The Covid-19 Opportunity: Creating More Ethical and Sustainable Research Practices

Oscar Abedi Dunia, Maria Eriksson Baaz, David Mwambari, Swati Parashar, Anju Oseema Maria Toppo and James B.M. Vincent

Responses to and consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak have shed an uncomfortable light on existing, rampant inequalities. Beyond the critical voices urging us to examine why countries in the Global North only react when an epidemic affects them, there have been numerous reports from the United States and across Europe showing that Black people and other minority groups are infected and dying of the virus at much higher rates than white people. While predictions of mass deaths in low-income countries are problematic from a range of perspectives, many places in the Global South already endure extreme situations of poverty and starvation, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Related, yet different, inequalities have marked research since long before the pandemic; in particular, research in insecure settings in the Global South. There is (most often) an overt inequality between what we here call "facilitating researchers" (i.e., researchers based in research locations who regulate the access and flow of knowledge, often, in the literature, pejoratively referred to as "local research assistants" or even "fixers") and "contracting researchers" (i.e., researchers, often based in the Global North, who contract facilitating researchers)1.

"We…argue that Covid-19—by highlighting inequalities and immobility—offers an opportunity to rethink and push for more ethical—and more equal—research practices."
In a recent essay published on *Items*, Aymar Bisoka sheds light on these inequalities in the context of research in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Bisoka also importantly demonstrates how the discussions around the effects of Covid-19 research are marked by "a sort of Western narcissism" that "assumes Western and African researchers face the same problems in the same way." While describing Covid-19 as a nonevent, Bisoka highlights how the pandemic offers an opportunity to question discourses of academics based in the Global North who commission studies in the Global South. Concurring with this position, we further argue that Covid-19—by highlighting inequalities and immobility—offers an opportunity to rethink and push for more ethical—and more equal—research practices. Yet, rather than simply reflecting on why Covid-19 may or may not provide such opportunities or simply accounting for experiences of exploitation, we outline various paths forward to make fieldwork and research a nonexploitative experience in collaborative knowledge production.

Covid-19: Opportunities amidst inequalities and "involuntary mobility"

While research practices marked by inequalities and exploitation have a long history, going back to colonialism, there has been a surge in articles and blog posts on the theme in recent years.2 Sukarieh and Tannock, for instance, report from what they call the Syrian "refugee research industry," a research environment bifurcated into Northern "research capitalists" and a Southern "research proletariat."3 Moreover, David Mwambari and Arthur Owor describe a black market of knowledge production where Northern researchers "rely on local human resources to collect knowledge" separating foreign "experts" from adjunct local experts due to abysmal differences in financial situations. In another blog post by most of the authors of this text, as well as in pieces written for the Silent Voices Blogs, such inequalities of research have been extensively recorded.

"Facilitating researchers often have to handle precarious and insecure situations with very limited financial means and without insurance."

The long and uncomfortable history being documented highlights the disparate experiences of contracting and facilitating researchers. Facilitating researchers conduct crucial research tasks—such as providing access to respondents; translating and adapting methodology (interview guides/survey questions) to specific contexts; collecting data in insecure settings, summarizing the data and providing crucial inputs into interpretation. Despite this they tend to be systematically erased from published research texts and their voices silenced. Often, they are not even informed about the publications that emerge out of the research for which they were contracted. Importantly, facilitating researchers often have to handle precarious and insecure situations with very limited financial means and without insurance. Precarious living and financial conditions also force many to accept work that involves considerable risks and limited pay, fearing the loss of any potential income. Also, it is not uncommon that facilitating researchers are made to handover their findings in the middle of the research process and are left with less than half of the remuneration promised. In short, facilitating researchers, often at great risk to themselves, navigate insecurities with scarce resources on behalf of others.

The Covid-19 outbreak also accentuates experiences of "involuntary immobility." Within a very short time, working remotely has become a reality for many. Yet, clearly such "involuntary immobility" has only been possible for those who can afford it. For many, including facilitating researchers in the Global South, "involuntary immobility" is an impossible option, in turn questioning the relevance of notions and distinctions between "in/voluntary immobility."

Covid-19 measures have restricted the possibilities of more privileged researchers to be present "in the field" in particular ways. Yet, restrictions are likely to continue and were present before the pandemic. Research institutions in Europe, Australia, and North America have, over the last decade, increasingly regulated and restricted fieldwork access due to security concerns of their staff.4 In short, so called "remote research" where contracting researchers remain in the comfort of their country or stay in comfortable hotels in safe urban settings in conflict zones, while facilitating researchers do the ground work and collect data

for them, was becoming more common even before the pandemic. The relative absence of debates on what this may entail for the security of facilitating researchers and the ethics of the research itself, clearly reflects not only Northern navel gazing but also provides insights into the "research industry" and its lopsided priorities. Funding agencies also tend to enable such practices by not asking questions about facilitating researchers' situation and roles while at the same time funding research that do not require contracting researchers to visit these sites themselves.

We also anticipate and hope for a continuation of travel restrictions and remote research practices after Covid-19, as a response to the massive and truly global challenges of climate change. For these restrictions to be fairly implemented, the inequalities between the Global North and South in terms of responsibility for climate change and climate action has to be considered. We argue that limited opportunities of travel have to be more evenly distributed (beyond North to South travels).

In short, we are faced with the challenges arising from long distance/remote research. Most of the limited literature addressing this development highlights how it may increase the risk of exploitative and unequal research relationships and partnerships.5 Yet, that may not necessarily be the case. The increasing "long-distance approaches" are, as Myrttinen and Mastonshoeva conclude,6 not necessarily negative. Instead, they may offer new opportunities for facilitating researchers and can lead to more emancipatory ways of coproducing knowledge.

Ways ahead: What needs to change?

While changes mandate a fundamental and structural shift in collaborative research practices, which are beyond the scope of this limited text, we highlight three aspects that appear as particularly important at this juncture.

First, we need to rethink and challenge our understanding of "authorship" of research findings. Co-authorship is often denied (if discussed at all) on the grounds that it requires authors' involvement in two or more parts of the research process (preparation/conceptualization; data collection; interpretation and writing) but facilitating researchers only collect data. This, we argue, unfairly ignores the hard work that collecting data entails, particularly in insecure settings. Moreover, it erases the role that facilitating researchers often play in the other phases (i.e., translating and adapting the methodology and interpretation of data).

"Currently, many facilitating researchers fear that any attempt to renegotiate terms of compensation can result in the termination of the contract itself."
Second, the work undertaken by facilitating researchers needs proper compensation, which is seldom the case at present.7 There is need for a better and more transparent remuneration policy through documented contracts, leaving space for the compensation to

be open for negotiations, rather than presenting it as a fixed fee (passed on informally by contracting researchers). Currently, many facilitating researchers fear that any attempt to renegotiate terms of compensation can result in the termination of the contract itself. This has to change so that the facilitating researchers do not feel so disempowered. Moreover, as it is standard in many other contexts, remuneration has to reflect the levels of risk involved and the changing costs of living.

Third, the current situation in which facilitating researchers work without insurance and often have to cover unexpected costs in the field—caused by accidents, illnesses, theft and managing intimidation and threats—through the meager remuneration offered to them, is untenable.8 We need to arrange for access to insurance through formal institutions (as is standard for contracting researchers based in the Global North). Yet, until this is possible, funds must cover unexpected costs crucial to the health, well-being, and safety of facilitating researchers within overall project budgets.

A comprehensive approach toward ethical and collaborative research

In order to ensure fair, equal, and transparent research practices, a comprehensive approach in which various key actors assume responsibility and press for change, is needed.

First, *funding agencies, ethics boards, and research institutions* need to ask questions about the role and situation of facilitating researchers at various stages of the project. Such institutions have to demand details about how research projects address the issues raised above, before approving any funding. But they also have to follow up upon the completion of the project to ensure compliance, requiring statements from the concerned facilitating researchers/partners.

Second, *academic publishers, in particular academic journals*, have great responsibility to ask questions about the role and situation of facilitating researchers and demand details about how the research project was conducted, addressing the points raised above, before accepting to publish. Just as there are obligatory declarations of funding and "conflict of interest," there should be a requirement to list and acknowledge research collaborators and their roles beyond mere tokenism. In cases when publications are based on research in which facilitating researchers were heavily involved but are not listed as co-authors, questions have to be asked as to why and whether facilitating researchers have even been offered the opportunity to co-author.

Finally, while history astutely demonstrates that change requires much more than appealing to the willingness or consciousness of individual researchers, *we must not lose sight of our roles and conscience as individual researchers*. In addition to making our own research practices more ethical, we can also put pressure on fellow colleagues through constructive critique and engagement. In particular, we have special responsibilities as *reviewers of*

journal articles and other research publications. As part of the review, we must demand clarity about the research process and the roles of facilitating researchers, in any fieldwork-based article or book.

"One of the obstacles identified in workshops involving some of the authors is the high competition between and lack of organization among facilitating researchers."
It is critically important that facilitating researchers also engage in efforts to bring about change. One possible direction is the formation of union-like organizations. One of the obstacles identified in workshops involving some of the authors is the high competition between and lack of organization among facilitating researchers. This, in turn, makes it possible for contracting researchers to haggle by referring to other facilitating researchers willing to do the work for less remuneration. While not an easy task, creating union-type organizations could be a useful way to negotiate better pay, demand co-authorship and assurances of security measures, and in general assert greater authority. Such organizations could also be useful in enhancing research capacity by sharing experiences and arranging seminars. In addition to this, the yearly organization of conferences, seminars, or symposia for facilitating researchers could help enhance collaboration and further knowledge about how various research institutions work.

As we all know, the impact of any campaign or movement carried out on social media is far-reaching. Hence, drawing attention and gathering support for change can be done through various social media outlets in creative and constructive ways. Importantly, such efforts should enable anonymous reflections in order to encourage the sharing of experiences by limiting fear of repercussions. While naming and shaming should always be up to the individual researcher, it should arguably be avoided as it risks framing the problem as one of individuals, downplaying the structural causes and systemic inequalities.

Conclusion

As we watch the horrors of the Covid-19 pandemic unfold around us, the deaths, mourning and losses, we are confronted with inequalities at a global scale. These inequalities have compounded the precarities and suffering of many around the globe, especially in the Global South. We are also bearing witness to this moment in history when racism, colonial symbolisms, and inequalities both in discourse and practice are being challenged in unprecedented outpourings of protest and outrage. This is an important time for us as researchers located in various contexts to think about our duty of care and ethical responsibilities toward those on whose lives and through whose labor we build our careers and enjoy professional success.

"Covid-19 is probably going to be around for a long time and its impact will be felt acutely, including in research and knowledge production."

Covid-19 is probably going to be around for a long time and its impact will be felt acutely, including in research and knowledge production. An urgent rethinking and searching for new —and more equal—research practices is needed at this time, and a comprehensive approach calls for the involvement of a range of actors. The duty of care and overall ethical responsibilities in research lie with funding bodies, ethics committees, publishers as well as contracting and facilitating researchers themselves.

We recognize that ours is one amongst other voices and we hope that more researchers globally will join in this urgent conversation. Let us take this opportunity to unlearn, rethink, and query our own complicities and work toward more emancipatory, respectful, antiracist and sustainable ways of coproducing knowledge.

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1 For an overview see, for instance, the Silent Voices Blog and Maria Eriksson Baaz and Mats Utas, "Exploring the Backstage: Methodological and Ethical Issues Surrounding the Role of Research Brokers in Insecure Zones," in "Research Brokers in Conflict Zones," ed. Maria Eriksson Baaz and Mats Utas, special issue, *Civil Wars* 21, no. 2 (2019): 157–178.

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Oscar Abedi Dunia

Oscar Abedi Dunia is an independent researcher who is also the president of the NGO Aide Rapide aux victimes des catastrophes et Recherche (ARCV), based in South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He has over 15 years of experience working with research on conflict dynamics and armed groups in the eastern DRC. He has been working with research teams and individual researchers from Europe and the United States, as well as the UN mission, various international humanitarian organizations, and journalists.

Maria Eriksson Baaz

Maria Eriksson Baaz is professor in political science at the Department of Government, Uppsala University, Sweden. She has authored several books, such as The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid (Zed Books, 2005) and Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond, with Maria Stern (Zed Books, 2013). Additionally, her articles have appeared in several international peer-reviewed journals.

David Mwambari

David Mwambari is a lecturer in African security and leadership studies at the African Leadership Centre (ALC) in the Faculty of Social Science & Public Policy at King's College London (UK). He is a by-fellow at Churchill College Cambridge University (2019–2020) and a fellow of the CODESRIA African Academic Diaspora. His publications have appeared in peer-reviewed journals, including International Journal of Qualitative Methods, African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review, Memory Studies, and the Journal Leadership of Leadership and Developing Societies. He is a coeditor of Beyond History: African Agency in Development, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution (coedited with Elijah Nyaga and Aleksi...
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Swati Parashar

Swati Parashar is director of the Gothenburg Centre for Globalization and Development (GCGD) and associate professor in peace and development at the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University, Sweden. She is the author of Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury (Routledge, 2014); coeditor (with Ann Tickner and Jacqui True) of Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations (Oxford University Press, 2018); and coeditor (with Jane Parpart) of Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains (Routledge, 2019). She is an associate editor of Critical Studies on Security and serves on the advisory boards... Read more

Anju Oseema Maria Toppo

Anju Oseema Maria Toppo is an assistant professor at the Department of History, St. Xavier's College, Ranchi in Jharkhand, India. She has served as guest faculty at Nirmala College and at the Postgraduate Department of History, Ranchi University. Her ongoing research is on gender and forest management, focused on the empowerment of indigenous women in Jharkhand. She is also engaged with the Adivasi social movements. She holds a master's degree in history from Loyola College, Chennai, and is currently a doctoral researcher, affiliated to Ranchi University.

James B.M. Vincent

James B.M. Vincent holds a master of arts degree in governance and development from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, United Kingdom, and is a researcher and consultant on governance, development and conflict-related issues; on youth issues, especially youth development and employment creation programs; and agriculture in Sierra Leone and the Mano River region. He has worked with major donors (World Bank, DfID, the

UN) as well as research teams and groups from Europe and the United States. He is the author of A Village-Up View of Sierra Leone's Civil War and Reconstruction: Multi-layered and Networked Governance (Institute... <u>Read more</u>

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