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## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS



**“The distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena.”**

Yin, *Case study Research: Design and Methods*, p.2.

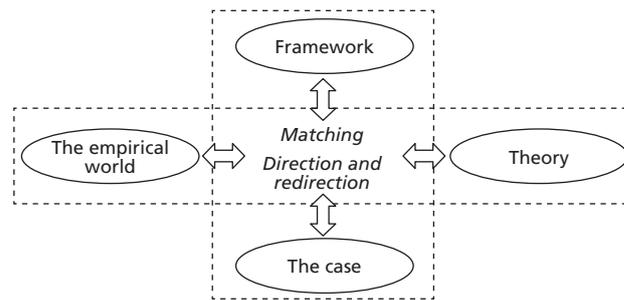
Yin suggests that a case study approach is an appropriate research methodology to use when the research objective asks ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions.<sup>81</sup> ‘How’ and ‘why’ questions often relate to the study of phenomena that are “messy”, emergent, non-sequential and politically sensitive, which are best considered within their natural setting. As a result, case research provides a better explanation of the historical and complex links that govern state welfare systems, notably, in this particular case, Egyptian food subsidies.

A mixed methods approach was deemed most suitable for addressing the research objective of the book. Mixed methods research explicitly attempts to examine the social within the economic in order to demonstrate a more mutual exchange of ideas between sociology and economics.<sup>82</sup> Modell defines mixed methods research “in terms of its propensity to enable research to combine breadth and depth in empirical enquiries to enhance the validity of research findings through triangulation and to facilitate the mobilisation of multiple theories”.<sup>83</sup> The collection, thorough reading and preliminary analysis of relevant documentary material thus formed a key part of the information used. This was further supplemented with the data from semi-structured interviews in the field according to the interview guidelines set up in Lawrence Neuman’s *Social Research Methods*.

An abductive research approach seemed most suitable given the nature of the research objective. Unlike inductive and deductive reasoning, abductive research can explain, develop or change the theoretical framework before, during or after the research process.<sup>84</sup> In fact, abductive research moves back and forth between inductive and open-ended research settings to more hypothetical and deductive attempts to verify hypotheses. Accordingly, abductive reasoning consists of a pragmatic approach to advancing the social sciences through a process of “systematic combining” in academic research as depicted in Dubois and Gadde’s model below.<sup>85/86</sup>

81. Yin, R. K. *Case Study Research*, 3rd edn. London, England: Sage Publications, 2003.
82. *ibid.* p.124.
83. Modell, S. “Bridging the paradigm divide in management accounting research: The role of mixed methods approaches”, *Management Accounting Research*, vol. 21(10), 2010, pp.124-29.
84. Dubois, A., Gadde, L.E. “Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research”, *Journal of Business Research*, vol.55, 2002, pp.553-60. Dubois A. Gadde L.E. 2002.
85. Friedrichs, J., Kratochwil, F. “On Acting and Knowing: How Pragmatism can Advance International Relations Research and Methodology”, *International Organization*, vol.63, 2009, pp.701-31.
86. Dubois and Gadde perceived an abductive research as a possibility to capture and take advantage not only of the systemic character of the empirical world, but also of the systemic character of theoretical models.

Figure 3. Abductive reasoning



Source: Dubois and Gadde, 2002.

### Publicly available documentation and secondary sources

The main types of primary documentation include reports in the extant literature on the *baladi* bread subsidy in Egypt, newspaper clippings in Arabic and English, policy recommendations made by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and USAID, as well as external evaluation reports by the World Food Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Throughout the literature review in chapter 1, I made use of the above sources including previous academic studies on Egypt's food subsidy system. In addition, I have examined unpublished Ph.D. dissertations in the field to fill in any of the remaining gaps in the extant literature. Annual reports and publications by various government ministries helped evaluate how different actors in the *baladi* bread supply chain perceive their interests and the extent to which these were reflected in their activities. Policy recommendations and peer reviewed studies within the academic literature provided a more precise understanding of how alternative approaches and frameworks were used to reform the *baladi* bread supply chain. On the other hand, newspaper clippings provided an outlet for different actors in the supply chain to broadcast their opinions, particularly in the case of conflicting actors' interests. This was usually seen with intermediaries that perceived the activities and operations of another actor in the supply chain as unequal or unjust.

These documents have provided an extensive body of information that has helped me structure the history and operations of Egypt's bread subsidy system as well as the generation of concepts throughout the data analysis. This initial documentation process served as a basis for identifying issues that dominate the academic, policy and public discourse in the Egyptian *baladi* bread subsidy debate. The collected data selects some aspects of the intermediaries' perceived reality and interests in the supply chain to analyse how they go about fulfilling their interests and distorting the system. The next stage of the data collection process made use of these findings to identify and highlight additional actors in the supply chain that could be interviewed.

## Interviews

Field research that was conducted over a period of 12 weeks culminated with a total of 36 in-person, phone and email interviews during three field visits to Cairo, Egypt, each lasting up to four weeks: June-July 2013, July-August 2013 and December-January 2014. A list of the interviewees is available in the appendices and includes the organisation's name, interviewee's position, the interview date and method of interview (in person, phone, e-mail) for each interviewee. It was deemed better to conceal the full name of interviewees for reasons of confidentiality and the political sensitivity of such a topic at various socio-political levels in Egypt.

In this case, field research and interviews were a means to connect the research studied to the context in which it appears. I followed the principle of naturalism where ordinary events governing the *baladi* bread supply chain – e.g. purchase of wheat, storage of wheat, milling of flour baking of bread, sale of bread – were observed in their natural setting and what Neuman calls the “authentic reality”.<sup>87</sup> Throughout my time in Cairo, I attempted to include as many different perspectives as possible of actors within the system and then switch back to a researcher's viewpoint to get a better understanding of their interest and role in the supply chain.

The interview questions were deliberately open-ended in order to better understand and capture each stakeholder's own role in the supply chain. These questions varied at each stage of the research process and can be classified into three different types: descriptive, structural and contrast interview questions. A sample list of questions used for various groups of stakeholders is available in the appendices.

In the early stages, many of the questions were descriptive in order to explore each actor's perception of the structure of the *baladi* bread supply chain. The questions were worded so as to get each stakeholder to describe their role and responsibilities towards other actors in the system. This was then followed with structural questions based on a domain analysis of the actor's role in the supply chain.

Finally, contrast questions built on the analysis verified by structural questions were asked. They focused on similarities and differences between each actor's perception and knowledge of the administration and distortions occurring throughout the supply chain.

Interviews were conducted in English or colloquial Egyptian Arabic, and sometimes in both. The interviews took place in the informant's home environment or, in some cases, at a previously agreed location (e.g. coffee shop, tea house, informant's residence or office). Each interview was transcribed in English to ensure a coherent and homogenous collection of data for the analysis section. From a total of 36 interviews, 31,000 words of empirical data were transcribed.

The interview notes contain extensive descriptive details drawn from memory and written notes that fit with some of the criteria set by Neuman for fieldwork.<sup>88</sup> Jotted notes were words, phrases and drawings that were made while in the field and during the interviews. Direct observation notes were written directly after leaving the field visit or interview and they served as a detailed description of what was seen and heard in very concrete and

**87.** Neuman, L. W. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 7th Edition*, Pearson, 2013.

**88.** See: Neuman, 2013, p.420.

specific terms, these would seek to “as closely as possible, replicate an exact recording of particular words phrases or actions”.<sup>89</sup>

When possible, and with the consent of the interviewee, some of the interviews were recorded. These constituted a separate category of interview notes that were either directly transcribed or translated into English.

## Data analysis

The empirical data was analysed using axial coding and interpretation.<sup>90</sup> Axial coding was used to establish sub-categories and components of the main higher-level codes such as actor’s roles, incentives and distortions. Then, testimonies and data from previous publications and interviews were coded to fill descriptive and conceptual gaps in the study. The method of coding relied on pre-analytical remarks and coloured highlighters to segregate between different data nodes and categories.<sup>91</sup>

The coding began with a provisional production of concepts that “opened-up” the data to identify potential properties and dimensions of Egypt’s *baladi* bread subsidy system. The initial coding process was subject to close scrutiny and many of the codes were tentative and subject to revision throughout the research process as new insights from the data emerged. The second stage of the coding process focused on the analysis of larger relations between the incentives of stakeholders in the supply chain and the political economy of the *baladi* bread subsidy system. This was also an interactive process involving back and forth assessments of data sources.

Ultimately, the interpretation and re-interpretation of empirical data sources focused on the analysis of core conceptual themes to construct accurate representations of the roles of intermediaries and middlemen in the Egyptian *baladi* bread subsidy system.

However, the empirical data presented in this book is not an objective picture of social reality. Rather, it is what Alvesson and Deetz refer to as a “set of impressions and interpretations produced by situated persons, characterised by feelings, imaginations, commitments and particular pre-structured understandings... what is offered here is one story”.<sup>92</sup>

Data from the interviews and initial documentation process was incorporated within the political economy framework of the study. The data analysis in subsequent chapters has adopted an explanation-building approach where specific constructs and emerging relations provided critical insights into the roles and incentives and various actors in the *baladi* bread supply chain. These subsequently construct a narrative, highlighting the underlying role of political economy in the administration of the *baladi* bread subsidy.

## Methodological limitations

Despite acknowledging the importance of contexts and boundary conditions, there are several limitations that relate to the method design, selection and analysis of empirical data. A common concern in case study

89. *ibid.* p.435.

90. Axial coding is the disaggregation of core themes during qualitative data analysis. For additional information see: Charmaz, K. *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*, London: Sage, 2006.

91. Patton, 2002.

92. Alvesson, M., Deetz, S., *Doing Critical Management Research*. London: Sage publications, 2000, p.136.

research is the lack of rigour where the researcher can bias the conduct of the experiment due to the lack of systematic procedures in place.<sup>93</sup>

Other researchers have also argued that case studies provide little basis for scientific generalisation and lack external validity as the findings cannot be generalised to theoretical propositions.<sup>94</sup> In the case of this study, the choice of actors in the *baladi* bread supply chain or even the timeframe for empirical analysis will vary between researchers. The transcription of some recorded data from Arabic to English also interferes with an objective interpretation of testimonies from interviewees.

I have attempted to address these issues throughout the research process. The mixed methods approach combined the study of a wide range of archival data, public documents and interviews, focusing on the case of the *baladi* bread subsidy in Egypt. This measure has allowed for a more robust coverage of time, events and development in the state-administered food subsidy system. With regard to the quality of data, some of the questions were repeated to different actors to cross-check facts and feedback from my supervisor. Still, it is difficult to claim that the above measures resolve the problem entirely. The analysis in subsequent chapters navigates through these research limitations to present an accurate account of the role of intermediaries in the *baladi* bread supply chain.

**93.** Rosenthal, R. *Experimenter Effects in Behavioral Research*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1996.

**94.** Yin, 2003, p.33.

