**Advice and tips with thanks to the following people:**

* Dr Hannah Cross (POLIS), who spoke about ethnographic research among West African migrant communities in Senegal, Mauritania and Spain.
* Vivek Mathur (Sustainability Research Institute), who discussed ethnographic fieldwork in a village in India, looking at experiences among the users of a sustainable technology.
* Rosemary Morgan (Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development), who talked about fieldwork in Tanzania, researching HIV/AIDS policy processes in faith-based non-governmental organizations.

**General**

If possible, arrange for someone to meet you at the airport, or at least get advice on how much a taxi should cost.

Get the numbers of a few good taxi drivers.

Where to stay? Choosing to stay with a particular family or NGO will have implications for how you are seen by others. There’s unlikely to be a perfect answer. You will also need to balance practicalities, for example, a house with some facilities.

There might be group email lists that you can join in advance, for example, for finding accommodation or learning about social activities.

Be guarded with your personal details and contacts — especially if female. There’s a difficult balance between establishing trust with gatekeepers and making sure people can reach you, and ensuring you don’t get rung up in the middle of the night with requests for money or marriage!

Don’t try to do more than two interviews per day: it’s exhausting. And leave time between them as people often run late.

Be realistic when thinking about the number of case studies as it takes time to build up trust.

If you need to photocopy documents (consent forms etc), do this well in advance as you may find there’s no electricity on the day.

Use a digital camera to take photos of newspaper articles and other documents; it is quicker and it takes up less suitcase space than cuttings or photocopies.

Act like a sponge: don’t see anything as insignificant, take it all in. you may not know what is relevant at first. For example, with interviews, don’t try to control things too much and don’t worry if it’s hard to stick to the schedule – people will talk about what’s important to them (especially with ethnographic research).

Understand local realities. Don’t be too driven by the literature you’ve read or official ethical procedures. Be open to what’s actually happening and aware to ethical issues that arise.

If your PhD is part of a larger research project, think about how to retain your independence. You may need to avoid getting pushed towards certain research questions or case studies, eg. those designed to show success stories.

**Interpreters**

Interpreters can be very helpful, not just for translation but also for conducting interviews and giving advice. However, this depends on finding the right person and building up trust.

Strategies for finding an interpreter can include advertising on internet forums or asking local academics.

If you use an interpreter, be clear at the start about the level of detail that you need (ie. verbatim translation, not just summaries).

Some people found they lost some depth in interviews with an interpreter – perhaps depends whether the interpreter conducts the interview (ie. the conversation is between them and the participant), or whether they just translate your questions (ie. the conversation is 3-way)?

Having different interpreters or translators can help to check the accuracy of data.

**Finding the contacts for your research**

It can be difficult to predict the paths for snowballing. Just keep getting out there and talking to people, and the contacts will come!

Contacting people by email before going: success will vary, depending partly on who you’re trying to contact. People who don’t reply to emails can prove to be extremely helpful in person. It can be much easier to establish trust in person or on the phone (this gives more opportunity for people to ask you questions). Communication styles vary culturally: in some places, it’s rude to call without sending an SMS first.

Contacting people before ethical approval: it’s OK as long as you’re not collecting data.

Diaspora groups in the UK, other university students and alumni can be a great source of advice.

If you can afford it, a preliminary field visit can be very helpful for checking research questions, making contacts etc.

Funding for fieldwork: there may be some funds from your department, the body that pays your scholarship, or your supervisor.

**Challenges (and some solutions!)**

Ethical clearance can take months. It might help to be in the country, go on a tourist visa and talk with officials to arrange approval in person.

It can be exhausting: long days, a hot climate, different food etc. This can make it hard to find the energy to write up field notes, transcribe tapes, or keep your research diary in the evenings. Be realistic about what you can manage in your schedule, and give yourself breaks.

Attitudes to timekeeping can be very different. You need to be flexible and patient.

Finding the confidence for elite interviews can be difficult, but people usually turn out to be very friendly and helpful.

Relationships with gatekeepers and participants: how to balance trust and openness, and maintain a professional distance?

Reciprocity: it can be uncomfortable when participants may stress the need for resources – how should you handle this? How can you make the research a real exchange? Open up to people as much as they open up to you, and try to report what they’re saying honestly. Some people have found very practical ways to give back, for example, volunteering with an NGO or helping teach.

Leaving the field: it’s hard to leave after immersing yourself in a different country and culture and becoming friends with research participants, but you can stay in touch.

Negotiating insider/outsider roles: there can be a tension, for example, cultural differences even when researching communities in the country you come from. It helped to really listen to people, dress sensitively, reduce obvious marks of distinction (don’t get your camera out straight away).

The first month can be difficult. You may be lonely, unused to the culture and climate, and unsure how your research will proceed. Social clubs (such as the Hash House Harriers) can be an excellent source of friends and connections, for finding accommodation etc.
Then there’s culture shock when you come back. After the excitement of fieldwork, you may face weeks of transcribing. Transcription takes a LONG time.

Relevance: should a PhD aim to influence policy? How can we think about relevance during the planning stage, for example in discussion with policy contacts? Is there a tension between having clear, policy-focused research questions and being open to what the issues are when you’re on the ground? Don’t go in with too many preconceptions, and see if your questions make sense to people there.

**Best bits**

Fieldwork can be a hugely rewarding experience: one of the most personally rewarding experiences ever.

It can also be surprisingly easy. What seems like an ethical nightmare beforehand usually turns out to be very enjoyable, and people are often very willing to speak and share information.

Some people find they have a brilliant social life while on fieldwork. It can be lots of fun!

**Brown bag seminar, 2011**