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Regular Article

Negotiating Organizational Access as a Multifaceted Process: Comparative Research Experiences With Three Advocacy NGOs in Kenya

Tara Saharan[1,2] , Maaike Matelski[2,3], and Emmanuel Kumi[4]

Abstract
Although research with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has become an established practice, the process and politics of gaining access to such organizations often remains implicit in methodological literature on qualitative research. Drawing on a systematic comparison of research experiences with advocacy NGOs in Kenya, this article discusses organizational access as a multifaceted process. Based on three case studies that were comparable in set-up and context but yielded different outcomes, we argue that the process of obtaining and maintaining access to NGOs is influenced and shaped by researcher positionality, internal and external gatekeepers, organizational characteristics and research topic, and that these factors should be studied in interaction rather than in isolation. Taken together, these factors determine the process of obtaining and maintaining research access, and consequently the outcome of ethnographic fieldwork with NGOs.

Keywords
NGO research, access, gatekeeping, positionality, trust building, Kenya

Introduction

The process of establishing and maintaining research access in various types of organizations is increasingly getting attention from qualitative researchers (Clark, 2010; Grant, 2017; Riese, 2018; Siwale, 2015). Organizations differ from everyday life due to their structured environment that details certain rules, strategies and meanings (Bell, 1999). Access to organizations is characterized by uncertainties and complexities of research sites that are subject to changing circumstances and repeated negotiations (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Bondy, 2013; Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). Gaining and maintaining access is a non-linear process which involves responding to political and ethical dilemmas that often depend on the type and nature of relationships between the researcher and research participants (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). Organizational politics and the nature of the research influence the type of access as well as knowledge generated in the form of research outcomes (Siwale, 2015). Non-Governmental Organizations[1] (NGOs) have additional concerns due to their intention of "doing good" and their inherent entanglement with and dependency on the support of other stakeholders such as states, donors, and intended beneficiaries (Sampson, 2017). Furthermore,

gatekeepers within NGOs play an increasingly important role in establishing initial access within research, as they are uniquely concerned with impression management, and wary that a tarnished reputation may directly influence future funding opportunities (Bell, 1999; Clark, 2010; Marland & Esselment, 2018; Reeves, 2010).

Fieldwork access to organizations that operate within the aid chain[2] can be particularly challenging, due to the donor dependency culture which makes NGOs mindful of potential consequences of "bad exposure" for future funding (Siwale, 2015, p. 9), and more prone to "filtering and regulating the flow of

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information and stabilising representations" (Mosse, 2005, p. 12). The outcome of qualitative research with NGOs is inherently uncertain for the research subjects, and researchers may be viewed as intruders with the power to misrepresent or expose undesirable information about the research subjects; alternatively, they may be viewed as welcome amplifiers of their concerns. In the case of Greenpeace in Norway, for example, public criticism of its anti-whaling campaign caused some of the (former) employees to react with suspicion to the researcher, denying her interview requests and checking her background with colleagues before participating (Riese, 2018). Similarly, in the case of Rural Power, an NGO in India, the organization's response to research dissemination constituted criticism and denial by the NGO staff, highlighting their interest in controlling narratives of project success (O'Reilly & Dhanju, 2010). Particular attention therefore needs to be paid to processes of gatekeeping and impression management employed by organizational representatives (Grant, 2017). This article discusses how these factors influence the research process in three comparative research projects with advocacy NGOs in Kenya.

Negotiating organizational access goes beyond the process of gaining entry to the research site, and these negotiations include consideration of relationships between the researcher and the researched (Reeves, 2010). Additionally, access to advocacy NGOs is a "multidirectional" process involving different actors that is dependent on the researcher's abilities and capacity to manage relationships with the research participants (Riese, 2018, p. 12). Within an international setting, access is also contingent on how the researcher's identity is constructed based on her or his positionality as an "outsider" or "insider" (Bell, 1999; Siwale, 2015; Sultana, 2007). Researchers' awareness of their positionality and reflexivity in understanding the power dynamics of the environment in which they operate can enhance the validity of the research outcomes (Kwak, 2019; Noh, 2019). With regard to negotiating and establishing access, this study explores researcher positionality and reflexivity as additional intersecting factors.

Research on Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), most notably NGOs, has become a significant field of study, as they voice the views and represent the interests of a sizable section of the population, particularly those on the lower end of the power spectrum (see for example, Banks et al., 2015; Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). Yet, the processes ethnographic researchers undergo in order to gain access to such organizations often remain implicit, as most existing studies delve straight into the researchers' interpretation of the field, or stay very close to the organizations' "self-legitimating discourse" without exploring the power dynamics they engage in (Demars, 2005 as cited in Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006, p. 670). The majority of methodological literature on access in NGO research has highlighted either the role of gatekeepers or researcher positionality (see for example, Noh, 2019; Riese, 2018). Additionally, most of the existing studies draw on a single case study (e.g., Markowitz, 2001; Noh, 2019; O'Reilly & Dhanju, 2010; Riese, 2018). While these studies are appropriate for studying individual NGO cases, they are typically

ill-equipped for capturing and comparing context-specific experiences of negotiating access, particularly in non-Western settings which have been underrepresented in the methodological literature on organizations.

While a range of studies have explored organizational characteristics, gatekeepers and researcher positionality as independent factors influencing research access, this article aims to understand how the interaction between them influences and shapes access negotiation in NGO research from a comparative perspective. This study aims to guide future researchers in setting up their research design and also proposes some suggestions for negotiating the processes of access within NGO research. This is done by drawing on the experiences of three researchers who took part in a large study on CSOs' advocacy strategies commissioned by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), but who conducted research in different organizations in Kenya. Despite the similar research framework, context and entry to the field, the three researchers had vastly different experiences in terms of the access they obtained to the organizations and individual NGO representatives. This article therefore seeks to explore the underlying factors that accounted for the differences in experiences of access to advocacy NGOs in Kenya.

In doing so, this article makes two contributions to the methodological literature on NGO research. First, based on three different but related case studies, this article shows how four factors namely gatekeepers, researcher characteristics, organizational characteristics, and research topic intersect to influence how research access is obtained and maintained. Our findings clearly demonstrate the complexity involved in obtaining and maintaining research access to NGOs. For this reason, access should not be conceived of as a linear process, but rather as dependent on the interactions between researcher positionality, organizational characteristics, research topic, and the role played by gatekeepers. Second, by adopting a comparative lens in studying access to NGOs, we highlight a broad range of factors that would be nearly impossible to understand by studying a single case. Our findings therefore show the significance of qualitative comparative study on access to NGOs which is relatively limited in the methodological literature.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section details the context of the research project and the methodology adopted. We then discuss a number of organizational and individual characteristics that determine how researchers negotiate and obtain access and establish relationships in the field. The conclusion presents the need for looking at the intersection of different factors in understanding how access is determined, and suggests future methodological directions for research on advocacy NGOs.

Research Context and Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was adopted by the three researchers who took part in a larger project which aimed to scrutinize the assumptions behind the Netherlands MFA's Theory of Change for "Dialogue and Dissent," a funding program

that aims to strengthen the lobby and advocacy capacities of NGOs in low and lower-middle income countries, and enhance their political roles. In 2017, six research projects were awarded funding in this program, of which three were situated in Kenya.[3]

The three researchers were part of two research projects that focused on civic engagement and on the aid chain, respectively. For these projects, extensive fieldwork took place in Kenya between April and December 2018, with some further research activities conducted in the Netherlands as well. Researcher 1 conducted fieldwork with a local organization (Organization A) based in a small village in Eastern Kenya.[4] Data collection consisted of participant observation at the organization's office and during field visits, and the researcher held interviews and focus group discussions with NGO staff, board members, community members (i.e., intended beneficiaries), local authorities, and donor representatives.

Contrary to Researcher 1, Researchers 2 and 3 were primarily based in Nairobi, where the head offices of the two organizations were located. In addition, both researchers made regular field visits to the counties where the organizations were implementing their advocacy initiatives under the "Dialogue and Dissent" program. Data was collected through informal discussions, participant observation, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews with the NGO staff, government officials, consultants, donor representatives and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) by Researcher 2. Similarly, for Researcher 3, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions were conducted with donor organizations (i.e., the MFA and the Royal Netherlands Embassy, hereafter Embassy), international and local NGOs, and government officials.

As the three researchers operated in similar research environments in the Netherlands and in Kenya, they started exchanging experiences on gaining access and participating in offices and field-based activities of the respective organizations. During these conversations, significant differences started to emerge which the researchers decided to explore further after their return from fieldwork. To this end, tables were drawn in which each researcher shared their experience on a particular phase of the fieldwork access process. Based on this exercise, four main factors emerged that the researchers felt influenced their organizational access in different ways, which will be elaborated on below.

The four factors identified in this article as influencing organizational research access are thus based on explicit reflexivity regarding research access from our individual experiences in the field, and the joint process of viewing these experiences through a comparative lens. The comparative lens not only aided in highlighting the similarity and variance across the cases under study, but also revealed unique as well as common characteristics that would have gone unnoticed when studying a single case (Eisenhardt, 1991; Mills et al., 2006). The resulting analysis therefore went beyond "self-reflexivity" and explored the consequences of variations in research access comparatively.

Gaining Research Access to Advocacy NGOs

In this article, we will look at the process of obtaining and maintaining access to three Kenyan advocacy NGOs with reference to a number of factors that influence this process: internal or external gatekeepers, characteristics of the individual researchers, the organizations under study, and the research topic (see Figure 1). Of course, no research outcome depends on one of these factors alone, as they inevitably interact with each other in the field. Yet, for analytical purposes, we introduce them here as separate categories in order to highlight the way each of them influences and shapes the research access process. The empirical discussions are structured around the differences and similarities as experienced by the three researchers for obtaining access in the entry phase and maintaining access in the fieldwork phase of the research process. We explore access as a multifaceted process resulting from interaction between the gatekeepers, researcher characteristics, research topic, and the NGOs under study.

Research Topic Influencing Access and Dissemination Processes

Our comparative research showed that the nature of the research topic had a direct impact on gaining and maintaining research access with the three NGOs. Researcher 1 took part in a project on civil society engagement with land rights advocacy, while Researchers 2 and 3 took part in a project studying NGOs in the aid chain (see Table 1). Project 1 on land rights advocacy in the context of large-scale corporate land investments was conducted in partnership with an international NGO (INGO) with offices in Kenya and the Netherlands. Projects 2 and 3 were part of a larger study that examined how the institutional design of aid chains influences and shapes the advocacy work of CSOs in the Global South.

Within the broad framework of the aid chain, Project 2 was based in a national-level feminist NGO (Organization B) and focused on improved protection of women and girls against gender-based violence in Kenya. Project 3 focused on CSOs' participation in improving the labor conditions of workers in the Kenyan cut-flower sector through a collaborative partnership between a Dutch INGO and seven local NGOs in Kenya. Because of the sensitivity associated with the aid chain project (i.e., NGO funding and their relationship with donors), both Researchers 2 and 3 experienced considerable unease among staff members of participating NGOs. They were often perceived as someone doing an evaluation exercise, despite repeated clarifications about the goals and rationale of the research project. The combination of the research topic with researchers' introduction by representatives of donor agencies (i.e., the Embassy and INGO) resulted in additional barriers to research access. These factors inadvertently positioned both researchers as outsiders despite several measures they took to build rapport and trust. For instance, Researcher 2 frequently joined the NGO staff members during lunch and coffee breaks, and actively participated in the advocacy campaign that was
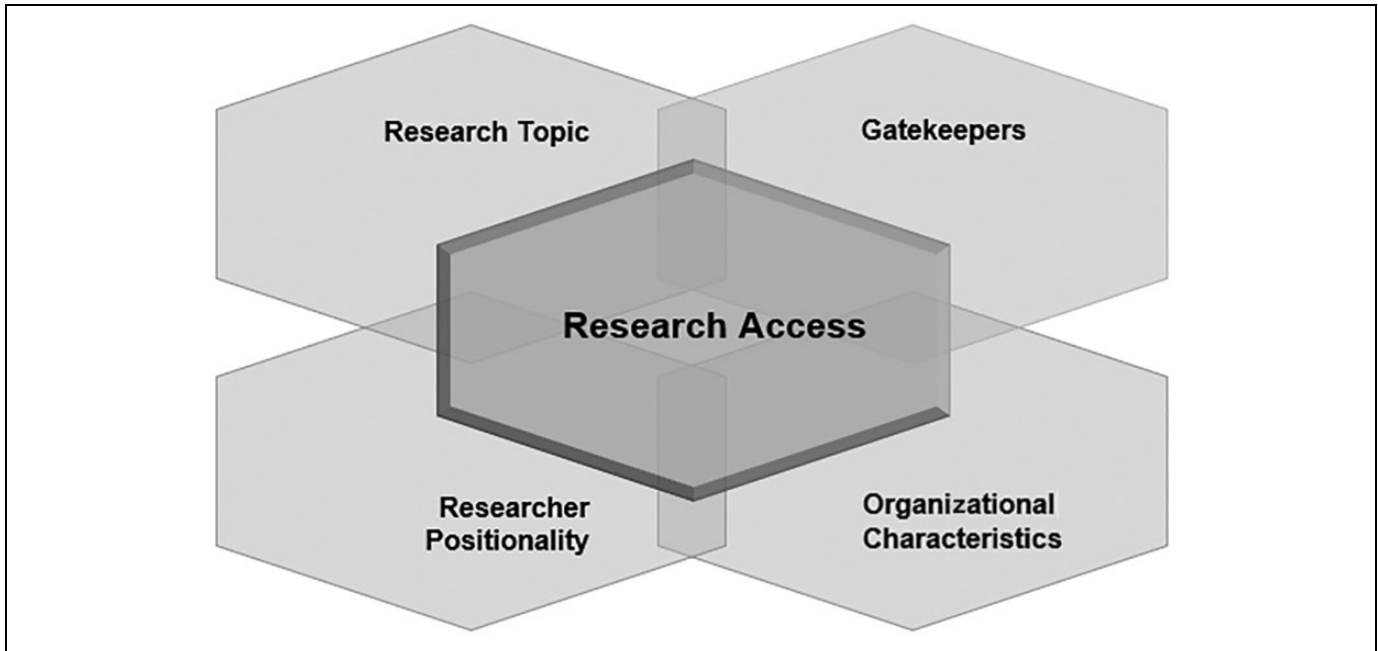
Figure 1. Factors influencing organizational access to advocacy NGOs.

Table 1. Organizational Details Where the Research Was Conducted in Kenya.

	Researcher	Organizational Focus	Thematic Focus of the Research Project
Organization A	Researcher 1	Civic education and advocacy on land rights'	Civic engagement
Organization B	Researcher 2	Women's rights advocacy	Aid chain
Organization C	Researcher 3	Rights-based development	Aid chain

organized by the NGO during her stay in Nairobi. Similarly, Researcher 3 also joined the NGO staff members for lunch and office birthday celebrations, and participated in staff drink ups. In comparison, Researcher 1 had the advantage of working on a topic (land rights) that was not only welcomed by the organization, but also formed a part of their own advocacy agenda. These factors made the participants enthusiastic and keen to engage in discussions, which facilitated access to the organization and ensured that the staff made sufficient time for the researcher.

The research topics also influenced the dissemination process, which was received differently in the three organizations. In contrast to Organization A, the staff members of both Organizations B and C feared backlash in light of the critical findings that emerged from the research. They were worried that any negative findings would have consequences for their future funding opportunities, their image, reputation, and relationship with the donor. Presumably, the focus of the research project on understanding the influence of the institutional design of aid chains on NGOs' abilities to undertake advocacy framed the research as an evaluation exercise and further contributed to the defensive attitude of the NGO staff about their advocacy work as well as the role played by the funding agencies. Informed by these concerns,

Researchers 2 and 3 approached the NGO staff members to actively discuss critical findings that were not received well. These backstage negotiations show the influence of the research topic and the significant role of gatekeepers in the research process which is discussed in depth in the following section.

The Influence of Gatekeepers on Entry to and Exit From Research Sites

Before any field research can take place, connections between the researcher and the organization must be established. This is usually achieved with the assistance of one or more gatekeepers, who may be located either inside or outside the organization. However, such intermediaries should not only be viewed as instrumental in the initial access phase, but are also likely to influence the data collection phase, and even the research outcomes (Siwale, 2015; Stamm, 2019). In all three case studies described in this article, initial access to the organizations was established with the help of intermediaries, all of whom were initially contacted in the Netherlands. Despite this similarity, all three researchers adopted unique strategies for establishing primary access as per their context.

For Organization A, access was established through representatives of one of its donor organizations (i.e., an INGO) with offices both in the Netherlands and in Kenya, and formalized through a written Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The INGO aided in establishing contact with Organization A, after which a starting date for the fieldwork was agreed on. The organization had earlier worked with European volunteers and with a Master's student from the Netherlands working on land rights, and clearly valued such external involvement. Throughout the fieldwork period, the researcher was able to accompany the representatives of the NGO working on land rights to all community (and other) meetings, and she was told repeatedly that researchers like herself provided an important "mirror" for the organization.

For Organization B, the primary contacts for access were made through the Embassy in Kenya. The agreement was based on emails, Skype and verbal communication with the policy officer at the Embassy as well as the NGO staff, and no MoU was signed between the researcher and the NGO. Being introduced to the NGO through the policy officer aided in establishing primary access. It facilitated easy access to the NGO under study and to consultants as well as CBOs who formed a key part of the project funded by the Embassy in Kenya. In addition, the NGO staff also introduced the researcher to staff members of other local NGOs advocating for women's rights in Kenya, which helped to gain access in a short period of time.

For Researcher 3, primary access was agreed on through an MoU between the research team and the Dutch INGO. The Dutch INGO staff introduced Researcher 3 to their East Africa Regional Office in Nairobi. The staff in Nairobi served as gatekeepers who in turn introduced the researcher to their seven local NGO partners in Kenya. Within the INGO office in Nairobi, the Manager of the project under study (i.e., labor conditions of workers in the Kenyan cut-flower sector) served as the main gatekeeper, as she had to arrange and consent to all meetings the researcher had with other staff members. Consequently, while the top managers at the headquarters in the Netherlands had granted access, it did not mean that all staff in the Nairobi Office welcomed the researcher into the organization, as he had to negotiate access to sections of the organization with the manager on an individual basis.

In all three cases, as part of the research dissemination, learning events were organized at the end of the fieldwork phase to validate the findings from the three projects. Gatekeepers of the three organizations influenced and reacted differently to the dissemination process. While Organization A proved very open to mild criticism regarding its focus and blind spots, representatives of its "gatekeeper" INGO were a bit more defensive of these practices, which they explained as being in line with the overall advocacy objectives. The researcher attributed this difference in perspective to personal characters, as well as to the INGO's focus on strategic goals and its staff's less direct engagement in the field, which might have obscured certain nuances or contradictions. However, at no point did any of the NGO representatives voice serious concerns or objections to the researcher's analysis, and comments took mostly the form of additions or clarifications. Both the researcher and the NGO representatives considered the research activities successful, and expressed interest in future collaborations.

In contrast to Organization A, the dissemination process was received differently by the gatekeepers in Organizations B and C. Though the staff members of Organization B were critical of the research findings, the Embassy representative viewed the dissemination exercise in a positive light, and treated it as an opportunity for exchange with the implementing partners of the advocacy program. In a similar stance, although the findings from Researcher 3 were discredited by the INGO staff in Nairobi, the same findings were well received by the staff members in The Hague (The Netherlands) for Organization C. The staff in Nairobi were more defensive in their approach because of the need to protect their job compared to those in The Hague who saw it as an opportunity for self-reflection and organizational learning. For instance, a local NGO staff member stated that "I find your findings troubling when you talk about upward accountability in the manner that you did" (Interview with NGO staff, October 29, 2018). On the other hand, a senior staff of the INGO in The Hague had this to say about the same research findings: "As a matter of fact, we want to learn as an organization. The local NGOs must speak out and tell us when they feel that our rules or whatever we're doing is oppressive to them and we are not giving them a voice. We don't want to be a defensive organization because the research has been an eye opener" (Interview with INGO staff, June 25, 2019).

The staff in The Hague argued that the findings helped them to reflect on their future engagements with donors and local NGOs. While management at the headquarters of Organization C and the Embassy saw the research findings as an opportunity for organizational learning, INGO staff in Nairobi perceived these negatively because of their potential to affect their job security and organizational survival. We now turn to the influence of the researchers' own characteristics and behavior in the field on the access obtained to NGOs.

Researcher Positionality and Strategies for Negotiating Access

We identify researcher-related factors affecting access to NGOs as two inter-related components: researcher positionality, and researcher strategies in the field. Positionality includes aspects such as the role one takes on in the field, or what Bell (1999) calls "working roles" (e.g., as observer, participant, or expert), and personal characteristics that may or may not resemble the researched population, such as personality and demographics (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, class). In this case, each of the three researchers came from different countries (i.e., The Netherlands, India and Ghana), and being a European, Asian and African contributed differently to the way they established access. For example, the African identity of Researcher 3 created opportunities for him to establish relationships with NGO staff because they perceived him as one of them, or at least as an insider who understood the African

context. However, at the same time, the researcher's identity as a West African undertaking research in an East African country for the first time made navigating initial access a challenge. While the researcher identified broadly as an "African" (insider), marked differences between Eastern and Western Africans (e.g., language) and his status as a non-Kenyan made him an outsider, which influenced how the NGO staff related to him. As noted in previous research (see for example, Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Mwangi, 2019; Siwale, 2015), African researchers studying in the West who subsequently return to the African continent can feel like an "insider-outsider," as their identities partly overlap with their research subjects (e.g., ethnicity and language), and partly with the researchers in their study environment (e.g., education, class and income level). Furthermore, they may conduct research in their home country but outside their home area. In the case of Researcher 3, although he visibly resembled the research subjects, he was in fact from a very different part of the continent.

Similar to the experience of Researcher 3, the Indian identity of Researcher 2 was instrumental in establishing primary access in the initial stages of the research process because of the familiarity with Indian-Kenyans living in the country. Likewise, the gender identity of Researcher 2 served as an advantage in breaking the ice with Organization B during the initial days of fieldwork, as the researcher was able to build a close relationship with several staff members working in the NGO, who were mostly women. In addition, the researcher's identity as a female put her in immediate solidarity with women's rights issues. As a result, she could sympathize with structural constraints that the respondents faced by the patriarchal system in which they operated that surfaced often during the interviews. While the Indian identity and gender of Researcher 2 made the initial access possible, being non-Kenyan and working in the capacity of a researcher rather than a staff member positioned her as an outsider in some instances. The NGO staff did not have any experience with a researcher, and her proximity to the donor organization often made them suspicious of her goals. Moreover, affiliation with a European University contributed to the researcher's position as an outsider in the eyes of the NGO staff. These shifts from the position of insider to suddenly being an outsider, made Researcher 2 realize that she was often treated as "inbetweener" (Grant, 2017; Milligan, 2016) who is neither entirely inside nor completely outside in terms of positionality. In order to build trust with the staff members, Researcher 2 made formal presentations of her research project, discussed issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and organized meetings with the senior project leaders from her university when they visited Nairobi. Additionally, Researcher 2 regularly met staff members for coffee as well as dinner outside the office and traveled with them to the counties where the project was implemented, sharing the same transport and staying in the same hotel. These informal interactions provided important opportunities to build trust relations with the NGO staff. However, these engagements did not guarantee access as Researcher 2 had to continuously negotiate access as she was welcome to participate in most of the activities organized by NGO staff members, but definitely not in all of them.

For Researcher 1, her identity as a white woman was reflective of the perceived unequal relations between researchers in the Global North and their research subjects in the Global South Moreover, her European identity raised immediate associations with Western donor representatives who periodically visited the field. This was especially confusing to the rural communities she visited as part of her research with the NGO, with community members initially resorting to a seemingly rehearsed promotional talk regarding the important work conducted by the NGO in their area. Western researchers are often confronted with "over-researched" populations in Southern countries (Clark, 2008 cited in Siwale, 2015), who fail to see concrete outcomes of completed studies. Wary of this background and potential neo-colonial associations of Western researchers in Africa, Researcher 1 tried to adapt as much as possible to the NGO office atmosphere by learning some of the local language, adopting a local name and participating in office lunches, coffee breaks and other social events, joining office staff to field visits and other meetings, and giving them the lead in the sharing of relevant information for the project (i.e., not insisting on formal interviews early on in the research phase). She was complimented by the NGO staff for visiting local communities extensively, blending in with their daily lives and staying over in local residences, something that most visiting researchers and donor representatives had apparently refused to do. This led various staff members to conclude that she had become "one of them", despite her evidently different background and appearance.

While for all three researchers in this project their doctoral degree and affiliation with a European university was useful in establishing access to officials in the public and private sector (in some cases being referred to respectfully as "doctora"—i.e., doctoral holder), it also created a certain distance from those with a lower educational status, such as rural community members and manual laborers who showed concern about giving "right" or "useful" answers. When in the field, the researchers also noted that their privileged socio-economic status elicited frequent requests for financial assistance as well as access to relevant donors. For instance, Researcher 3 was asked by flower workers to provide financial assistance for their community football team, and Researcher 1 was repeatedly asked by marginalized community members to contribute to the school fees for their children or provide access to education funds.

Despite similarities in qualitative research methods and tools adopted for data collection, the three researchers employed different strategies for conducting participant observation suited to their unique circumstances. Researcher 2 based in Organization B functioned as "an expert" by closely collaborating with NGO staff members in several day-to-day tasks including working with the communication team, fundraising through proposal writing and participating in advocacy campaigns, staff meetings, project reviews and strategic planning discussions. Researcher 1 in Organization A played the role of

Table 2. Organizational Characteristics of the Three Advocacy NGOs.

	Number of Staff	Scale of Organization's Work	Development Partner	Work Environment
Organization 1	10	Regional	Community members and CBOs	Informal and movement based
Organization 2	14	National	CBOs	Semi-formal and professional
Organization 3	35	International	NGOs	Formal and professional

"participant" by spending time in the office and observing interactions among staff members and with visitors, conducting informal conversations, and visiting board members in the vicinity, as well as joining staff to community field visits. In contrast to Organizations A and B, Researcher 3 had limited interactions with the staff members of Organization C, and collected data mainly as an "observer" during the fieldwork period. This was largely due to the formalized nature of interactions between the staff of Organization C and Researcher 3. These different roles indicate that organizational characteristics influence and shape how researchers interact with their research participants. This implies that, while researcher positionality plays an important role in access to NGOs, the researchers' characteristics and behavior in the field are largely qualified by a fourth main factor, namely the characteristics of the organization under study.

Organizational Characteristics and Access

Although all three organizations functioned as advocacy NGOs, they differed in their organizational characteristics in terms of size (i.e., number of staff), scale of operations (i.e., international, national and regional), work environment (formal, semi-formal and informal) and partnerships (see Table 2). These differences in organizational characteristics contributed to variations in how the researchers negotiated access. Establishing and maintaining access in Organization C was the most difficult due to its formalized and professionalized nature compared to Organization B which was semi-formalized, and Organization A which was informal in nature. For example, access to the director in Organization A was simply established by walking into her office whenever Researcher 1 found her car parked outside. Researcher 1 was also invited repeatedly to the homes, churches and dinner parties of various staff members, including the director. Access to all the staff in Organization B, including management staff, was easily established, however, participation in meetings and workshops was discussed in advance through email. For Organization C, Researcher 3 was unable to have any direct discussions or meetings with the director because all appointments had to follow strict chains of command. For this reason, it was not easy getting access to the director.

Organization A laid strong emphasis on being close to community members in the field and being community-led, in comparison to Organizations B and C that relied mostly on other local organizations for implementing the project activities; for instance, Organization C had seven local NGOs as

implementing partners for the project under study. All three organizations facilitated initial access to their local NGO and CBO partners for the researchers. While the introductions by the organizations ensured quick access and goodwill with constituents who might not otherwise be easily accessible, the researchers were inevitably associated with the organizations during field visits, and were often confused with staff, consultants or donor representatives. In some cases, this resulted in slight interference in the type of questions asked and the emphasis on certain answers that were received. For example, while Researcher 1 had intended to start with general questions to see what issues community members would bring up first, whenever an NGO representative was present, (s)he would immediately steer the answer to what was perceived to be the interest of the researcher (i.e., women's land rights). To counter such biases, all three researchers made attempts to build trust independent of their organizational affiliations. For instance, after first visiting the field with NGO staff members, Researcher 1 was later able to conduct independent discussions to inquire further into the relations between the NGO and community members, which provided additional valuable data. Organization A also facilitated access to some of its donors and to regional politicians, with whom the researcher held separate interviews. Similarly, Organization B introduced Researcher 2 to CBOs that were implementing the project along with other stakeholders including government officials and other NGOs advocating for women's rights issues. Following the initial introductions, Researcher 2 conducted focus group discussions as well as interviews independently without the presence of NGO staff. For Researcher 3, although the INGO staff introduced him to the seven local NGOs, he conducted interviews in the absence of the INGO staff. This provided enough opportunity for the local NGO staff to express their views. However, many of the local NGOs were reluctant to critique the INGO because of its implications for future funding opportunities. This demonstrates how the entanglement of different actors within the aid chain can influence the research findings (cf. Sampson, 2017).

In addition to organizational characteristics, the three NGOs also showed variance in their respective daily work environments. The informal, non-hierarchical and collaborative atmosphere in the office of Organization A created a situation which was relatively easy for Researcher 1 to navigate, as no one ever questioned her intentions or her presence in the office. The fact that all but one staff member were from the same ethnic group and spoke the same language may also have contributed to this cooperative atmosphere, as staff members regularly referred to

their ethnic group as "easy going." The informal and non-hierarchical atmosphere was reflected in the director's attitude, who served as the first contact person for international donors and other high-profile visitors, but usually included other staff members (and even the researcher) in such meetings. When staff forgot to invite the researcher to meetings or to provide her with relevant documents they were even inclined to apologize, indicating a sense of obligation or, more likely, willingness to accommodate her. During a focus group discussion, the staff members commented that: "research on our strategy will benefit the community . . . and you can make recommendations . . . If we look at the research that was done by [a Master student from the same university] . . . we are basing most of our arguments on that research . . . When we do fundraising, we can also look at the research and the conclusions on our work, it is already done and it can be seen" (Focus Group Discussion with NGO staff members, August 6, 2018). Organization A, in short, clearly valued the involvement of academic researchers, and staff members did not show concern about their job security as a consequence of this involvement. On the contrary, they viewed the prospective research outcomes as useful for their fundraising efforts.

In contrast to the informal atmosphere of Organization A, Organizations B and C were formal in nature with higher levels of professionalization across the management and project staff. Yet, in terms of level of professionalization and structure of operation, the two organizations differed considerably. For instance, in Organization C, each staff was assigned to specific grants projects and given responsibilities and tasks as stated by one staff: "I am the quality manager and I am responsible for the availability of procedures and instructions, the ISO certification and quality objectives within the organization" (Interview with INGO staff, December 7, 2018). This clear division of labor was evident in the sitting arrangement of staff members that was based on their specific roles under each project in the organization. This formality and hierarchy were not so evident in Organization B, as some staff had a defined role in the form of duties that were project-specific, while others worked thematically on issues of finance, monitoring and evaluation, communication and media, and fundraising across project lines.

The degree of informality in the work environment of the three organizations was closely associated with the extent of access that could be maintained over the research period. Small staff-sized Organization A with a regional focus and an informal work environment echoed ease in maintaining access all through the research process. In mid-size Organization B with a semi-formal atmosphere of management and operation, navigating access was a chequered process, with the researcher having both easy and challenging times. The fact that access needed to be negotiated on a regular basis in Organization C can be partly explained by its scale of operation, staff size and hierarchical work environment. In contrast to both Organizations A and B, which were only indirectly involved in global advocacy campaigns through their foreign donors, Organization C had an international advocacy agenda with a global

office in the Netherlands and regional offices across the world, including Kenya. The organizational characteristics of three NGOs directly influenced the nature and degree of access obtained by the researchers.

Discussion

Obtaining and maintaining research access is a dynamic process that does not stop once entry into organizations is obtained, but needs to be frequently re-negotiated over time (Grant, 2017; Riese, 2018). This study shows that negotiating access not only depends on managing the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Reeves, 2010; Riese, 2018) but also on the research topic under study. While all three researchers were funded under the same project, research topics that were likely to contribute to the cause of the organization (e.g., exposing the role of large investors in land rights violations) were met with more goodwill than topics that were a bit further removed from beneficiaries' everyday realities (e.g., the workings of the aid chain). Moreover, research access was not linearly linked to the topic under study, as two researchers who both studied implications of the aid chain on advocacy NGOs had to negotiate access differently in the organizations where they were based. Thus, research access also depended on the characteristics of the individual NGOs, including the scale of the organization, and whether they had any prior experience hosting researchers or not. In addition, advocacy NGOs that are prone to reputation management were particularly sensitive to research topics and processes that may affect their organizational survival (cf. Siwale, 2015), such as inquiries into their role in the aid chain, and involvement of donors. Although researchers can only mitigate such sensitivities to a certain extent, having prior awareness of them can help to adapt one's research methods and behavior in the field.

Gatekeepers at different positions play diverse roles in facilitating access in organizational research, which Grant (2017) refers to as macro, meso and microlevels. The initial access for all three projects in our research was established through donor organizations at the international level. This association caused confusion regarding our independent role as researchers and indicated implicit power for all of us as a result of this association. Moreover, staff members of local organizations acted as gatekeepers with whom access had to be continuously negotiated during the research process. This access negotiation depended not only on respective staff members in the three NGOs, but also on researcher positionality, and characteristics of the organization where the research was conducted. Additionally, the exit process marked by dissemination of the research findings highlighted shifts in the power dynamics that are reflected in the fieldwork relationships (Cf. Barnes et al., 2003; Bloor & Wood, 2006; Feldman et al., 2003; O'Reilly & Dhanju, 2010). INGO staff, donor representatives and other intermediaries with a more powerful or financially stable position (e.g., based in the donor country or other headquarters, or having multiple funding sources) value reflexivity and organizational learning more than staff members whose position can

be threatened by critical research findings. The different reactions observed among the three Kenyan organizations show that the influence of gatekeepers can vary widely depending on their own position in relation to the organization under study.

The findings demonstrate that access to the research site should be viewed as an ongoing, inherently political process. In this ongoing process, the researcher performs "identity work" by selectively emphasizing one's insider or outsider status. The educational status of the three researchers served as a strategic entry point in the field, but it also posed limitations for research access. Similarly, the power differential between the researchers and the research participants often positioned us as outsiders, due to our privileged socioeconomic status and urban background. Additionally, a combination of ethnicity, gender and linguistic skills determined to what extent we could present ourselves as insiders. For the researchers of African and Indian origins, acceptance was high in the initial period of the research process, while the Dutch researcher had to make additional efforts to overcome stereotypes linked to her background. Nevertheless, the dynamic nature of access makes researcher positionality a fluid experience, often resulting in a position that lies in between being an insider or an outsider (Grant, 2017; Milligan, 2016). Being European, African or Indian posed opportunities and constraints for the three researchers; however, being aware and reflective about their own positions aided them to navigate through existing barriers. Their approach toward the NGOs and the method of data collection influenced their relationships with the organizations involved and also impacted on the degree and type of access granted by the organizations.

Building on literature that discusses access to organizations and NGOs in particular (see for example, Riese, 2018; Sampson, 2017), we highlight additional challenges that come with power dynamics of advocacy NGOs in non-Western contexts that operate as part of the aid chain. The comparative discussion of three NGOs further revealed how institutions that have more resources at their disposal exerted more power in denying or granting research access. We recommend that researchers who intend to do ethnographic fieldwork with NGOs take into account not only the intersecting factors we have identified, but also characteristics of the organization such as scale of operation and consequently, its likely openness to critical insights. Such a perspective does justice to the entanglement and dependency on various actors that previous research has identified as characteristic of NGOs (Sampson, 2017).

This article confirms that research access is a dynamic and multi-faceted process, with particular implications for research with advocacy NGOs (cf. Riese, 2018). The comparative analysis has highlighted that the strategies for establishing and maintaining access that can work for one researcher might not work for others. It is important to be aware of this complexity and translate it into one's own research context because navigating access even in the same research project would require different strategies, which need to be aligned with who is doing the research, on what topic, where and how. While previous literature has predominantly highlighted successful strategies, we aimed to also describe some limitations and constraints that one may encounter, and how reflection and comparative exchange may help to overcome these.

Conclusion

In this article, we addressed the question of how research access to NGOs is obtained and maintained. To answer this question, we explored the interaction between organizational characteristics, researcher positionality, the role of gatekeepers who may be from inside or outside the organization, and the research topic. Despite the similar set-up of the three research projects, we had vastly different experiences in terms of securing access and negotiating the outcomes of our research. Based on comparative analysis of these factors, this research confirms that negotiating research access should be viewed as an inherently political process that is dynamic in nature.

Finally, by comparing multiple cases, we highlight the process of establishing and maintaining access to advocacy NGOs in a developing country context. Future research can enhance the scope of this analysis by comparing experiences across global South and North, and the implications on research methodology related to organizational literature. By bringing together the experiences of three researchers in a comparative frame of analysis, this article aims to distinguish factors that have direct implications for access beyond a single case study or a theoretical exploration of research access. Furthermore, by comparing three cases, we highlight not only the successful practices but also the challenges that we faced, thereby attempting to contribute to a body of literature that is "real rather than sanitized" (Riese, 2018, p. 13). Among the multiple facets we identify as influencing research access, our analysis in this article is limited to the role of gatekeepers, researchers, NGOs' organizational characteristics and research topic. Including other factors that influence research access to NGOs (e.g., a systematic study of the way the research topic impacts reception within the organization) will add to the growing literature that focuses on the complexity inherent in the process of access in qualitative research, and to NGOs in particular.

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Notes

1. Following the definition of Salamon and Anheier (1992), NGOs are considered to be formalized, self-governed, non-governmental, non-profit distributing and at least partly voluntary organizations. In this article, we will refer to the three organizations we studied as NGOs, although they are of different sizes and work on different scales (local, national and international).
2. By aid chain, we mean the chain of funding from the Global North to the Global South where institutional donors give funding to international NGOs and then to local NGOs.
3. The three other projects were situated in Ethiopia, India and Ukraine. In 2018, two further projects were awarded funding for research in Bangladesh, Palestine, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. For an overview, see https://includeplatform.net/theme/new-roles-for-csos-for-inclusive-development/
4. We have anonymized all the three NGOs that were a part of this research to ensure confidentiality.

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