

# PERSPECTIVE PIECE

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## DOING RESEARCH ON REAL-WORLD CHALLENGES

*Produzindo pesquisa sobre os desafios do mundo real*

*Producción de investigación sobre los desafíos del mundo real*

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### ABSTRACT

There are often calls for scholars to do more practically relevant research, but there is little guidance on how to do that. Doing work dealing with real-world challenges is a tough task, often requiring an interdisciplinary approach. I offer six strategies to help scholars. It is important to care about the challenge as this is a resource in the research project. Scholars must read widely about the challenge, often outside the core discipline. They should plan a structured literature review as a scholarly deliverable alongside the empirical work. Because the intent is for the work to be practically usable, the empirical component has to be very robust. Recommendations should be linked to the core discipline, but the dissemination strategy should go beyond academia.

**Keywords:** practical relevance, interdisciplinary research, real-world challenges, structured literature review, empirical rigor.

### RESUMO

São muitas as ocasiões em que acadêmicos são solicitados a fazer pesquisas com relevância prática, embora haja pouca orientação sobre como fazê-lo. Levar a cabo um trabalho que lide com desafios do mundo real é uma tarefa difícil e que, em geral, requer uma abordagem interdisciplinar. Com o objetivo de apoiar pesquisadores nessa empreitada, o presente artigo oferece seis estratégias nesse sentido. É importante preocupar-se com o desafio que, de fato, é um recurso para a realização do projeto de pesquisa. Os acadêmicos precisarão inteirar-se sobre o desafio, muitas vezes além da disciplina principal. Eles poderão considerar o planejamento de uma revisão estruturada da literatura como uma entrega acadêmica em conjunto com o trabalho empírico. Como a intenção é que o trabalho seja utilizável na prática, o componente empírico deve ser robusto. As recomendações devem ser vinculadas à disciplina principal, mas a estratégia de disseminação deve ir além do âmbito acadêmico.

**Palavras-chave:** relevância prática, pesquisa interdisciplinar, desafios do mundo real, revisão estruturada da literatura, rigor empírico.

### RESUMEN

Hay muchas ocasiones en las que se pide a los académicos que realicen investigaciones con relevancia práctica, pero hay poca orientación sobre cómo hacerlo. Realizar un trabajo que aborde desafíos del mundo real es una tarea difícil y generalmente requiere un enfoque interdisciplinario. Con el objetivo de apoyar a los investigadores en este empeño, este artículo ofrece seis estrategias al respecto. Es importante preocuparse por el desafío que, de hecho, es un recurso para la realización del proyecto de investigación. Los académicos necesitarán aprender sobre el desafío, a menudo más allá de su disciplina principal. Pueden considerar la planificación de una revisión estructurada de la literatura como resultado académico junto con el trabajo empírico. Como la intención es que el trabajo sea utilizable en la práctica, el componente empírico debe ser sólido. Las recomendaciones deben estar vinculadas a la disciplina principal, pero la estrategia de difusión debe ir más allá del ámbito académico.

**Palabras clave:** relevancia práctica, investigación interdisciplinaria, desafíos del mundo real, revisión estructurada de la literatura, rigor empírico.

## INTRODUCTION

For decades, scholars have bemoaned the fact that management research is so often concerned with theory at the expense of practical relevance (Kieser et al., 2015) and have called for scholars to engage more with the practical challenges of the day (Wickert et al., 2021). This call has special resonance for scholars of emerging markets. We can see first-hand the many and diverse challenges with which managers and employees are grappling. To make sense of our complex world, the research often does not adequately serve us. However, we often struggle to do research that can address those challenges.

The first issue is that real-world challenges are generally multi-dimensional. Imagine a firm trying to understand how to serve poor customers (the so-called “base of the pyramid”) in a way that is both ethical and profitable. A manager can put together teams to understand different people’s views in poor communities, the marketing-related issues of costing and channels, new product development, and more. However, scholars do not operate in terms of project-specific details. We need to come up with principles, with generalizable insights, and with heuristics – some format that will allow learning from one context to be used in another. Moreover, we typically have about 10,000 words in a journal paper to make our point. Interdisciplinary research can be very powerful, but it is also hard to do (Leahey et al., 2017). How does one find an entry point into a very complex problem?

Another important stumbling block is that we often lack a theoretical “launchpad.” Much as we may question the reification of theory, it makes a big difference whether one sees the performance problems of employees as due primarily to conditions inside the firm, or primarily due to issues from outside the firm, such as personal obligations to take care of family members. Those questions are fundamentally theory questions, but because we live in an under-researched context, we do not always have appropriate theories at hand.

These challenges are not fundamentally different from the issues faced by management scholars across the world – all researchers struggle to find a focused question and to theoretically frame their work appropriately. However, because problems are often so complex in emerging markets, and because the literature on them is less developed, these challenges are likely harder for scholars of emerging markets to address. Nonetheless, given the multiple challenges of climate change, poverty, disintegrating social fabric, and more, it is worth accepting the challenge of doing robust work on real challenges.

## DRAWING INSIGHTS FROM MY OWN EXPERIENCES

In this paper, I reflect on my experiences working on an empirical paper on violence and how it affects FDI - foreign direct investment (Thakur-Wernz et al., 2024). I suggested the topic and did most of the theory development, but I was fortunate to be part of a team of co-authors with complementary skills. We could act as a sounding board for each other and share the workload. This also left me curious:

If I had to invite a scholar to another such project, what could I say about the process awaiting us? As I reflected on our experiences, I distilled six key learnings from the project.

## Care about the challenge

This may appear so obvious that it seems not worth saying, but if we had not really, really cared about how violence affects FDI, I doubt that we would have been prepared to do the hard work it turned out we had to do.

As a South African who grew up under Apartheid, I was familiar with violence. We had bomb threats several times a year at school. A bomb once went off just outside the cinema where my parents were watching a movie (I was visiting a friend), and I knew numerous people who had lost family members in the violence. And then, in the immediate post-Apartheid years, the violence stopped. There were issues, yes, but we did not have burning blockades on the major highways or protestors throwing stones at passing cars. Slowly, these actions started coming back. Certain parts of the country were no longer accessible, and later, certain roads in even accessible locations had to be avoided. There were certain times of the month or year that one needed to just stay away, and knowing when was, of course, important knowledge one sought out. But it felt as if one could somehow manage the risk.

This was life until July 2021, when the country just exploded into violence, killing hundreds of people in a few days, looting and burning down dozens of shopping malls and other buildings (Vhumbunu, 2021). Out of the blue. And then that intense violence stopped – and we went back to protestors blocking highways or burning tires on a “less intense” basis.

I really wanted to understand what was going on. As a scholar, research is how I make sense of the world, and I started reading up on the topic. Because I am an international business scholar, I focused on violence and FDI. To my amazement, the evidence was mixed. Personally, I wanted to run away from all the violence, but some scholars (e.g., Dai et al., 2017) found that sometimes multinational enterprises (MNE) stayed?!

While we worked on the project, I said no to numerous projects that other scholars felt were worthwhile. Climate change. Gender empowerment. Small business development. What I learned from the interactions with my colleagues is that no project is inherently more worthwhile than another. If we do our work properly as responsible scholars, we are all doing work on topics that matter. But, to do good research on a challenge, the challenge needs to matter **to you**. Caring deeply about that challenge will be an important resource in the development of the paper.

## READ WIDELY ABOUT THE CHALLENGE

It was soon clear to me that the literature on violence I found in my discipline, international business, was not appropriate for the question we were trying to answer. The literature generally assumed that violence was a risk that could be managed (e.g., Oh & Oetzel, 2017), whereas what

South Africans had lived through was a truly unexpected event. The international business literature also seemed to deal almost exclusively with political risk and political violence – Ramos and Ashby's (2013) paper on organized crime in Mexico was a rare exception. I needed to find more such papers. I needed to understand better what was already understood about violence to help me make sense of not just the literature but, more importantly, violence. I needed to read more widely about the topic.

I finally found a database on violence from Sussex University, ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data). ACLED categorized violence in practical and non-theoretical ways, but it was extensively used in the peace and violence literature. By searching for papers using ACLED data, I found papers on violence in peacekeeping, sociology, international relations, and other fields. Those papers helped me to revisit the international business literature and to better see what was there, and also what was not.

I could see that case studies, even in international business, often identified various types of violence alongside political violence (e.g., Barnard & Luiz, 2018; Luiz et al., 2019). This led me to search for literature on social violence, which I found in criminology, sociology, and social psychology. I was very keen to find some typology but eventually discovered that violence is almost impossible to categorize. What type of violence is it when a young man with no money to further his education and no chance of finding stable employment goes to a political rally because it is something to do and rapes a political opponent on the way back?

I often felt lost, but it helped that I was reading in a domain grappling with the very questions I wondered about. I felt that I was developing the scholarly tools to make sense of what had happened in South Africa. When I started editing a handbook of qualitative research in emerging markets for Elgar (Barnard, 2025), I discovered that mine was actually a typical response: Faced with a topic that is new to management research, many scholars read beyond the discipline.

It does not matter whether your interest is in Indigenous governance, traditional agriculture, construction practices, the workplace behaviors of people suffering from intergenerational trauma, or anything else. Although it is unlikely that management scholars will have written on the topic, it is almost certain that scholars in other disciplines will have written about it. Going forward, I will be much quicker to look beyond the boundaries of the field.

## CONSIDER WRITING AND PUBLISHING A STRUCTURED LITERATURE REVIEW

The process I followed to find the articles on violence was one of discovery. Having found a few important papers, I forward-chained and backward-chained from them. I used “find similar journals” on Scimago to find related journals and looked up the key scholars in the field. However, the process was not systematic or structured. We were trying to find the evidence to support our argument that violence sometimes functioned not as a risk but as Knightian uncertainty (Knight, 1921).

We were in a hurry to get the paper to the journal, and once the paper had been reviewed, we were scrambling to make the deadlines for the revisions. It never felt worthwhile to pause to consolidate the mass of readings. Structured literature reviews, also called systematic literature reviews, have become important in the management field because they help scholars make sense of the enormous and growing body of work out there (Rousseau et al., 2008). It would have taken time to revisit the literature using a more structured process, for example, with more transparent choices about the types of journals consulted or the keywords used to find papers. Because we were in such a hurry to wrap up our empirical paper, the idea of a structured literature review fell by the wayside.

**Table 1.** Research that Addresses Real-World Problems – Strategies to Do Good Research

Recommendation	Motivation
Choose a challenge that you really care about	You will want to really immerse yourself in the topic so you can speak with authority. But that takes a lot of time and work.
Read widely about the topic, also outside of the management literature	This topic may be new to management scholars, but it is likely that you can find useful resources in related fields like political science, sociology, environmental science, etc.
Consider writing and publishing a structured literature review on the literature that is not familiar to management research	You need to master the literature from different fields, and it will help you to have a structured way of thinking about it. Also, others in the field may benefit from a guide about prior knowledge on that topic.
Make sure that your empirical section is extremely robust	We cannot make practical recommendations about a real-life challenge if we have not done the most robust empirical work possible. If the intent is for work to have real-world implications, the expectations of scholarly rigor increase.
Connect your recommendations to what is already known in your own field.	Recommendations that may appear far-fetched may be consistent with earlier scholarship or may reflect a different interpretation of what is already known. Linking to previous work helps strengthen those recommendations.
Plan for multiple outlets for the same message, not just academic journals.	Some journals are more amenable to practice-oriented work than others, but even then, their primary audience is academic. Plan separate outlets for communicating with policy-makers, with communities, with investors - whomever you have identified as important stakeholders.

Yet, we had developed an integrated map of the literature on violence. Reflecting on the project now, it would have been a relatively small amount of additional work to consolidate the insights gained through the extensive reading process. When I next do a project that requires extensive reading and synthesizing of dispersed knowledge, I will budget time to write and submit a structured literature review on the topic for publication.

## MAKE SURE THE EMPIRICAL SECTION IS ROBUST

The fact that a paper addresses a real-world challenge does not mean that the empirics can be less robust than usual. On the contrary – papers on real-world challenges are meant to change the status quo, which places additional obligations on authors. We were haunted by the possibility that we had somehow made mistakes in our work. What if policymakers, using our findings, made choices that increased rather than decreased violence or reduced rather than facilitated FDI-assisted development? I was reminded of a scholar who commented that the aim of statistical analysis should not be to find significance but rather to destroy it. If significance persists, in spite of one's best efforts to get rid of it, then one can assume that findings are robust.

All of us discussed the empirical strategy – we wanted to get this right. However, I write in much greater detail about the challenges of finding the right literature than about the analysis because I was not in charge of the empirical section of the paper; Pooja was. Although I am glossing over the details of the work she did, I can confirm that it was as demanding as finding the right literature. To begin with, we needed to find the most robust data sources for our paper. We used ACLED to measure violence, but to be consistent with the bulk of studies in the field (Liu et al., 2024), Pooja also reanalyzed everything with data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. We needed multiple control variables and multiple proxies for the quite abstract matters they were measuring. We needed multiple analytic tests and, in fact, reported only a small fraction of the robustness tests conducted.

We were lucky: We could find the data sources for what we (or the reviewers) believed we needed. Sometimes, a project uses primary data, or the data needed does not exist in that context. Because research about real-world challenges matters, when an argument cannot be empirically supported in a robust way, I am not sure that it is responsible to make that argument. At the very least, I believe that editors who reject a paper because the empirical section is not robust enough – painful though it may be – are right to do so.

## LINK YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO YOUR CORE LITERATURE

As international business scholars, our interest was in how unexpected, unpredictable (“Knightian uncertain”) violence affects FDI. In the course of familiarizing ourselves with the literature on

violence, we discovered so many interesting new things. The notion of the “conflict trap” – that conflict worsens the conditions giving rise to conflict (Hegre et al., 2017) – was intuitively simple and yet so powerful. It turns out that the perpetrators of violence target large businesses to fund the violence (Pinto & Zhu, 2022). This made us think differently about the value and risks of large FDI investments, e.g., infrastructure projects. In our evidence, we discovered (as expected) that when violence was Knightian uncertain, FDI decreased. However, counterintuitively, exports increased. We went hunting for literature on exports and violence.

It was easy to forget about the more familiar international business literature, and the first drafts of our document were cluttered with irrelevant material. We did not think nearly enough about what our findings meant for our own discipline. Yet our evidence suggested important implications for international business and the literature on FDI-assisted development. That was what we needed to discuss. Sometimes, when we know a field, we do not see the contributions and insights in that field as clearly as when we encounter a body of knowledge for the first time. Much as our insights about violence excited us, they were generally well-established insights among peace and violence scholars.

There is another reason why it is important to link back to the core discipline. We were forced to read outside of the field of international business because there was no work that could guide us in developing our argument. Having done the work to enrich the understanding of violence in international business, we would have been unwise to forget about our primary audience. The body of literature on violence in international business had started after the 9/11 terror attack in the USA, and although social violence was underrepresented, there was an active conversation on political violence that we could enrich. We contributed by bringing insights about non-political violence from another literature into our home discipline.

Thanks to the guidance of the reviewers and editor, we did correct course. It became clear how much we belonged in the scholarly conversation of international business scholars when another paper on violence appeared not only in the same journal but in the same issue of the journal as our paper (Liu et al., 2024). For scholars grappling with a new body of knowledge, my advice is to not lose sight of how that new knowledge could – and perhaps even should – shape one’s home discipline.

## GET THE MESSAGE OUT

It is wonderful when a research project about a real-world challenge produces a paper in a credible journal. For the scholars who worked on it, such papers are sources of legitimacy and potential opportunities, time, and funding to further their work. Yet publishing academic papers cannot be the final step in the research process if the aim is to address a real-world challenge. Very few people read academic papers, and those who do are rarely in a position to challenge the status quo.

The insights from the research project must, therefore, also be shared through other avenues. Some people thrive on writing opinion pieces in newspapers, speaking to interviewees, and convening workshops with managers or policymakers. However, the ability and sometimes even the interest in getting the message out cannot be taken for granted in a research project team. In our paper on violence, we had not planned for wider dissemination, and our team lacked those skills.

A first learning is, therefore, that it is important to constitute a research team about a real-world challenge so that at least one of the participants in the project is capable and interested in sharing insights beyond the academic world. This is a specific role in the project and cannot be left to chance. When I started asking colleagues how they go about sharing insights, it struck me that this role requires a very specific skill set.

Colleagues who are actively communicating with a broader audience raised questions I had never thought about. One question was simply: Did we want to speak to companies or policymakers? As we spoke, it became clear that a very important part of getting the message out was to be clear about the audience. Even something like “policymakers” was too broad. It is important to think about the level of government and what branches of government, e.g., security versus economic development, will care about very different metrics and may need very different messages about how violence affects FDI.

One also cannot assume that the intended audience will share one’s interest in the findings. It is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation: You want the right audience to pay attention to your message, but for them to pay attention, they need to think your message is important to them. Short communications that get straight to the point are important. Helena-the-scholar was almost cringing when thinking about shortening and simplifying our nuanced academic argument. But we cannot expect people to listen to us if we cannot translate our insights into language that makes sense to them.

And then, there are many different ways of reaching one’s audience, with the precise platforms varying based on the topic. Opinion pieces in newspapers, presentations at conferences for managers or policymakers, and even social media posts leave clear documentary evidence to provide evidence of outreach for funders or accreditation agencies. However, direct engagement with small groups, whether managers, policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and/or social activists, is sometimes the most powerful way to amplify the message of the work.

Although we are all actively spreading the word about our paper, in hindsight, we should have planned this as a key part of the project. It takes skill to reach the right audience with a message that is crafted right for the audience.

## CONCLUSION

What I have not yet said is perhaps the most important point of all: I am glad I worked on that paper. It was hard work, and we sometimes wondered if we would ever get it right, but it never

felt like a waste of time. Academics are people with an unusual level of discretion in exactly what they choose to do with their time. Doing research on a real-world challenge felt meaningful to me, and I believe this will be true for many other scholars.

It is a tough task. The research task itself is harder than when doing research in an established tradition. In good research, the question will always be novel, but when a field is better established, a researcher can draw on readily available theories, measures, and proxies. As scholars of emerging markets, prior knowledge is harder to find and typically less advanced. At the same time, we often have multiple roles and responsibilities and little time to do research. In this piece, I reflect on what I learned, seeking to do good research on a real-world challenge.

Scholars of emerging markets have long known that it is a waste of precious resources to do research on topics that do not matter. Emerging markets are skills-scarce, and as the privileged recipients and custodians of higher education, we need to do research that matters and then also share our findings as widely as possible. It is my hope that the practices I share in this paper can help other scholars do good practically relevant research.

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## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION**

Helena Barnard: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – proofreading, and editing.