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Building relationships and praxis despite persistent obstacles

Maria Grazia Imperiale

Introduction

This chapter discusses how *participatory methodologies* were developed for use in what became an entirely online study researching critical English language education in a context of protracted crisis; that is, the Gaza Strip (Palestine). The project on which this chapter is based was developed between 2014 and 2017; however, this chapter was written in summer 2020 when people in most countries of the world were self-isolating, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Contexts of protracted crisis as in the Gaza Strip, as well as more generally contexts in the Global South in which different forms of knowledges and multiple ways of working coexist, are well positioned to illuminate the research landscape and methodological adaptations that these times of uncertainties require.

The Gaza Strip has been under blockade since 2007, and this impedes free movement and the flows of people and goods into and out of the Strip. The condition of forced immobility has consequences for the mental and physical well-being of Gazan inhabitants. In the context of academia, the blockade affects the mobility of staff, who, hence, cannot attend international conferences and events, making it challenging to create networks and long-lasting, collaborative partnerships. In addition, the flow of knowledge into and out of the Strip is affected not just metaphorically, as books and any other materials published outside the Strip cannot easily be posted and reach colleagues inside the Strip. The study on which this chapter is based aimed at co-constructing critical, creative, and localised pedagogies for English language education in secondary schools in the Gaza Strip (Imperiale, 2017; Imperiale et al, 2017; Imperiale, 2018; Imperiale, 2021). Through a series of workshops, that were held entirely online, the researcher – based in the UK – and the participants, 13 pre-service English teachers based in the Gaza Strip, analysed and developed teaching materials and lesson plans for teaching English adopting creative and critical methodologies. Some of the teaching materials were then trialled and evaluated based on participants' use of them in their classrooms. The study was grounded in participatory methodologies, and consisted of a cycle of critical participatory action research (CPAR), which included the phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

This chapter is structured as follows: in the next section I present the research context, important to understand the research design and methodological considerations; then I focus on the chosen methodology, the research design, and on how methods were used. I then describe the main challenges and I reflect on ethical considerations of the study. In the conclusions, I point out the implications of this study and my personal insights into doing research in times and contexts of crisis.

Researching in a context of protracted crisis: the Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip, with the West Bank and East Jerusalem, constitute the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas on the planet, inhabited by almost two million Palestinians living in a very small piece of land, measuring about 40 km in length and between 14 and 16 km in width. Tawil Souri and Matar (2016) present some of the statistics of the Gaza Strip, which are worth citing in full as these offer an insight into Gaza's astonishing reality and its numbers:

> More than two thirds of the population is made up of refugees; 70% live in poverty; 20% live in 'deep poverty'; just about everybody has to survive on humanitarian hand-outs; adult unemployment hovers around 50% give or take a few percentage points; 60% of the population is under the age of 18. This is the Gaza where on a good day there is no electricity 'only' 20 hours a day; where before the latest Israeli military operation, in summer 2014, there was already a shortage of 70,000 homes; where 95% of piped water is below international quality standards; where every child aged 8 or younger has already witnessed three massive wars. (Tawil Souri and Matar, 2016: 3)

People in the Gaza Strip live in a condition of 'forced immobility' (Stock, 2016) which is detrimental to transnational social relationships and to individuals' development, their autonomy, and self-determination, and individuals' mental and physical well-being (Smith, 2015; Fassetta et al, 2017; Imperiale, 2018). Movements into and out of the Strip are virtually impossible as both the Eretz crossing (at the border with Israel) and the Rafah crossing (at the border with Egypt) are usually sealed, with just some rare exceptions (Winter, 2015; Tawil-Matar, 2016). In addition, three military operations were carried out by the Israeli government respectively in 2008, 2012, and 2014, which devastated the living conditions of people in the Strip (Fassetta et al, 2020).

One way for the Gazan inhabitants to tackle, and perhaps even survive, forced immobility has been the increasing reliance on an Internet connection, which may potentially enhance the chances of online employment and reduce isolation (Fassetta et al, 2017; Imperiale et al, 2017). However, it must also be noted that, first, as Aouragh puts it, no technological medium can 'transcend economic gaps' (Aouragh, 2011: 52), neither can it be a replacement of human freedom and of human development (Imperiale, 2018).

Nevertheless, several cross-border academic research projects have been conducted in the last decade through online international collaborations. In a recent edited book entitled *Multilingual Online Academic Collaborations as Resistance* (Fassetta et al, 2020), authors describe a series of online academic collaborations between higher education institutions in the UK and US and the Islamic University of Gaza. The contributions in the book tell the story of the challenges and of the gratifications of collaborating online, when intercultural encounters are affected by the lack of physical proximity. Those efforts are described as 'a form of defiance and resistance to the physical confinement experienced by Gaza's academics, students and the general population' (Fassetta et al, 2020: 1).

Methodology: critical participatory action research for a social-justice-through-education agenda

As the research project was framed by an intrinsic commitment towards social justice through education, the research process reflected this social endeavour: the chosen methodology was a cycle of critical participatory action research (CPAR). This CPAR consisted of a series of workshops that were designed, developed, and delivered, analysed and evaluated, responding to the needs of the participants: at its heart was a practice-based approach which makes participation and knowledge co-construction prominent.

While CPAR is considered as a research methodology, it is important to acknowledge that the scholars who developed and adopted CPAR describe it as 'a worldview', a 'philosophy of life', and 'a social practice' (respectively in Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Fals Borda, 2001; Kemmis et al, 2014). These scholars agree that participatory research should be considered as something more than a methodology, as not limited to the use of instrumental techniques for collecting research data. *Critical* PAR is conceived to be a 'practice-changing-practice' that aims to change both discourse and individuals' practices in the public spheres (Kemmis et al, 2014: 28). It is therefore grounded in *praxis*, combining pragmatic approaches and knowledge co-construction (Freire, 1996).

Participation is a core tenet of CPAR, which is based on the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984) and on the opening of public spheres as safe places where the participants engage in conversation and in democratic participation. Following the tradition of Habermas, participants commit to genuine conversations based on comprehensibility, truth (in the sense of accuracy), and sincerity. Establishing a public sphere means establishing a set of relationships, wherein individuals relate to one another freely, respectfully, openly, and purposefully (Habermas, 1984). This relationship and the commitment to these kinds of conversations aim to involve the participants and the researcher equally in research (Kemmis et al, 2014). This approach, therefore, seeks to avoid the imposition of the research agenda on to participants, trying ultimately to develop research that is beneficial for the participants who take part in it.

CPAR as part of emancipatory praxis in difficult circumstances

The methodology of CPAR was chosen for this project based on the following rationales, which will be further unpacked below:

- educational research *with* people living in precarious and difficult circumstances requires ethical approaches which avoid extractive ways of conducting research and are rather grounded in participation; participants were recognised as experts, and therefore knowledge was co-constructed rather than extracted;
- in contexts of crisis, the relationship between knowledge and power is intertwined and embedded in praxis, and CPAR is underpinned by emancipatory aims which challenge power imbalances;
- the methodology was initially designed for face-to-face research. When the study was conceived it seemed possible to travel to the Gaza Strip; however, when access was denied, the methodology was adapted for use online.

Research in vulnerable settings requires strong ethical principles, which underpin CPAR and its focus on participation and emancipation.

Much has been written about participation in research, and the ethical necessity of conducting research with participants, and not on research subjects, or worse, on 'objects of investigation' (Freire, 1996: 87). The work of Freire and Fals Borda is relevant in this regard: the authors emphasise the ethical dimension of participation in pedagogical and political action aiming at emancipatory objectives. Freire highlights that through participation, critical awareness of reality and self-awareness are deepened: participation is a starting point for developing 'cultural action of a liberating character' (Freire, 1996: 87). Equally important, in this study participants did not only have an active role in participating in knowledge co-construction, but were also considered the experts on their own context. Melanie Walker (2019), based on Miranda Fricker's (2007) work and on the work of Amartya Sen (2009), writes that students within higher education need opportunities to make their 'epistemic contribution capability' flourish – that is, to be able to receive and interpret knowledge in the ways they value. In this research project, by acknowledging who the experts were, I provided a space for participants to exercise their epistemic agency.

Also in the literature on participatory action research, the intertwined relationship between knowledge and power is often explored. Gaventa and Cornwall posit that:

> We can also more clearly situate knowledge as one resource in the power field. Knowledge, as much as any resource, determines definitions of what is conceived as important, as possible, for and by whom. Through access to knowledge and participation in its production, use and dissemination, actors can affect the boundaries and indeed the conceptualization of the possible. (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001: 72)

Research, therefore, can be empowering, aiming at social transformation, not only communicating unheard participants' voices, but also acknowledging their power to build knowledge and to contribute to transformative actions. In this study, knowledge, reflection, and power were produced, explored, and countered in *praxis*. Regarding the power imbalances between the researcher and the participants in this study – and acknowledging that those power imbalances can only be reduced to a certain extent – we used the power of languages and multilingualism: the research was conducted mostly in English, with also a partial use of Palestinian Arabic. The researcher, who has only a limited knowledge of Arabic and of Palestinian Arabic, was at times *incompetent* and at times needed participants' translations (for more on the multilingual dynamics of this research, see Imperiale, 2018; Imperiale, 2021). Languages and language choices helped us navigate (linguistic) power dynamics and relationship building.

Finally, the research was initially designed for face-to-face work. CPAR was chosen for its attention and focus on *localised* practices, as, being ecologically sensitive to the sites in which research is carried out, it aims to ameliorate local educational or social issues (Kemmis et al, 2014). In addition to the local focus of CPAR, it must be added that Noffke (2009) highlighted the global dimension of CPAR: the local intersects with a broader overarching political aim devoted to human flourishing and social justice, which prefigures research as embedded in a global context. The attention to both the local and global dimension made CPAR a good fit with the educational project's local-global scope, and a robust methodology for this specific research project. However, when in-person physical access to the Gaza Strip was denied (see Imperiale, 2018), considerations were made about other possible ways of achieving the same research purposes or re-profiling the whole work. However, the choice that seemed most appropriate was to adapt CPAR to the online environment, rather than to adapt the principles and the vision of the research project.

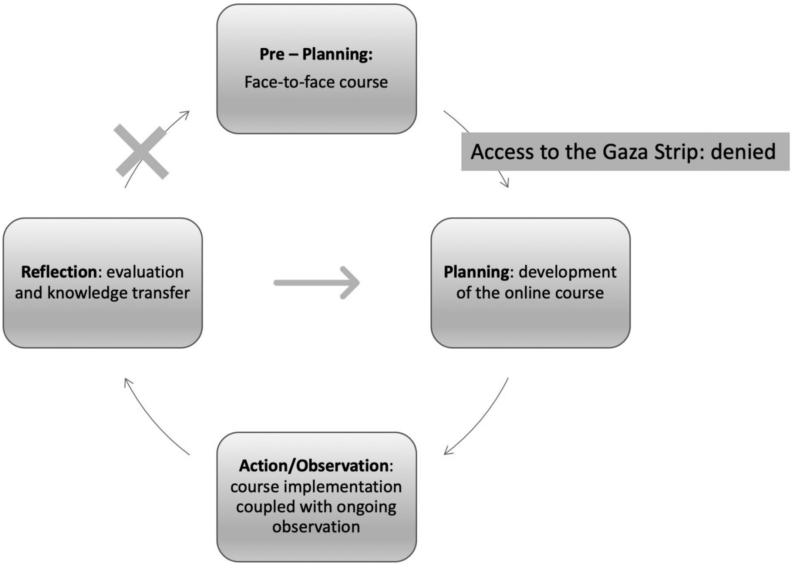
How methods were used

Based on Kemmis et al's critical participatory action research planner (2014), the research design was structured by adapting the phases of CPAR – namely planning, action, observation, and evaluation – to serve the needs of the project. The cycle of CPAR, illustrated in Figure 13.1, involved four phases: (1) a first *planning phase*, during which access to the Gaza Strip was sought, participants were recruited and the series of workshop was planned, informed by participants' initial doings-sayings-relatings; (2) a *(re)planning phase*, after access to the Gaza Strip was denied, in which the course was amended to suit online delivery; (3) the merged *action–observation phase*, in which the workshop series was implemented and observed in a continuous process; and finally, (4) the *reflection phase*, in which data analysis and the evaluation of the research project was conducted.

The planning phases: seeking access, workshops' planning, and participant recruitment

During the planning phases, in addition to the development of the workshop series, access to the Gaza Strip was sought – unsuccessfully – and

Figure 13.1: The CPAR cycle


Pre – Planning: Face-to-face course
Access to the Gaza Strip: denied
Planning: development of the online course
Action/Observation: course implementation coupled with ongoing observation
Reflection: evaluation and knowledge transfer

participants were recruited. In order to attempt to get access to the Gaza Strip, several actors were contacted: the Italian Consulate in Israel, the British Consulate in Israel, the Israeli Embassy in the UK, the Israeli information centre in Scotland, the Israeli Ministry of Defence, the Palestinian Authority Embassy in the UK, and the Egyptian Embassy in the UK. After extensive email correspondence and several phone calls, access to the Strip was denied.

Access denial was not totally unexpected, due to the blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip. Anticipating this option, the researcher and the partners involved in the project at the Islamic University of Gaza had already developed 'a Plan B'. It was already agreed that should it not be possible to travel to Gaza, the series of workshops would be conducted online, via Skype or by using other video-conference software. Therefore, the workshop series was promptly redesigned, considering the online practice architectures and the technological constraints. This proved challenging, frustrating, and discouraging, and it was only thanks to the participants' enthusiasm towards the research project that it was possible to continue the research endeavour – as will be further described later.

While seeking access, participants were also recruited. Identifying and recruiting participants was done in cooperation with the partner university, the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). In cooperation with

Prof Nazmi al-Masri who, as local academic partner, is the expert on the IUG institutional procedures, selection criteria were developed, and the workshop series was announced on the IUG website. Out of a cohort of 29 applicants, 13 participants were selected according to their academic attainment, their motivations, their teaching experiences, and the content and quality of their application form. Participants were all young women: the sample composition was representative of the student population in the English department at IUG, which consists mostly of females. In addition, as the project was developed in partnership, such an all-women group of participants allowed the researcher not to interfere with the IUG rules: in the institution male and female students are allocated different classes, they attend their courses in different buildings, and female teachers cannot teach male students. Having only female participants, therefore, was considered appropriate to the context.

The action/observation/evaluation phase: the workshop series in a snapshot

The series of workshops involved exploring the use of political cartoons, comics, drama, and films for English-language teaching. All the activities were embedded in the Gaza Strip context: we referred to *English for Palestine*, which is the textbook adopted in schools in Palestine and in the Gaza Strip, and dealt with authentic material relevant to the Palestinian context. For example, we integrated the *English for Palestine* textbook with the political comic books *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza* by Joe Sacco; the website 'Palestine Remix', YouTube videos, poems, and extracts from books written by Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani, two of the main Palestinian writers.

The format of the online workshops was highly interactive, consisting of a combination of input sessions, group work, interactive activities, discussions, peer learning, peer observation, lesson planning, and teaching practices in which the trainees planned, developed and delivered simulated English lessons by teaching to their peers. At the end of the course, participants received a Certificate of Attendance.

After the workshops, participants were involved in filling in a feedback form, they took part in interviews and focus groups, and they wrote a final reflection on a topic of their choice – this data was gathered to conduct the evaluation of the project. Without being asked to do so, however, several participants continued to communicate with the researcher as they moved into new jobs and new positions: sometimes they asked for advice on how to apply to a foreign university, other times they wanted to share their teaching practices and ideas. As such, relationships extended beyond the CPAR cycle and the research project itself: participants nurtured friendships and some of them are still in contact with each other. Some of the participants were involved in subsequent research projects co-designed by the researcher and the IUG Co-I Prof Al-Masri, ensuring long-term collaborations.

Challenges and how those were addressed

The challenges encountered were identified and categorised on two levels: first, those related to the frustration of being *always* and *only* online which were mostly challenges the researcher faced since the participants attended the workshop series together from a class at the IUG; and second, the challenges related to technological issues, which affected everyone.

The process of conducting the whole research online, without having the opportunity to meet participants face to face, proved extremely challenging, tiring, and frustrating. Despite all the gratifications that came with the project, the lack of physical proximity, of sharing the same classrooms, of sitting next to each other was difficult to deal with. At the time of writing, after summer 2020, the majority of the world has experienced the issues and frustrations that come with working at a distance. During the pandemic, educators have been forced to reflect on the tension between teaching and learning as a fundamentally human and interpersonal activity with many different values and outcomes, and the technological deterministic idea that technology could replace the relational, interpersonal element of the teaching and learning process. However, when the project was conducted (in 2015–16), not many participatory researchers had experienced the challenges of developing participation and of building relationships entirely online – and therefore there were not many resources that might have helped deal with the emotional burden and with participants' and researchers' well-being in those specific circumstances.

How was this addressed? In hindsight, and as written more exhaustively in other articles (Imperiale, 2018, 2021), it was important to be flexible and open to the possibilities and the *constraints* that were part of the nature of the project. During the project, participants were an inspiration thanks to their resilience, how they dealt with the difficult conditions, their persistence and steadfastness: with the clear aim of completing the research project, and thanks to participants' enthusiasm and guidance, there was no choice but to put frustration aside, and enjoy the relationships as these unfolded. This required the ability to let things go, without being in control at all times.

The technical challenges, to list a few, consisted in poor audio- and video-quality, interruptions and disruptions due to poor Internet connection, frequent power-cuts in Gaza, etc. In an article (Imperiale et al, 2021) those are addressed in detail: for example, what it means to work when you spend half of your time not hearing properly, not being able to see the person at the other end of the screen, when connection drops and calls fail, when you rely on blurred images of participants and on the colour of their hijab and the sound of their voices in order to be able to identify them, and the list could continue. Not being able to see our research partners, on one hand, reminds us that we cannot take partnerships for granted; on the other hand, when partnerships are built entirely online, it also tells us about the determination and willingness to connect, despite the challenges. If, on one hand, we still may miss something; on the other hand, it is important to explore what connects us. Finally, it must also be acknowledged that challenges often can also represent opportunities.

These challenges were addressed by adopting an open and flexible attitude which allowed us to work *within* those disruptions rather than *against* them, having a series of plan Bs and Cs ready to be put into place (for example, use of other mobile software; a plan for working in asynchronous modality; a participant ready to become a researcher when connection failed – for example, taking notes and pictures during the workshops). Because the participants were the main agents of adaptation, power shifted from the researcher to the participants, who, in their words, 'felt the responsibility' to make this project happen (Imperiale, 2018). At the heart of the whole research project, therefore, there were relationships and an 'immanent ethics of responsibility' (MacDonald and O'Regan, 2012).

Ethical considerations

Careful attention was given to ethics throughout the research process. Ethics was therefore considered as a continuous process that lasted from its inception to its evaluation and dissemination. The research study was underpinned by what has been described as an 'immanent ethics of responsibility', ethics arising from 'the immanence of the relationship with the other rather than through a Kantian appeal to a transcendental moral signified' (MacDonald and O'Regan, 2012: 10). This study worked on the basis that ethics is situated in praxis and in relationships building. It therefore acknowledged the precariousness of the encounters and the immanency of relationships. Important to the study was what Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) has written about how we encounter others and how we establish relationships with, in this case, participants:

> The ethical valence of the situation is thus not restricted to the question whether or not my account of myself is adequate, but rather concerns whether, in giving the account I establish a relationship to the one to whom my account is addressed and whether both parties to the interlocution are sustained and altered by the scene of address. (Butler, 2005: 50)

The idea of relationships of accountability and giving an account to each other takes ethics beyond the procedural and practical issues listed in the ethics forms that researchers need to fill in. This study involved participants who might be othered as 'vulnerable' by institutional ethics committees as some of them were refugees, young women living in a post-conflict context, in a context of protracted crisis. What was considered to be an ethical process of conducting research with people living in difficult circumstances was therefore *not* underpinned by universal moral principles and by institutionalised 'box-ticking' codes of ethical practices, but rather consisted of exploring and developing a safe public sphere in which relationships of trust were built, and where research has a clear purpose of benefitting participants in the first place. Rooting research in participation and engaging with the messiness of intercultural relationships allowed the opening up of a safe space for the exploration and the development of language pedagogies and of research methodologies for well-being.

The development of researcher–participants relationships also allowed to protect researcher's and participants' safety and well-being, that is key to conduct research in challenging circumstances. Equally important, at the time of the project, I was the co-convenor of GRAMNet (Glasgow Refugee Asylum Migration Network) which was a peer-to-peer support network in which researchers working on difficult topics, shared theories, findings, social events, writing retreats, book clubs, workshops, and other useful events around our research. Establishing a support network for researchers working in similar areas could be included as a way to mitigate researchers' risks, which might involve vicarious trauma, issues of transference, and others that affect mental well-being.

Concerning the institutionalised ethical procedures, before undertaking the research project, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee of the College of Social Sciences, for dealing with *human subjects*. Interestingly, in the formula used by the Ethics Committee, participants are labelled as 'human subjects', merely as a category to be subjected to research. This seems to be in contradiction with the understanding of ethics as a process of relationship building in the research encounter. In addition, although the ethical approval form does not consider the role of languages in research, languages were important. The participant information sheet and the consent form were provided both in English *and* in Arabic. The forms included an outline of the purposes of the research project, the consequences for participants should they decided to take part in it, the reasons why they had been selected, their power to withdraw at any point during the research, and issues of anonymity and confidentiality.

All the participants spoke fluent English; hence, the Arabic translation was not needed. However, the rationale for providing both versions was twofold: the first point was related to the English-language proficiency of the participants; that is, the form in Arabic was provided in case participants might have preferred to sign a document in their native tongue rather than in a foreign one; the second argument instead carries a symbolic value. By showing the participants respect for their own native language and presenting them with the possibility to work both in English and in Arabic, was important to comply with the understanding of ethics as relationship building and, hence, encompassing linguistic hospitality (Ricoeur, 2004). These considerations related to researching multilingually are often overlooked and underestimated in research processes, research dissemination, and also in research ethics, but are crucial to the research outcomes (Holmes et al, 2013). Whereas English is usually the language of research and publications, researching in languages other than English allow us to reflect on decolonizing dynamics and on problematizing the role that English – as a colonial language – carries (Phipps, 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter discusses participatory methodologies for education research in a context of protracted crisis. It is hoped to be relevant to those researchers who are working in a situation of crisis, and to those who are shifting and adapting methodologies in order to carry out research despite travel restrictions and the impossibility of physical proximity. Specifically, by sharing the methodological considerations of this research project, I hoped to offer educational practitioners, teacher trainers, and language educators more broadly a tool to enhance their reflections and to encourage them in pursuing their challenging work amid even more challenging circumstances.

To conclude, reflecting on my learning and trying to summarise it, I would like to draw attention to:

(a) *The potential of the unexpected, of the accidental and the importance of learning to embrace what is unpredictable.* In every research project, issues and challenges emerge. In these times of particular challenges and uncertainties, it is crucial that researchers embrace what Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, described as 'strategic positioning':

> 'The end result cannot be predetermined. The means to the end involves human agency in ways which are complex and contradictory. The notion of strategic positioning as a deliberate practice is partially an attempt to contain the unevenness and unpredictability, under stress, of people engaged in emancipatory struggles' (Tuhiwai Smith, 2006: 186).

(b) *The acknowledgment of the digital in shaping our projects.* It is necessary that – as researchers involved in social research – we understand how technology and 'non-human' actants shape our interaction. Actor–Network Theory and new materialist scholars are well positioned to help us guide our understanding of how relationships evolve and how they are affected by objects and things.

(c) *Ethics and relationships should be foregrounded in every research project.* The recognition of ethics as an ongoing process, built in immanent relationships, may help foreground ethical considerations. To guide our research from an ethical point of view, we find that formula and tick-box exercises are sometimes not exhaustive. We therefore invite researchers to consider how relationships are built, how they evolve, and what's the legacy of each research project in terms of sustainability and long-term impact.

This chapter provides reflections that might be useful for researchers that are trying to work in precarious conditions, adopting participatory and decolonizing methodologies that recognise and value the primacy of knowledge that comes out of such difficult contexts. The chapter does not aim to be a how-to guide to conduct research in times and contexts of crisis, as each research is contextually grounded, but it hopes to provide stimuli for reflections, learning from those contexts which know better how to deal with crisis and emergencies.

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