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**Social science  
research and  
Covid-19**

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## **Abstract**

Academics and researchers working in International Development face a number of predicted changes to the research environment and landscape in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in relation to fieldwork conducted in middle- and lower-income countries. This paper is designed to provide researchers and research teams with an understanding of how to manage these changes at all stages of the research process, placing a particular focus on issues of safeguarding and collaborative research. Information from reports, blogs and webinars (limited to the English language) has been analysed to discern how and why research and research methods will need to adjust in the context of the pandemic. The paper finds that the research environment and landscape are likely to change in a number of ways, and highlights the emphasis placed in the information analysed on decolonising research post-pandemic. Although decolonising research is by no means a new topic, the significance placed on things such as safeguarding, ethics and collaborative research within this discourse makes it a valuable topic for consideration by researchers now. The paper concludes with a synthesis of recommendations and resources for adapting research design in light of the aforementioned changes brought about by the pandemic. In the short term and beyond, the research community has an opportunity to reimagine internationalisation, to strengthen existing research partnerships and to place equity as a core principle in new partnerships.

## **Keywords**

Social Science, Research, Decolonisation, Research Methods, Safeguarding, Covid-19

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## 1. Introduction

This report is designed to provide researchers and research teams working in the field of International Development with an understanding of how researchers and their practice may respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. The information within the paper is directed towards those employing qualitative research methods in the social sciences, although it can be used to inform research more generally. Further to this, many of the points presented here are of particular relevance to researchers in higher-income countries undertaking research in partnership with actors in lower-income countries, but it can be argued that it is important for all participants in International Development research to be aware of this information. As opposed to using 'Global North' and 'Global South', which implies a geographical determinism not consistent with the content of this paper, 'higher-income countries' will be used to signify countries that are associated with the 'Global North', several of which are former colonial powers, and 'middle- and lower-income countries' will refer to countries categorised as the 'Global South'. This is intended to avoid reinforcing the neocolonial power dynamics between researchers from these separate categories highlighted below.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions to research institutions of all kinds. Common impacts include the postponement and cancellation of conferences and workshops (Bania & Dubey, 2020); increased caring responsibilities limiting researchers' ability to continue working as normal; an inability to conduct face-to-face research because of the risk of virus transmission; an inability to conduct overseas fieldwork as a result of travel restrictions; and disruptions caused by higher education institutions moving to online learning.

Although many research councils have allocated resources in order to contribute to the Covid-19 pandemic response, platforms used to discuss the future of research for development have revealed concerns that damage to the economies of the UK and other high-income countries may negatively affect the availability of funding for research partnerships in lower-income countries (Brooks, 2020). Analysis of a sample of published articles has revealed a trend towards smaller partnerships, which presents the danger that researchers from developing countries will be excluded from collaborations and the sharing of papers and data (Richardson, 2020). Less participation in the field by developing countries has also been recorded, as well as a decrease of 4% in the production of articles from researchers in such countries since Covid-19 emerged (Richardson, 2020).

This reduction in research partnerships between lower- and higher-income countries is of particular concern considering the experience many lower-income countries have with tackling epidemics, including researching within the context of health emergencies. Examples include Asia's experience tackling outbreaks of SARS, Africa's experience tackling Ebola outbreaks, Latin America's experience with Zika, and outbreaks of malaria and Chikungunya in countries across the world. Knowledge sharing and use of

the research capacity of lower-income countries are essential to tackle the many global challenges we are facing, of which Covid-19 is just one (Richardson, 2020). However, in addition to ensuring that partnerships between lower- and higher-income countries continue, it is also essential to ensure that such partnerships are equitable and that the research methods employed are appropriate.

In order to inform researchers engaging in such partnerships, information from reports, blogs and webinars (limited to the English language) has been analysed to discern how and why research and research methods will need to adjust in the context of the pandemic and beyond. The following section of the paper will outline some of the predicted changes to the research environment and landscape as a result of the pandemic for those working in International Development and researching in middle- and lower-income countries, particularly with marginalised and vulnerable populations. This leads into a discussion of the role of social science research during the pandemic, including the opportunities to contribute to the pandemic response and to use this as a moment of reflection on our work practices. The next section will outline approaches for social scientists to identify research priorities during the pandemic, emphasising that these should involve addressing imbalances in power between researchers from higher-income countries, especially those which are former colonial powers, and those from middle- and lower-income countries, which include former colonies. This is explored further in a section outlining the role of decolonising research both during the pandemic and after it. Decolonising research is a salient topic because of the additional risks researchers and their partners now face in conducting fieldwork, and as a result of the time for reflection that has been made available thanks to the disruption to research activities the pandemic has caused.

The next section advances the topic of safety within research in order to discuss safeguarding. Safeguarding as a concept is examined before it is applied to the context of the pandemic: the subject has received increased attention in recent years but has become a critical issue in light of the increased vulnerabilities the pandemic has caused, as well as of the risks that inevitably must be taken by both researchers and participants. In line with the earlier discussion on decolonising research, researchers' responsibilities are highlighted, including ensuring that both the benefits and risks of research are shared equally within research partnerships. Section 7 on collaborative research furthers this to explore the role of collaborative research partnerships in the pandemic response, acknowledging the challenges of such partnerships in the pandemic context and providing examples of those partnerships that have adapted to new conditions. Section 8 provides practical suggestions for adapting research design and methods to the context of a global pandemic, informed by the key messages from the preceding sections. It is recognised that the challenges of adapting research will not be the same for researchers in middle- and lower-income countries, and outlines some of the approaches taken in these contexts. The final section provides a conclusion which brings together the key points from the paper to show that the global pandemic has made inequalities in research relationships clearer than ever, and that in

the future researchers must take on board decolonising critiques to integrate a culture of care that permeates all aspects of the research process.

## **2. Predicted changes to the research environment and landscape capitalised**

For those working in International Development and researching in middle- and lower-income countries, and particularly with marginalised or vulnerable populations, the impacts of Covid-19 in the field are worth particular consideration, as changing conditions could make previously planned projects inappropriate, or necessitate their adaptation. Beyond the widely documented health implications, the pandemic has created a human and economic crisis on an unprecedented scale (Oldekop et al, 2020). Globally, the deepening social inequalities now recognised as endemic to the current neoliberal economic order are likely to intensify the suffering that the pandemic causes (Macgregor et al, 2020). The lockdown measures implemented internationally in domino effect can already be seen to be translating into high unemployment rates, and consequently greater poverty and social inequality (Corbera et al, 2020). This is evident in the grievous situation in which India's lockdown placed internal migrants and those living in informal settlements (Oldekop et al, 2020; Barei-Guyot, 2020). Inequalities in access to services and benefits will also be starkly highlighted by the pandemic, especially in countries without access to universal healthcare (Macgregor et al, 2020).

The pandemic has also been highly gendered in its impacts (Oldekop et al, 2020; Alon et al, 2020), the most widely documented being the exacerbation of violence against women and girls (VAWG), including the increased risk of violence within the home and sexual exploitation in exchange for health care services or social safety-net benefits (UN Women, 2020). There are also concerns that women have had to deal with increased caring responsibilities as a result of Covid-19 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). However, this does not mean that men have not been badly affected, and there is some evidence to show that they have an increased likelihood of suffering from the disease. Researchers should therefore make potential gendered impacts on research partners and participants a key consideration when preparing a research project.

The situation has to be reassessed further in low-income, conflict-affected contexts. Unfortunately, the outlook for the populations of such countries is fairly bleak, although the isolated nature of conflict zones may prevent pandemic spread to some degree (Stern, 2020). Pandemic responses will face the challenges of fragmented authority, low state capacity, high levels of civilian displacement, low citizen trust in leadership and political violence (Brown & Blanc, 2020). Conflict itself leads to abject poverty, and Covid-19 has delivered a heavy blow to the world's economies, meaning that conflict-affected populations who already have few social safety-nets are likely to be severely affected (Stern, 2020). The resultant economic hardships will exacerbate tensions and

act as a driver of further conflict (Guijt, 2020). Income will determine how and whether people withstand the pandemic in a conflict, highlighting the existing levels of inequality (de Harder, 2020b).

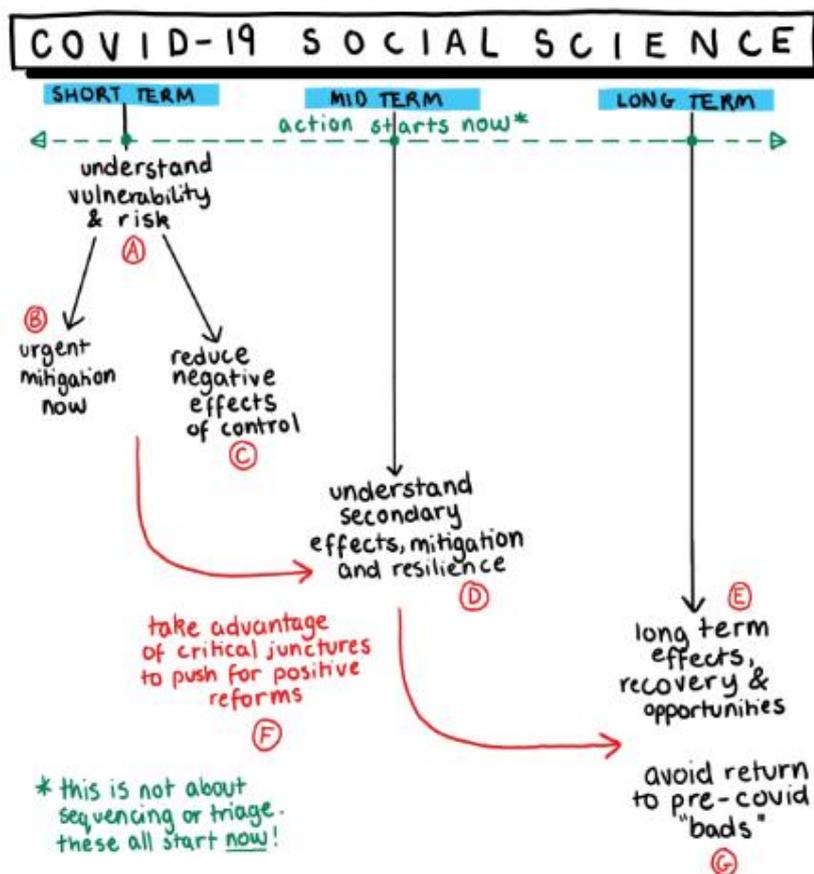
Those planning to conduct research requiring participation, especially with marginalised or vulnerable populations, or those in conflict-affected countries, should therefore consider these new, tumultuous conditions at all stages of research, including when deciding what to research. This also applies to research partnerships, as the effects of Covid-19 will also be felt by colleagues across the world who may be requiring extra care and consideration. Although the complications faced by those designing and conducting research in a post-pandemic world may seem overwhelming, social science now has a significant role in understanding and shaping that world, as will now be discussed.

### **3. Role of social research right now**

Researchers are faced with an ethical imperative to continue researching during public health emergencies in order to provide answers to questions that can only be investigated during emergency contexts. For example, data on what does and doesn't help during health emergencies are necessary to support the immediate response and improve future responses (WHO, 2020a; Wright & Harvey, 2020). This section will further outline the role of social science researchers in responding to the pandemic, as well as the opportunity that has been provided to reconsider the work culture in research.

Qualitative inquiries provide some of our best methods for recording social responses to the pandemic, which has already presented itself as a highly social phenomenon (Wright & Harvey, 2020; Teti et al, 2020). With these methods it is possible to analyse how people cope with and understand health and illness, and there is the potential to help explain, plan for and address health emergencies in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner (Wright & Harvey, 2020; Wright, 2020). In order to maximise the impact of social science research, we need to reconsider how social scientists can present their research to, and engage with, the public sphere, which involves recognising the benefits of using social media to represent expertise (Wright & Harvey, 2020). Figure 1 provides a vision from a UK academic writing on the Oxfam blog of how social science can contribute to the Covid-19 response and to mitigating its mid- to long-term impacts (Marquette, 2020).

Figure 1: Covid-19 and Social Science



Source: Marquette (2020).

In order to continue contributing valuable insights into the pandemic and the response to it, social researchers must adapt their methods to the new obstacles the pandemic has presented (Gardner, 2020). Interdisciplinary collaborations will be key to addressing complex issues (Bouchon, 2020), allowing an understanding not just of 'what' but also of 'how' (Teti et al, 2020). This enables us to account for the gaps between assumptions made in epidemiological models and social realities, to reveal the unintended consequences of interventions and to nuance mathematical modelling to improve its parameters (Teti et al, 2020; MacGregor et al, 2020). It is also essential to use a wide range of evidence when negotiating life and research post-pandemic, such as both expert and experiential knowledges (Macgregor et al, 2020). This is relevant to recent discussions on how we should be approaching research relationships, particularly those with partners and participants in middle- and lower-income countries, and will be elaborated upon further in the sections below on 'decolonising research', 'safeguarding' and 'collaborative research'.

The pandemic and the resultant pause in many people's work routines has also been presented as a quieter moment for researchers and academics to reflect upon some critical issues that are often glossed over in the commotion of everyday life. For example, will current circumstances cause us to reflect upon and recognise the

complex domestic social structures that sustain academic research? Will we increase serious engagement with online forms of research communication (Wright & Harvey, 2020)?

The goodwill and flexibility that has been extended during the pandemic should be carried forward and the momentum used to embed kindness into research practice (Derrick, 2020). This suggested change in attitude within research extends to prioritising tasks which will have an impact, taking seriously knowledge transfer to civil society, engaging in policy change activities and writing less but better (Corbera et al, 2020). Projects can be redesigned to be more socially meaningful and environmentally sustainable, and to reduce stress on the research team and participants (see Figure 4 in useful links and resources) (Corbera et al, 2020). This pandemic has demonstrated that, with the right motivations, or in this case a lack of other options, change can happen (Derrick, 2020), and the decisions we make now may shape the future of social science (Wright & Harvey, 2020). Before thinking about the methods we use to research and the associated ethical challenges, we need to think about the most important questions to ask and the top priorities for research right now (Malila, 2020). These will be addressed in the following section.

#### **4. Priorities for research**

As touched on in the section above, social science researchers have a significant role to play in responding to Covid-19 and envisioning a life after it. This means that what constitutes a priority for research now must be carefully considered. There is the obvious need for better evidence on what does and doesn't help during an emergency (Wright & Harvey, 2020), which may be achieved through either incorporating pandemic-related questions into existing projects, or redesigning projects to focus on Covid-19. As well as qualitative research on the impact of and response to the pandemic, it has been suggested that research should focus on the following: observing the emergent agency of those coping with Covid-19; paying more attention to fragile and conflict-affected contexts; and beginning to synthesise the large volume of research that is set to be produced (de Waal, 2020). It has also been suggested that a good place to start for research would be to identify countries where strong research networks are in place (de Waal, 2020).

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020a) has identified some preliminary priority thematic areas for social science contributions to supporting the Covid-19 response: public health; clinical care and health systems; engagement in public health response and clinical research media and communications; sexual and reproductive health; and international cooperation. It has also identified priority research questions in each thematic area, as well as providing an appendix containing an overview of research planned or in process related to the disease. WHO has also specified that all research agendas and questions will need to be closely contextualised at regional, national and local levels (WHO, 2020a). CASS (2020) has developed a brief to guide social

scientists seeking to use their research to support the Covid-19 response in Sub-Saharan Africa, which provides a summary of suggested research questions and a rationale for how they would inform the response.

Research on the gendered impacts of Covid-19 has also been highlighted as essential: it has been acknowledged that women are among those most affected by the pandemic and that their voices, particularly if they are migrants or displaced, are often overlooked in responses to the pandemic (Marzi, 2020). The aforementioned increase in VAWG during the pandemic requires investigation in order to understand the relationship between the health emergency and this increase, to identify risk factors, to establish the availability of services for women and how women's ability to access services is affected, and to discover what new needs arise in the short and long term (UN Women, 2020). This will enable the development of more effective strategies and interventions to prevent VAWG in future emergencies and health crises (UN Women, 2020).

Another approach to identifying the priorities for research in the wake of the pandemic is to listen carefully to and support the research agendas of researchers in middle- and lower-income countries, some of whom have raised concerns about existing research priorities, which have forced, some research (eg on HIV/AIDS) into the backseat (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). This is key to disrupting the hierarchies of privilege which dictate who sets research priorities, namely those in higher-income countries, several of which are former colonial powers. In a similar vein are the calls to replace the developmentalist, interventionist model of research for research that takes place with a politics of solidarity at its centre (People's Palace Projects, 2020). There are also calls for the pandemic to instigate more concrete communication between the policy making and academic communities in the face of other crises we face, such as pollution, biodiversity loss, global climate change, the sanitation crisis, and rising social and economic inequalities (Corbera et al, 2020).

One of the prominent themes in the discussion surrounding the future of social science research relates to the deep-rooted power dynamics and colonial 'logics' in the research relationships between higher-income countries and middle- and lower-income countries; these have been made impossible to ignore in light of the changes brought about by international lockdowns (Renton et al, 2020). When research has such a significant role to play in the pandemic response and we are approaching fairly uncharted territory for many researchers, it is essential to remember that researchers' actions are just as important as their findings (Corbera et al, 2020). The next section will examine power imbalances between researchers in higher-income countries and those in middle- and lower-income countries in more detail.

## 5. Decolonising research

The increasing number of lockdowns enforced by countries during the Covid-19 pandemic have left many researchers from higher-income countries more reliant than ever on their partners in middle- and lower-income countries, revealing the work which has often been made invisible by the enduring colonial legacies plaguing such research relationships (Bisoka, 2020; Renton et al, 2020). These are the object of this section. In challenging research contexts there tends to be an unequal racial distribution of roles, and also of vulnerability (Bisoka, 2020). Being left fully reliant on researchers in middle- and lower-income countries has led many researchers in higher-income countries to recognise the problems with 'normal' research conduct, primarily the ways in which research partners and participants in the former are silenced by what can be considered colonial practices (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). These practices include extracting knowledge from middle- and lower-income countries without explicitly acknowledging where it has come from (Bhattacharya et al, 2020). The pandemic-induced disruption to traditional research practice offers a moment to set this right and work towards decolonising development research (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). This is by no means a new topic (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020), yet it has been observed that producing a new language of development that doesn't change the politics of power doesn't really change anything, and actually limits the impetus for further action (Bhattacharya et al, 2020). It could be described as rather like putting on a new coat – decolonising knowledge is at risk of being reduced to an 'add-on' to existing practice, as opposed to displacing it. In this respect it is similar to the critiques of the 'buzzwords' of gender mainstreaming within development (Renton et al, 2020).

There are embedded inequalities in the research process, especially relating to funding, pay, authorship and representation (Renton et al, 2020). Researchers from higher-income countries usually lead in the design of research and the writing of articles and reports, regardless of the nature of the partnership (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). The power this gives researchers in higher-income countries is not often made explicit, and a recent study has found that one of the main manifestations of the unequal power relations between researchers in higher-, middle- and lower-income countries is the power to define risk, vulnerability and harm (SOAS, 2020). This is reminiscent of colonial ideology, which presented the 'other' as riskier, and it highlights the limitations a narrow 'Northern/Western' lens presents for being able to assess risk and harm within alternative contexts (Renton et al, 2020). In order to be sure that definitions of risk, harm and vulnerability are locally informed on a continual basis, especially in the midst of a global pandemic, it is necessary for researchers in higher-income countries to willingly relinquish some of the power and control they currently hold in research processes and relationships (Renton et al, 2020). Decolonising is a daily practice involving a lot of self-reflection; we need to recognise that much of what we do reinforces a particular understanding of history that places higher-income countries centre-stage and blurs the inequalities in research

relationships between them and middle- and lower-income countries (Bhattacharya et al, 2020). New Zealand has been held up as an example of a country that has dealt with the pandemic well, while other middle- and low-income countries that have also done well, such as Senegal and Liberia, have received less press. This could be seen to reflect a power dynamic within knowledge production that resists acknowledging that middle- and lower-income countries have valuable knowledge and forms of governance that are independent from 'Western' knowledge and influence.

Speaking on a panel held by the Sheffield Institute for International Development to discuss decoloniality post-Covid, Dr Laura Loyola-Hernandez called for researchers from middle- and lower-income countries to consider their complicity in reproducing hierarchies between global knowledges, and urged resistance to being tokenised as a centre of diversity by universities (Bhattacharya et al, 2020). Privilege can be harnessed to encourage the recognition and use of alternative forms of knowledge, as well to increase the accessibility of research to those outside academia (Bhattacharya et al, 2020). It is important to recognise the neocolonialism currently present in development education: for example, 'capacity building' as a concept fails to acknowledge what researchers in middle- and lower-income countries have to teach us, and doesn't allow space to properly value local knowledge and expertise (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). There are also warnings that the movement to decolonise knowledge should not become one in which researchers from higher-income countries play saviour to those in countries with lower income (Bisoka, 2020). The overarching answer to questions of how to equalise power relations between researchers is co-production in research, guided by our partners' ideas of what co-production means, as well as by our own understandings (People's Palace Projects, 2020) (see the 'Collaborative research' section below for more). It is also important for researchers in higher-income countries to reflect upon the power relations, hierarchies and inequalities between themselves and others in their home country. The shift to online platforms to replace seminars and conferences during the pandemic has demonstrated a capacity for international conversation that is essential for decolonising development research.

Ultimately, efforts to decolonise research and knowledge should cause reflection on the meaning we give to international development and the way we engage with others in the course of researching (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). Addressing the growing issue of safeguarding, is therefore also an essential element of decolonising research post-Covid. Researchers should be working towards using carefully considered ethical standards and guidelines, as will be expanded upon in the following section (WHO, 2020b).

## **6. Safeguarding**

Safeguarding has received increased attention since the Oxfam abuse scandal of 2018. This section will highlight the importance of safeguarding to International

Development research both during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. Safeguarding as a concept is sometimes hard to distinguish from health and safety and ethical concerns, and it is easier to find terms closely associated with safeguarding, such as 'exploitation' and 'harm', within the international literature than 'safeguarding' itself (Aktar et al, 2020). This discussion on safeguarding in the wake of the pandemic therefore integrates ethical considerations where deemed appropriate. The ambiguity around what constitutes safeguarding also makes clear communication between research partners essential, as well as the provision of resources and time to build expertise, meet requirements and respond to emergent safeguarding needs (Orr et al, 2019). Much of the discussion on safeguarding comes from the humanitarian sector, but the power relations shaping safeguarding challenges are also applicable to research relationships (Aktar et al, 2020).

While the increased pressure from international funders, largely driven by those in the UK, to set up systems and processes for safeguarding is a step in the right direction, tensions have been identified in meeting these demands while also establishing equitable global research partnerships (Aktar et al, 2020). In research relationships between those in higher-income countries and those in middle- and lower-income countries this can result in demands being placed upon partners in the latter category for formal information and extensive preparatory work (Orr et al, 2019). This creates a concerning administrative burden and the potential for neocolonial power relations; such power relations can be seen in the control that institutions in higher-income countries have over narratives on safeguarding, and the power they have to impose safeguarding upon partners as a set of requirements (Aktar et al, 2020; Orr et al, 2019).

Orr et al (2019) set out nine key principles for safeguarding practice in International Development research, addressing such power dynamics through the inclusion of principles like recognising the risks created through dictating standards, creating a space for clear communication and mutual learning, and having a consistent awareness of power differentials. It is also essential to pay close attention to the dynamics of vulnerability, risk and harm, which are contextual and directly shape research relations and practice (Orr et al, 2019).

This concept of contextual, or situated, vulnerability is relevant when attempting to define safeguarding. Safeguarding is defined in multiple ways according to the context in which one is working, but all definitions refer to a response to the harms that research can cause, as well as the risk it poses of adding to existing injustices and exploitation, no matter how well intentioned it may be (Wright & Harvey, 2020). One definition is the "responsibility to anticipate, mitigate and address harm" in research, as well as "preventing and addressing any sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment of research participants, communities and research staff, plus any broader forms of violence, exploitation and abuse ... such as bullying, psychological abuse and physical

violence” (Renton et al, 2020). Safeguarding therefore means being conscious of those who are vulnerable, or could become vulnerable, within research processes.

While children are perceived as inherently vulnerable, classifying adults similarly is more complex and contextual (Aktar et al, 2020). It is therefore recommended by Aktar et al that vulnerability be understood relationally, meaning that it is not a property of a person but a relationship between that person and others in specific times and places. In turn, these relationships must be considered within wider systems of power and axes of inequality, such as gender, caste, disability, social class, ethnicity and citizenship (Aktar et al, 2020). Research processes within International Development inevitably interact with existing societal relations of power, making it essential that all actors are aware of the potential for these processes to exacerbate, challenge or subvert said power relations by creating new relationships or by reconfiguring existing ones. This includes research processes limited to one country and those across international contexts (Aktar et al, 2020).

A wide-ranging international consultation on safeguarding for the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) brought a diverse range of issues to the fore, underscoring inequalities in international research relationships that remain unaddressed (Renton et al, 2020). It was found that a lack of adequate attention to equity and fairness, along with a failure to implement the necessary actions to mitigate and address risks and harms in research, provides opportunities for multiple forms of abuse and exploitation at various levels (Renton et al, 2020). As highlighted in the above section, the power to define risk and harm is symptomatic of the inherently unfair, neocolonial relationships embedded in international research partnerships (Renton et al, 2020). Using the concept of situated vulnerability, researchers must gain information on what potential harms may exist; this may not be immediately apparent, especially to those without adequate local knowledge (UKCDR, 2020). Safeguarding should therefore be implemented as a shared responsibility between research partners and approached with an ethos of inclusiveness, maintaining awareness that dictating safeguarding standards in a top-down manner may also result in unintended harms (Orr et al, 2019).

## 6.1 Safeguarding and ethics in light of the Covid-19 pandemic

Safeguarding has added significance during the Covid-19 pandemic for a number of reasons: there is a danger of it being overlooked during the chaos of a health emergency; whistleblowing procedures may be delayed or severely disrupted; new unconsidered risks may arise as a result of the pandemic; researchers’ ‘risk line’ may shift, increasing their level of acceptable risk; unscrupulous actors may take this opportunity to commit harm and abuse; and pressure to produce research rapidly could override the instinct to follow the usual ethical procedures (Renton et al, 2020). The pandemic has also raised new vulnerabilities and added a layer to existing ones: a person who was not considered vulnerable before the pandemic could have become

vulnerable depending on the policy response.<sup>1</sup> Covid-19 exponentially increased the risks of sudden loss of income or access to social support, resulting in consequences which are difficult to predict, in turn making it difficult to work out who will be 'vulnerable'.<sup>2</sup> The 'vulnerable' will extend beyond the usual groups we define as such – the elderly, those with ill health and comorbidities, the homeless and under-housed – to include those from a gradient of socioeconomic groups that might struggle to cope financially, mentally or physically with the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Safeguarding should now be at the forefront of all studies (Maglio, 2020), and digital safeguarding in particular is being discussed with an increased intensity thanks to the new reliance on digital tools and methods in International Development research. The UKCDR has produced a Covid-19 companion piece to its *Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research* (Renton et al, 2020), which highlights specific issues during the pandemic and signposts additional resources. In the original piece, UKCDR presented a grid/matrix with questions about safeguarding to inform actions by all those involved in the research process, allowing them to *anticipate, mitigate and address* potential and actual harms at all stages (UKCDR, 2020). Some of these specific safeguarding considerations within social science research in light of the Covid-19 pandemic will now be presented.

Social science studies which involve human participants will now have to consider face-to-face meetings in terms of virus transmission (Maglio, 2020). Researchers not from the communities in which they are researching must consider themselves potential transmitters; doing no harm in the pandemic context means not contributing to the virus's spread (Goldstein & Kondylis, 2020). This will potentially increase reliance on international partners in conducting fieldwork (see 'Collaborative research' below). Power dynamics must be examined; many researchers in higher-income countries are working from home, thereby reducing their risk of infection and transmission, while those in middle- and lower-income countries may not have this luxury (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). Local researchers and organisations may be under certain pressures, such as funding or other obligation, to continue working at risk to the safety and wellbeing of themselves and others (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet).

Safeguarding considerations for those attempting to transition to digital methods in place of face-to-face interactions start with asking whether participants will be put under any additional stress by participating (Jowett, 2020). This includes considering the vulnerabilities associated with online security. For example, if there are political risks in a participant being interviewed via video, it is worth using an application with end-to-end encryption. For research on VAWG, the use of remote data collection can entail serious risks to participant safety because of the reduced ability to ensure privacy

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<sup>1</sup> 'Redefining vulnerability in the era of Covid-19'. *Lancet* 395, 1089.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

(UN Women, 2020); doing no harm is always the priority, and if online methods cannot meet ethical standards the data collection should not proceed (UN Women, 2020). Obtaining individual informed consent – which is acknowledged as a fundamental ethical requirement for research – in the midst of a pandemic, can be particularly challenging (WHO, 2020b). For online research, audio-recorded consent may be an option, with one study using video dialogues containing project and ethical information; others have used phone calls or digital consent forms with a column to be ticked (Marzi, 2020; Maglio, 2020; Ojiakor et al, 2020). Some researchers have reported that not being able to record the giving of consent during this time can be an issue (Ojiakor et al, 2020). Participants must be aware that they can withdraw from studies at any point, and of any risks they may face by virtue of participating, including those relating to privacy when using a computer (Maglio, 2020). Awareness must also be made of privacy rights and protection, including the use of participant data, particularly with marginalised communities (Marzi, 2020). Participants' involvement must be justified, and researchers must ensure that a feedback mechanism is built into the research process (Marzi, 2020). It may seem justified to exclude 'vulnerable' groups (subject to contextual understandings of vulnerability) at this time because of the difficulties associated with their inclusion, but this may skew results and produce an inaccurate picture (Marzi, 2020).

A report for the Nuffield Council on Bioethics found that safeguarding and ethical issues can be anticipated; useful and authoritative guidance documents are in place to support researchers; and ethics and ethics oversight are definitely not barriers to effective research (Wright, 2020). However, as noted above, safeguarding should not be enforced in a top-down manner; it should not be higher-income countries which decide who is vulnerable, risk should not be ethno-centrally imagined, and safeguarding definitely shouldn't be reduced to a checklist activity (SOAS, 2020). We have to check whose voices are being heard, and who ethics is really for, without reinventing the ethics wheel – research has been conducted in previous crises which we can learn from and use to identify where misunderstandings or risks of exploitation may arise (People's Palace Projects, 2020; Wright & Harvey, 2020; Malila, 2020). The pandemic may even present a good moment for organisations to further invest in staff's capacity to conduct ethical research in the field post-pandemic (Maglio, 2020).

Many of the available standards and guidelines on ethical preparedness have been developed for clinical research, which is useful for other fields to draw upon (Malila, 2020). Much of the literature emerging on changes to research in the wake of Covid-19 is in agreement that the safety of everyone in the research process, and the integrity of research, remain a priority (Avis, 2020). In particular, the usual priority given to timelines and deadlines in research culture cannot come before the health and wellbeing of participants and researchers during a global pandemic (Jowett, 2020). Although research ethics is often confined to the official ethical review processes, there appears to be some consensus that there should be a much broader approach to ethics (Wright & Harvey, 2020). For example, it is not just about the behaviour of

people directly involved in research; the decisions taken at policy level are highly relevant to shaping ethical possibilities in the field (Wright & Harvey, 2020). The World Health Organisation (2020b) has produced a set of universal ethical standards, extending beyond health-related ethics, during the pandemic to be adhered to by all those involved in research, and to be adapted contextually and circumstantially.

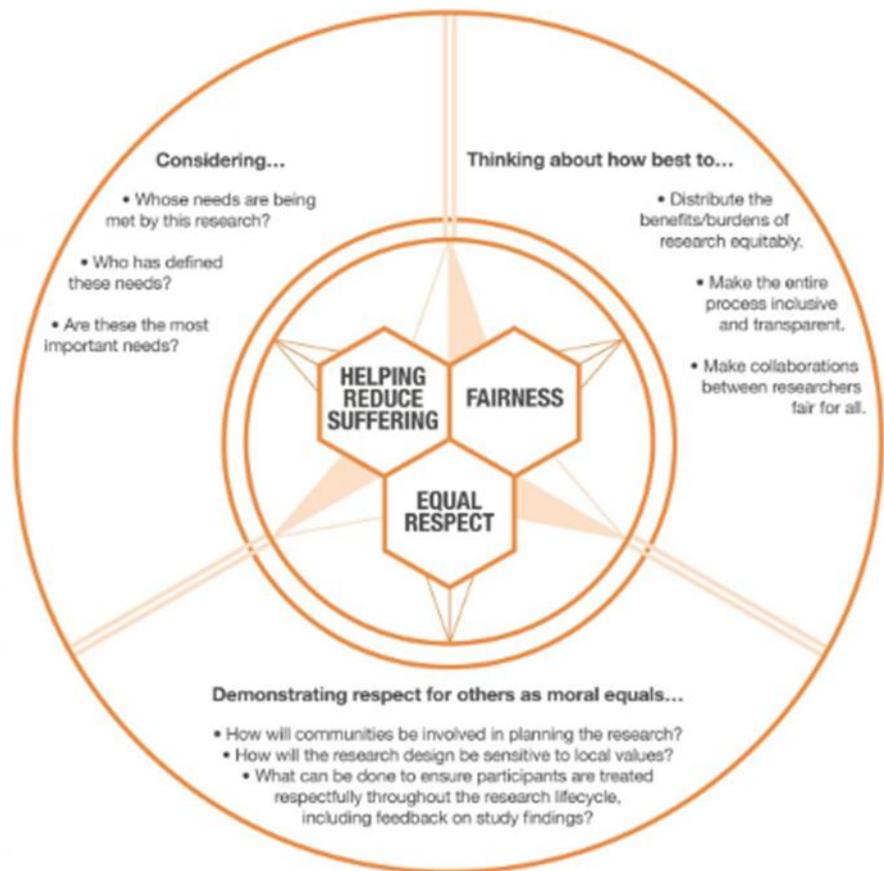
Some of the ethical challenges highlighted by global health emergencies are outlined in the Nuffield Council on Bioethics's report (Wright & Harvey, 2020):

- Questions of power and influence: how are the voices of those who are most affected by emergencies meaningfully included in deciding what research takes place, where, and how?
- Questions of appropriate study design and flexible review that are sensitive to the difficult contexts in which research is taking place.
- Achieving meaningful consent processes within a wider ethical system of governance, to ensure people's interests are respected.
- The need for greater fairness in collaborations between researchers and research institutions in different countries.
- Consideration of when and how data and biological samples provided during an emergency may ethically be used by other researchers.
- Considerations of how front-line research workers can be better supported in addressing the ethical dilemmas they face.

The report also contains recommendations supported by three core ethical values that together form an 'ethical compass' (see Figure 2) (Wright & Harvey, 2020). The values are: helping to reduce suffering by acting in accordance with fundamental duties, founded on solidarity and humanity, to help those in need; demonstrating respect for others as moral equals ('equal respect'); and fairness, which includes both duties of non-discrimination in the treatment of others, and the equitable distribution of both benefits and burdens (Wright & Harvey, 2020). The report states that in many cases these three values will point in the same direction to reveal a clear course of action (Wright & Harvey).

It explains that the primary justification for conducting research is provided by the principle of helping to reduce suffering; this constrains what research should be considered and allows for it to be fairly prioritised. Issues of fairness are encountered throughout the research process and include considerations of how benefits and burdens are divided between participants and partners, thereby ensuring that research partnerships are as equitable as possible. Demonstrating respect for others as moral equals is emphasised as a key element of the recommendations provided by the report, as is the fact that it is essential to conduct research ethically 'with', not 'on', those trying to cope with the pandemic (Wright & Harvey, 2020).

FIGURE 2: THE ETHICAL COMPASS



Source: Wright & Harvey (2020).

A supplement to the International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) Research Ethics Policy has also been designed to guide researchers and project managers in negotiating pandemic-related ethical issues, with an emphasis on the importance of continuing to assess risk and appropriate responses in consultation with other partners who understand the fieldwork context and can inform on local guidance on Covid-19 (Avis, 2020). The importance of conducting research in a non-extractive manner which avoids top-down practices can be found in both the IIED's and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics' recommendations. The following section will explore this concept further in the context of collaborative research partnerships during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 7. Collaborative research

The Covid-19 pandemic has made evident the currently unequal distribution of roles, vulnerabilities and recognition in challenging fieldwork contexts (Bisoka, 2020). This

unequal distribution of power is symptomatic of the colonial relationships which have plagued the social sciences for hundreds of years (Bisoka, 2020). Research agendas tend to be developed in higher-income countries, some with former colonial ties, which in turn serve the interests of these countries and direct benefits back to them in an extractive manner. In this way, the dominance of 'Western' knowledge persists and alternative knowledges are devalued in a manner that is distinctly neocolonial.

Equitable research partnerships are therefore a key theme within the emerging discussion on decolonising knowledge and research. The underlying principle of co-produced or collaborative research is the ethical imperative to treat others – colleagues and participants – with equal respect (Wright, 2020). Dr Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka has clearly demonstrated the necessity of urgently changing our approach to research relationships by showing that a kind of 'Western narcissism' falsely assumes that researchers in higher-income countries are facing the same difficulties as those in middle- and lower-income countries during the pandemic. He goes further to show how such assumptions are currently affecting research assistants in Africa. When the time for 'difficult' or dangerous fieldwork there comes, research assistants become body-instruments, an extension of the bodies of researchers from the higher-income countries, allowing the latter to avoid dangerous fieldwork (Bisoka, 2020). Bisoka shows the paradox of the Western modernity which social science is central to: it simultaneously adheres to a humanist discourse while refusing to relinquish privileges that contribute to oppression and subordination during research. In order for this "amnesia about the shameful realities of knowledge production" (Bisoka, 2020) to be addressed, Bisoka insists that the social sciences must take decolonisation criticism seriously and work towards deconstructing the community of fieldwork-based social scientists and the inequitable (and racial) distribution of roles, vulnerabilities and privileges within that community. It is worth remembering, however, that a context perceived as dangerous or difficult by one person may not be perceived as such by another. In fact, lower-income contexts may be perceived as fairly safe by some in the time of Covid-19, thanks to the relatively low levels of reported deaths compared with higher-income countries.

Collaborative research has long been advocated as a means to replace traditional, unequal power relations between researchers from higher-income countries and those in middle- and lower-income countries with partnerships that have equity as a core principle (Newman, 2020); the travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic have forced a change in research partnerships, presenting a unique moment in which power imbalances can be addressed (Leon-Himmelstine & Pinet, 2020). A time when local researchers in middle- and lower-income countries, both academic and non-academic, have begun to take the lead in research design and data collection is a time to adapt to working in a truly collaborative manner. It has been recognised that collaboration extends beyond fellow academic researchers; meaningful community engagement goes beyond communicating research plans to take the form of relationships of respect which enable community concerns and experiences to help shape and inform research

questions, study design and the research process from beginning to end (Wright, 2020). This level of engagement ensures that research is responsive and sensitive to local needs, realities values and cultures – something that is essential at a time where pandemic responses are being researched (WHO, 2020b).

Equitable partnerships can be defined as ones that respond to locally contextualised needs while building the capacity of those involved (Newman, 2020). (Note, however, that, although capacity building may be perceived as neocolonial, this doesn't mean that skills development is not important during research.) Appropriate capacity building is two-way, sharing skills and capabilities; it is not the higher-income countries dictating proper practice to those in middle- and lower-income countries. Good research rests on bringing together partners with different areas of expertise, working together collaboratively to ensure that methods and approaches are consistent across the partnership (Wright & Harvey, 2020). Some of the key success factors in collaborative research have been identified as strong leadership; a team of local consultants who know the terrain and culture/customs; effective communications and logistics planning; and strong community engagement (Wright & Harvey). There should be shared aims between partners, based on both international and local priorities (WHO, 2020b), and opportunities for all to shape the research design and outcomes (Wright & Harvey, 2020). In the pandemic context, research partners should collaborate to prioritise the challenges faced during the outbreak, to determine the research design to best address those challenges, to conduct the research, and to guarantee that this benefits the participating community (Newman, 2020).

While this is a perfect time to re-ground research partnerships in equity, it is also a challenging time to engage in collaboration and participatory methods, as a result of pandemic conditions and travel restrictions. Many have moved towards the use of remote and online tools as a way to continue working collaboratively, seeing this as an opportunity to think about new ways to maintain connections with communities, as well as to come to terms with the uncomfortable loss of control researchers from higher-income countries may feel when co-producing research (Marzi, 2020). A collaborative study between researchers in the UK and Colombia has provided a success story (though admittedly not without its limitations) for adapting to remote research during the pandemic by using remote participatory filmmaking (Marzi, 2020). The ideal would be to develop community engagement networks in advance to foster equitable relationships, but when this is not possible it is recommended to include scope for a more emergent design, learning and adapting in response to feedback during the research process (Wright & Harvey, 2020). Inequalities in partnerships may not be obvious; for example, it is important to check that there are no exploitative differences in the terms of employment for any of the research team (Wright & Harvey, 2020). However, a response to such inequalities must be carefully considered: paying all workers international rates could undermine local health systems and economies (Wright & Harvey). We should also no longer overlook the fact that researchers in higher-income countries have disproportionate control over publishing mechanisms,

which may often lead to the research contributions of those in middle- and lower-income countries being made invisible (Bisoka, 2020).

The considerations for research design outlined in the following section must therefore be worked out collaboratively. Indeed, many of the solutions to problems that arise may already be present in the knowledge within middle- and lower-income countries, easily missed when researchers from the higher-income countries do not recognise and value alternative forms of knowledge. Complex problems need to be approached and addressed from multiple angles, such as through interdisciplinary collaborations and conversations between forms of knowledge which may not traditionally work together (Bouchon, 2020). Collaboration and co-production are not just recommended for researchers from higher-income countries. The example provided by an East African community-based organisation of and for former child combatants shows how they ensure that participants are safeguarded in research – namely, they are actively involved in co-producing the research agenda and interview schedule, including identifying the kinds of questions they would and would not like to be asked (Renton et al, 2020). Thus participants in studies on child combatants would like more emphasis on positive questions about the present and future, such as: “What skills are you contributing to the community?” and “What are your hopes and aspirations for the future?” (Renton et al, 2020). The participants have been able to ensure their needs and rights are respected throughout the research process by working collaboratively and co-producing the research (Renton et al, 2020).

It was also with this ethos of collaboration and co-production that Chile created the ‘Covid-19 Social Round Table’, headed by the interior minister, alongside the health and science ministers as well as a number of other public and government representatives, including universities (Bouchon, 2020). The roundtable members agreed to meet twice a week in order to strengthen their Covid-19 action plan and fundamentally guarantee the protection of the population’s health (Chile Reports, 2020). This example of collaboration and coordination will help to define Chilean national policy during this health emergency, and to identify solid proposals to lessen its effects (Chile Reports, 2020). As pointed out in an article for the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (De Harder, 2020a), working across countries, and also collaborating within countries, has never made more sense than in response to a global issue.

## **8. Considerations for research design**

When planning research in a pandemic context it is important not to rush into new projects, as there are many things which must first be reflected upon (Eggert, 2020), and it has been suggested that researchers use what journalists used to call the 5Ws and H – Who, What, Where, When, Why and How (Malila, 2020). Questions could include: ‘Who can and should be central to social research?’ ‘What kinds of research

are possible and what will the research tell us that is essential to know now?' 'Where can research take place in a safe and responsible manner?' 'When should research be carried out and is it more responsible to wait until the pandemic has been overcome?' 'Why is social research essential to overcoming the crisis?' Other key questions are: 'is this the right study for this location and this community?' 'Will local populations benefit from any positive findings?' 'Who has been involved in identifying the problem that the research seeks to answer?' 'Is this the right design for this location and community?' 'How have local needs, concerns or preferences been taken into account?' 'Are data currently being used and where are the gaps in essential social and development research?' (Malila, 2020).

Researchers with an interest in Covid-19 have a responsibility to prevent harm caused by poorly designed, implemented and disseminated research (Eggert, 2020). Some of the ways to prevent this include acknowledging existing expertise and the work that has already been done; ensuring there is sufficient background knowledge on the context of investigation and its response to Covid-19; and adopting intersectional approaches to fully understand the complexity of the impact of the virus, considering intersections such as gender, race, class, age, faith, ethnicity and global inequalities (Malila, 2020). Whether or not existing data resources and repositories have been optimally used to address the research questions should also be explored before embarking on any data collection at this time (UN Women, 2020).

The main options for conducting research at this time are (Avis, 2020):

- continue as previously planned;
- modify data collection methods to take into account issues of ethics and safeguarding, and to comply with local regulations;
- postpone research;
- cancel research.

The following sub-section will provide information regarding the option to modify data collection methods, maintaining a focus on safeguarding and equitable research partnerships.

## 8.1 Methods

There are various sources of advice available for those who must change or adapt their chosen data collection methods as a result of the challenges presented by the pandemic and social distancing. This section will provide direction for choosing appropriate methods within the climate of the pandemic that will further the equitable research partnerships outlined above.

If it seems appropriate to continue with face-to-face methods, this should be done outdoors and conforming to local guidance on social distancing and PPE (Avis, 2020). Pre-assessment should be conducted to ensure that particularly vulnerable groups are

not involved in face-to-face data collection (Avis, 2020). Where outdoor meetings are not appropriate, a shift to remote researching is advised. The advice on this can generally be divided into advice for those reflecting on the potentialities of new or adapted methods, and suggestions for those who are sharing their experiences of replacing or adapting their methods. Different projects will require different adjustments, but qualitative research is particularly well positioned for the reworking of methods, methodologies and theoretical frameworks to new circumstances (Gardner, 2020). An emergent design approach is also something to consider in the context of Covid-19, meaning that the research design and associated methods are carefully reconsidered in relation to emergent understandings of participants' experiences and views (Ravitch, 2020). This has been argued to allow for more traditional qualitative methods to be connected with participatory frameworks and humanising methodologies, such as trauma-informed methodology (Ravitch, 2020).

It is crucial for researchers to recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic is a traumatic event, and there are those who have already been exposed to trauma before it (Middleton, 2020). There are also sub-groups of the population who are likely to be disproportionately affected by this traumatic event, such as those who are poorer and socially disadvantaged (Middleton, 2020). These populations are also potentially harder to access as a result of the pandemic, because of the displacement it has caused through loss of employment and evictions, meaning care must be taken to avoid excluding such people from data collection. Trauma experiences can influence behaviour and responses in focus groups and interviews, and trauma-informed methodology allows researchers to cultivate a research environment comfortable for those who have trauma in their past, recognising their resilience and resources (Middleton, 2020). Compassionately engaging with different kinds of trauma when designing research, whether related to Covid-19 or not, and also considering the intersection of trauma with aspects of social identity and structural inequity has become critical in a moment of collective trauma (Middleton, 2020). Critical humanising qualitative methodologies, such as trauma-informed methodology, help us to engage with cosmopolitanism – the idea that we are all connected, dependent on and responsible for each other as fellow human beings (Ravitch, 2020). It is useful to engage with the mental health field in order to go beyond the usual ethical requirements to strengthen safeguarding approaches, and even just to ensure that all research encounters are handled with compassion. There are resources available – for instance a blog from Fulfilling Lives in the UK, which provides tips on taking a trauma-informed approach to coronavirus (Middleton, 2020).

As mentioned above, in some cases it will be possible to use data sampling techniques (Jowett, 2020). There is an abundance of potential data sources available, such as print and broadcast media, qualitative analyses conducted by other social scientists, online discussion forums, open access data archives and social media (Middleton, 2020). Secondary analysis of qualitative data actually remains a neglected research strategy, despite there being exciting opportunities to merge data from different studies

into a new data assemblage (Jamieson, 2020). A method for this, referred to as ‘Big Qual Secondary Analysis’, or the ‘Breadth-and-Depth’ method, has been developed to allow researchers to remain true to the principles of qualitative research while working with large quantities of secondary data (Jamieson, 2020). Such options reduce the need for risky fieldwork during a pandemic.

What has become apparent is the necessity of researchers learning a new set of skills to design and conduct valid, humanising research online (Ravitch, 2020). Janet Salmon’s e-research framework has been flagged as a useful tool when transitioning to online research (Gardner, 2020). Shifting to online methods requires recruitment documentation to be updated or for existing participants to be consulted regarding the changes in methods, but it is still possible to conduct interviews and questionnaires (Avis, 2020). The most obvious techniques are video-calling or the use of text-based instant messaging (Jowett, 2020). Leaving aside limitations such as participants not being technologically literate or there being an inadequate WiFi connection, video-calling provides as close an experience to in-person interviewing as is possible over long distances (Jowett, 2020). There are, of course, issues of bias as a result of these limitations, and the exclusion of certain groups of participants during Covid-19 and beyond is discussed further below. It has also been noted that focus groups are not as effective virtually (Ojiakor et al, 2020).

Where video-calling is not appropriate, online surveys could be an alternative; they generate less rich data than interviews but maintain many of the benefits of qualitative research, while allowing for large quantities of data to be gathered relatively quickly (Jowett, 2020). For those who aim to capture experiences over an extended period of time, Audio Diaries, and more specifically Repeat Question Audio Diaries, have been highlighted as a potentially suitable method (Gardner, 2020). In one study, participants recorded 10–15-minute-long WhatsApp messages or left a standard voicemail message to a dedicated number every fortnight (Gardner, 2020). In a different study in Gaza, diaries were used in conjunction with photo tools while working with adolescents who were uncomfortable with face-to-face interviewing, mainly because of issues of privacy (Ojiakor et al, 2020). In central Bangladesh, The Hrishipara Daily Diaries project tracks the money transactions of 60 low-income households on a daily basis.<sup>4</sup>

The project’s objective is to understand the economic realities of low-income households, with the goal of gaining insights that will enable policy makers and service providers to have a positive impact on their livelihoods.<sup>5</sup> During the pandemic and lockdown in Bangladesh, the project has continued and has provided detailed insight into how severe economic conditions became in these households during April 2020, during the partial recovery that took place in May, and the impact of heavy flooding in Bangladesh in July (Rutherford, 2020a; Rutherford, 2020b). In another co-productive

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<sup>4</sup> Hrishipara Daily Financial Diaries. [Available at <https://sites.google.com/site/hrishiparadailydiaries/>]. Accessed: 3 September 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

research study, methods were adapted to use remote participatory filming as a data collection method (Marzi, 2020).

FIGURE 3: SAMPLE CHW TRAINING PLATFORMS AT A DISTANCE

<p><b>On-demand mobile training</b></p>	<p>CHWs can receive information through different platforms: text messages, mobile applications, phone trees, 24-hr support call-in numbers, and remote support and training. These platforms can support pre- and post-tests to identify content questions and monitor misconceptions. See the Community Health Impact Coalition guidance on training and protection for CHWs during COVID-19.</p> <p>The National Department of Health in South Africa launched <b>HealthWorkerConnect</b>, a WhatsApp-based service that provides official and up-to-date COVID-19 guidance and information for Health Workers of all cadres. Content includes information on the epidemiology and clinical characteristics of COVID-19, management of suspected cases, management of confirmed cases, infection, prevention &amp; control, recording and reporting, ways to contact specialists, support for health workers under stress and other useful resources. <a href="#">Click here to engage with the service</a></p> <p>In Kenya, Amref Health Africa's LEAP platform has an offline group chat that is used for discussions by CHEWs and CHWs. LEAP offers training, peer support and supervision for COVID-19 via mobile platforms. [See Amref's LEAP].</p>
<p><b>Online and social media training</b></p>	<p>Through the USAID-funded Breakthrough ACTION's COVID-19 response, CCP is working with Indonesia's National Family Planning and Population Board (BKKBN) to mobilize a large network of Field Workers (PKB) to engage with CBV networks around COVID-19. Engagement is being conducted online via weekly Facebook (FB) Live sessions where PKBs tune in and receive information and skills building on prevention, preparing communities for quarantine, helping people to self-isolate, and ensuring at-risk populations are supported. PKBs learn how to set up community COVID-19 task forces to help educate communities and manage COVID-19 cases, whether they need to be referred or instructed to self-isolate. FB Live sessions include videos, print materials, and training sessions. More than 7,000 PKB are participating; they have registered more than 130,000 community volunteers. Participants post questions, comments, and photos of their activities.</p>
<p><b>Radio distance learning</b></p>	<p>Pre-recorded training or live training can be broadcast via radio at a specific date and time that has been communicated to CHWs and offering hotlines for live call-ins during the program to ensure on-the-spot responses.</p>

Additional examples can be found in Appendix A

Source: IFRC (2020).

Structured in five-week cycles, each containing three weeks for filming and two for editing and analysis, which were repeated three times, the study allowed women to create and share short films on previously discussed and identified topics, with participants increasingly deciding on the video content and theme selection (Marzi, 2020). The participants also played a significant role in the editing process, in keeping with the study's participatory ethos, which resonates with the decolonisation movement described in the above section. The process was admittedly uncomfortable at times as participants had varying levels of online experience, but training and skills development was also an aim of the study (Marzi, 2020).

In the report *Tips for Engaging Communities during COVID-19 in Low-resource Settings*, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) has produced sample training platforms for training to be done at a distance (see Figure 3). Although this

guidance was produced from Community Health Workers, some of the ideas may be adapted for social science research purposes (IFRC, 2020).

In a crowd-sourced document many alternative sources of research materials have been collected for those aiming to transition from face-to-face to online research (Lupton, 2020). The IIED has also provided advice from its perspective on options available to effectively support online research (Avis, 2020). Online data collection must be secure; it can be done through methods such as Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom, telephone, WhatsApp or Google hangouts, which all have end-to-end encryption (Avis, 2020). Another useful tool highlighted during an Overseas Development Institute (ODI) webinar (Ojiakor et al, 2020) is the Open Data Kit. This is an online data tool which also allows data to be gathered offline, increasing the potential to research in remote areas. Researchers should check if their professional bodies have any specific guidance on online research (Avis, 2020).

Online methods are also by nature exclusionary; not everyone has unlimited access to communications methods: for example, power relations within households may prevent people from accessing such resources (Avis, 2020). This leads to bias and may render the hardest to reach invisible in the data (Avis, 2020). The validity of data produced from interviewing people online may also be called into question because the pandemic is variously affecting participants' state of mind and behaviour, and therefore their responses (Jowett, 2020). One suggestion is that researchers document when data was received and control for differences (Clay, 2020).

Because of the limitations of trying to replicate face-to-face techniques online, sometimes telephone interviews or surveys may be the most suitable option. Removing the need for video means that participants only need access to a telephone, as opposed to a smartphone. As mentioned previously, privacy can be an issue with telephone interviews and surveys – it can be difficult for participants to ensure that they will not be overheard, or they may have to borrow someone's phone. Confidentiality is paramount and permission must be sought if the interview is being recorded or notes are being taken, conforming to data protection guidance (CASS, 2020; Avis, 2020). A safe word can also be arranged for occasions where the participant suddenly needs to end the interview inconspicuously (Ojiakor et al, 2020). Participants should also be advised to delete any messages post-survey (Ojiakor et al, 2020). If conducting telephone interviews, the costs of phone calls and of any other communication should be incurred by the research teams (CASS, 2020). During the calls, the estimated time for the interview should be communicated, with an offer to reschedule if inconvenient (CASS, 2020). Reducing the size of interviews and surveys may also be wise, given the additional time constraints many people are facing as a result of lockdowns and working from home, etc. One postponed study has been replaced by a study designed to investigate the short-term impact of Covid-19 on young people (aged 19–25) through the use of telephone surveys; at the end of each round of calls the researchers publish

headline outcomes which are used to provide rapid analysis to policy makers on the effect of the pandemic on young people (Tilford, 2020).

For researchers from middle- and lower-income countries who do not have the option to postpone their fieldwork, there are different considerations. Charles Ojiakor, a Research Associate from the University of Nigeria, has reported how fieldwork is still going on but the research teams are adopting health guidelines. He reported that it has been necessary to draw on existing relationships, and to spend or budget more to ensure that there are masks, sanitiser and other PPE for participants (Ojiakor et al, 2020). Other researchers in middle- and lower-income countries have adapted their fieldwork at short notice in various ways. Dayani Mbowe, a Manager at Camara Education Tanzania, had to redesign the research approach completely, turning to a remote implementation of the project (Ojiakor et al, 2020). SMS-based surveys were used, delivered using Whatsapp, to collect data from parents and their children; an interactive system allowed for participants to respond in order to receive the next question. Participants were given 3–5 days to respond, with an SMS reminder of the upcoming deadline being sent to them (Ojiakor et al, 2020). The opportunity was also taken to send messages advising participants and their families on how they could protect themselves from Covid-19. The study was further adapted by reducing the sample size (by roughly 50%), the period of data collection and the number of questions in the survey, with questions also being added in order to collect data on how families were coping with and adapting to Covid-19 (Ojiakor, 2020).

Mirza Manbira Sultana, a Manager at WaterAid Bangladesh, also described adapting a study investigating the vulnerability of waste workers and of women's vulnerability relating to menstrual hygiene to remote data collection via mobile phones (Ojiakor, 2020). Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone. Like the project in Tanzania, the sample size was reduced but, in this case, this had an impact on the quality of the data, and the opportunity was lost to stratify the data in order to gain an understanding of the vulnerabilities of different groups of waste workers (Ojiakor, 2020). Several researchers in middle- and lower-income countries have also reported providing participants with some small compensation for things such as transport, time, internet coverage and PPE (Okiakor, 2020).

In Gaza, all research activities were suspended for two months, leading Sharooq Hosam, a qualitative researcher from GAGE, to shift to a virtual methodology using technology, specifically diary and photo tools (Ojiakor et al, 2020). The study works with adolescents, and it was reported that virtual methodologies were more comfortable for some participants who felt uncomfortable with face-to-face interviewing (Ojiakor, 2020). Some participants were using their parents' phones, which made privacy an issue, and some participants, especially women, didn't have access to the internet. The research team were trained in safety measures and received PPE, and they also received psychosocial support sessions on adapting (Ojiakor, 2020).

Mixed-methods research is encouraged at a time when researchers need new applications of existing methodologies and the development of new methodologies to address a host of challenges across many areas of scholarly investigation (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2020). Opportunities should be taken, where possible, to foster solidarity and 'give back'; this may take the form of using research and online platforms to convey important messages regarding Covid-19 to participant communities (Maglio, 2020). Primarily, a focus should be kept on safeguarding and equitable research relationships when designing or adapting research.

## **9. Conclusion**

Flexibility and the ability to adapt have always been key components of research, but Covid-19 has made this more apparent. The rapid pace at which the world went into lockdown has revealed that it is sensible to incorporate versatility into research design. Travel restrictions, which confined some researchers to higher-income countries and made them dependent on research partners in middle- and lower-income countries for their research to continue, have made clear the ways in which the latter have been heavily relied upon in the past, without the scale of their contributions being explicitly acknowledged. This has presented those working in research, in all countries, with an opportunity to reframe partnerships with equality at their centre. This also necessitates considering the safety, risks and vulnerability of those engaging in research, who may have previously been exploited within unequal research relationships reflecting the colonial legacy of International Development.

Inequalities which were visible but largely overlooked before the pandemic – for example, spatial inequalities within urban areas – will no longer be ignorable, thanks to Covid-19 not only emphasising, but deepening them. In the case of spatial inequalities within urban areas, the inability to socially distance during the pandemic as a result of the cramped living conditions in informal settlements, something which tends to include health hazards at the best of times, has shown that settlement upgrading is a priority for everyone. Researchers across the globe should take this moment to strike while the iron is hot and engage with policy makers about these inequalities, be they related to past research that has renewed relevance or to new research that could contribute to addressing inequalities in the pandemic response. Researchers also have a responsibility to carefully consider their research design and conduct so as to not create new inequalities, for example by making an effort not to exclude people from studies who may be more difficult to include within the pandemic context. Observations such as that made by the Head of Research for Oxfam UK, Dr Irene Guijt, show that there are extraordinarily conflicting narratives about what is happening in relation to Covid-19 globally (Guijt, 2020). She has attributed this to the incentives within academia to produce new research, making the synthesising of existing work on what is emerging from the pandemic a priority for researchers (Guijt, 2020).

One of the strongest messages to come through from the emerging discussion on research and research methods during the pandemic is that this global emergency has demonstrated that dramatic, positive changes in how social science research is conducted are necessary. At the very least, we need to learn to care for one another and develop new ideas of how we can engage with one another – other researchers, participants, and anyone else who is part of the research process (NCPPE, 2020). That is not to say there will not be challenges, but the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the capacity for change is possible when it is deemed essential – and more egalitarian research relations are essential. In the short term and beyond, we have an opportunity to reimagine internationalisation, to strengthen existing partnerships, and to place equity as a core principle in new partnerships (Newman, 2020).

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## Appendix 1: Useful links and resources

- ALNAP's COVID-19 Response Portal [available at <https://covid19.alnap.org/>].
- Arise (2020). *Remote Research Methods to use during the COVID-19 Pandemic* [available at [www.ariseconsortium.org/remote-research-methods-to-use-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/](http://www.ariseconsortium.org/remote-research-methods-to-use-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/)].
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- Social Sciences on Coronavirus* [available at [www.socsci.ox.ac.uk/social-sciences-coronavirus](http://www.socsci.ox.ac.uk/social-sciences-coronavirus)].

