

## Learning guide

# Mutual learning for policy impact: Insights from CORE Adapting research methods in the context of Covid-19

## Background

On 25 November 2021, the CORE Knowledge Translation Services team at the Institute of Development Studies, UK, hosted an online clinic session to facilitate the sharing of experiences and mutual learning on how CORE projects have or can adapt their research activities in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Four overarching questions helped to frame the session:

- **How are we adapting our research methods, approaches, and operations during Covid?**
- **What have been some of the key challenges to this?**
- **Have there been any advantages or opportunities to new ways of working?**
- **How can we improve what we are doing now?**

The clinic was attended by 22 CORE members from 12 projects and featured contributions from two CORE projects: *[The Youth Question in Africa: Impact, Response and Protection Measures in the IGAD Region](#)* and *[A New Digital Deal for an Inclusive Post-Covid-19 Social Compact: Developing Digital Strategies for Social and Economic Reconstruction](#)*.

CORE members raised questions about how peers have adapted methods, such as key informant interviews and focus group discussions, during lockdown restrictions; preparation and roll-out of surveys via mobile apps and telephone and how these have worked differently in varied contexts; and the challenges projects have faced more broadly in engaging stakeholders.

## Challenges to research methods during Covid-19

Many participants shared similar challenges during the pandemic. Many of these were related to a sudden forced reliance on **digital/telephonic/internet-based** platforms. For instance:

- **Internet connectivity** where projects work is often patchy. Many stakeholders – especially vulnerable research participants, but also others such as policy actors and implementers (particularly at the local level) – have been hard or even impossible to reach and engage.
- **Phone access or mobile data** was also not necessarily guaranteed. The pandemic has made more salient the challenge of people running out of mobile data or credit.
- **Using new/unfamiliar digital tools** to design and implement surveys, pay data collectors, and undertake other activities came with steep learning curves for projects.

**Lockdowns and movement restrictions** – in addition to forcing the cancellation or significant postponement of in-person research and engagement – also presented several other challenges:

- **Inability to follow up** in person with research participants involved in longitudinal studies who became unreachable through remote methods.
- **Difficulty getting data from state institutions or other organisations** which are more inclined to ignore email and phone-based requests than in-person enquiries.
- **Challenges generating rapport and buy-in** with stakeholders remotely.
- **Hiring, training and mentoring** new researchers who benefit from the informal interactions enabled by face-to-face engagement.

A final theme revolved around **context-based differences**. These challenges were particularly salient for projects operating in multiple locations. Challenges included:

- **Different public health measures, and general uncertainty** necessitating different approaches to research (in different places, but also over time).
- **Different orientations of populations or cohorts** towards some methods. For instance, random phone-based surveys were not as well received in Nigeria as they were in South Africa due to widespread scepticism about them being scams. Yet even in South Africa response rates differed significantly between white and black populations.

## Making research methods work during Covid-19

Participants discussed a variety of ways in which they adapted their work to the Covid-19 pandemic. A key challenge was the role that **dynamic and fluid pandemic restrictions** played in adapting research. However, most projects were able to transition online. Participants discussed a variety of sampling methods, with benefits and drawbacks to each. For example:

- **Snowball sampling via telephone.** While this method allowed for a broader reach, single female-headed households, the elderly, and people with disabilities had the lowest access to phones and were under-sampled.
- **Going through a gatekeeper.** One project discussed using local associations of informal workers to reach their target sample. They began by building rapport with the association leader, which enabled them to reach informal workers more easily.
- **Switching to in-person sampling.** Some found it too difficult to sample remotely via telephone and switched to field-based sampling from people's work locations. They used worker lists to sample every first and third individual.

Another key theme was **flexibility**. This included testing and adjusting surveys, using open-ended questions, and allowing participants to respond to surveys on more than one occasion.

## Incorporating 'new' and 'old' ways of working

**Projects are blending and repurposing a combination of established and innovative approaches** to help navigate the Covid-19 pandemic and achieve research aims.

**Telephone surveys** are being carried out alongside the use of social media tools to ensure better follow-up or to build a more complete picture of the populations involved in their projects.

CORE members have experienced **the 'flattening' effect of certain innovations** in practice in the context of Covid-19. For example, shifting to Zoom-based meetings that made it more possible for a wider range of stakeholders to be part of decision-making processes and knowledge sharing.

In effect, the opportunities and risks created by the layering and interaction of both 'old' and 'new' ways of working has varied greatly across CORE projects, but there was some agreement that this fluidity of approach added up to a **substantial amount of experiential learning** – both during the pandemic and for deeper reflection on the 'other side' of its impact.

## About this report

This learning guide was produced as part of the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) Knowledge Translation Programme, which supports the translation of knowledge emerging from the CORE initiative. Supported by the International Development Research Centre, CORE brings together 21 projects to understand the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, improve existing responses, and generate better policy options for recovery.

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