia Roth.





4 - Using Decolonial Theories and Analysis

In my work and research, I use the lens of Latin American critical theory (see Anibal Quijano, Boaventura de Souza Santos, Edgardo Lander, Ochy Curiel, Pablo González Casanova, Ramón Grosfoguel, Yohanka León del Río, and many others). This is not only due to my academic background and personal experiences but also because I believe that the international cooperation community too often perceives the issues it addresses as unanticipated, novel, or exceptional, labeling them as 'crises,' 'situations,' or 'emergencies'. Often, solutions reflect this short-term perspective. On the contrary, Critical Geopolitics, World Systems Theory, the Coloniality of Power, intersectionality, and other critical theories allow us to develop more comprehensive analyses of current Latin American 'crises'.

Critical analyses involve considering these 'crises' in the context of their root causes, specifically the long-term historical and political processes contributing to their emergence. Latin American critical theory is also dedicated to championing the demands of people's movements and grassroots that advocate for increased independence while challenging racism, colonialism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism (Yohanka León del Río).



An example of how we can apply these theories in our region is by analyzing how Haiti's peoples and history are portrayed by the mainstream media, Global North-based politicians, academics in the Global North, and some INGOs and agencies. In these representations, the ongoing human rights and humanitarian crises in Haiti are often attributed to isolated events, such as the 2010 earthquake, later natural and human-induced disasters, and recent political incidents like President Jovenel Moïse's assassination in July 2021. In reality, Haiti's present situation results from various overlapping historical processes that have also shaped other countries in the Americas into the unequal, unjust, and racist societies we find today. Haiti's 540-year-long history encompasses colonial pillaging, oppression, and genocide of its native peoples; the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring legacies of structural racism; bloody dictatorships; imperialism and direct US intervention; the imposition of international structural adjustment programs; myriad natural catastrophes and environmental degradation poorly addressed by our governments; and mass emigration.

Taking the example of regional migration policies to address large-scale displacement of people on the move across Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years, conceptualizing migration from the region as an **'emergency' or 'humanitarian crisis'** is limiting. This perspective obscures the reality that migration and forced displacement are complex, multi-faceted, constant, and structural processes that cannot be resolved through isolated, narrowly defined policies or interventions. In contrast, when we apply critical theories, we're instead concerned with developing system-wide solutions that prioritize social justice and human rights for people on the move and address the actual 'root causes' in each context. This brings us to our next point: Applying what we've learned and integrating theory and practice.





5 - Applying What We've Learned: Integrating Theory and Practice

We can examine every social justice and human rights issue we aim to address through the critical, decolonial, intersectional perspective described in the previous pages. Here, I'll use the issue of **protection issues connected to large-scale displacement of people on the move across Latin America and the Caribbean** in recent years. According to my research and that of others, persons and populations who live at the intersection of being on the move, migrants or refugees, and one or more of these

identities and factors are disproportionately affected by various forms of human rights violations at different stages of their migration journey:

- Women and girls;
- Unaccompanied and separated children;
- Persons with disabilities (including older people on the move);
- The LGTBQ+/people with diverse SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and sex characteristics), particularly Transgender women;
- Black people on the move, including Sub-Saharan Africans, Haitian nationals, and other people of Haitian origin;
- Linguistic minorities (i.e., people whose mother language isn't English, French, or Portuguese), who are disproportionately affected by language racism;
- Indigenous peoples who hold belief systems (cosmologies) different from the Western ones and rely on Indigenous ways of teaching and learning;
- Individuals whose livelihoods and safety are at risk due to climate change (i.e., affected by increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events that impact agriculture and food security and the economic and infrastructural devastation emerging from man-made and natural disasters).



The multiple human rights violations against these individuals in transit and destination countries include being disproportionately exposed to physical violence and extortion by security forces and criminal groups, Gender-Based Violence, decreased access to legal information, racism, prejudice-based violence against the LGBTQ+, food insecurity, and many more. Once they arrive at their destination or while temporarily stranded in transit countries, poor access to dignified, lawful work and/or inaccessible regularization processes may challenge their socioeconomic integration and expose them to situations of abuse and exploitation.

These human rights violations reflect longstanding systemic social injustices in Latin America and the Caribbean, originating from historical factors like colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and the formation of Nation-States led by Europeanized elites. Discrimination and racism are rooted in the social, political, and economic exclusion of Indigenous peoples, Black populations, women, and other 'sociological minorities' (social groups that, despite making up a large chunk of the population, are oppressed and excluded) by the colonial and later national elites.

Discrimination, racism, and violence against people on the move echo society's prevailing cultural norms, beliefs, and attitudes and are deeply rooted in our patriarchal and postcolonial societal

structures. Sexism, age-based discrimination, structural racism, xenophobia, misogyny, aporophobia (prejudice against the poor), classism, homophobia, and transphobia may inform the actions of government officials, security forces, communities in transit and destination countries, and other people on the move, resulting in these human rights violations and protection issues we witness.

Another cause for exclusion is the frequent invisibility of these groups in the actual implementation of protection policies on the ground. All transit countries have extremely complex mixed movements, serving as countries of origin, transit, destination, and return. The proliferation of unofficial migration routes often means that people in transit may go unnoticed by international agencies and governments. Additionally, even when governments register individuals in transit, they may not consistently collect data disaggregated by sociodemographic characteristics. This lack of detailed information significantly hampers the ability of governments, NGOs, and international agencies to deliver targeted protection services to groups in need of heightened support.

To find examples of **decolonial** and intersectional research by other researchers across different geographical areas and issues, follow Tobias Denskus's [Aidnography blog and newsletter](#).



Thank you for getting to the end of this short guide! If you found value in this guide, please pass it along to your colleagues to spread the knowledge.

Also, if you have any comments or questions, or **if you'd like to discuss how we collaborate on a research project**, feel free to send me a message through [my website](#) or [LinkedIn](#). You can also [subscribe to my newsletter](#) to receive helpful resources, updates on my research, and firsthand accounts from field visits only two or three times a year.

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