

# The NCRM wayfinder guide to equitable research relations in and after Covid-19



## In it together? Promoting fair and equitable research at a distance

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on international research practices. Restrictions on global travel have disrupted planned research projects and encouraged researchers to explore new ways of undertaking research 'at a distance', either directly or through collaborations with international partners. A previous Wayfinder Guide on ethical practices during Covid-19<sup>1</sup> identified how the pandemic has exposed historic and exploitative inequalities within the global research community, as well as providing opportunities to do research differently. This guide draws upon workshop discussions and recent literature to provide pointers and ideas on how experience of the pandemic might be mobilised to establish more equitable research practices.

### The challenge of not being there

During the pandemic there has been an increased uptake of remote research tools, whereby researchers engage directly with a study area or study participants without being physically co-present. Some tools, such as the use of remote sensing data or secondary survey data present challenges for the ongoing engagement of local populations in the validation, sharing and joint development of reporting and interpretation of the results being developed. Other tools, particularly digital platforms, can raise questions of the extent to which fully informed consent is realised<sup>2</sup>. The development of research approaches based on remote interactions with participants can also raise methodological challenges, as recent research in the US demonstrates: In a review of the use of remote technologies in legal proceedings, the Brennan Centre found that the use of remote technologies typically led to differential outcomes when compared to the outcomes of the same proceedings held in physical courtrooms<sup>3</sup>. As Veeck<sup>4</sup> reminds us, the setting of an interview is as important as the questions asked. The issue of online impacts on methods, positive and negative, become even more important when participatory and reflexive methods are used.

The pandemic also produced examples of where UK-based researchers returned to (or remained in) the UK, whilst local researchers undertook research on the ground. Managed and supported appropriately, such

arrangements have the potential to build local capacity, boost the career opportunities of local researchers and encourage alternative sites of theory building<sup>5,6,7</sup>. However, where local researchers disproportionately bear the risk of working in more vulnerable settings their wellbeing, physical and mental health should be paramount. Undertaking research at a distance should not be an exercise in extraction and in transferring risk and vulnerability from researchers in the Global North to teams in the Global South. On-site researchers must be consulted and supported to realise the roles they are being asked, and agree, to play. This can include considering the administrative and governance structures and systems required to utilise and account for the resources transferred.

### Changing research practices

There is now a broad consensus that research should be inclusive, empowering and undertaken with individuals and communities rather than being done about them or to them<sup>8,9</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the use of platforms that enable remote data collection and collaboration<sup>10</sup>. The use of digital platforms such as WhatsApp messaging services, Facebook communities, Microsoft Teams and Zoom, alongside the use of smartphones as research devices has provided a means to continue existing research projects and to initiate new activities. Reflective articles suggest that technological practices can offer new opportunities for research practices, but also raise new ethical and methodological challenges<sup>11,12,13,14,15,16</sup>.

Whilst extant research has reported positive views of the use of digital technology for data collection from both researchers and participants, this literature also highlights that technological challenges and difficulties in building rapport can strongly influence the interview experience, with implications for data quality<sup>17,18,19,20</sup>. Not all platforms are freely accessible to all users in all locations and some actors are more willing or more comfortable in their use of some technologies rather than others. Costs of access and reliability considerations can also differentially influence individual opportunities to engage. In some contexts, use of such platforms may also be considered a political act. Wariness of technology and privacy concerns may promote reluctance to engage amongst potential participants, especially when this intersects with the challenging political contexts and deep inequities in digital access within and across countries. These considerations highlight the important decisions to be made by researchers seeking to make use of digitally-enabled platforms to connect themselves to their research locations. Researchers will want to reflect on how use of such technologies might influence the content and quality of the research being undertaken. This is particularly pertinent in the context of decolonised and post-colonial research approaches<sup>21,22,23</sup>.

## Consciously construct opportunities for collaboration

Fairness and equity in research relationships lies at the heart of good research practices<sup>24,25</sup>. Tilley and Kalina<sup>26</sup> powerfully remind us that local researchers are more than simply gatekeepers or, as they eloquently phrase it, 'facilitators, fixers, and translators'. When research projects are being led from afar it is particularly important that local expertise is fully recognised and that local researchers are not simply seen as 'boots on the ground'. Recognising and dealing with the equity dimensions in such collaborations also means that such relationships should be empowering, for example, through building specific capacities within local research teams and reflexive methods that devolve the research process as close to those affected as possible. We should also be aware that features such as class, caste, gender, race and capitalism may influence the research relationships of local researchers.

When constructing opportunities for collaboration, researchers highlight the significance of building flexibility into the research framework to allow

prioritisation of local concerns. This helps to bridge the gap between local community, local researchers and UK based researchers. Projects that enable the flexibility to include local issues of concern are better placed to connect to the realities in the field and engage meaningfully with both local communities and researchers. This was particularly true during the pandemic. Experience suggests that when undertaking research at a distance the need for researchers to be alive to the sensitivities of local context is heightened, including questions of who can speak for whom. This extends to recognising the role language choices can play in changing meeting dynamics.

Used appropriately, remote technologies can assist in promoting more equitable and fair relations, through encouraging mutual participation, building trust and enabling equal inputs. However, activities must be actively constructed to promote these goals and not impair the engagement of any party. Equally, remote research technologies can be utilised to open up opportunities for researchers from the global south to engage with and to reshape the global research landscape, including contributing to research projects in the global north. At present, this is more readily seen in heightened engagement in research events, such as networks, seminars and webinars, but more substantive activities may follow. Used wisely, remote technologies can reduce the direct and indirect cost of some aspects of research, including time and money otherwise spent on travelling and securing visas – creating new spaces and opportunities for collaboration. Creating opportunities for collaboration is of course only a beginning, researchers in the UK must also recognise that the costs of online participation can be disproportionately high for researchers working in low- and middle-income countries and actively work to offset this.

## Dissemination, engagement and knowledge sharing

Engaging local populations in the sharing of research findings can be a challenge for researchers who are working at a distance from where the research is undertaken. The potential pitfalls of relying on online formats for disseminating knowledge and understanding is well-documented<sup>27</sup>. Experience suggests that the pandemic has opened up new opportunities to place local partners at the forefront of research that is being undertaken, including in their more direct voice in reporting on research done in their own settings.

Empowering local partners through well-developed collaborative research projects, working with local populations, and the appropriate use of remote technology formats provides a positive vision of how research might be reconfigured to involve collaborative, but geographically-separated, research teams. Done well, this not only creates a window for a deeper appreciation of the role played by all members of a research team but can also lead to a more productive research process.

## Overcoming institutional barriers

The potential for longer-term collaborative relations between globally-connected research institutions, such as universities, in overcoming complex societal problems is well-recognised. Overall, research organisations and funding bodies are reported to have been understanding and supportive of project amendments as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Analysis of constraints on fair research relations does, however, identify the significant role played by research institutions, such as Universities<sup>28</sup>. Financial and administrative conditions imposed by UK institutions can act to shift the burden of risk on to partners who are already operating in more vulnerable financial contexts, or can favour those institutions that have the capacity to engage with external requirements. Whilst these are not issues unique to the pandemic, or to the carrying out of research at a distance, they can act to further contribute to structural and systemic asymmetries in the balance of power. If the positive opportunities emerging from collaborative research done at a distance are to be fully realised then institutional structures are required that empower the process. In part, this requires a shift from short transactional relationships to more strategic, empowering and longer-term engagements. Crucially, this should include working with partners to ensure they are able to build the capacity to act as sites for data analysis and reporting, and not be regarded primarily as sites for data extraction.

## Being attuned to our own positionality and that of others

Arguably, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the fault-lines that already existed in research relationships between the Global North and the Global

South, highlighting enduring imbalances in power and resources across the global research landscape<sup>29,30</sup>. As researchers we must recognise our own position in this landscape. In this spirit, we acknowledge that this guide has been written primarily from the perspective of UK-based researchers, informed directly and indirectly by the insights provided by collaborative partners based outside of the UK. It is written from the standpoint of researchers in the fields of the humanities, social, biological and medical sciences.

## An interlude or a critical juncture?

The consequential financial costs of the pandemic are already being seen in the substantial reductions of the UK's overseas aid budget and the adverse implications of this for the UKRI's Global Challenges Research Fund<sup>31</sup>. For some researchers, the reduced funding landscape may encourage a greater reliance on undertaking research at a distance through deeper engagements with local collaborators. For other researchers, the convenience of new distanced research arrangements will prove to be compelling. If this is so then it is important to document and learn from the experiences of researchers in the Global South and the Global North during the pandemic, so that we may develop better practices as we progress along this pathway.

## Looking to the future

The Covid-19 pandemic has acted as a significant disruption for many researchers, whilst also opening up multiple avenues for new, and often urgent, research. Equally, many researchers wished to find means to continue existing research programmes and projects. Digital platforms provide a means to maintain research agendas at a distance, particularly when in collaboration with local partners. However, we must learn and document the strengths and challenges of using digital technology so that they are appropriately used in the future. Much has been learnt of the challenges this presents for ensuring equitable and ethical research relationships based on research methods that can be trusted rather than simply being convenient. Sharing these experiences and listening to the issues raised by southern researchers can help to promote better research practices benefits us all and is imperative if we wish to address the gap that too often emerges between aspirations and operational realities<sup>32,33</sup>.

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