

International development research in the time of COVID

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Plan International Indonesia, Institute for Sustainable Futures and local research consultant facilitating participatory community mapping with youth in eastern Indonesia for inclusive climate-resilient WASH

Photo Credit: Jeremy Kohlitz

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us all in so many ways. At the same time, it has provided the opportunity to reconsider the nature of international development work. The disruption created by the pandemic brings to the fore many issues that have been on our minds for a while at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, forcing us to challenge and transform our ways of working on development research. Here we provide food for thought on how international development research might be reshaped by the experience of COVID-19.

As international development researchers we are used to travelling the world, or at least the region. Normally we engage directly with local NGOs, researchers, governments, communities and consultants. Now we can't travel. We can't 'be with' our local partners. We can't be enriched and informed by local contexts and realities. Remarkably, like others, we have continued to work during the last year with the benefit of technology.

Remote communication has enabled us to collaboratively design research, carry out data collection and analysis, and write up our research outputs. We have even managed to engage users of our research to facilitate its uptake, **a dimension of our practice we continuously seek to improve**. Our **partnerships with NGOs and local researchers** have been critical in making this possible. For some projects this has meant increasing space for the localisation agenda, supporting greater leadership and autonomy for our partners.

But we need to test ourselves on this. We need to ensure that working remotely does not mean that power is still held in Australian hands. We need to purposefully evolve our practice and work in new ways that change the balance. This doesn't just

mean a shift for us as international development researchers, but also a shift in funding and contractual arrangements to ensure that local agendas shape and inform the research initiatives from the start. Such a starting point is the only **ethical pathway** in such disrupted times.

Also, we shouldn't forget that working remotely is only possible with strong telecommunications. For those with access, the power of inclusivity and connections is amazing. But we know that for those without access, existing inequalities and marginalisation are exacerbated. We need to be careful to be creative and thoughtful about ways to include voices that otherwise are not heard. This will mean 'us working remotely' is not at the centre of our international development research. Rather, our role is to remotely support the local agendas and actors central to international development.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the ongoing impacts of climate change, have shown us that we need to prepare for risks, an **approach recently coined as 'risk integration'**. Countries of the Blue Pacific are all too familiar with the risks of climate change, extreme weather events and geological hazards such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. A range of different risks must be factored more explicitly into development programming, and equally into development research. We can't continue to work in sectoral silos, which make us blind to potential risks to, or unexpected consequences, from our research recommendations. Systems thinking and a transdisciplinary research approach can assist us to recognise the interplay of multiple risks and also see leverage points for long-term change.

One thing that COVID-19 has demonstrated is the importance of 'no regrets policy'. It also paints starkly the need to consider how risks affect some parts of societies and communities disproportionately. Integration of gender and social inclusion are critical to ensure existing inequalities are not exacerbated by development activities. Consideration of the dynamic nature of risks now, and for the future, offers us the opportunity to make more impactful contributions from development research. Of course, local partners know risks better than anyone, and with us no longer being able to travel, let's ensure these local voices are at the centre of risk analyses and integration, and continue to build **equitable partnerships** that enable that.

Local partners have been critical to the continuation of international development research in this last year. We can build from this to strengthen the centrality of local knowledge in international development research. A pro-localisation approach has already been advocated by many and calls for **decolonising knowledge** have intensified. We need to ensure that development research is not simply 'outsourced' as we continue to work in Australia behind travel bans that disconnect us from the realities of the rest of the world. Now more than ever, we need to work reflexively

and acknowledge our privilege. This would in turn provide space and scope for local partners' understandings, perspectives and knowledge of context, inclusive of diverse risks and aspirations, to inform our development research agendas.

Are we prepared and ready for the change that is upon us informed by the COVID-19 global pandemic? For many, the pivot to working remotely has required skill development in new ways of working. From Google docs to Zoom videos, we have used all manner of technology to proceed. But should we just do what we were doing before as international development researchers and practitioners, just remotely?

We don't think so. We think that we can use the disruption of COVID-19 as a catalyst for change in our sector. We would like to see a shift in the systems and structures of funding and relationships to enable and strengthen the roles of NGOs and local researchers in their own countries to engage with and lead in policy and practice debates related to international development, poverty and social justice. This may require changes to contract and grant parameters, longer-term funding, or institutional partnerships to work together on longer-term agendas that appreciate the interlinkages of development issues. The role and responsibilities of Australian-based researchers might change and evolve in light of local development agendas and the role and leadership of local researchers may be augmented in engaging policymakers, professionals and communities to take up their research evidence.

Responding to a pandemic has shifted global agendas and has highlighted the need for joint action. This might be an important opportunity to take stock of our own work practices and recentre our role in international development research.

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