



BLOG, REFLECTIONS /// FRIDAY 24 JULY 2020

Engage young people as participants and collaborators in research projects

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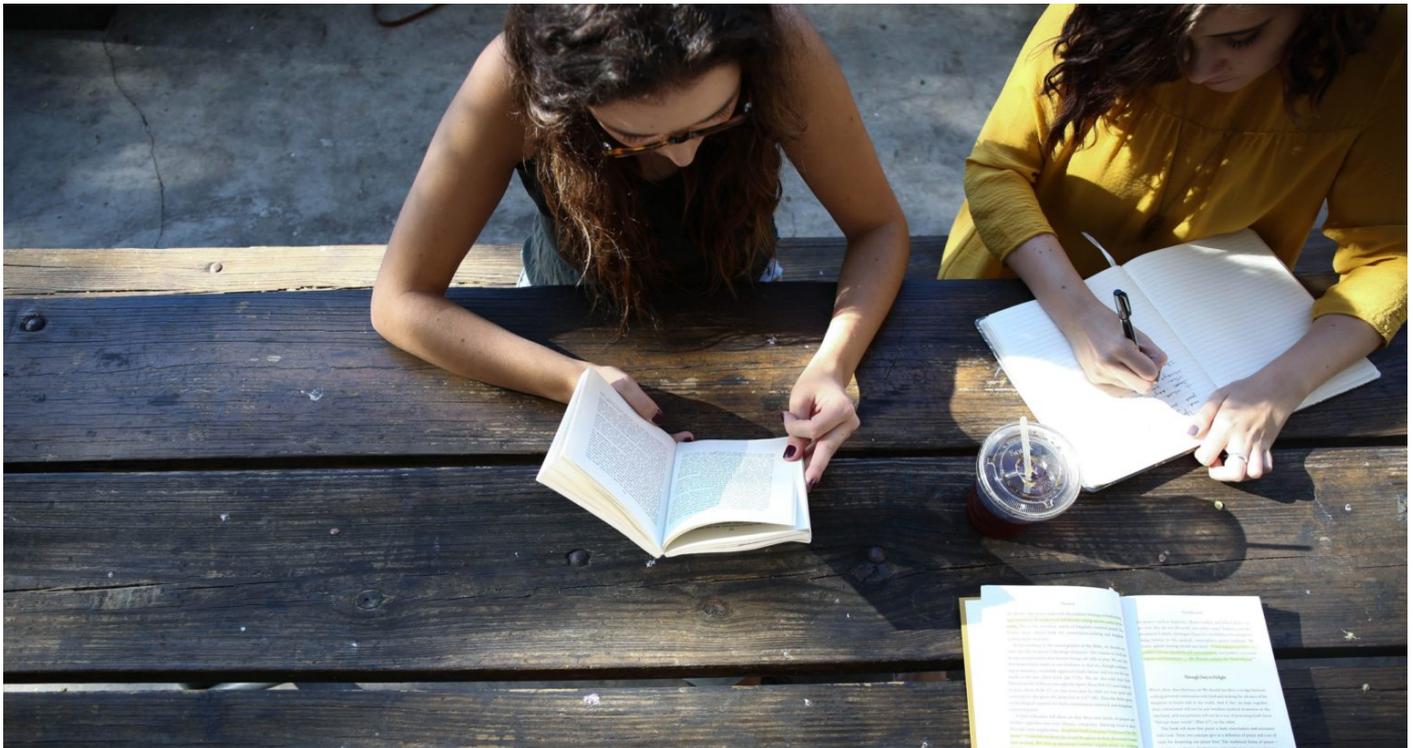


Photo by Alexis Brown on Unsplash

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How can we continue to engage young people as participants and collaborators in research projects? That was question posed to Global Challenge Research Fund Network+ projects during a recent online seminar co-hosted by Changing the Story and Praxis, and facilitated by Katie Hodgkinson (PhD Candidate) on 26 June 2020.

Three questions framed the discussion:

1. What barriers are you finding in engaging young people with research activities?
2. What are the ethical implications of engaging young people in research activities during lock-down?
3. How can we build trust between researchers and participants when using online platforms?

COVID-19 has created a new set of contextual challenges for engaging young people in research activities. Is it ethical to ask young social entrepreneurs to engage in research when they are concerned about protecting jobs? How do we really know how young research participants are doing given the varying experiences of lock-down, different in every context? What is the impact of COVID-19 on young people's home-life and mental health? These are some of the questions Changing the Story research projects have considered since global lock-down measures were introduced, but COVID-19 has also exacerbated and made increasingly visible existing inequalities, from access to tech and data at the local level, demands on young people's time and digital security threats.

What was interesting about the discussion, in addition to deepening the shared understanding of the barriers that exist in different contexts, is how COVID-19 has become the trigger point for challenging existing assumptions about research. That is to say, assumptions about ways of working, how to keep co-researchers and research participants safe, what counts as research, what counts as work and how we conceptualise research in the current and post-era of COVID-19.

One example of how COVID-19 has been the vessel through which existing assumptions about research have been challenged, centres on the question ‘should research participants be paid to participate in research?’

Where paying participants to engage in research remains an ethical grey area (Zutlevics, 2016), researchers on Changing the Story projects had begun to interrogate the ethical implications of *not* paying or financially compensating participants. COVID-19 has fuelled this discussion, leading some Changing the Story researchers to question what happens to ethics in a time of global pandemic. Are the ethical guidelines adopted pre-COVID-19 still appropriate given the possible long-term economic implications of COVID-19 on young people and their families?

Acknowledging that institutions and ethics boards have historically decided what types of labour has monetary value, the discussion raised important questions around how research participation should be defined. If participation requires time and energy that participants would otherwise be spending on something else, should they not be compensated for this? Should their participation be considered work, and if it is considered work, then why shouldn't participants not be? In not compensating participants, are we contributing to structural hierarchies?

The answer isn't straightforward and counter-arguments put forward during the discussion suggest there is a need to be mindful of the implications of redefining what research participation means in different contexts. In the case of Nepal for example, international researchers paying participants has created a culture of expectation around payment that has made it difficult for researchers, who cannot pay participants, to conduct research. There is also a need to understand if and how research participants want to be compensated for their time without being ignorant of what it is participants want and need.

At Changing the Story, COVID-19 has encouraged researchers to rethink budgets collaboratively given that travel is restricted and the use of online methods has the potential to exclude the already most marginalised groups in societies. Projects are reallocating budgets to pay for textbooks and tech to improve digital connectivity, as well as new activities delivered locally to support civic engagement during and beyond the life of the project. Looking ahead, there is a real enthusiasm to shift how budgets are built in favour of more co-produced, participatory budgeting and youth first budget allocation and to collaboratively re-imagine what research looks like and whom it is for.

TAGS: CO-PRODUCTION COVID19 PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING RESEARCH YOUTH

