Human Participation Letter

Project title: Assessing the potential of civil organizations within regions affected by criminal violence to hold state institutions to human rights-based development

As detailed in the Case for Support, the project involves ethnographic fieldwork comprising of interviews and participation observation (including attending meetings) in the west-central states of Michoacán and Jalisco. The Ethics statement of the Case for Support considers such ethical considerations as the risk of reputational damage, as well as detailing the approvals that will be in place ahead of starting the grant. Specifically, the Mexican partners have already approved the proposal, as confirmed in the respective Letters of Support, and the University of Aberdeen's REC has given provisional approval and will conduct a final review, as a matter of urgency and prior to the start date, of any changes required during the application process.

This Human Participation statement will focus on the risks of intimidation or violence incurred by participation, whether as researcher or research subject, in research on a topic with some relation to organised crime, even if that is not the main focus of the research. As the October 2015 ESRC Research Guide makes clear: "Not all risks can, or in some cases, should be avoided, but it is important that researchers and RECs develop awareness of potential risks" (27). The Guide also notes that: "[e]thics scrutiny should be proportionate to the level of risks and appetite for risk in the specific context of the research proposed and its potential benefits" (27). We explain here 1) what risks may be incurred by the project team and other project participants, 2) to what extent the anticipated risks could be mitigated, and 3) how the remaining level of risk can be justified in terms of the urgency of the research:

1. <u>Potential risks to human participants, including project team</u>

We begin by identifying the risks to research subjects, before addressing risks specific to the researchers, because a) we want to stress that the risks are not only to researchers, and b) in mitigating the risks to other participants, we can mitigate the risks to the project team.

a. Risks to project participants, especially interviewees

The focus of the project is on the activities of civil organizations and not criminal ones, and interviewees will be actively discouraged from giving specific information about criminal activities. Most interviewees will be members of the civil organizations, and therefore well aware of the risks of intimidation or violence incurred in working to counter the activities of criminal organizations. Yet it is possible that participating in the project will incur additional risks to interviewees, if criminal organizations believe that they have provided specific information that might affect their interests and that the researchers might use this information to that end. These risks may outlive the project, which means there is a need to consider long-term data management.

b. Risks to project team

FCO does not advise against travel to any region of Mexico, although it does advise caution when travelling beyond tourist areas. However, even if there have been no reports of violence against researchers in the country, the risks to interviewees of intimidation or violence may be shared by the researchers.

2. <u>Extent to which risks to project participants and team can be mitigated</u>

a. Mitigating risks to project participants, especially interviewees

Interviewees will be actively discouraged from giving specific information about criminal activities, since this is not germane to the project objectives – the focus is on civil and not criminal organizations.

Given there may still be risk, not only will researchers take extra care to obtain active and fully-informed consent prior to interviewing, but this consent will be renegotiated during the lifetime of the project, and interviewees will be given every opportunity to withdraw their consent. We will not select vulnerable people (such as young people) as interviewees because their ability to give consent may be limited.

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This principle of enduring consent (ESRC RG p. 30) will apply a fortiori to data sharing. In addition, as detailed in the Data Management Plan, data sharing will be fully anonymised (unless interviewees ask to be identified and the PIs judge this appropriate) and any non-anonymized data (such as audio recordings, if used) will be destroyed as soon as possible.

When attending organization meetings, fieldworkers will not request written consent but will clearly advertise their presence and role in advance. Written consent will be obtained for interviews. The Consent Form and Participation Information Sheet are not permitted attachments in this application, but they have already been reviewed by the University of Aberdeen's REC. Although the applicants discussed the possibility of a degree of covert research, it was decided this would be more rather than less likely to arouse suspicion, and would also interfere with the research subjects' ability to determine the risk of participation. It was also decided that the topic is not directly threatening to criminal organizations, and we would be actively discouraging any specific information to be shared, and is thus suitable for full disclosure from the outset.

The criteria for selecting organizations and recruiting interviewees have been detailed in the Case for Support, and is explained in the Participation Information Sheet, which also includes information about how to contact the research team, for example about withdrawing consent, and about how to make a complaint.

Any change to the human participation protocol, including to consent procedures, will require approval by the University of Aberdeen's REC.

b. Mitigating risks to project team

By mitigating risks to the project participants, we would be mitigating risks to the project team. The non-research specific risks of living in regions with criminal violence can be mitigated in the same way as residents of the regions, that is, by paying attention to rumours of specific threats.

In the event of any intimidation to researchers or research subjects in a sub-region, we would withdraw from that sub-region. This would still leave other sub-regions in the project, thus allowing us to achieve our objectives, although where possible researchers would begin fieldwork in a different sub-region considered safe for the research, taking advantage of the fact that all the researchers have experience and contacts in more than one sub-region.

3. <u>Justification of remaining level of risk to project participants and team</u>

As the ESRC Guide indicates, it may be ethical to incur a certain level of risk to project participants in the pursuit of research, if there is *no alternative methodology* – this is argued in the Case for Support - and the *risks are balanced against the benefits* to participants and broader public value of the research (28).

a. Benefits to participants

Most of the interviewees will be members of civil organizations who are seeking to counter the effects of organized crime. One of the key objectives of the project is to produce policy recommendations which will support and orient the activities of such organizations, as well as seeking ways that development actors can work more effectively with them, as detailed in the Pathways to Impact statement.

b. Broader public interest

The topic of criminal violence is central to the "Inclusive, Accountable and Secure Societies" theme in the call. Criminal violence is, the funding partners recognize, a major obstacle to Mexico's prospects for sustainable development, and both funders deem the topic a priority for research, despite the risks.

UK PI Trevor Stack

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