The researcher's intentionality in knowledge production practices: issues in demographic and health data collection in Africa

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I- INTRODUCTION

Interest in the ethical norms to respect in research in the field of social sciences, particularly among marginalized populations has increased in the past few years. However, most researchers face difficulties in applying these norms due to a lack of clear orientations and because of the inappropriateness of these norms to the specific research situations in social sciences. This is essentially because most social sciences disciplines involve a fieldwork and the researcher is thus confronted to the effects of his research practices on the social groups under study and to the pertinence of the ethical norms supposed to minimize any negative outcomes of the research. This leads to the issue of the universality of the ethical norms in research. [1] [2] [3].

In this paper we will specifically address the issue of the research practices as those directly relate to the work of the Research Ethics Boards (REB). This leads us to the following question: what are the criteria which have been used to develop a particular research methodology mobilizing various method tools? Moreover, how has the research been conceptualized to lead to these methodological choices? In this perspective, research participants' uncomfortable feeling about how the research is conducted may not come from the methods used per se but rather from what these methods reflect regarding the researcher's world vision, and thus of his/her way of conceptualizing research issues and defining the methodology to address these issues. However, this specific problem is never addressed during the process of obtaining the REB's approval before starting a research.[4]

We will show how, as 'well intentioned' researchers, we were 'trapped' thinking we would solve a problem which we defined as ethical while omitting the problem discussed above. We thus made a hypothesis based on a wrong evaluation of why research participants' were feeling uncomfortable regarding the research process in which they were involved, and we somehow 'imposed' a solution fitting with the normative REB perspective. We will describe how, in the

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[1] Cefaï, Daniel, 2009. « Codifier l'engagement ethnographique? Remarques sur le consentement éclairé, les codes d'éthique et les comités d'éthique ». in : Daniel Cefaï, Paul Costey, Edouard Gardella, Carole Gayet-Viaud, Philippe Gonzalez, Erwan Le Méner, Cédric Terzi (eds.), *L'Engagement ethnographique*, Paris, Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2009

[2] Otero, Marcelo, 2008. « Un univers parfois étonnant », Revue du CREMIS, 1(2) : 21-24

[3] The last version of the Canadian Tri-Council Statement recalls the three core principles for research ethics : respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice; the underlying value of these principles is respect for human dignity.

[4] ibid

course of our research we progressively revised the conceptualization of the problem and thus our 'research intentions'. This study took place in the particular context of demographic surveillance systems (DSS) in two sub-Saharan African countries, Senegal and Burkina Faso. People in these systems are constantly the subjects of investigation defined by external research teams, and their increasing weariness to these heavy research processes has been observed everywhere. However, few studies have attempted to document this phenomenon although it raises both ethical and scientific issues. We hypothesised that by reporting results back directly to the research participants rather than only to local leaders and decision makers as is often the case with large studies would help them better understand the interests of the research and thus feel more motivated to continue participating. In other words, by increasing participants' awareness of what the research could lead to we followed the principle in research ethics of participants' benefits. A related hypothesis was that to ensure proper information, special attention had to be put on the communication tools and channels.

II THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Our research is anchored in the context of African countries and starts from what we observed while conducting research on diverse issues in DSS sites in Senegal and Burkina Faso. We observed participants' increasing weariness as they do not see the concrete outcomes of the research they have been involved in for several years, decades in some cases. We interpreted this weariness, sometimes clear exasperation, as *caused* by inadequate research methods (here the longitudinal demographic approach which is extremely heavy). This led us to the hypothesis that to address this issue one solution was to report results back *directly* to the participants as they had been concerned by these researches for so many years. In fact we should have interpreted this uneasiness as related to the way how research is conducted, in other words looking at research practices as a result, an effect of the researcher's world vision which does not make sense for the populations under study.

By formulating the problem this way, we omitted to address the real 'cause' of people's uneasiness and thus made an erroneous hypothesis. In fact, while people say they do not understand the objectives of the research, this lack of understanding is usually not perceived by researchers since the ethical norms imposed by REB have been respected, in particular the informed consent (although REB often do not concern social sciences in many developing countries[5]).[6]. We thus considered that, in order to be legitimate, the research process should be understood by all actors involved, which leads us to the issues of interpretation and translation. As Mounin states[7]:

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[5] Ngnie-Teta I., C.A Kamga Youmbi, M. Kokolo and G.B. Fumtchum, Tamdem, 2009. « Le comité d'éthique de la recherche au Cameroun : la décentralisation comme solution? *Cahiers de recherche sociologique*, n°48 : 129-142

[6] Research methodologies are generally defined in terms of data collection rather than of data construction process. Hence, in most cases researchers use pre-defined social groups (the poor, handicapped people, etc.) ending up creating regulatory categories ('what should be') rather than descriptive ('what exists'). This raises an ethical issue as individuals are included in groups which may not correspond to their own perception of reality and as a result may not understand the explanations provided by researchers while seeking to obtain participants' informed consent. What is thus at stake is to develop a methodology that would allow the contextualization of various types of knowledge in order to co-construct data that fits with the studied populations' world vision.

[7] Mounin, G., 1963. *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*, Gallimard, p. 23

> *… in order to translate a foreign language, two conditions must be met, each of them is necessary but none of them taken separately is sufficient : to study the foreign language; to systematically study the ethnography of the community using this language.*

Thus, in the particular case of reporting results back, the researcher who has to formulate the results of his work, sometimes in a foreign language, sometimes in the same language, faces the following challenges: to ensure both the proper linguistic translation and the conceptual translation which means to take into account populations social organization and world vision. We are not talking of simplifying knowledge as is often the case in top down knowledge transfer, but rather emphasizing the need to establish the conditions for an 'egalitarian' dialogue between the research and the participants based on the sharing of their respective perspectives. This is what Massé argues, by seeing ethics as an arena[8] where universal principles and the way they should be reinterpreted in a given context is discussed between the different actors involved. Despite the limits of such an approach (who should participate to this discussion, what are the criteria which should define the 'adapted' ethical principles?), what is interesting here is the dimension of exchange and the search for a consensus between the different actors involved in a research process including the participants. This implies to identify which actors should be gathered together, in order to construct a methodology adapted to the local realities in conditions that are ethically acceptable. In this perspective, ethical norms are guidelines for the discussion while taking into account the local context.

The researcher who is present for long periods or even continuously is placed in an obligation relationship with responsibilities towards the locals which imply to be particularly cautious with one's attitudes; as such morals and ethics tend to mix leading the researcher to have a confused view on the fieldwork realities.[9] The methods used (survey questionnaire, semi structured qualitative interviews, life histories, etc.) are the key here, as they are the vectors through which researchers and participants interact directly or via intermediaries such as interviewers. These tools are designed according to a specific conceptual, even political or ideological orientation, and lead to certain types of relationships between the researcher and the population. Ethics appear in actors' interaction, it is a question of ethos, of *in situ* evaluation. We thus shift from *research ethics* based on the respect of norms defined a priori to *ethics within research* which can be measured from the perspective of research practices as well as of the concepts and methods mobilized to do the research. Hence, ethics principles cannot ignore their translation into facts; otherwise they may lose their meaning[10].

The fact that research is legitimized through the research ethics core principle of the persons' well being, and that participants' consent is related to the advantages that they will find by participating to the research, is problematic. In social sciences, research does not systematically

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[8] Birschenk, T. and J.P. Olivier de Sardan (1997). "ECRIS: Rapid collective inquiry for the identification of conflicts and strategic groups", *Human Organization*, 56(2): 238-44

[9] Cefaï, 2009, ibid

[10] Massé, R . 2003. "Valeurs universelles et relativisme culturel en recherche internationale: les contributions d'un principisme sensible aux contextes socioculturels." In : Doris Bonnet (éd), *L'éthique médicale dans les pays en développement.* Paris : *Autrepart, Revue de l'Institut de Recherche pour le développement (IRD) éditions de l'Aube,* (28) : 21-35.

end up in concrete outcomes, since what is observed are social facts[11]. It is actually becoming common to see research ethics approvals given, provided that the researcher clearly states that participants will not gain anything in particular; this is somehow a paradox as participants are subjected to various research constraints without being ensured that they will gain anything (or improve their well being) although participants are generally selected because of their vulnerable situation.

The power relationships between the different actors involved in a research process may hinder participants' capacity to understand the objectives and interests of the research and thus lead to an almost systematic bias while giving one's consent to participate to the research. Consent can thus rarely be fully informed as a gap between the researcher and the participants is unavoidable, due to the difference of education levels, backgrounds, etc. The challenge is thus to articulate participants' vulnerable condition (which is also why they are selected) and their freedom to accept and participate.

This raises the issue of the usefulness of research when it is not followed by concrete effects. For example the study of specific behaviours such as union formation can be pertinent to understand a more global phenomenon (fertility) which can be associated to concrete policies and programs (family planning). This raises the following question: how can we make it acceptable for populations that it is not the research *per se* which is conducive to concrete actions, but the way it is used and that the use of it does not solely depend on the researcher but on other actors? Researchers in the context of vulnerable populations tend to become vectors of hope because of their capacity of informing and sensitizing local authorities about health, education and other issues. These issues are exacerbated in the case of demography where most research consists in describing and explaining trends related to mortality and health, fertility or migration, without necessarily leading to concrete actions. The increasing requirements formulated by funding agencies for researchers to design studies conducive to policy recommendations illustrate the shift from the *necessity* of research to its *usefulness*.

In this paper we will show that paying specific attention to this particular stage in research which is reporting the results back to the research participants has to be associated to other stages of the research process – conceptualization and implementation – which all imply an effort of reflexivity on the categories we are using, on the data collection methods and on data analysis approaches.

III CONTEXT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research questions described above come from the authors' own confrontation to the methodological constraints imposed by the demographic surveillance systems (DSS) implemented in many African and Asian countries. These sites located in rural areas in most cases but also increasingly in urban settings, are composed by a group of villages or neighbourhoods selected on the basis of criteria defined according to the initial interests of the DSS designers. These systems work on the basis of a continuous data collection process using standardized questionnaires with questions on vital events (births, deaths), health, marriage and migration. The questionnaires have become more sophisticated through the years integrating

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[11] However in demography and public health, an increasing number of studies using problem solving approaches offer opportunities for more operational research.

new dimensions such as education and poverty. These ‘population observatories’ were initiated in the 1960s and have multiplied since then. The initial objective for researchers and funding institutions was to fill the gaps in demographic and health data in developing countries and to evaluate the impacts of various health programs implemented locally on the observed trends (family planning programs, vaccination campaigns, etc.)[12].

The specificity of these DSS relates to the continuous data collection process and thus to the longitudinal perspective they offer[13]. This means that interviewers visit every household included in the system regularly during the year and asks the same questions; data is systematically computerized and go through complex control processes to ensure the coherence of the answers across time. The main drawback of such systems, despite the tremendous advantages they offer in terms of the quality of the data collected, is that they rely on residents’ constant participation to the same data collection process with heads of households or their representatives interviewed several times a year for long periods. These systems also imply a heavy and costly logistic including interviewers, supervisors, vehicles, sophisticated computer programs and skilled technicians among other dimensions. Finally these systems constitute research platforms for other research teams willing to use the DSS baseline to conduct their own studies on a sample of the population. As a result in the most ‘popular’ DSS, residents are literally overwhelmed by surveys, studies of all types without necessarily seeing any clear change in their daily lives.

Therefore populations’ growing weariness has been observed in most DSS, jeopardizing the continuity of the research process[14]. As the following excerpts illustrate from interviews in the Niakhar DSS (Senegal) in 1999, people do not see the point of all these researches and clearly refer to the accumulation of studies they have been involved in and that end up ‘haunting’ the area[15]:

> *…can you explain what is the use of your research?*
> *My question is as follows: she [man talking to the interpreter about the researcher] interrupted my work to do her own work and with her questions I have told her about my private life and now I wonder in all this, what can I expect from her or her work?*
> *Are you going to do like the other [researchers], once you will be done with your work you will leave and we will never know what you have done with the information we have given to you?*

This is how the idea came to us to design a multi-site project in order to elaborate a procedure of reporting results back in DSSs. The sites are located in Senegal and in Burkina Faso, three are rural (Niakhar, Bandafassi et Nouna) and one is urban **(table 1)**.

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[12] Check the INDETPH-network web site : http://www.indepth-network.org/

[13] Madhavan Sangeetha, Mark Collinson, Nicholas W. Townsend, Kathleen Kahn and Stephen M. Tollman, 2007. « The implications of long term community involvement for the production and circulation of population knowledge”, *Demographic Research*, 17(13): 369-388

[14] Madhavan et al., 2007, ibid

[15] Rob van den Berg and Philip Quarles van Ufford (2005). “Disjuncture and Marginality – Towards a New Approach to Development Practice”, in D. Mosse and D. Lewis (eds), *The Aid Effect. Giving and Governing in International Development*, Pluto Press, p.196-212

Table 1 : main characteristics of the DSS sites[16]

	Niakhar (Senegal)	**Bandafassi (Senegal)**	**CRSN (Burkina Faso)[17]**	**OPO (Burkina Faso)[18]**
Institution	Institut de recherche pour le développement/IRD (France)	Institut national d'études démographiques/INED (France)	Ministère de la santé (Burkina Faso)	Institut supérieur des sciences de la population/ISSP (Burkina Faso)
Start[19]	1983	1974	1992	2002
Villages/neighbourhoods	30 villages	42 villages	52 villages, 7 sectors à Nouna	2 neighbourhoods
Residents	35000	11500	77000	5445
Ethnic groups	Sereer	Peulh, Bedik, Malinké	Marka, Bwaba, Mossé, Samo, Peulh	Mossé
Religion	Muslim Christian Animist	Muslim Christian Animist	Muslim Christian Animist	Muslim Christian
Collected information	VE, VA, health, households, schooling	VE, VA, households	VE, VA, HS	Households' assets, schooling, housing, VE
Nb. Visits/year	Quarterly	Yearly	Three times/year	Quarterly
Interviewers	Permanent, locals	INED interviewer and local interpreters	Permanent, locals	Permanent, locals

Note : VE = vital events, VA = verbal autopsies, HS = household survey

Our hypothesis was as follows: it is the lack of understanding of the research process and the data management (and thus of the research findings) that engenders feelings of uncertainty, weariness, even exasperation among participants. It becomes thus necessary to organize a systematic result dissemination procedure, directly to the populations and taking into account the local communication characteristics. This procedure must be designed in such a way that it can be updated (because of the continuous data collection process) and replicated across time.

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[16] At the time of our study (2006-2008) each of the four sites were active. Since then, Bandafassi has been abandoned by its managing institution and the Ouagadougou pilot site has led to the actual larger population observatory.

[17] CRSN : Centre de Recherche en Santé de Nouna

[18] OPO : Observatoire de Population de Ouagadougou; in 2006-2007 the OPO was till at the pilot phase and was composed by only 2 neighbourhoods. At that time the goal was to check the feasibility of implementing a much larger DSS in an African urban environment; the new Obervatory is now composed by approximately 80000 persons.

[19] We are using the date of the first exhaustive local census conducted in each site.

This will ensure the continuity of DSSs as well as the quality of the data. This idea, although not entirely new, was innovative in the sense that it questioned existing reporting back procedures by targeting directly the research participants and avoiding the traditional gathering of local authorities and leaders; it also aimed at documenting more systematically the weariness expressed by the populations but known to researchers in an anecdotal way. In adopting such a perspective our objective was to address the gap in the access to information between the populations – although constantly subjected to surveys – and their own leaders[20].

The choices usually made when organizing result dissemination activities are guided by the logistic constraints (gathering together the DSS residents) and residents' poor education levels. Hence an additional question is: through which communication channel and with what communication tools is it possible to provide residents with meaningful information?

Ultimately the idea of reporting results back is that it should lead participants to a greater freedom as it will allow them to better understand the research process and at the same time lead to a better knowledge of their own community. In that sense our objective is to go further than the knowledge transfer process, common in the health domain, which is more top down oriented; instead we advocate for a process of knowledge exchange based on a more egalitarian type of relationship between researchers and participants[21]. However the latter procedure also implies that the researcher will be confronted more directly to the interpretation given to the results as participants may discuss these[22]. Such a confrontation between researchers and research participants may lead the former to question the categories used, the methods and the justification for using these methods[23].

This is where, according to us, the issue of the researcher's engagement becomes meaningful: because the scientist is socially invested of the power to 'find and tell the truth and as such acts on the world by disseminating what he/she has understood from this world'[24], the researcher is responsible for the questions asked, the methods mobilized to answer these questions, and ultimately for the methods used to 'exchange' this knowledge with the research participants.

Another issue is related to the motivation of ensuring the continuity of the DSSs and their efficiency : to what extent the initial ethical objective (the research participants' right to know the results and what they lead to) is not being used in the researcher's interests alone in terms

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[20] However, interesting work has been done by Lesclingand and Hertrich (2007) who made huge efforts to report their results back to the local residents of a small DSS site in Mali. These people now benefit from a regular event where updated results are described through a very pedagogi slide show and personal interactions between researchers and inhabitants.

[21] Gravois Lee R. & Theresa Garvin, 2003. « Moving from information transfer to information exchange in health and health care », *Social Science and Medicine*, 56(3): 449-464.

[22] We should remain cautious with this 'well intentioned' perspective. It seems to us erroneous to think in terms of knowledge exchange without considering the reciprocity of the perspectives from the start of the research. In other words, simply talking of knowledge exchange seems to imply the parallel existence of various forms of knowledge and does not refer to the co-construction of knowledge which is based on more egalitarian relations between the actors involved in the research process.

[23] Bergier, B., 2000. « Le versant éthique de la restitution » (chapitre 9), in : B. Bergier (ed), Repères pour une restitution des résultats de la recherche en sciences sociales », L'Harmattan – Logiques sociales, p. 253-272

[24] Ibid : 254

of career for example[25]. We suggest going beyond the Research ethics boards requirements as, especially in the social sciences, the need to take into account the complexity of situations has led to an inflation of norms and experts committees with the consequence that the researchers transfer their responsibility towards others by respecting strictly these norms, and thus neglecting the personal and autonomous reflection[26]. If we define ethics in our research practices as the ethics of caring for others, then it must be discharged from the imperative of efficiency and rationality through the obedience to a code. Therefore we will follow Bergier's perspective, where the author describes various situations going from the systematic result dissemination procedure by researchers having 'bad conscience' to a reject of such procedures by other researchers who consider that it is not part of their work. He suggest a third possibility, more contingent by considering that reporting back is first and foremost a social act in the sense it has an impact on people and more specifically on the research fieldwork. As such the procedure is framed by the rules of the research area and by the local constraints (communication channels, period of time when reporting back would be acceptable, etc.).

In this latter option, the researcher is free to choose whether reporting results back is a good thing or not and what would be the best format. This freedom of choice implies researchers' engagement and responsibility as they question the act of reporting back itself by taking into account a whole range of constraints. Therefore, researchers should: 1) question their relationships with the population under study; 2) remain open to the way the reported material will be perceived and understood by the audience; 3) remain empathic (thinking of the effects of both the research practices and the reporting back procedure). In that sense it is important to remain conscious of the potential positive and negative outcomes of reporting back activities: it can reveal new areas of knowledge for people and open for debates and freedom; on the other hand it can also highlight 'social determinants' (especially in demography) creating new forms of social determinism which could paralyze the concerned social groups (e.g. the sick, the poor, the uneducated, etc.) who would thus not see the purpose of being informed about the results.

Hence, reporting results back addresses the relationship between the different research actors on the field and concerns research participants' well being (the ethical aspect). This goes along the same lines as the efforts made by an increasing number of scholars who want to go beyond the often positivist, evolutionist, universalizing contemporary development frameworks[27].

Our main objective was to identify the most adapted communication tools to report results back activities in each site directly to the research participants. Other objectives were:

1- Identify DSS residents' perceptions on the research activities they have been subjected to for years through the surveys and the longitudinal follow-up

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[25] ibid

[26] Ibid : 256

[27] For example see the « actor-oriented approach » developed by Long (Long, N. 2001. "The case for an actor-oriented sociology of development". In: N. Long (ed), *Development Sociology. Actor perspectives*. Routledge, pp. 9-29); also Olivier de Sardan (Olivier de Sardan J.P., 1995, La politique du terrain. Sur la production des données en anthropologie, in *Enquête*; Olivier de Sardan, J-P., 1995, *Anthropologie et développement. Essai en socio-anthropologie du changement social*, APAD, Karthala). The two authors suggest a new perspective on the power relationship existing between the actors involved in development projects.

2- According to the great number of researches conducted in the DSS and the huge amount of information produced accross time, what are the aspects that interest participants most? As it is not feasible to report all results back at once, how can choices be made, which are the priorities? This dimension should be discussed with DSS residents as well as with the interviewers, especially those based locally, and with the researchers[28]?

3- Understand populations' attitudes : if they express weariness or discontent, why do they continue to participate and how can these problems be solved?

4- Identify the most appropriate formats of reporting back activities according to local norms in terms of communication, social codes, etc. In other words: how can we report results back in diverse cultural and social communities?

IV METHODS

We used a heuristic approach exclusively based on qualitative interviews and constant exchanges with the local interviewers due to their long lasting contacts with the local populations. In each site, research assistants conducted the interviews but in a preliminary phase the principal investigator was present to become familiar with the sites and the diversity within them.

From the start it became clear that reporting back should take into account the characteristics of the research conducted and thus the type of data and the local context. In order to capture the local issues related to the communication channels and social mobilisation spaces while respecting local social dynamics we used the notions developed by Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan[29]: arena (social space of actors' confrontations), conflicts (indicator of how social relationships work) and strategic groups (local and project actors' dynamics according to their respective interests)[30]. These concepts, because of the heuristic fieldwork approach they imply, allow researchers to go beyond the limits engendered by the standardization of certain research methods, especially the statistical surveys[31].

In each site several interviews were conducted with local authorities and with different people considering age groups and sex. We also know that the education level plays a role in people's understanding of the research process. Based on this preliminary information a more systematic series of interviews were conducted individually or through group discussions. All interviews

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[28] Another issue relates to the inflation of additional studies conducted in DSS sites but which have nothing to do with the longitudinal follow up. Not only populations lose track of the motivations of all these researches but it appears that this inflation of data increasingly leads to its under exploitation which also poses ethical problems.

[29] *Op. cit*

[30] Bierschenk, T. et Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, 2007 «ECRIS : Enquête Collective Rapide d'Identification des conflits et des groupes Stratégiques», *Le bulletin de l'APAD*, n° 7, *Les sciences sociales et l'expertise en développement* , [En ligne], mis en ligne le : 3 décembre 2007

[31] See the « actor-oriented approach » Long (op. cit) in sociology of development, which examines the power relations between the actors involved in development projects; also see the work of David Mosse, 2005, *Cultivating Development. An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. Pluto Press. These perspectives are pertinent here to examine the methodological aspects and research practices these lead to.

were conducted in the local language by the research assistants or with the help of local interviewers. In the sites where a diversity of ethnic groups is represented (Nouna and Bandafassi) we ensured that a sample of people belonging to these would be selected. We exclusively took notes and transcribed them regularly[32]. At the end of their fieldwork the research assistants working in their respective DSS sites wrote a report in the form of a diagnosis in order to address the main question of our study : what should be reported back, to whom and how?

Table 2 : total number of interviews conducted in each site

	Villages/ neighbourhoods	**Individual interviews**	**Dicussion groups[33]**	**Total**
Niakhar (Senegal)	30	57	57	114
Bandafassi (Senegal)	26	0	25	25
Nouna (Burkina Faso)	19	34	10	44
OPO (Burkina Faso)	2	23	12	35

Our study was funded and supported by the INDEPTH-network[34] which federates most DSS in the world. It is worth to note that despite the complexity of the relations existing between DSS researchers and managers with us as we were perceived as a potential source of conflicts between them and the populations. Nevertheless, the necessity to ‘do something’ was admitted as they were worried about the continuity of the sites they were working in. The ‘good intentions’ related to the ethical approach of our study could not be questioned, however the research project was worrying the DSS leaders as they were fearing that a better understanding of their rights by the populations could lead to increasing rejections to participate to the longitudinal follow-up. Hence, there were two conflicting objectives: the identification of means to ensure the continuity and efficiency of the sites for the DSS leaders and ours, which was to understand the processes leading (to ?) the gaps between populations’ and DSS teams’ respective interests and question the research practices seen as the source of these gaps[35].

V WHAT WE LEARNT FROM OUR FIELDWORK

In this section we present the similarities and differences we found in each site. These findings led us to question the way we initially conceptualised the issues. It is essential to locate the excerpts we are using to support our arguments in the respective contexts of each site where

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[32] We opted for the note-taking instead of recording the interviews in order to avoid typical REB questions such as ‘do you accept to be recorded?’; we also wanted an exchange as ‘natural’ as possible.

[33] The discussion groups were conducted among men and women separately of together in mixed groups depending on the context.

[34] http://www.indepth-network.org/

[35] This can also refer to the research partnerships imposed by many funding agencies and which bring together various actors with often different and opposed interests.

populations are constantly solicited to participate to surveys in addition to the DSS follow up and are thus particularly sensitive when asked to talk about it.

Participants' perceptions on the research activities in the DSS sites

The key issue here is the routine associated to the longitudinal follow-up where DSS sites' residents are regularly asked the same questions through the years. Although most respondents in our project wonder about the purpose of such a follow up we found different types of reactions to the questions they were constantly asked.

In each site there are two main types of attitudes to the follow-up questions : a lack of understanding, with participants not seeing the point or the meaning of the question, and a negative reaction to a question considered as embarrassing.

The questions which do not make sense for our respondents are generally related to the households composition, and the entries and exits of people in the household; these are typically 'routine' questions asked each time the interviewers visit the households composing the DSS site. Because the answers barely vary from one visit to another (especially within the same year), the purpose of these questions is not clear for participants whose spontaneous reaction is to tell the interviewer: "but I've already answered this question last time you came!"

The questions to which DSS residents react most radically concern more intimate domains which are often related to the households' precarious situations: reproductive health and fertility. It is essentially women who are targeted by these questions which they often consider as inappropriate and which purpose is not clear to them either. In some cases, such as among the Sereer in Niakhar, asking questions about how many children were born or are desired is simply not acceptable.

Another sensitive domain relates to the households' assets. Such questions are asked systematically in the OPO and in Nouna and have only been asked through a separate survey in Niakhar and not in the follow up. The negative reactions to such questions can be explained by the following reasons:

- The questions about households' assets recall the period when the administration collected such information for tax purposes; therefore there is a systematic suspicion to these questions;
- In rural areas and in some ethnic groups (the Peul in particular), the amount of cattle is never mentioned precisely;
- More generally the respondents perceive these questions as forcing them to expose their poverty with no change for their future more than a feeling of shame about their condition. They express exasperation to the interviewers who usually know their condition because they live in the site as well but nevertheless come and ask questions about it.

> *Imagine, your harvest is bad because of a lack of rain; you have no ox and no plough to cultivate and someone comes to ask you how much you spend everyday. It becomes embarrassing (an old Marka man, Bourasso, Nouna DSS)*

> *Interviewers who come every three months to talk to us also ask questions about what we possess; they ask us if we have a television, a radio, a motorcycle, a bicycle, cattle, if the inside house is cemented or not. Honestly I have to admit that these questions bother us a lot. Imagine that we have to enumerate all this without knowing what it will be used to and by whom (a head of a neighbourhood organisation, Wemtenga, OPO)*

The domain that is conducive to the most emotionally reactions relates to the verbal autopsies. The verbal autopsy procedure is indeed essential to identify the causes of deaths in contexts where vital registration is limited. Hence verbal autopsies fill a gap in the local information system in such a way that not only the direct causes of deaths are systematically reported in the DSS but also the indirect causes which provide some explanations for the death (e.g. what has led to the individual's weakness thus exposing him/her to disease; the inadequate therapeutic trajectories, etc.). One objective of these procedures is to inform local health institutions with the hope that they will be able to mobilise the limited resources they have to tackle certain health priorities identified through the analysis of the verbal autopsies conducted in the area.

Despite these potentially positive impacts of verbal autopsies, most participants react negatively to them and this is related to the concrete way such questionnaires are administered:

> *It is often difficult and hard to talk about the death of your own child... these situations recall many difficult moments (a woman in Nouna).*

The most negative reactions were expressed in Bandafassi and this is certainly because of the way the information is collected in this DSS. In this site, and contrary to the other, interviewers come only once a year and do not visit systematically every household; a 'village informant' (in most cases the chief or the health agent if there is one) collects information of all vital events happening during the year; it is only in the case of deaths that the interviewer visits the concerned household to conduct the verbal autopsy. Therefore, residents associate these visits to the need to recall and tell in details sad events such as the disease and the agony of a child (which is frequent in this area as child mortality is very high). Beyond this emotional dimension, the negative attitudes to these procedures also come from the fact that villagers do not see any concrete changes occuring in their daily lives , especially those related to health:

> *R1 : If your child dies, they come to ask you many questions, it is moving, you are asked to remember things and after that the interviewer goes away and you stay with your revived memories…*
> *R2 : Since they are asked questions about health and deaths, populations expect some kind of assistance in terms of medications. What surprises them is that since 20 years they haven't seen anything…(group discussion, men Bandafassi)*

Of course assistance does exist via external NGOs and governmental aid. But this aid is not related to the DSS activities despite its long lasting presence in the area and this is what people do not understand. Villagers in the other DSS sites of our study may not have reacted so strongly because of the presence of the interviewers the year long and their regular visits which allows them to discuss these issues more often. Therefore, multiple visits, even if more costly and time consuming, may constitute an advantage as it contributes to better communication between the different actors at stake: the populations, the interviewers as constant intermediaries between the participants and the DSS researchers, and the researchers.

In summary, the negative reactions expressed by the different groups we met and interviewed essentially suggest that participants expect to see a relation between research and action. The difficulty with longitudinal follow ups is that by definition such research processes are long lasting and thus difficult to be understood by the broader public. Therefore most of the follow up questions do not make much sense for the residents: *honestly, the question do not make sense if they are not followed by concrete interventions targeting the immediate needs of the populations (a neighbourhood leader, sector 1, Nouna)*.

Participants' motivation to answer despite their lack of understanding of the research process

Participants' lack of understanding of the purpose of the questions asked led us to explore their motivations to continue answering.

In each site, the research teams had already made efforts in terms of explanations and dissemination of information, especially during the past years, in order to respond to the increasing feelings of weariness expressed by populations and reported by the interviewers to the DSS leaders. However, as shown above, these efforts have obviously not been fruitful enough to inform people about the interests of the research:

> *All these questions we are answering, what's their use?*
> *What are you looking for with your questions? What are your objectives?*
> *In fact it is the meaning of your work we do not understand. We are answering your questions without understanding what you are looking for with us.*
> *Tell us clearly, all these questions, what is their purpose?*
> *(excerpts from an interview with a young Mossi man, sector 3 Nouna)*
>
> *Interviewers come, they write, and they leave. We do not understand anything of all this (young Bwaba man, Nouna).*
>
> *I do not understand the objectives, the reasons, ... of your surveys (a woman in the unzoned area of Taabtenga, OPO)*

All these reactions are supported by the interviewers' own observations as they are faced with populations' own questions:

The demographic surveys are feasible because of the strong relationships between us and the people. But people are frowning when they see you coming... [and then the interviewer explains how difficult it is to enter the compound and start his work] (...)
People have become familiar with the questions. But do they only know what demography is? The questions related to deaths, the verbal autopsies are problematic. People do not understand why they have to 'summarize' the death of their child
(an interviewer in Niakhar).

To our question : « if you don't understand the purpose of these questions, why do you continue to answer », we found that most reasons to continue participating to the DSS activities could be explained by unequal power relationships between the populations and the DSS leaders and interviewers :

- the interviewers' status and the perception people have of research designed by external teams :
  For them, surveys are organised by the State, therefore they feel obliged to answer. (...)
  for us, they come from the government, there is no way we can refuse to answer
  and in addition it has become a habit for us (group discussion, men, Bandafassi)
- some respondents told us they had never thought of searching for information, interviewers' visits had just become a habit
- other told us they did not know that they could ask for information
- and finally, some said they had asked the interviewers but the latter could not give them satisfactory answers

The general perception is that they have never been informed of the DSS objectives. One reason for this can be that the information sessions did not touch them because restricted to the local leaders who did not do the necessary to disseminate the information later. Another reason, and this is our core hypothesis, is that what is considered as an explanation by research teams is not by local populations; this implies a more in depth reflection on the communication modalities and channels within the communities and also on the issues of 'conceptual translation'[36]. In other words, the relative lack of knowledge by most DSS teams about the socio-cognitive dimensions of people's world vision makes any attempt for explanation more complicated whether at the start of the research when trying to obtain participants' informed consent or at the end, when designing reporting back activities[37]. Reporting back may thus be a way to clarify objectives a posteriori (later, at the end); if so, what about the quality of the information collected among people who did not understand the purpose of the research but who however gave their consent to participate?

The answer to this question certainly lies in the unequal relationships existing between the different actors involved in DSSs (research teams, technicians, interviewers and populations). To the question why they continue to answer, our own respondents highlighted the following dimensions:

- the hope to see their life conditions improve, see programs implemented
- the relationships established with interviewers who are often the 'country's children' and whom they do not want jeopardize by making their job difficult
- a less clear reason is related to respondents' feeling of inferiority as they are poorly educated, cannot read or write, do not understand the questionnaires, etc.

> *We do not understand the importance of these data. Nobody has told us yet why you are doing this data collection [meaning the longitudinal follow up]. we*

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[36] See Mounin, *op. cit*

[37] The fact that in some cases the researchers are 'locals' does not necessarily solve the problem as the conceptualisation and methodology of DSSs are a result of external initiatives and funding. It is not that they do not know well the local populations but researchers' latitude to put local perspectives at the forefront of the data production process is limited.

> *answer to please the interviewers. Since they need it, we cannot refuse to participate. By answering we also hope that there will be something for us some day (discussion group, young men, Wemtenga OPO).*

Or this older woman during a discussion group in Bandafassi:

> *If you see questions about births and deaths every year it must be because there is aid coming.*

The role played by permanent interviewers is thus essential. Because of the close relationships between them and the populations they know how to convince people who have become reluctant to answer the questions. Therefore they also insist on their own need to better understand the purpose of the DSS approach as they don't see themselves a concrete articulation between the data collection process and actions targeting populations. In each site we visited, there was a consensus among interviewers and interpreters (in the case of Bandafassi) that reporting back results would not make any sense if it doesn't highlight the benefits populations may find in participating to the DSS longitudinal follow up as illustrated by the following excerpts from a discussion group with the Niakhar interviewers:

> *In fact the problem is not there, they [the populations] don't care about explanations. We must show with the explanations that they gain something with the surveys. Populations associate demographic surveys with health surveys which have more immediate and concrete outcomes.*
>
> *You can provide explanations but the problem [populations' weariness and anger] will come back 2 or 3 years later.*

Other interviewers in the same site described their daily work conditions where feelings of constantly disturbing people, feelings of guilt (especially in the case of verbal autopsies) clearly emerged. In all sites interviewers emphasized the fact that their work was more difficult when they had to ask the questions to a more educated person, as in this case the participant would be more reluctant and requesting information which they can often not provide, thus exacerbating their own uneasiness.

These excerpts raise important issues. First, they emphasize the hierarchical dimension of the relationships between researchers, interviewers and participants where feelings of mutual dependence emerge: between the interviewers and the populations and between the interviewers and the researchers. Hence relationships of shared interests and in some cases of solidarity (essentially between interviewers and populations) have emerged across the years which contribute to the continuity of the DSS without ensuring populations' full adhesion to it.

The dimension of dependence also appears through people's hope that by participating, development programs are likely to multiply in the area whether these programs are directly related to the topics addressed by the longitudinal follow up or not. This attitude highlight the difficulty of explaining the purpose of a DSS which by essence is meaningful on the long term to people whose preoccupations are daily, immediate. More generally it is the old problem of the gap between research, which is long term, and research participants' expectations which are immediate that emerges here[38].

The fact that people do not seek to understand, that they don't seem to realize that they can ask for explanations, or consider that they do not get proper information, means that they haven't provided a consent that that is fully and properly understood. If this is the case, reporting back results takes a pedagogic dimension where explanations about the whole DSS approach have to be provided in such a way that it is understood and means something to DSS residents. In other words, it is essential to get back to the conditions in which the consent has been obtained by the research leaders.

Hence two apparently contradictory findings emerge: first a social demand for being informed about the results is expressed in our interviews; but beyond this information, people need explanations about the purposes of the questions they've been asked for several years:

> *Why after all these years we are not told anything? I would be very happy if we got explanations about the questions we are asked. People come, ask questions et leave after saying thank you. We do not understand why interviewers cannot provide explanations about the usefulness and the purpose of these surveys (group discussion, men, Bandafassi).*

But there is also a lack of interest in having the results reported back if no concrete actions are associated to these results. It becomes thus essential to explain the purpose of DSSs, and why it is beneficial for the populations. It becomes a pedagogic approach more than explanatory or simply informative. What is essential to understand here is that what is important for the populations is less the articulation between the survey they are participating to and the related actions than see that something is 'happening', ongoing; in other words they relate their participation to an external interest to their situation whatever this leads to. This also brings some nuances to the objectives of reporting results back to address the issue of populations' weariness to the DSS approach; here, reporting back would be interpreted more as a sign of respect, faithfulness from the research team who have been 'using' DSS residents' information for years. This was clearly shown in the work of Lesclingand and Hertrich (2007)[39] where residents were interested in seeing how their community had been evolving across time explained by the researchers they had seen visiting them for years.

How to report back

Regarding how to report results back, there was a consensus that an interactive and interpersonal approach between all actors is needed. DSS residents see the reporting back activities as an opportunity to exchange with researchers, ask questions and give their own opinion. Also these activities are seen as an event which breaks with their daily lives activities. In

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[38] Boiral, 1985, « Logiques de recherche et logiques d'action », in Boiral P., Lantéri J-F., Olivier de Sardan J.P., 1985, *Paysans, experts et chercheurs en Afrique Noire. Sciences sociales et développement rural*, Paris, Karthala

[39] Lesclingand Marie & Véronique Hertrich, 2007. *When the population is changing… A presentation of research findings in Mali*. INED, Paris.

that sense it is essential to keep in mind that the populations concerned are often marginalized whether geographically or in terms of their socioeconomic situation or both.

Various suggestions emerged in the different sites and from different sub groups (essentially the ethnic groups in Nouna and Bandafassi):

- small discussion groups at the level of the neighbourhood (often women)
- larger meetings at the level of the village with visual events, drinks and food
- large meetings at the level of the village but with no festive dimension and based on interactive communication (the Peul in Nouna)

In the rural areas the main social mobilisation space is under the tree where local authorities traditionally meet or close to the village chief's compound; in other words any place that is accepted by all and respecting the local social relationships' hierarchy. Residents need to be told in time by their local authorities in order to organize their activities. It is thus important to take into account local communication channels to spread the information.

The other issue is related to the type of communication tools to be used. Beyond visual events and group discussions spontaneously suggested by both inhabitants and interviewers, applied theatre, used in most cases in sensitization campaigns could be an interesting tool to address the pedagogic dimensions described above[40]

All participants in our study expressed their preoccupation to be present at such activities and about their availability. In general the dry season was suggested to organise these events because people are free from the agricultural work; however in many cases in rural areas most people migrate to cities during this period to ensure a continuation in their earnings which thus makes it difficult to gather the majority of the residents during this period.

VII- CONCLUSION

If our research does not always make sense to the research subjects it would be too easy to conclude that it is because of their lack of education or simply because they are lay persons compared to 'scientists'. In our study, participants' perceptions that they do not have any explanation concerning the DSS approach reflect a gap between them and the researchers about the notion of explanation itself. Therefore, beyond the need to identify the communication channels, tools and the social mobilisation spaces, it is also necessary to invest time and energy in the translation of ideas, in other words, enter the local populations' 'minding' to ensure that there will be a mutual understanding of what is being done and why.

Our study also shows the importance to relate the stage of result dissemination to other dimensions of research ethics such as the modalities surrounding the informed consent. Moreover it leads to the difficult question: if, from the start, people consider that they haven't understood the objectives of the research, not only are they not informed but what about the quality of their answers? Let us recall the interviewers' descriptions of how they have developed efficient strategies to 'convince' reluctant participants to continue answering the questions.

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[40] Stuttaford Maria, Claudette Bryanston, Gillian Lewando Hundt, Myles Connor, Margaret Thorogood and Stephen Tollman, 2006. "Use of applied theatre in health research dissemination and data validation: a pilot study from South Africa", *Health*, 10(1): 31-45

The constant issue of the long term perspective of research compared to research participants' immediate, daily preoccupations is exacerbated in the case of a DSS where data analysis is meaningful on the long run. Hence people perceive these research systems as far from their daily life conditions and thus question the usefulness of these systems. Therefore, the issue of linking research to action, found in other research situations, takes an important dimension in the case of DSSs[41]. However, if research and action can be intuitively associated in the case of health, what about research undertaken within other social science disciplines? Demography is a tricky one as it can be extremely 'technical' and at the same time focuses on the complexities of human behaviours in order to better understand changes in demographic trends. Therefore some studies may seem 'useless' (e.g. the study of local marriage processes) as they are not conducive to concrete actions but are however important for a better understanding of broader social changes.

These issues emphasize the need to establish a dialogue between researchers, developers and populations on a regular basis as their respective agendas and interests are different. These aspects have been extensively described by Boiral[42] and Mosse[43] in various contexts. The constant and regular interactions involved by DSSs should be used to establish such dialogues and formalize links between research and action even if the latter is not related to the DSS longitudinal follow up[44]. To us the problem lays in the gap between researchers ideas about the pertinence of their own questioning and populations daily experience[45]. This gap is exacerbated in the DSS context where populations are vulnerable (both socioeconomically but also in terms of their social status compared to the research teams) and research teams are constantly present, either directly or via the work of interviewers. This presence makes it more difficult for the residents to understand why not concrete actions are undertaken by these teams despite their knowledge of the local constraints and daily issues.

With our project we somehow fell in a trap by designing our research following the typical demographers' approach by hypothesing that by reporting results back with appropriate communication tools directly to the DSS residents, we would address their feeling of weariness and exasperation more efficiently. This approach was thus based on an action scheme defined a priori with the idea of identifying the results to be disseminated and how. However, by focusing on people's perceptions in an open way, we were able to bring new findings to light and re-think the purpose of our project. In other words our research methodology allowed us to adopt a

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[41] Mesnier P-M.; Missotte P., 2003, *La recherche-action : une autre manière de chercher, se former, transformer*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 325 p

[42] Boiral, 1985, « Logiques de recherche et logiques d'action », in Boiral P., Lantéri J-F., Olivier de Sardan J.P., 1985, *Paysans, experts et chercheurs en Afrique Noire. Sciences sociales et développement rural*, Paris, Karthala

[43] Mosse, D., 2005, *Cultivating Development. An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. Pluto Press.

[44] Madhavan Sangeetha, Mark Collinson, Nicholas W. Townsend, Kathleen Kahn and Stephen M. Tollman, 2007. « The implications of long term community involvement for the production and circulation of population knowledge", *Demographic Research*, 17(13): 369-388

[45] See Linda T. Smith (2006). Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples, Zed Books Ltd, University of Otago Press. The auhor shows the 'symbolic violence' used on populations formerly colonized in the name of a research essentially based on Western conceptualisation and methodology. Research procedures thus do not make any sense to the natives and the author calls for initiatives where natives would take control of the way knowledge concerning them is produced.

reflexive approach, leading us to question the principles on which our research was initially based.

In this particular case the issue is to understand how we could make a mistake in the identification of the cause of the uneasiness expressed by DSS residents; we interpreted this uneasiness as a result of the effects of the data collection methods on the populations. However, it is less these research procedures which are problematic as the ideas, concepts on which these procedures are based: the categorizing of people classified in ways that are meaningful for demographic analysis but in which they do not recognize themselves; a way of formalizing their daily realities which doesn't make any sense to them, etc. This has led us to interpret the observed uneasiness wrongly and to formulate a 'solution' which is not in fact addressing the real issues. The often strong reactions by some of our respondents to the idea of reporting results back, saying that it was not what they were interested in, and thus rejecting the normative ethical prescription, obviously emphasized this misunderstanding.

In the case of social sciences this would mean that applying blindly ethical norms does not ensure that the research practices will be appropriate in the context in which they will be used. A provocative question would be: to what extent should the 'rule' by which informed consent form and result dissemination be mandatory? How can social sciences offer a more adapted way to ensure that ethics within research will be respected as long as research ethics are normalized and standardised?

Social scientists need to relocate the ethical issues within the specific characteristics of their discipline and the local context. In our case, result dissemination becomes a pretext for a pedagogic work, hand in hand with all actors involved by the research procedure. This implies that the motivations for the result dissemination and its procedures are also well explained and that local power relationships are taken into account. Ultimately it is not so much reporting results back that is at stake than the need to establish a dynamic of good communication between the actors involved; this would certainly meet the requirements of localised research ethics based on general principles admitted by all.