

Fieldwork in the time of Covid-19: researchers' insights

From 16-27 November 2020, PRAXIS hosted a virtual workshop on transforming conflict and displacement through arts and humanities research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the event was designed as an entirely virtual space where AHRC GCRF researchers and their communities could join conversations, engage in dialogue and debate key themes of conflict-related research. Part of this programme was a roundtable discussion on 19 November, which brought together two field research experts, Dr Margaret Ebubedike (Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, the Open University) and Dr Heather Flowe (School of Psychology, University of Birmingham) to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on field research

Research in times of COVID-19

Dr Heather Flowe highlighted how the COVID crisis, including numerous national lockdowns, resulted in an environment where abuse and sexual violence increased. In her work in Kenya, Dr Flowe stated that there had been an increased prevalence of violence against women when using public spaces, as well as an increased risk for child sexual abuse when schools were closed. She highlighted instances of grooming under the guise of allowing children to access the internet in lockdown

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Dr Ebubedike agreed that the COVID crisis had also led to an increase in gender based violence and child rape in Nigeria. These two countries' experiences are disturbing examples of the accountability vacuum left by curfews and police enforcement that were a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis. It is also indicative of the importance of continuing research in conflict and insecure environments despite the pandemic, to ensure those working with vulnerable groups and communities continue to partner with in-country organisations to provide resources and, when appropriate, amplification of key issues that would otherwise remain unheard. Recognition from funders on the impact of COVID-19 on in-country partners and vulnerable communities is also a necessary first step.

Challenges and opportunities stemming from COVID-19

The discussion focused on the inevitable change in established and new relationships with in-country partners and research participants, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The difficulties with relationship and trust-building using only online media speak for themselves, with participants flagging the lack of "down time" or social time with partners and research communities as a fundamental loss that is hard to mitigate.

Despite these challenges, participants mentioned how the “slimmed down” approach necessitated by the pandemic has the potential to be beneficial for relationships: working online, often the only things researchers are able to do, is listen – as opposed to “doing” in the field. This has opened up lines of communication and re-prioritised dialogue and collaboration for some. In addition, the prioritisation of online media has made it easier to reach out to wider communities, without having the cost of fact-to-face meetings and events to consider.

Some participants highlighted how they have used this to their advantage when running projects that span different countries, pairing researchers with their counterparts from different project locations for learning and skills exchanges. These positives still ring a cautionary note, however: the “nice and orderly” manner in which online life unfolds via networking platforms and video calls cannot replicate the chance encounters and insights gained from organic interaction with partners and research communities.

Researchers from the global north have also had to cede control over projects to in-country partners, with such partners stepping up to fulfil research and co-ordination roles that would otherwise have been provided by UK-based academics travelling to the field. In some cases, this has resulted in a more ethical and equitable research relationship, while simultaneously up-skilling and empowering in-country researchers and partners to take ownership of research projects. The necessitation of delegation and the impossibility of micro-managing in-country partners has the potential to correct power and agency imbalances in global north/south research projects.

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The need to be creative and flexible when beginning research with new partners, working completely online, is key to successful projects. Dr Flowe raised the use of mobile technology to document incidents of sexual violence across Kenya. The use of an app is a survivor led approach, using their own data they have collected to address duty bearers and demand justice; but this app has also helped survivors document the changing patterns of violence and abuse during the pandemic – particularly important as access to medical and judicial services and advice offices has been curtailed in the COVID-19 crisis.

Critiques of COVID response

Dr Margaret Ebubedike highlighted that for many people working in areas affected by conflict and crisis – or areas where access is restricted or limited by a range of political and environmental factors – the COVID-19 pandemic’s research restrictions are not unusual or novel.

As in all research environments, research during the COVID-19 pandemic requires:

- Considerations of duty of care to participants
- Livelihoods building in research proposal: a community empowerment scheme attached to the project, e.g. vocational skills development
- Training and paying community research assistants

This emphasises the point that in many countries in the global south, the COVID-19 crisis is simply one more problem alongside a range of other complex situations; and there is a risk of western academics exceptionalising the current pandemic. This becomes problematic when such singular focus on one issue results in a lack of consideration of structural and systemic issues that relate and interact with the COVID-19 fall-out. Some concerning results of this way of thinking could include a reduction in funding for longer-term research, and a negative impact on relationship-building with partners.

In addition, a singular focus on the COVID-19 crisis means researchers are focused on “when life goes back to normal” and how their projects can be mitigated. What one participant called the “mad rush” of re-working proposals and projects into online formats meant that the opportunity for documentation, reflection and longer-term learning from this scenario has been compromised. There is no consideration of working with or “inside” the pandemic, as with any other research obstacle. There is a hope that rather than exceptionalise the COVID-19 crisis, the pandemic can highlight the interconnected nature of the environment, society, politics and economics. A push for funding for more multi-disciplinary work, such as arts and humanities approaches, could capitalise on this.

