



University
of Glasgow



Economic
and Social
Research Council

DOING KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

RESEARCH REPORT

What lessons have we learnt?

Workshop Report

This report summarises the results of the workshop Doing knowledge exchange during the COVID 19 pandemic: what lessons have we learnt? held on the 29th of April 2021. The workshop was a joint initiative between the Low and Middle Income Countries Research Network and the Centre for Adult and Lifelong Learning - College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow. The report has been produced by Ana Miranda (LMIC Knowledge Exchange Associate).

Background

The COVID 19 pandemic has forced research projects to adapt the ways that they engage with partners in the Global South. The move towards online and digital platforms has presented challenges, however it has also led to innovative approaches to promote the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders. This report presents the main lessons learnt on the new ways of doing research and knowledge exchange. The findings are based on the workshop organised by the Low and Middle Income Countries Research Network (LMIC) in collaboration with the [Centre for Research and Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning \(CR&DALL\)](#). The event took place on the 29th of April 2021 and was attended by over 40 academics from the College of Social Sciences, including early career researchers and post graduate students. The discussions drew upon the experiences of University of Glasgow staff and research partners within projects funded through the Global Challenges Research Fund, specifically the University of Zimbabwe and University of the Philippines, as well as the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, and Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA).

Presentations were made by the following speakers:

- Prof Charles Nherera – University of Zimbabwe / UKRI International Panel Member (Zimbabwe) and a collaborator with the British Academy/GCRF project, [Strengthening Urban Engagement of Universities in Asia and Africa \(SUEUAA\)](#)
- Dr Raul Valdes-Cotera - Senior Programme Specialist and Programme Manager of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities/[UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning](#) (Germany)
- Prof Mario-Delos Reyes – Dean at the University of the Philippines School of Urban and Regional Planning / International Co-Investigator for the GCRF Centre for Sustainable, Healthy, and Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods (Philippines)

- Dr. Kaustuv K Bandyopadhyay, Director, [Participatory Research in Asia](#) (India)
- Dr Barbara Read - Reader in Gender and Social Inequalities, CR&DALL, School of Education, University of Glasgow (United Kingdom)/PI of the ESRC funded GCRF project, Economic and Social Research Council Grant: [Gendered Journeys: The Trajectories of STEM Students and Graduates through Higher Education and Into Employment, in India and Rwanda](#)

Dr Srabani Maitra, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education provided the introduction to the workshop. Closing remarks were made by Prof. Michael Osborne, Director of CR&DALL School of Education who summarised the central themes explored during the event.

This report summarises key lessons identified in the workshop with the final section providing a summary of the good practices identified through discussions and a review of resources produced by international development organizations. Copies of presentations made by each speaker together with a recording of the webinar can be found at: <http://cradall.org/content/lmic-workshop-series-doing-knowledge-exchange-during-covid-19-pandemic-%E2%80%93-what-lessons-have>

The challenges with remote approaches

“While in some countries the move towards online and digital platforms have led to innovative approaches in others it has presented insurmountable challenges. We therefore need to find productive pathways and contact points for new modes of scholarly exchange that can work against the consequences of the pandemic” Srabani Maitra, School of Education

Travel bans and social distancing have changed established ways of doing research. As the pandemic progressed academics have had to redesign their research methods and rethink the way they promote knowledge exchange. Ensuring meaningful engagement from different stakeholders and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups has always been a challenge, but it has become even more difficult without face-to-face interactions. While research projects have found innovative ways to engage with partners and communities online many challenges remain.

Addressing the impacts of the pandemic on research projects - perspectives from the Gendered Journeys Project

School of Education, University of Glasgow

The Gendered Journeys Project aims to explore how far and in what ways, the cultures and practices of universities and workplaces in the STEM sector are gendered. The project is a collaboration between the University of Rwanda, the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta and the University of Glasgow. All project activities are underpinned by the fair and equitable

research partnership principles promoted by the Rethinking Research Collaborative, giving it a clear orientation towards the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders. The project had envisioned in depth interviews and primary survey data collection, as well as workshops to develop research skills and tools. The pandemic led to significant delays in project implementation especially fieldwork. A lot of time and effort had to be dedicated to redesigning research methods and knowledge exchange activity. These challenges were compounded by the recent cuts to international development research funding. Research teams will now collect data remotely using online surveys and virtual workshops.

Using digital technology to engage communities remotely can make it more difficult to promote broad based participation and address power imbalances. It is easy to assume that the whole world is online. Yet according to the [Alliance for Affordable Internet](#) almost half of the world's population do not have any access to the internet. Internet connections, mobile phones and computers are still too expensive for most people living in low-income countries. Those excluded are disproportionately women and people living in rural areas. Across low and middle income countries, women are 20% less likely to own a smartphone than men, while rural areas are 40% less likely to have access to the internet than urban ones. Furthermore, internet networks where available are often underdeveloped leading to slow and unreliable services. Many types of applications such as video conferencing services require licenses which can be costly to many organizations.

In addition to access there are also differences in the ability to use technology effectively which is often referred to as the second level digital divide. This is also a consequence of social, economic and technical barriers that deter people from developing the necessary digital literacy to participate in online spaces. This divide also has the most impact on marginalised communities as well as women and girls in the Global South. The pandemic is widening these inequalities, as those with computer skills and internet access are able to continue participating, learning and working and those without fall further behind.

Inequalities in access also affect civil society organizations and academic institutions based in low and middle income countries. While many have found ways to continue their work, some have struggled to use online platforms and digital tools due to limited resources and skills. Furthermore, these organizations play a key role in disaster response and are facing the additional challenge of supporting vulnerable groups while ensuring the safety of their staff. Research

partners in many cases may therefore have less capacity to engage with research activity.

"...then of course there are the prohibitive costs of technologies for developing countries like Zimbabwe. This means disparities between developed and less developed countries are going to increase" Charles Nherera, University of Zimbabwe

These capacity related challenges must generate reflection on how meaningful engagement can be achieved especially in relation to the representation of women and other excluded groups. Online tools and platforms may skew participation towards men and young people as well as more urban populations. Great care and attention must be paid to who is actually represented in the data as well as knowledge exchange activities.

"We still need to work out how to get a full range of participants, some of whom don't have access capabilities to take part in online surveys" Barbara Reid, School of Education

Furthermore, overreliance on crowd-generated data such as social media feeds can also reduce communities to the role of data providers, while the role of data processor remains within research teams who will interpret and attribute value to the data. It can exclude stakeholders' views and interpretations as well as contextual factors that are crucial to the understanding of issues. Importantly, this can reinforce traditional power imbalances between researchers from the Global North and their partners in the Global South.

The move towards remote data collection methods also has significant data protection implications. Information provided through social media and online fora is often considered in the public domain. However, this assumption needs to be critically addressed by research teams. Ensuring data privacy and security involves careful consideration of the rules related to which data are collected and how data are acquired, used, stored, and shared. Projects working with vulnerable and marginalised groups are more likely to handle sensitive data therefore must find ways to mitigate risks and ensure compliance with ethical and legal guidelines.

Given the inequalities in access to technologies, it is unlikely that all research projects will be able to shift data collection and knowledge exchange activity entirely to online spaces. Offline data collection techniques such as phone calls and text messages have been used for many decades in research. They leverage familiar and basic technologies helping to overcome problems related to access to digital platforms and tools. Nonetheless, they also present their own set of challenges. In face-to-face interviews, researchers can be more confident that respondents have privacy during the interview process. This is more problematic in the context of

the pandemic as more household members may be present in the home due to restrictions. In-person interaction facilitates rapport which can help respondents feel comfortable speaking about sensitive subjects. However, it can be more difficult to pick up social cues and build trust over the phone. In many contexts women are also far less likely to own a personal phone than men, thus reaching women often entails some type of mediation.

“The communities that we work with have access to smart devices, but a lot of people only use analogue mobile phones, so we had to think about using technology which is familiar to the participants and can be run on low bandwidth. We used phone surveys as well as conducting interviews on online platforms, so data was collected through various tools.”

Kaustuv K Bandyopadhyay, Participatory Research in Asia

Ensuring equity and inclusion through targeted actions

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning works in three key areas namely 1) Lifelong Learning Policies and Strategies, 2) Adult Learning and Education and 3) Literacy and Basic Skills. In order to continue their support to lifelong learning opportunities during the pandemic, the UIL produced specific publications and events such as the COVID-19 Education Issue Notes and the UNESCO Learning Cities Response to COVID 19 Webinar Series. The UIL also engaged in partnerships with city governments and civil society to develop education and learning strategies adapted to the new context as well as enable households to better cope with the crisis.

According to UNESCO school closures have disrupted the education of over half of the world's learners. More than 11 million girls may not go back to school after the COVID crisis. Most schools shifted to remote learning and teaching using digital tools. However, the move towards online learning has proved challenging in situations where poverty levels were high, and communities had limited access to technologies and low levels of digital skills. Other forms of distance learning also had to be utilized to ensure inclusion, such as the delivery and collection of physical learning resources to and from homes as well as television and radio.

Women, girls, ethnic and racial minorities, and other marginalised segments of society generally have less access to education. These groups are also disproportionately affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic. Distance learning strategies must consider intersectionality and ensure that inequalities are not exacerbated. Targeted actions are therefore needed to meet the needs of these vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the pandemic has had significant effects

on learners' and educators' mental health. It is also crucial to integrate specialized counselling and support services in education programmes.

The adoption of remote data collection and user engagement methods also requires researchers to develop their own skills. Face to face interviews have always been the gold standard in qualitative research thus academics have had to divert from common and familiar approaches. In addition to building rapport in a context where it is more difficult to read people's body language, research teams must also learn to mitigate practical problems such as computer application constraints and unreliable internet connections. Webinars which are often used for knowledge exchange activities can become passive and monotonous spaces. They can also be panel or expert centric reinforcing knowledge transfer models. Finding new ways to facilitate discussions and exchanges and promote active engagement from participants requires more planning, skills, training, and time.

Furthermore, the pandemic has significantly affected academic engagement. Events and conferences have been organised online but there have been fewer prospects for networking and relationship building. The shift to online teaching has required a lot of effort leaving researchers with less time for developing new collaborations and grants. Early career researchers are particularly affected by these changes as they have less opportunities to grow their own networks and engage in new partnerships.

“Conferences, seminars and so forth, have been cancelled. It is a big loss, especially for people in the Global South. It is affecting early career researchers who don't have networks”
Charles Nherera, University of Zimbabwe

The opportunities of remote ways of working

Beyond the challenges above, using remote technologies in research also presents advantages and opportunities. These opportunities range from direct benefits to research projects (e.g., lower data collection costs), to broader impacts such as reduced carbon footprints and more horizontal partnerships. Many research projects have highlighted that while remote approaches cannot completely replace face to face interactions, they do have the potential to generate high quality data as well as broad representation and participation from stakeholders.

Remote technologies can facilitate data collection and engagement across geographical areas without the need to travel. They can also allow research projects to reach more people at no incremental costs. When communities and other project partners have the necessary capacity for online engagement, digital technologies can facilitate their participation by reducing time and travel constraints. Contributors can answer surveys, leave comments, and watch videos from their computers and mobile phones whenever it is most convenient to them. Chat functions, online forums

and social media posts can encourage participation from people who are less comfortable with public speaking or voicing a different opinion from their group. Online spaces can be password protected and offer anonymity making discussions around sensitive issues easier. In cultures where it is less acceptable for women to attend public meetings digital platforms can provide them with a safe space.

Using Facebook for research and knowledge exchange during the pandemic

The Centre for Neighbourhood Studies (CeNS)

The Centre for Neighbourhood Studies (CeNS) is an independent non-governmental organisation dedicated to research partnerships to promote inclusive, resilient, and sustainable neighbourhoods in the Philippines. As the pandemic hit the country CeNS carried out research on how neighbourhoods were experiencing lockdowns. Researchers used online focus group discussions to collect data which was triangulated with Facebook posts. CeNS also organised the “Filipino Neighbourhoods in Quarantine: A Forum on Neighbourhood Governance during the COVID-19 Pandemic”, which brought together residents, community leaders and researchers to exchange knowledge as well as validate research results. The event was also streamed on Facebook which is widely used in the country making it accessible to more neighbourhood residents.

The research found that neighbourhood organizations (Barangays) played a key role in the response to the pandemic by providing several types of support to vulnerable households during lockdown. They delivered food assistance as well as face masks and hygiene products and implemented innovative initiatives to help residents cope with the adverse impacts on mental health. The barangays were also responsible for monitoring COVID 19 cases in their area and ensuring social distancing and the use of face coverings in public spaces.

The pandemic has also forced research activity to become more localised. This can potentially contribute to the sustainability of research by reducing its environmental impacts as well as supporting more collaborative and horizontal relationships between researchers and their project partners. Business travel accounted for 20% of the University’s carbon emissions in 2018/2019. The substitution of travel for digital technologies can contribute to the institutional commitment of becoming carbon neutral by 2030.

Moreover, many research activities have had to be devolved to local research partners who are closer to communities and other stakeholders. This can pave the way for researchers in the Global South to play a bigger role in research projects and have more agency over the research process. The need to develop links with local organizations that can reach communities can also lead to stronger relationships between academics and civil society, expanding knowledge networks and supporting more collaboration with non-academic actors

University of Zimbabwe Investing in capacity development to build more resilient research systems

The pandemic has affected all aspects of higher education in the Global South from teaching and learning to research and community engagement. Most projects have had to review their workplans leading to significant delays and in some cases interruption of all research activity. Conferences, researcher mobility and exchange programmes as well as networking opportunities have been significantly disrupted undermining international collaborations and partnerships. Early career researchers and women are particularly impacted by these losses.

The shift to remote ways of working has highlighted the digital divide between universities in the North and their partners in the South. Most higher education institutions have struggled with access to technologies as well as pedagogies for distance learning. However new opportunities have also emerged for Southern academics. There has been more uptake of digital technologies among research teams as well as innovative online and offline remote learning strategies for students. Budgets have been revised in order to respond to the demand for technology which will bring long term benefits to universities. Researchers have also played a bigger role in international research projects due to their closer proximity to communities, helping to meet the demand for data and evidence. Strategic support from funders, partner universities and private sector can strengthen the collective capacities of universities in the South. The pandemic should drive new thinking about how to build more resilient research systems.

Importantly, research teams can use the current context as an opportunity to strengthen the capacities of research partners and community groups to access technologies contributing towards bridging the digital divide. Research projects can include activities such as training as well as the provision of software licences, broadband connections and data packages. Women and girls should be specifically targeted by these strategies given that their participation and perspectives are

key in achieving research outcomes. This can also strengthen the impact of the research by enabling women to use these new skills and technologies to engage in advocacy and activism as well as the digital economy.

Realising these opportunities depends on the ability of research projects to redesign research methods and redirect budgets to research partners. It requires universities and funders to provide an enabling environment for these new ways of doing research and engagement especially by supporting capacity development among academics and project partners. For research projects, it entails collaborating with others by sharing information, insights, tools and resources to foster collective learning and innovative approaches to research, knowledge exchange and partnerships.

This supporting environment must also include special attention to early career researchers who are currently facing additional pressures such as fixed term contracts, limited networks, as well as constricted job market and fewer grant opportunities due to international development funding cuts. Universities should take steps to assess their particular needs and provide tailored support backed by sufficient resources. Spaces for peer learning as well as small grants and mentoring schemes involving more senior academic staff can help to mitigate some of the effects of the crisis on their professional development.

Conducting Participatory Research in Digital Spaces Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) is a global centre for participatory research and training based in New Delhi. PRIA focuses on promoting the empowerment of excluded groups through capacity development, knowledge sharing and policy advocacy. The centre has linkages with nearly 3000 non-governmental organizations implementing programmes and projects in vulnerable communities across India.

As the virus spread pushing millions of people into poverty, civil society organizations mobilised to provide vital assistance to affected populations. Capacity development for this vast network became a crucial part of the emergency response. This immediate need prompted PRIA to conduct research into key challenges and effective ways to use digital technologies in capacity strengthening interventions.

The study also provides practical tips for research projects:

- Use technology that is familiar to the participants and can be run on low bandwidth
- Triangulate data collected through various online tools – surveys, interviews, discussions, etc.
- Use WhatsApp and Facebook groups to connect with communities
- Create discussion spaces using breakout rooms or listening/ learning circles with light moderation
- Design motivating activities like simulations, role play and structured exercises.
- Limit the event time to a maximum of 2 hours and include regular breaks
- Use Facebook Live or YouTube for streaming in order to reach a larger audience

Good practices for research projects

Recognizing digital divides is essential in the design of research projects. Research teams should seek to define the data collection process in consultation with project partners that know the context well. Research projects should use tools and methods that are inclusive of people with different levels of digital skills and compatible with the types of technologies accessible to communities.

Research projects should include capacity development activities and resources to expand access to technologies especially among community based organizations. These strategies should specifically target women and girls.

It is crucial to define the level of community participation the research project is aiming to achieve. A high level of community engagement requires more planning and involvement from partners to ensure that tools, platforms and overall strategy are suitable to the context.

Research projects must agree on a standard procedure to ensure consent and data protection according to relevant guidelines.

Remote data collection methodologies should consider advantages and trade-offs in combining online and offline tools.

Devolving research activities to research partners will not automatically lead to more horizontal collaboration. Research projects should reflect on how to use the changes generated by the pandemic as an opportunity to promote more equitable partnerships.

Webinars may not always be conducive to active interaction among participants and can generate fatigue among them. Smaller discussion groups can stimulate peer to peer

discussion and learning. Facilitators can also help to mediate discussion, elicit responses, and ensure that all participants have the opportunity to speak.

Including energisers and icebreakers in online events can also help to keep participants engaged. Organizing several shorter sessions instead of a single long event may also prevent fatigue in the group.

Social media is widely used in low and middle income countries and can be an effective tool to promote exchanges among research participants. Facebook and WhatsApp groups, for example, have been used by research projects to collect data as well as share information about the pandemic and deliver assistance to vulnerable communities.

Universities should seek to develop training programmes and specific guidelines for researchers in order to develop their capacities in remote data collection methods and online knowledge exchange activities. This should include digital ethics especially in relation to data protection and consent.

Capacity development strategies targeted at early career researchers should be based on their specific needs. Mentoring schemes, networking opportunities and special grants should be part of a package of support.

Additional Resources and Guidance

Bandyopadhyay, K & Aravind, R. 2021. Impact of Pandemic on Capacity Building Support for Civil Society and Non-Profit Organisations in India. Participatory Research India Research Paper. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348431979_Impact_of_Pandemic_on_Capacity_Building_Support_for_Civil_Society_and_Non-Profit_Organisations_in_India

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Willitts-King, B. Bryant, J. & Holloway, K. 2019. The humanitarian 'digital divide'. Humanitarian Policy Group /Overseas Development Institute Working Paper. Available at: <https://odi.org/en/publications/the-humanitarian-digital-divide/>

For a more comprehensive list of resources and tools please visit the repository from the Overseas Development Institute. Available at: <https://odi.org/en/publications/tips-for-collecting-primary-data-in-a-covid-19-era/>

To find out more about ESRC guidance on internet mediated research please visit <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently-raised-topics/internet-mediated-research/>

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