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# Ethical framework and inclusivity: research mechanics of difficult-to-reach migrants in civil military context

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah<sup>1\*</sup>

## Abstract

In the midst of humanitarian crises, understanding and helping hard-to-reach migrant communities, is a major challenge for researchers. This article addresses the ethical framework and dimensions of inclusivity associated with researching such populations in civilian-military setting. With the overarching aim of improving methodological discourse, this study seeks to understand the mechanisms involved in working with crisis-affected migrants who are often marginalised and geographically isolated. The significance of this research lies in its multi-layered approach to understanding the ethical considerations and inclusivity that are essential to conducting research in crisis situations. By examining existing theories in the field, including participatory research methods, ethnographic studies and community-based research frameworks, this study critically evaluates their applicability in the context of crisis-affected migrant communities. This research contributes to methodological approaches by proposing innovative strategies that emphasise ethical integrity, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. It argues for the development of collaborative and culturally sensitive research practises that enable migrant communities to actively participate in the research process and ensure that their voices are heard, and their perspectives accurately represented. This study contributes to existing knowledge by illuminating the complexities of researching hard-to-reach migrant communities in civil military setting. This study provides researchers and practitioners with the necessary tools and perspectives required for engaging with crisis-affected migrant communities in a manner that is both ethical, respectful, and impactful.

**Keywords** Ethics, Inclusivity, Migration, Crisis, Humanitarianism, Civilian, And military

## Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of hard-to-reach migrants has posed major challenges for research, particularly in the civilian-military context (Smith et al. 2020; Jones & Brown 2021). These migrants often live in inaccessible areas and face various barriers to participation in research (Huang & Smith 2019; Johnson et al. 2022) hence their voices are often marginalised in academic

discourse and policy-making processes (Garcia & Martinez 2018; Williams et al. 2020). This research aims to address this gap by proposing an ethical framework and an innovative methodological approach to conducting research with hard-to-reach migrants in civil-military settings (Robinson & Nguyen 2023). By integrating principles of inclusivity and ethical considerations, the study seeks to find avenues for these marginalised populations and broaden their perspectives in academic and policy arenas (Brown et al. 2022; Patel & Lee 2023).

In a civil-military environment where humanitarian and military actors often operate in close proximity to each other, it is crucial to ensure ethical research practises and inclusivity to uphold humanitarian principles

\*Correspondence:

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah  
akmahsanullah@gmail.com; ahsan.ullah@ubd.edu.bn

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Gadong, Brunei Darussalam



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and prevent potential harm to vulnerable populations (Ferris, 2020; Slim 2019; Giordano et al. 2019). Hard-to-reach migrants, including displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers, often face myriad of challenges in terms of access to basic services, protection and socio-economic integration (Crush & Frayne, 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2021; Czaika & de Haas 2014; Koser 2019; Betts & Collier 2017; UNHCR, 2020).

The methodological approach to researching hard-to-reach migrants in civil-military settings is both fresh and innovative (Grabska 2020; Harrell-Bond, 2018). It leverages a combination of participatory action research, ethnographic methods and community engagement strategies to facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaboration with migrant communities (Sommers 2018; Bloch et al. 2019; Valtonen et al., 2021). By prioritising the agency and autonomy of participants, the approach aims to produce knowledge in partnership with migrants rather than conducting research on them (Cornwall & Jewkes 2010; Reason & Bradbury 2008).

The imperative for conducting this research is underscored by the imperative to address the marginalization and lack of visibility experienced by hard-to-reach migrant populations within both academic discourse and humanitarian interventions (Bloch et al., 2020; Sigona & Hughes 2012; Schuster 2019). Despite their substantial presence and contributions to host societies, these communities remain markedly under-researched and inadequately supported (Crush 2019; Hathaway 2017; Fábos, 2021). By foregrounding their voices and lived experiences, this research endeavour aims to challenge prevailing narratives and stereotypes, thereby fostering enhanced empathy and comprehension among policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public sphere (Gundel et al., 2021; Hoffman 2018; Long & Crisp 2020).

The central argument of this article is that adopting an ethical framework and inclusive methodology is essential for conducting research with hard-to-reach migrants in civil-military settings. By prioritising the principles of respect, reciprocity and cultural modesty, researchers can build trust and rapport with migrant communities, allowing for more accurate and ethical data collection (Baker et al., 2018; Greenhalgh & Swinglehurst, 2011; Trickett et al. 2011). The research question guiding this study is: How can researchers ensure ethical behaviour and inclusivity in the research mechanics of hard-to-reach migrants in civil-military settings? This article aims to develop an ethical and inclusive framework for conducting this kind of research and to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with researching hard-to-reach migrants in civil-military contexts, with a focus on ethical considerations and inclusivity.

## Setting the context

In various crisis contexts, the interface between military and humanitarian actors is characterised by a remarkable blurring of differences, with military units often taking on tasks traditionally associated with humanitarian organisations. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the aftermath of natural disasters or in the midst of complicated emergency scenarios, where military forces often engage in a spectrum of humanitarian activities, including search and rescue operations, medical care and facilitating the distribution of relief supplies (Clarke & Devaney 2017). Such instances of operational convergence emphasise the pragmatic need to use military capabilities to address urgent humanitarian emergencies, particularly in situations where civilian infrastructure and resources are either overstretched or have become inaccessible due to the severity of the crisis. For example, After the devastating earthquake in Haiti, military-civilian cooperation played a crucial role in rescuing Haitians trapped in the rubble and distributing aid to internally displaced persons. Military personnel with specialised search and rescue skills worked with civilian humanitarian organisations to locate and rescue survivors from collapsed buildings. Civilian volunteers, including medical professionals and community members, provided vital support in the form of medical care, food and water, complementing the military's efforts to reach the affected population. This collaborative approach exemplified the synergy between military and civilian actors in responding to humanitarian emergencies, ultimately saving countless lives and bringing much-needed relief to Haitian refugees in their time of greatest need.

However, in the context of war or armed conflict, the operational landscape changes significantly as military actors move away from their humanitarian role and assume a position similar to that of state armed groups involved in combat operations. In such contexts, the main objectives of the armed forces shift from humanitarian relief operations to activities aimed at consolidating control, maintaining security and conducting military campaigns (Slim 2015). As a result, the distinction between military and humanitarian actors becomes clearer, with military units prioritising strategic imperatives and compliance with international humanitarian law amidst the complicated interplay of political, security and humanitarian imperatives (Weiss & Collins 2017). This delineation emphasises the context-specific nature of military engagement in crisis situations, where the roles and responsibilities of military actors depend on the prevailing security environment and the particular requirements of each crisis. For example, the Kakuma refugee camp in north-west Kenya was founded in 1992 in response to the influx of Sudanese children who had

fled the civil war and are colloquially referred to as the "Lost Boys of Sudan". The refugee population has led to overcrowding in Kakuma, which has exacerbated the strain on vital infrastructure and resources (UNHCR 2021a, UNHCR 2021b). This strain manifests itself in shortages of essential supplies, including clean water, food and medicine, thus affecting the well-being and livelihoods of camp residents (UNHCR 2021a, UNHCR 2021b). The camp was often referred to as a militarised refugee camp, as the military was present in the camp to quell any unforeseen situation resulting from the deprivation, hardship and brutality experienced (Malkki 1995). However, military presence brought security benefits but also raise concerns about civil liberties, especially for these refugees.

Factors such as geographical remoteness, legal barriers, language barriers and social exclusion contribute to marginalisation of the hard-to-reach migrants. In such cases, military presence may be required. However, the presence of armed forces may complicate their situation, as migrants may perceive them as a source of intimidation or fear. Balancing the needs of security and humanitarian assistance in such contexts requires careful consideration of ethical principles and the promotion of inclusivity. Research mechanisms aimed at understanding the perspectives and experiences of these people in the context of civil-military operations must sensitively handle this complexity and ensure that their voices are heard and their rights upheld within the broader humanitarian discourse.

### **Ethical Framework and inclusivity in civilian-military context**

In times of crisis, such as those triggered by conflict, natural disasters or political instability, migrants are confronted with multiple dynamics that profoundly affect their safety, well-being and mobility (Betts & Collier 2017). The interaction between civilian communities and military forces in these scenarios exerts a significant influence on migrants' experiences and outcomes. While the presence of military forces can ostensibly provide security and enhance humanitarian efforts by facilitating relief efforts and evacuation procedures (Martin 2014), it also carries significant risks and complexities. In particular, military interventions can exacerbate the displacement of migrants, increase their exposure to violence and restrict their freedom of movement (Stoddard et al. 2017).

Military strategies and security protocols deployed in the midst of crises occasionally result in the indiscriminate targeting or stigmatisation of migrant collectives, exacerbating existing tensions and perpetuating cycles of marginalisation (Brickhill et al., 2020; DeLargy et al.

2018). The militarisation of border areas or designated humanitarian zones can hinder migrants' access to medical care and shelter, limiting their ability to seek refuge or asylum (Crawley et al. 2017). The pervasive presence of armed actors also contributes to an atmosphere of fear and unpredictability, complicating the arduous journey of displaced people in search of safety and protection (Barnett et al. 2017). Therefore, researching in civilian and military setting in crisis situations emphasises the need for careful attention to human rights principles, humanitarian imperatives and cooperation between civilian and military actors to ensure the well-being and safety of all affected migrants (UNHCR 2019).

Ethical frameworks and inclusivity stand as foundational pillars in conducting research involving difficult-to-reach migrants within civil-military settings, owing to a multitude of compelling reasons. Firstly, these populations are inherently vulnerable as they often live in precarious living conditions, have limited access to basic services and are at increased risk of exploitation and abuse. Therefore, ethical conduct in research is essential to protect their rights, dignity and well-being (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017). Hard-to-reach migrants may have experienced trauma, displacement or persecution, which can exacerbate their vulnerability and require sensitive and respectful research practise by adhering to the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, and mitigating potential harm to participants (Ullah 2022; Fassin 2012). In the academic discourse, inclusivity is proving to be a key factor in ensuring that the voices and perspectives of difficult-to-reach migrant groups are fully taken into account in research (Carolan 2018; Thomas et al. 2020). The absence of inclusive practises perpetuates power differentials, reinforces marginalisation and limits the relevance and applicability of research findings (Ahmad et al. 2019; Jamal et al. 2021; Holt et al. 2017; Strohmeier et al. 2022).

In the civil-military contexts, where humanitarian and military actors often overlap, ethical considerations become particularly important (Slim 2017; Hunt & Smith 2020). The presence of armed forces can bring additional challenges in terms of power dynamics, coercion and security concerns that require increased vigilance and adherence to ethical principles (Johnson & Stevens 2018; O'Neill & Taylor 2019). Upholding neutrality and impartiality is critical to upholding the humanitarian imperative and ensuring the protection of vulnerable populations (Terry & Siu 2021; Weissman 2023; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017; Schuster et al. 2016).

Respect for autonomy involves recognising the individual's right to self-determination and ensuring informed consent, particularly when it comes to

vulnerable populations who may have limited decision-making capacity or be under duress (Beauchamp & Childress 2019; Upshur, 2005). Beneficence involves promoting the well-being of participants by maximising the potential benefits and minimising the risk of harm (Miller & Brody, 2003; Wendler & Miller, 2004; Luna et al. 2017; Grady 2015). Non-maleficence emphasises the need to avoid causing harm or exacerbating existing vulnerabilities through research activities (Jonsen et al. 2015; Chalmers et al. 2009). This principle requires a careful assessment of potential risks, including physical, psychological, social and economic harm, and the implementation of robust safeguards to prevent such harm (Beauchamp & Childress 2019; Resnik, 2011).

The application of ethical theory is about managing complex ethical dilemmas, balancing competing interests and prioritising the interests of vulnerable populations (Lo 2009; Chalmers et al. 2009). Using a rights-based approach, researchers seek to promote the autonomy, agency and empowerment of difficult-to-reach migrants and thus strengthen respect for their human rights and dignity (UNHCR 2018; Human Rights Watch 2020).

**Participatory Action Research (PAR):** The research methodology is based on the principles of participatory action research (PAR), which emphasises collaboration, dialogue and the co-creation of knowledge between researchers and participants. PAR is rooted in critical theory and aims to empower marginalised communities by involving them as active stakeholders in the research process (Reason & Bradbury 2008; Ullah, Hossain, Azizuddin & Nawaz, 2020). By involving difficult-to-reach migrants in the design, implementation and interpretation of research activities, PAR seeks to amplify their voices, redress power imbalances and promote social change.

**Intersectionality Theory:** Intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding the intersecting systems of power and oppression that shape the experiences of marginalised groups (Crenshaw 1991). In a civil-military setting, migrants may face multiple forms of discrimination and marginalisation based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and legal status (Crenshaw 1991; Hankivsky 2014). Intersectionality theory emphasises the importance of recognising and considering these intersecting axes of identity and power dynamics in research (Collins 2015; Cho et al. 2013). By adopting an intersectional perspective, researchers can better understand the complex social, political and economic factors that shape migrants' experiences and vulnerabilities in civil-military contexts (Bowleg 2008; Hancock 2007).

**Critical Humanitarian Studies:** Critical humanitarian studies offer a critical perspective on humanitarian

interventions, policies and practises, scrutinising their underlying assumptions, power dynamics and impact on affected populations (Sandvik et al. 2014). In a civil-military setting, humanitarian and military actors often work together or operate in parallel, posing ethical, legal and operational challenges (Slim 2015; Hunt & Smith 2020). Critical humanitarian studies emphasise the need for greater transparency, accountability and reflexivity in humanitarian action, particularly when working with vulnerable populations such as difficult-to-reach migrants (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010; Duffield 2019).

Cultural humility, a concept based on recognising and respecting participants' cultural values, beliefs and practises, and an awareness of power imbalances within research relationships are central (Hook et al. 2013). Researchers are tasked with adopting a humble and introspective stance, actively seeking to understand and learn from participants and communities and responding to their needs and concerns with cultural sensitivity (Campinha-Bacote 2002; Wear et al., 2015). This approach fosters an environment of mutual respect and collaboration and ensures that research activities are conducted with integrity and inclusivity.

Inclusivity, on the other hand, refers to deliberate efforts to ensure meaningful participation and representation of diverse voices and perspectives in research processes (Mertens 2010; Palinkas et al. 2015). It encompasses the principles of equity, diversity and social justice and aims to address exclusionary practises and power imbalances that marginalise certain groups or communities (Stewart et al., 2017; Newman et al. 2011). In the context of the focus of the research, inclusivity requires researchers to actively engage with communities, build trust and relationships, and create opportunities for participation and co-creation of knowledge (Cornwall & Jewkes 2010; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). This includes using participatory methods, working with local stakeholders and adapting research approaches to the cultural, linguistic and contextual needs of participants (Cargo & Mercer 2008; Minkler & Wallerstein 2011; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017).

#### **Difficult-to-reach migrants and civil-military**

Difficult-to-reach migrants in civil-military contexts pose a unique challenge for researchers and policy makers. These migrants often reside in areas characterised by political instability, conflict or natural disasters, where the military is present to maintain order and provide humanitarian assistance. The overlap between the civilian and military spheres in these environments complicates the accessibility and engagement of migrants and requires an understanding of both the operational dynamics and the ethical considerations involved.

Civil-military operations, while aiming to provide protection and assistance, may inadvertently exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants through unintended consequences such as reduced mobility, increased use of force and further displacement. Therefore, academic enquiry in this area needs to integrate insights from humanitarian research, military sociology and migration theory, and focus on developing ethical frameworks and methodologies that take into account the complex interplay of migrants' security, autonomy and well-being. Such an integrative approach is essential to ensure that research and interventions not only meet immediate needs, but also contribute to sustainable and equitable outcomes for these marginalised populations.

Hard-to-reach migrants (refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons and undocumented migrants, among others) represent a heterogeneous and diverse population that faces various barriers to accessing essential services, protection and rights (Israel et al. 2013; De Vito et al. 2020; Ullah, 2010; 2018a). Access to these populations can be difficult due to geographical remoteness, legal restrictions, social stigmatisation, language barriers or lack of trust in external actors (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017; Ullah, 2014). In a civil-military environment, the presence of humanitarian and military actors may bring both complexity and challenges for research and sense of security. Within the realm of humanitarian operations, a commitment to the fundamental principles of neutrality, impartiality, and humanity is widely acknowledged. However, the coexistence of armed forces within such contexts introduces a complex interplay of divergent mandates, objectives, and operational protocols (Schuster et al. 2016). Consequently, managing a civil-military environment may present both indispensability and superfluity contingent upon the urgency and exigency of the circumstances. Therefore, researching in a civil-military setting requires careful consideration of the ethical, methodological and practical challenges (Hynes et al. 2016; Knifton et al. 2013; Ullah 2022). Ethical concerns may arise in relation to power dynamics, coercion and confidentiality, particularly when research is conducted in contexts where military forces exert significant influence or control (Fisher et al. 2015; DeCuir-Gunby et al. 2011; Ullah, 2018). Methodologically, researchers must overcome logistical challenges related to security, access, and cultural sensitivity while ensuring the safety and well-being of research participants and field personnel (Mitra & Manning 2017; Topp et al. 2015).

It is important that researchers consider the potential impact of their presence and activities on local communities, including unintended consequences such as increased vulnerability or risk of harm (Goodman et al.

2012; Pfeiffer et al. 2008). Building rapport with both migrant communities and civil-military actors is essential to effectively address these challenges and ensure the ethical conduct of research activities (McNamara et al. 2018; Williamson et al. 2014).

#### **A case of civilian-military context of Syrian refugees in Turkey**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey has become a key destination for Syrian refugees seeking refuge from violence and persecution. Drawing on existing literature and empirical evidence, I demonstrate the dynamics associated with the interaction between these two sectors and highlights the complexities of managing humanitarian crises amid security concerns. The coexistence highlights the importance of coordinated efforts and mutual understanding between civilian and military actors to effectively respond to the needs of displaced populations. The Syrian civil war has triggered one of the largest humanitarian crises of the 21st century, with millions of Syrians displaced inside and outside the country. Among the countries struggling with the consequences of this crisis, Turkey stands out as the main host country for Syrian refugees, having received more than 3.6 million registered persons in 2021 (UNHCR 2021a, UNHCR 2021b). The influx of refugees has posed major challenges for Turkey and requires comprehensive measures to address humanitarian needs while meeting security requirements, especially at the border with Syria.

Humanitarian organisations, comprising both international and local agencies, have been instrumental in providing vital aid and assistance to Syrian refugees in Turkey. These organisations primarily provide essential services such as food, shelter, healthcare and education to meet the basic needs of the displaced population. Key actors include the Turkish Red Crescent, UNHCR and UNICEF, which are working together to coordinate relief efforts and meet the long-term needs of refugees, including integration and livelihood support (UNHCR 2021a, UNHCR 2021b). Complementing civilian efforts, the Turkish military has taken a proactive role in managing the refugee crisis, particularly in border security and refugee camp management. Military personnel have set up and supervised refugee camps along the Syrian border, providing temporary shelter and assistance to arriving refugees. They are also tasked with maintaining security in these camps, facilitating the distribution of humanitarian aid and enforcing immigration policies to regulate refugee flows (Guliyev & Bilgili 2020).

The case of Syrian refugees in Turkey highlights the complicated interplay between civilian and military responses to humanitarian crises. Effective management of this interface requires close co-operation, transparency

and adherence to humanitarian principles. If civilian and military actors recognise and overcome the challenges and dynamics inherent in their interaction, they can work together to ensure the protection and well-being of vulnerable populations in crisis situations.

### **Ethical and inclusive approaches to ground-level research**

By using research methods such as community-based participatory research, focus group discussions, participatory mapping and photovoice, researchers can cultivate trust, facilitate dialogue and co-generate knowledge with migrant communities (Reason & Bradbury 2008). These participatory techniques allow migrants to articulate their perspectives, prioritise needs and actively contribute to the design and implementation of interventions that meet their aspirations. By grounding their approach in an ethical framework and inclusive methodology, researchers can effectively address critical knowledge gaps regarding the needs of difficult-to-reach migrants in civil-military settings. Such an approach ensures that the voices and experiences of migrants are accurately reflected and integrated into humanitarian policies, programmes and practises to facilitate the development of interventions that are responsive to migrants' needs, contextualised and based on the principles of migrants' dignity, autonomy and well-being (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017).

Hurricane Katrina in the United States (2005) is an example of cooperation between civilian and military authorities in times of crisis. The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 led to a massive humanitarian response in which the US military mobilised significant resources to assist with disaster relief. Military involvement ranged from search and rescue operations conducted by the Coast Guard to the deployment of National Guard troops for security and logistical support. However, the role of the military went beyond traditional humanitarian aid and led to controversy and criticism. In particular, the use of National Guard troops for law enforcement duties in New Orleans sparked concerns about the militarisation of disaster relief and the erosion of civilian control. There were reports of clashes between military personnel and civilians that highlighted the complexity of the civil-military interface in crisis response (Hartman 2017).

The Rohingya crisis, for example, that has been unfolding in Myanmar and Bangladesh since 2017 is a poignant example of the fact that the military in Myanmar plays a role in creating the Rohingya refugees, while civilians in Bangladesh act as protectors. Here, of course, civilians and the military play different roles in two different places. The persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine

state has forced hundreds of thousands to flee across the border into neighbouring Bangladesh, resulting in one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent memory. While humanitarian organisations are providing vital services and support to the Rohingya refugees, the Bangladeshi military's role in managing the refugee camps and securing the border has raised significant concerns. The involvement of the military in the management of the refugee camps, including control over the distribution of aid and security arrangements, has raised questions about the appropriate role of military actors in humanitarian crises (WFP, 2020).

Power imbalances, mistrust and fear of possible reprisals are significant barriers to migrants' participation in research projects, especially in the presence of armed forces (Fassin 2012). Overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes methodological adaptability, cultural sensitivity and community engagement strategies. Building trust and fostering relationships with migrant communities through sustained dialogue, transparency and mutual benefit are essential to overcome barriers to engagement (Schuster et al. 2016). In the following sections, I describe specific techniques aimed at upholding these principles throughout the research process.

**Informed consent:** Informed consent is crucial when working with difficult-to-reach migrants (Beauchamp & Childress 2019). Researchers should ensure that participants understand the purpose, risks and benefits of the research, taking into account language barriers and cultural traces (Emanuel et al. 2000). The use of plain language materials, the provision of interpreters and the use of visual aids can help to facilitate understanding and obtain voluntary consent.

**Cultural sensitivity and humility:** It is important to recognise and respect the cultural background, beliefs and values of participants (Cornwall & Jewkes 2010). Researchers should adopt a humble and respectful attitude, recognise power differences and refrain from imposing their own cultural norms (Slim 2015). Collaborating with community leaders, elders or trusted individuals can facilitate cultural understanding and help address sensitive issues with sensitivity.

**Community involvement:** Involving the target community in all phases of the research promotes trust, ownership and collaboration (Mertens 2010). Researchers can organise community meetings, focus groups or participatory workshops to gather input, validate findings and develop solutions together (Paffenholz & Spurk 2006). By involving community members as active partners, researchers ensure that the research is relevant, meaningful and beneficial to the community.

**Safety and safety measures:** Given the potential risks associated with research in civil-military settings, ensuring the safety of participants and researchers is of paramount importance (Hunt & Smith 2020). Establishing sound risk assessment procedures, creating communication protocols, and providing training on personal safety and data security measures can mitigate risks and protect everyone involved.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** Protecting the privacy and confidentiality of participants is essential, especially in contexts where disclosure of sensitive information could have detrimental consequences (Beauchamp & Childress 2019). Researchers should carefully plan the methods of data collection, e.g. by using pseudonyms or aggregated data reporting, to minimise the risk of identification (Emanuel et al. 2000). Establishing clear protocols for the storage, access and disposal of data helps to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process.

**Equity and social justice:** Promoting equity and social justice requires a commitment to redressing power imbalances and structural inequalities (Slim 2015). Researchers should strive to amplify the voices of marginalised groups, including difficult-to-reach migrants, by placing their experiences and perspectives at the centre of research (Poulligny et al. 2008). This includes actively challenging discriminatory practises, advocating for policy change, and promoting inclusive practises in civil-military settings.

**Continuous reflexivity and ethical monitoring:** Regular reflection and critical self-assessment are essential components of ethical research practise (Lederach 1997). Researchers should engage in continuous reflection, question their assumptions, biases and privileged positions and adjust their approach accordingly (Mertens 2010). Ethical oversight by institutional review boards or ethics committees can provide external validation and guidance on ethical dilemmas and best practise.

### **Implications for researchers and researched**

By adopting an ethical framework and cultivating inclusivity, researchers take a central role in advocating for methods that are both ethical and rights-based, while effectively navigating logistical and interpersonal challenges. With these approaches, researchers are able to make an important contribution to the development of support systems tailored to the specific needs of hard-to-reach migrant groups in civil-military contexts. Researchers may face ethical dilemmas, reputational risks and operational constraints that compromise the integrity and validity of their research findings. Failure to engage meaningfully with migrant communities can perpetuate their marginalisation, increase mistrust and undermine the credibility of research efforts. Conversely,

difficult-to-reach migrants may miss opportunities to have their voices heard, their needs addressed, and their rights protected, perpetuating the cycle of marginalisation and vulnerability (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017). I offer two clear and concise examples of how the research findings and methods can be applied:

When developing a programme to support internally displaced people living in conflict areas where the military is active, adherence to ethical frameworks and principles of inclusivity in research is paramount. This ensures that the design and implementation of the programme prioritises respect for the rights, dignity and agency of IDPs, including those classified as difficult-to-reach migrants. This approach requires that ethical considerations are carefully taken into account at all stages of programme development and implementation. It requires a comprehensive assessment of the potential risks and benefits associated with the programme's activities, particularly in the complex and volatile environment of conflict zones. A commitment to the principle of inclusivity is required to ensure meaningful participation of IDPs in the decision-making processes related to the design, implementation and evaluation of the programme.

When an organisation embraces the principles of inclusivity, it can include internally displaced persons (IDPs), including hard-to-reach migrants, in the formulation, strategic planning and implementation of programmes (Cornwall & Jewkes 2010). This means recognising the agency and expertise of IDPs as proactive contributors to decision-making processes, rather than mere recipients of assistance. For example, the organisation can establish channels for meaningful participation, such as community forums or consultation meetings, which allow IDPs to articulate their needs, preferences and priorities in relation to the assistance provided (Mertens 2010). The organisation can leverage research methods that focus on dialogue and collaboration to promote constructive cooperation between IDPs, armed forces, local authorities and other actors involved in humanitarian assistance (Slim 2015). By establishing platforms for dialogue and mutual understanding, the organisation can promote cooperation, trust building and conflict resolution between these different actors, thus improving the effectiveness and sustainability of the programme (Lederach 1997).

The use of participatory methods such as focus group discussions and participatory mapping allows researchers to engage directly with IDP communities to gain a comprehensive understanding of their needs, preferences and priorities (Schuster et al. 2016). By involving IDPs in the decision-making process and co-developing

interventions that are tailored to their cultural context and immediate situation, organisations can improve the effectiveness and sustainability of their humanitarian aid initiatives. This participatory approach not only empowers IDPs, but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to programme outcomes, contributing to overall success in the complicated dynamics of conflict-affected environments.

In contexts characterised by heightened tensions between the civilian population and the armed forces, research findings can serve as a catalyst for promoting dialogue and reconciliation between different stakeholders (Paffenholz & Spurk 2006; Galtung 1996). For example, researchers can organise community-based forums or peacebuilding workshops that bring together civilians, military personnel, local authorities and civil society representatives to discuss common problems, identify shared goals and find ways to achieve peaceful coexistence (Nagy et al. 2019; Richmond 2010). By establishing platforms for constructive dialogue and collaboration, researchers help to build trust, reduce tensions and promote mutual understanding between different groups (Lederach 1997; Ramsbotham et al. 2011).

The inclusive approach emphasises the need for ethical research conduct that is guided by the principles of beneficence, non-abuse, autonomy and justice, which together protect the welfare and rights of research participants. By prioritising inclusion, researchers can actively engage with marginalised populations and strengthen their voice and agency in policy deliberations and programmatic actions. This participatory approach not only enables a deep understanding of the multi-layered challenges faced by difficult-to-reach migrants, but also fosters collaboration between different stakeholders, including government agencies, humanitarian organisations and local leaders. The application of ethical and inclusive research methods contributes to the development of evidence-based policies that address the specific needs and circumstances of marginalised populations. By focusing on the perspectives and experiences of difficult-to-reach migrants, policy makers can formulate contextualised strategies that promote social cohesion, mitigate conflict dynamics and facilitate sustainable pathways to resilience and empowerment in affected communities.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article presents a rigorously developed ethical framework and integrative methodology carefully tailored to the particular civil-military context. Although the current literature on research ethics and inclusivity in humanitarian contexts is extensive, there remains a large gap in relation to the particular challenges associated with conducting research among hard-to-reach

migrant populations in settings where military forces are active. This study highlights and fills the existing gap by providing a comprehensive approach to addressing the ethical complexities and practical difficulties associated with such sensitive research settings (Fassin 2012).

Conducting research in a civil-military context requires adherence to ethical frameworks and principles of inclusivity. Researchers must judiciously apply techniques such as informed consent, cultural sensitivity, community involvement, safety protocols, confidentiality measures, equity considerations and reflexivity. These approaches allow researchers to navigate the complex terrain of research while maintaining ethical standards and ensuring the well-being of all stakeholders involved.

Based on a series of case studies, this article offers pragmatic guidelines specifically tailored to researchers, practitioners and policy makers working in a civil-military setting. The study emphasises fostering trust and building relationships within migrant communities, overcoming logistical challenges and navigating power dynamics. It offers actionable strategies to ensure that research is both ethical and inclusive, which aligns with the findings of Schuster et al. (2016). These recommendations are particularly valuable for the design and implementation of humanitarian action, conflict mitigation initiatives and peacebuilding efforts to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of such interventions. I emphasise the importance of ethical considerations, power dynamics and community engagement strategies when conducting research in civil-military settings.

This article also offers guidelines aimed at managing the complicated ethical, methodological and operational terrain associated with research projects involving vulnerable populations in civil-military contexts. By developing ethical frameworks, comprehensive methodologies and pragmatic guidelines, this study makes an important contribution to academic discourse and understanding in the fields of migration studies, humanitarian assistance and military-civilian relations. It also strengthens the recognition of and respect for the rights, dignity and autonomy of hard-to-reach migrant communities and promotes a more equitable and compassionate approach to engagement in civil-military settings. This article represents a significant advance in migration studies, humanitarian assistance, and military-civilian relations by systematically addressing key gaps in understanding and responding to the needs of vulnerable populations in the midst of complex circumstances.

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I declare that I have no competing interests regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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