

Too Close for Comfort:
Citizen Social Science and Methodological Innovation in Hamra, Beirut

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Quantitative data collection in the social sciences is often seen as disengaged from people's lived experiences. This is for two reasons: first, because those who design the research rarely take part in the data collection process on the ground; and second, because the data rarely register the encounters between the data collectors and the respondents. Quantitative research is about the numbers, not the experience or the process.

However, our recent experience of conducting surveys in the Hamra district of Beirut has taught us that one can do quantitative research differently, and that taking a more engaged approach—one based on what we call Citizen Social Science—can lead to innovation in both research practice and knowledge production.¹

Citizen Social Science, as we practice it at the Institute for Global Prosperity and the RELIEF Centre, is about building a research team based in and around the area of study. It is about recruiting local residents as Citizen Scientists, offering them training in research methods, developing a strong working relationship, and going out together to collect data in the field. The main idea behind this approach is that social science research should be carried out through sustained long-term collaboration with local residents in a way that ensures that the knowledge and skills developed in the process are embedded within the community. In fact, one of the authors, Mayssa, is a local resident who has spent most of her life in a neighbourhood immediately adjacent to Hamra.

In the context of this collaborative approach, our recent research activities have included a building and population count, an infrastructure survey, a household survey, and interviews with key stakeholders, including businesses, NGOs, local government representatives, and political parties in the neighbourhood. These activities are part of a larger and still-ongoing research agenda to map vulnerabilities and challenges to quality of life, and to develop a data-based prosperity index that can help local residents and organizations to more effectively identify and address existing challenges.

Undertaking surveys and other research activities as a large team—with a wider horizon of purpose than just collecting data—has allowed us to be more attuned and attentive to encounters in the field, and to translate such encounters into insights about the vulnerabilities that exist in Hamra. These were, in a sense, ethnographic encounters, much like the ones that we might read about in social anthropology texts. Yet, the fact that we were carrying out a comprehensive study of the neighbourhood, and that our team included more than ten Citizen Scientists with diverse backgrounds and experiences of the area, distinguished our work from traditional ethnography, which usually relies on a lone researcher selecting her or his interlocutors by following specific leads and networks in the field. Our practice differed from an ethnography in terms of the researchers, methods, and

intended data outcomes that usually characterize anthropological research. At the same time, the fact that we collected data on the ground as a consolidated research team committed to the area also allowed us to see things differently than we would have, had we relied on recruiting external data collectors or “enumerators.”

The Citizen Social Science approach enabled us to bridge the traditional distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. It allowed members of our team to experience the process of surveying the neighbourhood in a very intimate, emotionally charged, and personal fashion beyond the quantitative dimension. And given that the Citizen Scientists were locally embedded with a major role in driving the larger research process, and steering its future uses, their encounters and experiences in the field constituted an integral part of the knowledge and capacity building that will inform the team’s future work.

Hamra is a very diverse place and also a very unequal place, although most people do not consider it to be a vulnerable neighbourhood. It is adjacent to Lebanon’s two most elite universities, and has a growing market for high-end real estate. Despite this visible affluence, however, the neighbourhood hosts a large group of displaced Syrians, as well as migrant workers from East Asia, South Asia, and Africa who are in precarious positions in terms of jobs, income, and housing. The long-term inhabitants of Hamra also include low to middle income Lebanese families who, while still benefitting from old rent laws, often face the threat of eviction.

Part of our team’s work was to study Hamra’s inequalities and vulnerabilities quantitatively—through rigorous surveying of the neighbourhood’s buildings, infrastructures, businesses, and residents. The very process of conducting the surveys, however, has led to encounters that have revealed the emotional dimension of vulnerability, and the subtle ways in which it can play out at the personal level. The following excerpt from Mayssa’s research diary illustrates one of the many encounters of such a personal nature. The vignette involves Mayssa and a young Citizen Scientist, Dina, who has lived and worked in Hamra for the past two years.²

Dina and I entered cautiously into the stairway of an aging building in one of the alleys branching out of main Hamra street. The dire state of the building was clearly apparent from its exterior conditions and its crumbling stairwell. As we climbed the stairs up to the roof, we noticed a large Lebanese flag hanging on the wall of one of the floors.

When we reached the top floor, we realized that the roof had been appropriated with a makeshift construction. We knocked and a young lady in traditional Bengali clothing opened the door, looking a bit frazzled to see us. Once we explained who we were, and that the population count we were doing did not require names, she explained that all of the flat’s inhabitants were from Bangladesh: she and her husband, and a group of her husband’s colleagues. Similarly, when we visited the next flat, we were told the accommodation was inhabited by a group of workers from Bangladesh.

We descended again to the floor with the Lebanese flag and knocked on the door to ask for more details about the building’s inhabitants. A man opened the door. When we introduced ourselves as researchers with the American University of Beirut, his face lit up: “We are the only Lebanese in this building, God knows where the others are from.” With a smile, he

enumerated the six members of his family and their ages. Family members were appearing and disappearing behind him, until his daughter stepped out of the apartment. She was wearing a veil. Her brother appeared behind her, still inside the apartment. The father explained that the building will imminently be demolished. They have been living here for almost four decades and are waiting to be evicted by the owner.

After surveying the rest of the apartments, all of which were inhabited by migrant workers in overcrowded conditions, we stepped out of the building. That is when Dina turned to me and said: “I know the son of that Lebanese man. The one who stayed inside. He is the friend of a colleague and he works at a shop close by. I think he pretended not to know me . . . he told my friend and I that he lived in Ashrafieh . . . I understand why he would do that.”

What Dina understood was that the young man she recognized wanted to avoid being associated with an old, dilapidated building, whose poor condition was only reaffirmed by the vulnerable labour migrants who also lived there. In this way, the anxiety of living in poor quality accommodation had manifested itself in relation to the outside as a kind of refusal or denial—the young man refused to acknowledge his unfortunate housing circumstances. Instead, he projected himself onto a “distant”³ residential neighbourhood. At the same time, the flag in the stairwell produced the effect of an internal distancing—one that took place in the building’s public realm—between the Lebanese family and the rest of the building’s inhabitants. The flag signalled an exceptionalism that distinguished and dissociated the family from their migrant neighbours. The unease is twofold: on the one hand it is internally felt toward the “otherness” of migrant workers, and on the other hand externally felt towards living in an old and poorly maintained building, symptomatic of the housing inequality in Hamra.

Returning to the question of methodology, the story we presented above is one of many cases that illustrate how the practice of doing surveys through Citizen Social Science can produce experiences and insights about the little-known vulnerabilities in Hamra. The survey data offer valuable evidence about the quality of housing, overcrowding, quality of infrastructure, and quality of life in the neighbourhood. But beyond this dimension of numbers and maps, the practice of data collection has led to encounters that have revealed how people experience vulnerability, and how they relate to each other and to the world around them as a result of it. Working on the surveys through Citizen Science has revealed a new way of doing urban research and employing mixed methods. This is an approach in which engagement with the team, the area, and with local residents more broadly, has enabled us to capture the rigorous measures that we need to drive positive change, while at the same time uncovering, and learning from, the intricate network of neighbourhood stories as part of the research process.

¹ The surveys in question are part of the research carried out by the [RELIEF Centre](#) and the British Academy-supported project “Public Services and Vulnerability in the Lebanese Context of Large-Scale Displacement.”

² The names and many of the details of this vignette have been changed to preserve the anonymity of those involved.

³ Hamra is a one-hour walk from Ashrafieh, and about twenty minutes by car, crossing the Fouad Chehab tunnel and highway. But most importantly, the distance between the two neighborhoods is amplified by the history of

division in the city of Beirut. The 1975-1990 Civil War created a sectarian rift that subsists despite the "reunification" of the city. Furthermore, the distant reputation/stereotype of Ashrafieh as a high-class neighborhood (despite the areas of lower income populations that exist there), explain the young man's choice of it as a more reputable place to claim to reside in.