

Doing labour regimes research with large-scale surveys in Africa

Carlos Oya

SOAS, University of London

Citation: Oya, Carlos (2022) 'Doing labour regime research with large-scale surveys in Africa.' In: Baglioni, Elena, Campling, Liam, Coe, Neil M. and Smith, Adrian, (eds.), *Labour Regimes and Global Production*. Newcastle: Agenda Publishing, pp. 101-119.

THIS IS A PRE-PROOF VERSION

Introduction: questions, framing and methodological implications

This chapter discusses some of the methodological challenges in undertaking labour regime research and analysis. It draws upon the research design and process deployed in a four-year research project – Industrial Development, Construction and Employment in Africa (IDCEA).¹ The main focus of the research was a comparative analysis of differences in labour outcomes across leading firms of different national origins, including Chinese, domestic and other foreign companies in two sectors that have been growing or emerging in different parts of Africa, with Angola and Ethiopia exemplifying contrasting cases.

The research questions of this study were organised around three blocks. First, we wanted to ascertain contributions to direct job creation, and particularly the extent to which Chinese firms “localized” their workforces or not and why, an issue that has attracted much attention in the Africa-China literature (Lee 2017, Oya and Schaefer 2019). Second, the project aimed to ascertain whether wages and work conditions differed among the *leading* firms operating in the infrastructure construction and manufacturing sectors in Angola and Ethiopia, with particular attention to comparisons between Chinese firms, other foreign firms and leading domestic firms. In this regard, this study probed the popular claim (especially but not only in media reporting) that Chinese firms “exported” their “exploitative” labour practices as an expression of a continuous “race to the bottom” (Gadzala 2010, Bah and Hauch 2009), which is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it assumes that labour regimes in China and in Chinese firms are intrinsically more exploitative than labour regimes in African countries. Second, it implicitly assumes Chinese exceptionalism in labour relations, an issue already questioned by a growing body of research on labour in China (Chan 2005, Lee 2017, Luthje *et al.* 2013). Third, such claims thrive in approaches driven by “methodological nationalism” and its concomitant empirical reductionism, which gives primacy to national characteristics in exploring socio-economic

¹ The project webpage provides more information and access to publications <https://www.soas.ac.uk/idcea/>

outcomes, including labour outcomes (Lee 2017, Silver 2003). In short, the study worked with the hypothesis that Chinese firms did not or could not simply “export” labour practices from whatever concrete sector and geographical setting in China that they operated in.

A third set of research questions concerned the contributions of different firms to skill development, and more broadly to labour force upgrading. Finally, we were also interested in exploring through multiple methods the long and uneven process of building an industrial labour force in a low-income country aspiring to industrialize.

In order to tackle these research questions, we adopted a framework centred around the idea of multi-scalar labour regimes, by combining insights from the classic concept of factory regime in political sociology (Burawoy 1985), recent applications of the concept of labour regime by Lee (1999, 2015) in China and in the context of Chinese firms in Zambia, and Selwyn’s (2016) idea of multi-scalar regimes. We understand labour regimes as encompassing the interrelations of labour market segmentation and workforce reproduction, mobilisation, and utilization, i.e., conditions of employment, and forms of enterprise authority and control for the appropriation of surplus value (Bernstein 2007, Thompson 1989, Taylor and Rioux 2018). The adoption of a multi-scalar labour regime approach entailed a structure of three sets of categories and scales of analysis:² (a) the micro-level workplace dynamics and “raw” encounters between employers and workers over wages, productivity, safety, effort, and labour time, considering the notions of structural and associational power (Wright 2000) and drivers of mobilisation at factory level; (b) the characteristics and dynamics of a particular sector or set of global production networks, which cut across national boundaries; (b) the national scale of politics of production, including state–society relations affecting labour supply dynamics and labour-centred social and political struggles.

In order to encompass the different dimensions of labour regimes, to understand the wide range of factors accounting for observed differences in work conditions across workplaces, and to establish whether companies can or do “travel” with their labour practices, this chapter makes a case for the deployment of mixed methods, particularly with a component of large-N quantitative workers’ surveys. The multi-layered nature of labour regimes and their outcomes in terms of work conditions cannot be fully grasped with a single method, even when this is ethnography. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is more likely to provide a rich evidence base and address both internal and external validity.

² Our analytical framework bears strong resemblance to the empirical applications of multi-scalar (or ‘nested scalar’) labour regime analysis developed separately by Smith *et al.* (2018) and Baglioni (2018).

Besides a choice of sequential mixed methods over an extended period of time (three years of data collection), this research was based on the design of a large-N quantitative survey of workers in two different countries, Angola and Ethiopia. This chapter is particularly focused on this component of the investigation given that large-N direct quantitative surveys of workers are not common in the labour regime literature. To be sure, there is a long tradition in labour studies, especially in high-income capitalist countries, based on large-scale quantitative datasets, thanks to the availability of micro enterprise and socio-economic data in these contexts, from the work of Wright on class locations (Wright 1997) to the rich empirical studies of the Cornell Industrial and Labour Relations tradition often published in the *ILR review* (e.g. Card 2001, Yang 2020, Katz and Krueger 2019). In other contexts, this is less common, for a variety of reasons. Many researchers working on labour within a political sociology, political economy and/or and critical economic geography tradition tend to rely on qualitative research, especially key informant interviews, in combination with secondary data, and several excellent labour regime studies contribute new empirical evidence through these methods (Lüthje *et al.* 2013, Lee 1999, Smith *et al.* 2018, Selwyn 2021). Other studies applying a political economy framework to study labour relations, livelihoods and class do apply a range of methods, including quantitative surveys, but surveys tend to be small scale and are not principal components of the research design (Lerche *et al.* 2017, various chapters in Mezzadri 2021). Arguably, a large-N quantitative survey in more than one country may require a research budget that is not often available. However, methodological preferences and the nature of research questions rather than the size of grants are more likely to dominate these decisions.

The lack of high-quality secondary data in low-income countries is certainly a major driver of the need for direct *primary* data collection through quantitative methods, but doing research on labour processes and outcomes is a challenging endeavour (Oya and Pontara 2015). There is no readily available toolkit to inform researchers working in a political economy tradition about labour issues, on “how to” and “why” questions of research design, data collection tools, internal and external validity, and the politics of field research. Standard social science textbooks (Bryman 2016) only help to an extent and much of the valuable material on fieldwork in developing countries, including violent and closed contexts, does not focus on labour issues from a political economy standpoint and rarely on the use of large-N surveys for such aims (Devereux and Hoddinott 1992, Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås 2020).

The chapter thus attempts to contribute to the literature by offering a detailed account of our research process and the nature of the evidence collected, which may be of relevance to other researchers doing primary research on labour regimes. This methodological discussion includes elements that are of interest to the labour regime analysis community: 1) the specificities of particular industries/sectors,

as noted in the discussion of sampling and the politics of fieldwork; 2) the specificities of different places (the two countries) and how local contextual conditions matter for researching labour regimes, and 3) a comparative design, which is common to the lineage of labour regime analysis since Burawoy's seminal work. Finally, this chapter addresses the realities of doing fieldwork on labour issues in particularly challenging political and economic contexts, which shape not only the feasibility of research projects but also the way data collection happens in practice.

The chapter is organised as follows. The central section explains the various methodological choices, from overall research design to large-N survey and qualitative components, and covers the chosen protocols and what actually happened. This is followed by an account of research access and the politics of fieldwork, before concluding.

Accounting for research design and process: a case for mixed methods

This section focusses on the main features of the research design and process underpinning the IDCEA project. It starts by characterising the overall research design and its main components, followed by an overview of the comparative framework that informed the deployment of multiple methods (and sources of evidence). It then discusses issues of sampling and access, given their importance in a project where a large-N survey was a major component of the evidence base. Finally, some reflections on the politics of fieldwork and how the research encountered an evolving "field" over three years are provided.

A sequential mixed methods approach: why?

In labour regime studies we deal with complex problems, multiple actors, relations, processes and interactions. Thus, complexity needed to be embedded in our epistemology. This stance calls for a plurality of options to be considered in research that wants to understand, characterise and explain a labour regime and its outcomes in concrete settings. Studies of labour process and labour regimes often draw on Burawoy's extended case method (1998) as one that helps navigate different levels of analysis, and data collection at different scales to achieve depth. In this reflexive model of science, of ethnographies of industrial workplaces where the researcher is immersed in the subject of study, participant observation of everyday life requires appreciation of extralocal and historical context (Burawoy 1998). Lee (2017), in her study of varieties of Chinese capital in Africa, which partly inspired our research, follows in that tradition, including a difficult process of participant observation. Other studies that primarily rely on key informant interviews or participant observation are often reliant on prior knowledge, acquired in previous studies or direct experiences (Mezzadri 2021). Long-term knowledge of a sector in specific settings is a feature of Burawoy's extended case study method. While

the multi-scalar and comparative nature of the extended case method was highly relevant for our research, we tried to avoid the flaws of a single “model of science”, whether reflexive and subjective or positivist.³

Given the nature of the research questions addressed in this research, the aim to overcome internal and external validity problems, the limited availability of secondary data and the challenges of access that were expected, the project developed a mixed-methods research design to be deployed over three years of fieldwork. The selected design is part of a family of *explanatory sequential mixed-methods (MM) designs* (Creswell 2014). MM approaches are helpful in that “[t]he bias inherent in any particular data source, investigators, and particularly method will be cancelled out when used in conjunction with other data sources, investigators, and methods” (Johnson *et al.* 2007, 115, citing Denzin 1978). The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and their sequencing in this study responded to three methodological needs: triangulation, facilitation and complementarity (see below).

Epistemologically, this choice was informed by a critical realist approach and engagement with perspectives of “realist evaluations”,⁴ given the evaluative character of some of our research questions. A critical realist approach encompasses “extensive” and “intensive” methods, which do not just translate into a binary breadth-depth (Sayer 1992). Our different research questions (what vs how and why) and multi-scalar comparative framework call for both extensive and intensive methods. Finding patterns to classify labour regime characteristics or practices requires extensive methods, while a deeper exploration of manifestations of labour resistance in specific settings, and the interaction of multiple causes, calls for intensive methods.

Furthermore, the multi-layered analytical approach briefly sketched above also calls for multiple methods and triangulation. For example, much GPN analysis operates at the meso-level of sector analysis (Coe 2021). Interviews with sector experts and company management are often a key source of evidence for this level of observation. This is then complemented by micro-level factory floor evidence, which may draw on observation, and interviews beyond company management (i.e., with workers, suppliers, and key informants with a role in factory-level audits). Exploration of labour institutions and state-capital-labour relations at the macro level require the collection of historical evidence, which may be in part informed by selected key informant interviews.

³ See also Burawoy’s (2013) own reflexive account of ‘ethnographic fallacies’ in labour studies.

⁴ On realist evaluation, and especially the notion of ‘causal mechanisms’ which was also used in our data analysis, see Pawson (2013).

The design for this research combined two main instruments for data collection, with different components and deployed in different phases:

- (1) **Large-N sample surveys.** This component consisted of quantitative data collection through firm-level workers' surveys that sampled a *representative* cross-section of low-skilled, and semi-skilled workers in foreign and domestic firms in Angola and Ethiopia, complemented with **firm management surveys** for additional data at firm level. The size of the sample, combined with the empirical relevance of the selected firms in each subsector, focus on the main segments of workers, and the detailed questionnaires used to capture a wide range of potentially relevant variables ensured a reasonable degree of internal and external validity. The overall sample comprised over 1,500 workers from a total of 76 companies, of which 42 were in the manufacturing sector. These workers responded to detailed questionnaires, with face-to-face tablet assisted interviews lasting close to two hours. Over 800 workers were employed in factories (across Angola and Ethiopia) and more than one third of the sample were employed by Chinese firms. This large-N survey was followed by a **telephone survey** of a smaller sub-sample of workers in each country, conducted 12-18 months after the first survey, in order to capture trends in wages and labour attrition across target sectors and firms, given that high labour turnover had been identified as an important issue in the first phase of the large survey.

- (2) **Qualitative research in the form of semi-structured and in-depth interviews.** Despite the prominence of the quantitative survey in this design, evidence collected through qualitative research was essential for three primary purposes: (a) triangulation with findings from quantitative surveys, (b) to give depth to questions that were hard to analyse through a cross-sectional survey, and (c) to go beyond the analysis of correlation of contextually denuded variables (on workers' characteristics or work conditions). However, there were different objectives depending on when, with whom and on what kinds of questions qualitative methods were deployed. In terms of when, qualitative research consisted of two *main* stages: scoping and follow-up.
 - a. Scoping, completed by late 2016, was designed to build an understanding of the context, the sectors and to help frame research questions and prepare the ground for the quantitative research to follow. In this sense, qualitative research played a "*facilitation*" role to frame and improve the design of quantitative components (sample surveys). The scoping phase was crucial to negotiating access to hard-to-reach populations (see section below).

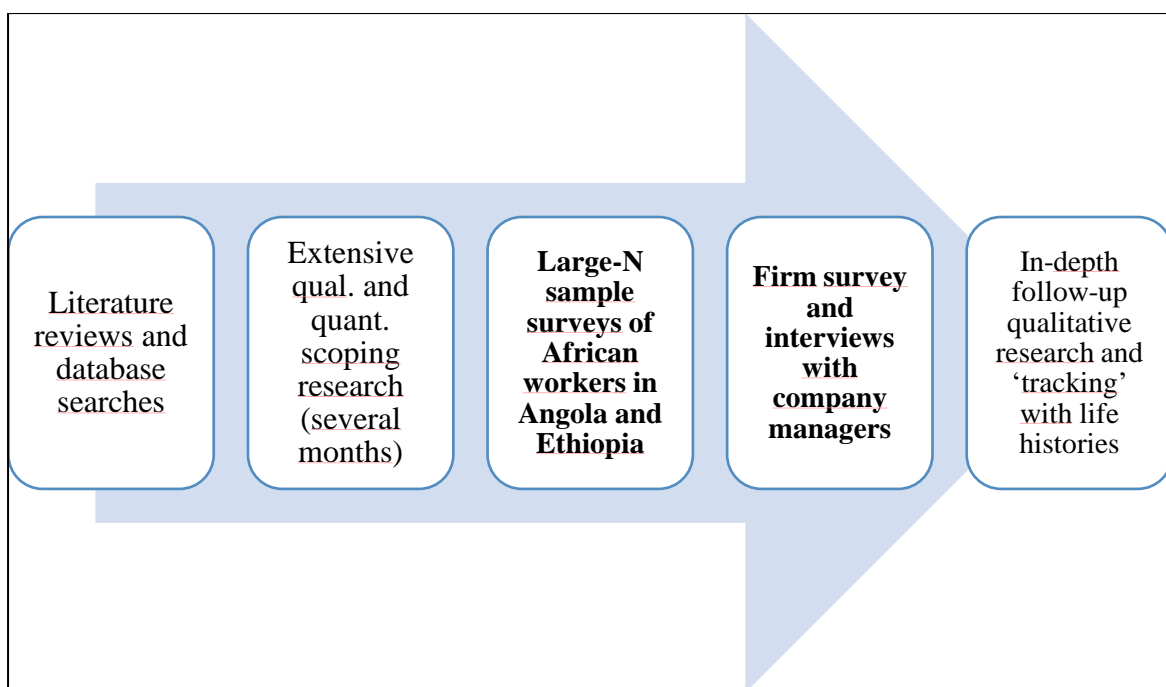
- b. The follow-up stage played a triangulation and “*complementary*” role by exploring in more depth emergent themes from previous phases of data collection (scoping and sample surveys). This stage followed sample surveys, which were concluded in September 2017, and consisted of two sets of semi-structured and open interviews, and observations through field visits:
- i. **Life/work histories** of a sample of workers extracted from the main quantitative sample (i.e. a “nested sample”) with a focus on their employment histories, particularly the nature of their previous employment, how they accessed current jobs, especially on what basis and through which means they were recruited, and the history of upgrading, if any, they had experienced through these jobs. This evidence was important to incorporate a longitudinal and more in-depth understanding of labour market participation in the target sectors. The information already extracted from the quantitative surveys was crucial to inform a careful selection of cases, following a purposive sampling protocol with a set of criteria on workers’ profiles. This method was particularly important to inform the analysis of broader questions on the formation of an industrial workforce and issues of reproduction and mobilization in Taylor and Rioux’s schema (2018: 32).
 - ii. **Semi-structured and open interviews** with company managers, supervisors, government officials, representatives of international organizations, trade union leaders and union factory-level representatives, among other groups of respondents. For this purpose, research teams targeted company managers and trade union representatives in order to explore issues of representation, labour conflict and resistance, work culture clashes, compliance with labour legislation, mechanisms to improve conditions and address problems faced by enterprises (e.g. labour retention and productivity). Many of these interviews in the manufacturing sector were also critical to develop a deeper understanding of the everyday life of global production networks, i.e. to explore the relationship between suppliers and buyers, buyers’ priorities, and how national and international trade unions bargain within the boundaries of global brand agreements and other negotiating spaces. For example, trade union leaders with global audit experience shared important insights to understand the complex interplay of interests and conflicts between big and medium brands, manufacturers/suppliers, headquarters and subsidiaries within suppliers, governments, national and factory-level unions and NGOs that work on labour

standards. By and large, this is the kind of data collection method that tends to predominate in studies of labour in GPNs and specifically of labour outcomes in Chinese firms in Africa (Taylor and Rioux 2018, Luthje *et al.* 2013, Lee 2017).⁵

- iii. **Field visits and observations.** Different members of the research team (including the field supervisors managing the quantitative sample surveys on the ground) visited many factories and construction sites, in addition to those included in the sample. They were able to observe labour practices, physical workplace conditions, interactions between workers and managers, and the pace and rhythm of work, something that escapes a snapshot quantitative survey. These direct observations were also important to corroborate/crosscheck data from both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. They added empirical “texture” that also helped address how and why questions. Furthermore, the design added a visual element in the form of a photographic database which resulted in an exhibition at SOAS at the end of the project.⁶

The research design followed a *sequential* process as summarised in Figure 6.1.

FIGURE 1. ILLUSTRATION OF RESEARCH DESIGN



⁵ Participant observation may also be conducted in industrial ethnographies, following Burawoy’s tradition, but is also risky and difficult to achieve.

⁶ The professional pictures can be seen at the photographer’s portfolio webpage <http://davidescalenghe.com/exhibition-employment-dynamics-in-africa-soas/>

The different tools of data collection and the way the sequence was organised ensured a “slow cooking” research process, which allowed for the flexibility that is necessary in mixed methods designs of this nature, especially if a method aims to inform the design and implementation of another method, e.g. qualitative scoping research being instrumental to the large-N quantitative survey design. This design and the different methods deployed also facilitated the challenging task of navigating the three different analytical layers discussed above, i.e., the factory/workplace, the sector-global, and the national political economy scales. Different methods described above contributed to different components of the evidence base for each of these layers.

Comparative framework in practice: variation and comparability

The sequential mixed methods approach was operationalised through a carefully designed comparative framework. One of the key problems with the existing literature on labour issues in Chinese firms in Africa is the lack of comparators and missing contextual evidence. Claims are often made about practices in Chinese firms without really addressing similar questions in other comparable firms in the same sectors or without even recognising the variety of labour regimes within China.⁷ As argued above, consideration of the extralocal and historical factors needed to depict a factory or labour regime is often achieved through long-term comparative ethnographies (Burawoy 1985, 1998). This project tried to overcome such shortcomings by developing a set of comparative contrasts following a logic of *contrastive exploration* (Lawson 2004). This approach contrasted conditions in firms that should normally be expected to have similar conditions in a given sector, specific branch of activity, size and degree of sophistication in the production process.

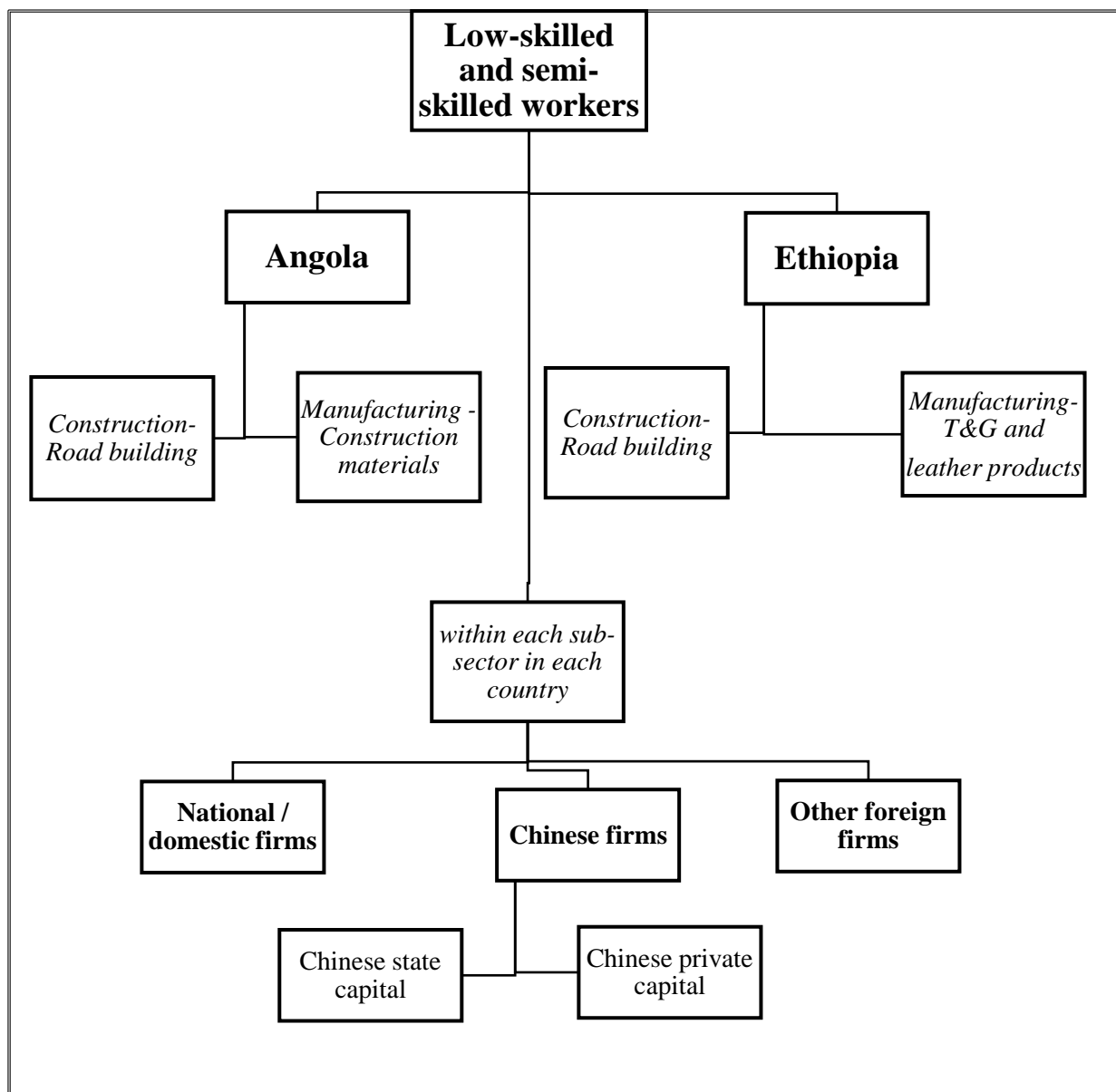
Therefore, the labour surveys at firm level were carried out in a 2-by-2-by-3-by-2 comparative framework (Figure 6.2):

- two countries (Angola and Ethiopia);
- two sectors (construction and manufacturing);
- three origins (national/domestic, Chinese and other foreign);
- two varieties of Chinese capital (private and state), which could be extended to similar varieties of Ethiopian/Angolan capital, with distributions relevant to each sub-sector (e.g, Chinese SOEs mainly found in infrastructure construction and private firms mostly in manufacturing within these samples).

⁷ Comparative approaches were also necessary to explain variation in labour regimes in China (Lutje *et al.* 2013).

We sought to avoid the trap of “methodological nationalism” that sometimes transpires in studies of Chinese firms overseas, or in descriptions of labour regimes linked to “varieties of capitalism” (Lee 2017). One guiding hypothesis was that there could be more similarities between Chinese private firms and other private companies within the same sector, e.g. garment production, than among Chinese firms operating in the same country. As Lee (2017) has argued, these are different “varieties of capital” (e.g. state vs private; GPN-linked vs domestically oriented) in terms of their logic of accumulation and corporate/management ethos and, as such, offer distinct entry points into understanding workplace relations and their trajectories over time. The main limitation, however, was the fact that state capital was found predominantly in construction whereas private capital was totally dominant in manufacturing, potentially conflating contrasts between varieties of capital with sector differences.

FIGURE 2 – COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK: LAYERS OF COMPARISONS



Sampling and negotiating access: why would you choose the workers?

Sampling design and decisions over its implementation required a great deal of attention in our research. This was because of the centrality of our large-N survey in the planned evidence base and the need to deal with internal and external validity issues for reasons of both research and policy impact. In fact, given the potential multiple causes and interactions of causes underpinning differences in wages and other work conditions across settings, there was need for enough statistical power and a dataset that permitted consideration of various confounding factors in order to meet minimum requirements of internal validity. Moreover, the empirical relevance of the sample of firms for the target sector, coupled with the statistical representativity of the workers' samples within each firm,

prevented serious external validity challenges. Given that much research in the political economy of labour and labour regimes in developing countries tends to be predominantly qualitative, sampling issues are not often discussed. Yet the selection of the sources of evidence, hence who is interviewed to provide information that is then translated into “data”, is a very important part of any research, whether using quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. For example, significant biases may arise if only a small sample of workers who share particular characteristics (e.g. casual workers waiting at the construction site gates) are interviewed, because of access problems. Given that social upgrading may be differentiated even within firms (Rossi 2013), a biased sample of workers within a firm can lead to misleading results. Equally, access to company managers is often severely restricted, especially for researchers studying labour, and such restrictions can generate sample boundaries that in themselves create biases, e.g. if those who are missed out have characteristics that are missing in those who are included. Direct observations also matter, of course, but a factory visit may be bounded by where and how fast researchers are allowed to observe.

Selecting respondents (workers) and maintaining research independence in a large-scale survey in sectors where boundaries are tight and monitored (factories and construction sites, in particular) is therefore a major challenge. Trying to do sampling by respecting basic rules of statistical representation and the need to implement a stratified random selection of workers on site makes the task even harder, especially in factories where the rhythms of work are notoriously demanding. However, the research aimed to achieve (a) a sufficient sample of workers, hence the need to target several firms in each country and a minimum of workers within each firm, and (b) to make sure that any substantial selection bias did not occur, either because sample frames were inadequate or access severely restricted. The survey teams encountered countless occasions where company managers or worker supervisors attempted to purposively select worker participants for our survey. The research team always managed to push back and politely and tactfully impose our independent sampling protocol in the name of scientific rigour and reputational risk for the firm. Out of the 77 firms that were approached for the workers’ survey only one had to be dropped because of a stern refusal by management to respect our sampling protocol.

From the experience of our colleagues in previous research projects (e.g. the *Working Poor* project, see Lerche *et al.* 2017), we learned the difficulties in accessing workers on site, especially in construction work, which led that team to identify workers outside the workplace and sample them without appropriate sampling frames, often following convenience sampling methods.⁸ We tried to avoid this situation because we aimed to produce representative samples of the relevant workers

⁸ From personal communication with the researchers.

within *each* firm, in order to avoid selection bias, which is potentially significant given the marked segmentation of the workforce into different categories (by skill, tenure, degree of informality, phase of work, etc.).

The implementation of such a large-scale quantitative survey was only possible after strenuous efforts to negotiate access while ensuring research independence, not least because of the focus on sensitive topics such as work conditions. The following sets out the main obstacles, which were confronted in almost chronological order during the research process.

First, the selection of firms was complicated due to the paucity and unreliability of official statistics for sample frames. There were no comprehensive and readily available lists of firms by sector and with the information we needed to select them. It was necessary to consult multiple sources and build our own enterprise sampling frames through triangulation and repeated crosschecking and updating of data. This was especially hard in the case of the infrastructure sector in Angola where the institutional fragmentation of data availability was striking.

Second, access to firms and workers was generally difficult, as expected, because of various sensitivities. There was sensitivity of the topic of labour relations, as interviewing is sometimes feared by managers because it can entice labour mobilization. For example, a supervisor in a construction site who got to see some of the questions included in the questionnaire complained that “asking those questions would risk raising awareness among our workers and create conflict”. The target sectors were also particularly sensitive. Infrastructure (road) construction sites and factories, especially many newly established by foreign investors who were new to the country and protected by authorities eager to attract more investors, created barriers to prevent curious observers, journalists and academic researchers from “spreading bad publicity”, in the words of a local site manager, especially in the case of flagship infrastructure projects. Third, Angola and Ethiopia have different research cultures but both can be characterised as having significant control over the reporting of matters that are of public concern. Thus, sensitive topics are treated with caution and suspicion. Obtaining authorizations, support and information from several government departments required a lot of patience, methodical work and capacity to engage government officials and build “buy-in” across different layers of authority, from national to regional and local.⁹ In Ethiopia many research institutions and agencies organise surveys, but in Angola this is much less frequent and most people are unaware of the protocols needed to ensure research independence and to avoid selection bias. Not surprisingly conducting research in these sectors was substantially more challenging in Angola. Finally, the nature of some of the firms added a layer of sensitivity. Most firms operating in these

⁹ See Cramer *et al.* (2016) for similar experiences in Ethiopia.

sectors, and especially firms concerned over their international reputation are likely to resist such a research exercise. Chinese SOEs are often perceived to be more impenetrable, in China and abroad, although this depends a good deal on the network of contacts developed and on the “buy-in” achieved with the host government.

During the early stages of the scoping phase for the research it became clear that the best tactical option was to maximise “buy-in” from government, so that access to the most resistant firms could be achieved. While government departments and relevant authorities were approached to present the aims of the research and its protocols, we also visited potential target firms to build networks and identify potential “allies” among the business community. This was especially important for Chinese firms, since building *guanxi* could also potentially contribute to gaining access. This process therefore consisted of a mix of formal approaches, multiple letters of support, and recourse to informal networks. It took a great deal of time and a number of sequential steps. Perhaps the most important task was to identify the key agencies and individuals that could unlock access to companies and obtain “buy-in”. In the case of road and dam contractors, having the key “client” on board (i.e. the relevant government department contracting the construction firm) was crucial and eventually proved determinant to help open some doors of firms that were particularly resistant. Time and patience also matter. Over a period of more than eight months, repeated scoping research trips and visits to companies and government institutions to maintain the contact and interest in the project, and especially finding “allies” among firms and snowballing from these to other firms and business networks turned out to be particularly effective, especially among Chinese SOEs in Angola. Initial trust from an important “anchor” firm informally opened new options for sampling. Finally, the combination of strong field teams with multiple roles, tight coordination facilitated by remote communication and a suitable survey software, and the frequent presence of lead researchers in the field, proved decisive to implement the research protocols and preserve the independence of the research.

The politics of fieldwork in workers’ surveys

Most of the access barriers described above had been anticipated at the beginning of the project, hence work has been planned to overcome them. However, the initial protocol underestimated the time needed to complete the data collection. While problems of access played a role in the delay, the main reason was the changing political and economic environment in both countries while the research was under way. Some of the developments that happened between 2016 and 2018 could not have been fully predicted even with deep familiarity with the context.

The initial aim was to begin quantitative surveys in June 2016 in *both* countries, especially in Ethiopia, but this had to be delayed by three months in Angola and more than 6 months in Ethiopia. In Angola, the main reasons had to do with the slow pace of institutional arrangements to get the logistics in place. The expected difficulties associated with the sensitivity of the research questions and the lack of tradition with respect to large scale workers' surveys in the case of Angola materialised. It took over five months to agree all the terms and conditions for the institutional partnership in Angola and to seek additional logistical support for the workers' and firm surveys, which could only be confirmed almost 9 months into the project. During this period, however, extensive scoping research was completed, which laid the foundations for a better designed sample protocol, consistent with the context-specific obstacles, and gave space and time for more "buy in" among government institutions and some companies. Therefore, in a way, the delay was a blessing in disguise, since a rushed approach to the survey could have greatly compromised the quality of data and the coverage of target firms.

The process of securing access to key players in the target sectors required persistent negotiation, discussion, formal and informal meetings with middle- and higher-level government officials and company managers. Researchers operated through formal and informal channels to make sure access was not blocked by formalities or by rumours about "hidden agendas" in our project. From the start it became clear that the topic of labour conditions was very sensitive for most parties involved, even including our own partner institutions in Angola and China. Quantitative surveys at workplace level are more intrusive and require stricter protocols than more informal qualitative interviews, raising concerns around reputational risks which needed to be negotiated. Even with contacts and "buy-in" from key government departments, most firms, both Chinese and non-Chinese, presented resistance to allowing surveys at work sites. Further, in Ethiopia policymakers were interested in the findings of the research, in Angola interest in employment issues among authorities did not seem at the top of the agenda.

Despite all these obstacles, the team managed to begin surveys in Angola with a delay of only three months. One of the outcomes of this protracted process and the significant sensitivities encountered was a revision of plans for interim workshops. It had become clear that organising inception workshops before surveys were implemented might backfire and result in sample biases because of drop-outs among key companies in the target sectors, especially in construction. There were strong views about Chinese companies in certain Angolan circles, especially within the local business community and some civil society organisations, and they saw accusations of labour "exploitation" as an opportunity to pursue their agenda. An "inclusive" interim workshop might have exposed some of these problems and sensitivities and would probably have led to even more reluctance to participate

in the project among both sets of firms (Chinese and non-Chinese) and government departments. On balance, these decisions on the eve of worker surveys paid off.

The main obstacle for workers' surveys arose from unexpected political developments in Ethiopia. Despite a good start suggesting surveys could be completed according to plan, political tensions began to erupt, including demonstrations and some unusual anti-government violence in different parts of the country. Expanding government action to curb protests resulted in a declaration of a state of emergency, making the conduct of large-scale surveys practically impossible. The security of the field teams of enumerators was the priority and the climate of state emergency meant that surveys on work conditions in factories and construction sites in particular could put the teams at risk, as well as making data collection less reliable. The interruption delayed the process by several months and required a permanent monitoring of the political situation at national and local levels. In fact, labour conflict started to pick up since the surveys began, partly linked to localised political protests. These simmering tensions provided a unique opportunity for us to witness and observe workplace conflicts and the politics surrounding them, adding highly relevant insights to our understanding of the "national political economy" dimension of our analytical framework.

Meanwhile, in Angola, the context of an economic crisis since 2015, and especially in 2016, meant that construction projects were either at low-intensity, with only "core" workforces in the case of some Angolan and other foreign companies, or simply delayed, as in the case of several road projects to be implemented by Chinese contractors. Field teams had to visually inspect the state of some of these road projects to triangulate information with conflicting reports from firms and government departments. This extra work was needed to make sure we understood the context in which surveys were conducted and the characteristics of the sample frames (e.g. including only "core" permanent workforces or temporary workers as well), and owed much to the manipulation of information on the real state of public works, which had important political ramifications at a time of economic crisis. The politics of information on execution of public works thus affected the rhythm and implementation of workers' surveys in construction sites. An additional complication stemming from the context of the economic crisis was that some (mostly Angolan) company managers feared that responding to our questions in the follow-up qualitative research phase might reveal tax avoidance in a period of more intense oversight.

These experiences underscore the importance of understanding and acting on the politics of fieldwork when conducting large-scale workers' surveys in countries undergoing periods of intense political and economic crisis. Data collection in social science research is always difficult in such scenarios but more so when the task is to collect sensitive information on work conditions through large-scale workers surveys in strategically important sectors. Doing quantitative data collection on labour issues in a

climate of political tension is particularly challenging as labour conflict often takes a political dimension in such contexts. Prior research experience in such challenging environments, combined with the political awareness of research teams are critical assets for such data collection efforts.

Conclusions

This chapter has documented the research design and process of a study of comparative work conditions in Chinese and other firms in construction and manufacturing in Angola and Ethiopia. It has described in some detail the methodological challenges in undertaking labour regime research and analysis. The research can be seen as an example of a “slow cooking” study combining multiple analytical categories and methods to address questions of labour outcomes, relations, processes and regimes in fluid contexts.

The chapter makes a case for sequential mixed methods over an extended period of fieldwork time to tackle research questions that combine an evaluative character and a focus on work conditions, labour processes and a wide range of contextual factors at micro, meso and macro level. Following a long tradition of comparative methods in labour regime analysis this research also adopted a comparative framework that contrasted country contexts, sectors and firms. This comparative framework shaped the way instruments of data collection were deployed, both sequentially and in terms of their interactions.

This chapter has also stressed the importance and challenges of incorporating large-N quantitative surveys of workers to address considerations of internal and external validity, and to avoid potential selection bias that can shape analysis of the *dominant* characteristics of labour regimes as well as concrete differences in labour outcomes across firms and settings. Although large N surveys come with significant costs and coordination challenges, when designed carefully and implemented with time, they can potentially contribute to strengthen the evidence base on labour regimes and make sense of variation across contexts and types of firms, to set the scene for the kind of in-depth qualitative reflexive research (extended case method) that has often dominated labour studies. The pay off in terms of quantity and reliability of evidence is significant, but researchers deploying these methods have to be mindful of several potential challenges that may undermine the process, especially in terms of access and the politics of fieldwork.

Dealing with issues of restricted access, research independence and the politics of fieldwork requires a “slow cooking” research process, with embedded flexibility to respond to different kinds of anticipated and unanticipated challenges. There are also challenges arising from the need to coordinate multiple research teams – institutional partnerships, researchers and fieldworkers – in a

variety of settings. Tackling them requires a lot of learning by doing. This research gave us a unique opportunity to keep learning.

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