Pathways to impact in the pandemic

A rapid review of Covid-19-related research engagement strategies in low- and middle-income country settings

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1. Summary

Implementing and ascertaining impact and outcomes of research is a prolonged process that may take several years due to complexities in bureaucratic, social, and economic systems. At the macro level, collective reflection on the different methods and approaches that research projects use to promote uptake and impact is rare but has potential to encourage learning and exchanges between different funders and projects around impact pathways as useful road maps for research.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the nature of research – while it has increased the demand for evidence to inform decision-making, it has further disrupted both the policy-influencing and engagement activities that would usually accompany such research. This report is based on an analysis of 90 research projects supported by the Covid Collective, COVID CIRCLE, and Covid Response for Equity (CORE) initiatives. It provides an overview and insight into how different funders and initiatives were working to facilitate change in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In line with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) definitions of 'impact', and subsequent work by the ESRC-FCDO's (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office) Impact Initiative, four categories were used to map the emerging outcomes and different types of change. These outcome areas comprise capacity, networks, conceptual, and instrumental outcomes. Outcome examples were then classified into more detailed descriptive groups highlighted in Table 1.

Key findings

- Cognitive and relational outcomes dominate the development research initiatives that were mobilised in response to the pandemic. Around half the projects analysed highlighted examples of impact pathways within the networks and conceptual outcome categories. The research initiatives reviewed have helped shape understandings of the crisis in diverse contexts and forged new connections between researchers, knowledge brokers, and decision makers.

- Despite the emphasis placed by research donors on instrumental impact on policy and practice, these kinds of impacts are difficult to record in the short term, with only a minority of projects reporting them. The impacts will most likely be more pronounced in coming years. The analysis also suggests that impact on practice is equally important as it is on policy.

- One quarter of the projects analysed strengthened the capacities of either researchers or intermediaries and the capacity of beneficiary groups to participate or engage with research. The legacy of this strengthened capacity may improve the production and use of research in response to the longer-term impacts of the pandemic and future health shocks.

- There is variance between the research initiatives regarding the impact pathways of projects. For example, within the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) CORE programme, most projects demonstrated at least one impact pathway in each outcome category and showed the most instrumental impacts of the three initiatives. One possible explanation for this is the degree to which the

think-tanks and research organisations funded through CORE are embedded in their local and national policy contexts. Furthermore, examples include highlighting the benefits of international partnerships and research that are associated with high-profile international institutions.

- Irrespective of the disciplines of the projects analysed, all the initiatives exhibited more outcome examples in the conceptual and networking categories than in the capacity building and instrumental outcome categories.

- The analysis presented here suggests that researchers and donors should value diverse pathways to impact. Facilitating change is complex and requires behaviour change at different levels, including community participation in projects, building of networks that connect research with practice, and changes in policy.

- The evaluated examples of research engagement demonstrate the need for flexible forms of funding and possibilities to reframe projects in real time during a pandemic. Funders should therefore consider explicitly supporting adaptive and flexible approaches to research production and engagement.

- The importance of systems-level, longer-term support was highlighted through several project examples that were able to deliver rapid research in a crisis due to their ability to quickly mobilise research funding. This enables building resilience against future economic, health, and environmental emergencies.

2. Background

A discussion paper was shared in advance of the Covid Collective Fireside Chat event 'The Impact of Evidence in a Pandemic: How has Covid-19 shaped the engagement of research with policy and practice in Low- and Middle-Income Countries?' on 27 June 2022 to provide some initial descriptions of the different pathways to impact applied by research projects. This event was organised in partnership with UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) and was the first webinar in the Fireside Chat series to be collaboratively coordinated. This rapid review provides more in-depth quantitative and qualitative analyses of the different pathways to impact with additional views, examples, and perspectives from the conversations during the event included (see section 5). The aim of the review is to explore the different pathways to impact applied by research projects from a range of scientific disciplines, geographies, and funding organisations.

The following researcher coordination networks are included in the review with further details and links to the relevant webpages below:

- FCDO's Covid Collective
- UKCDR's COVID CIRCLE Researcher Community
- IDRC's Covid Response for Equity (CORE)

The Covid Collective offers a rapid social science research response to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19-related development challenges. The platform combines the expertise of 28 global partner organisations across 34 counties and is coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The research portfolio and work are supported and overseen by the UK FCDO.

COVID CIRCLE – COVID-19 Research Coordination and Learning is a partnership between UKCDR and the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness (GloPID-R) harnessing current activities, including continual mapping and analysis of global Covid-19-related funding through the COVID Tracker. COVID CIRCLE coordinates funding efforts, connects networks of researchers, and collates learning to inform future epidemic and pandemic responses with a focus on lower-resource settings.

CORE is a three-year rapid research initiative that brings together 21 research projects to understand the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, improve existing responses, and generate better policy options for recovery. The research portfolio is funded and overseen by IDRC and supported by a knowledge translation project provided by IDS.

3. Approach and methodology

In this paper we are building on previous work by IDS to apply the principles of Outcome Harvesting to explore high-level outcomes across different research portfolios. This approach uses the Wheel of Impact, based upon the ESRC definitions of impact capacity, networks, conceptual, and instrumental, to categorise the emerging outcomes and different types of change. This builds on a mature literature concerned with the relationship between research and policy (Oliver, Lorenc and Innvaer 2014; Weiss 1979; Georgalakis and Rose 2019). Within the Covid Collective, CORE, and COVID CIRCLE portfolios, the impact pathways of 90 research projects were assessed: 19 from the COVID CIRCLE, 50 from the Covid Collective, and 21 from the CORE initiatives (see Figure 1). Outcomes were then categorised into the relevant description of the change observed. This exercise required a rapid review of the relevant documentation and aimed to cast a wide net across the different projects and portfolios to gather a snapshot of the types of outcomes that have emerged.

The remainder of the report uses a project coding system as follows:

- CoCo.Project number: Covid Collective projects
- CORE.Project number: CORE projects
- CC.Project number: COVID CIRCLE projects

Figure 1: Percentage of projects from each research initiative included in this review

CORE ■ COVID CIRCLE ■ Covid Collective
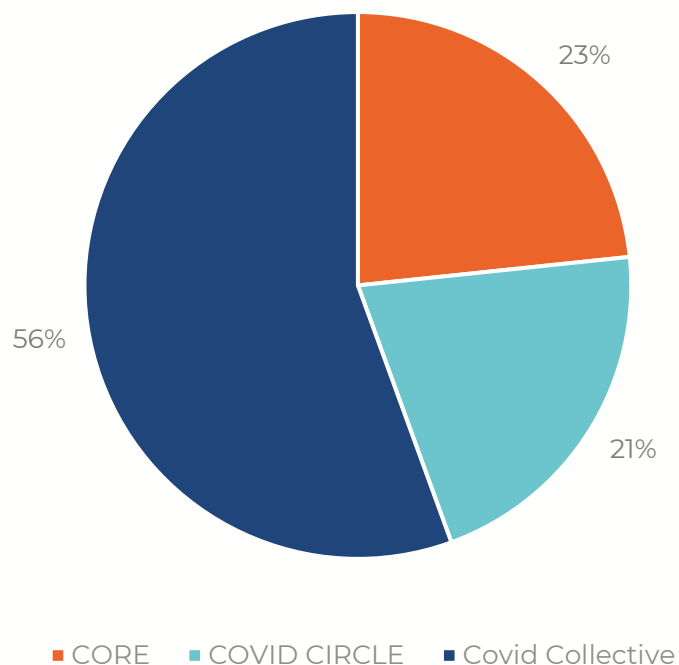
Source: Authors' own.

For the purpose of this review, the disciplines of the projects in these portfolios have been classified as social science; social science and economics, or life sciences. The social science and economics classification refers to projects which were of a social science focus but had a significant economics aspect. These are very broad classifications for the purpose of exploring the variation in impact pathways across overarching research disciplines and different types of outcomes generated.

The rapid review utilises a conceptual framework that describes four broad outcome areas associated with research engagement. These change processes are well documented in the literature on research impact (Georgalakis and Rose 2019; UKRI n.d.) and correspond closely with the modes of impact set out by several research funders, including UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). This conceptual framework was used to classify the outcome descriptions to inform our analysis of how different portfolios and research sectors have delivered different types of change processes. Table 1 provides a summary of the outcome descriptions identified, classified against the four outcome areas of research impact.

Table 1: Outcome descriptions classified by outcome areas

Capacity building	Networks	Conceptual	Instrumental
- Strengthened capacities of either researchers or intermediaries - New or improved approaches or strategies to support research uptake - Capacity of beneficiary groups to participate or engage with research	- Stakeholder platforms or spaces that bring different voices together - Engagement with key stakeholders - Partnerships with civil society / practitioners / policy or other relevant groups - Opportune alliances with diverse groups that inform the research process or expand the reach of the evidence	- Approaches that have built awareness of an issue or put it on an agenda - Engagement with media and civil society to shift attitudes or create public pressure - Evidence of a shift in the dialogue and discourse around a particular issue - Uptake of an approach or use of evidence to inform design of interventions - Stronger training methods and tools	- Evidence of having influenced a policy document or statement - Shifts in practice – application of new approaches, methods and practices

Source: Authors' own.

Capacity building outcomes include strengthening skills of both research partners and participants to conduct or engage with research or policy processes.

Networks outcomes include initiatives to strengthen partnerships and bring together different stakeholder groups to promote engagement with research findings or establish platforms to reflect on the implications and application of research findings.

Conceptual outcomes include stronger awareness and understanding of research to inform dialogue and debate; the replication of tools and methods in new contexts, and the utilisation of findings to inform the design of interventions.

Instrumental outcomes include evidence of how research has influenced a policy process or led to a change in practice.

3.1 Limitations

It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive analysis, and the outcomes identified have not been validated with relevant project teams to explore the causal connections as would take place with a more traditional Outcome Harvesting methodology. The sample sizes between the initiatives vary greatly, with twice as many projects sampled for the Covid Collective than for the other two initiatives due to the availability of project reports. The source material also varies in detail and focus as reporting requirements differ between initiatives. COVID CIRCLE data was limited to that which was available through public sources, whereas CORE and Covid Collective data was extracted from reports provided by project leads.

This review will present a brief analysis across the three initiatives of different types of impacts that will generate interesting lessons. The analysis will not provide information or judgements on the performance or quality of the three programmes since each one has a different focus area and works with various types of researchers. A comparative and evaluative analysis is, therefore, neither feasible nor advisable.

4. Results

A total of 169 outcome examples were collected from the 90 research projects analysed: 71 from the Covid Collective, 61 from CORE, and 37 from the COVID CIRCLE. The outcome examples were then classified into more descriptive groups detailed below. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the outcome categories and descriptions across the three initiatives.

Table 2: Number of examples of outcomes by initiative

Outcome areas and outcome descriptions	Total examples	Covid Collective	CORE	COVID CIRCLE
Capacity building				
Capacity of beneficiary groups to participate or engage with research	11	1	3	7
Strengthened capacities of either researchers or intermediaries	11	7	2	2
New or improved approaches or strategies to support research uptake	4	4	0	0

| Networks				
Opportune alliances with diverse groups that inform the research process or expand the reach of the evidence	25	11	12	2
Partnerships with civil society, practitioners, policy, or other relevant groups	18	8	3	7
Stakeholder platforms or spaces that bring different voices together	9	4	5	0
Engagement with key stakeholders	15	9	3	3
Conceptual				
Uptake of an approach or use of evidence to inform design of intervention	6	4	0	2
Approaches that have built awareness of an issue or put it on an agenda	43	17	20	6
Evidence of a shift in the dialogue and discourse around a particular issue	3	0	2	1
Engagement with media and civil society to shift attitudes or create public pressure	1	0	1	0
Stronger training methods and tools	1	0	0	1
Instrumental				
Evidence of having influenced a policy document or statement	10	2	7	1
Shifts in practice – application of new approaches, methods, and practices	12	4	3	5

Source: Authors' own.

4.1 Analysis

4.1.1 Domination of cognitive and relational outcomes

Conceptual (n=54) and network (n=67) related outcomes were more common across the three initiatives than capacity building (n=26) or instrumental outcomes (n=22). Of the outcome examples, 40 per cent were networks-related and 32 per cent were conceptual outcomes. Of the outcome examples, 15 per cent were within the capacity building category and 13 per cent were in the instrumental category (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of outcome examples for each outcome category
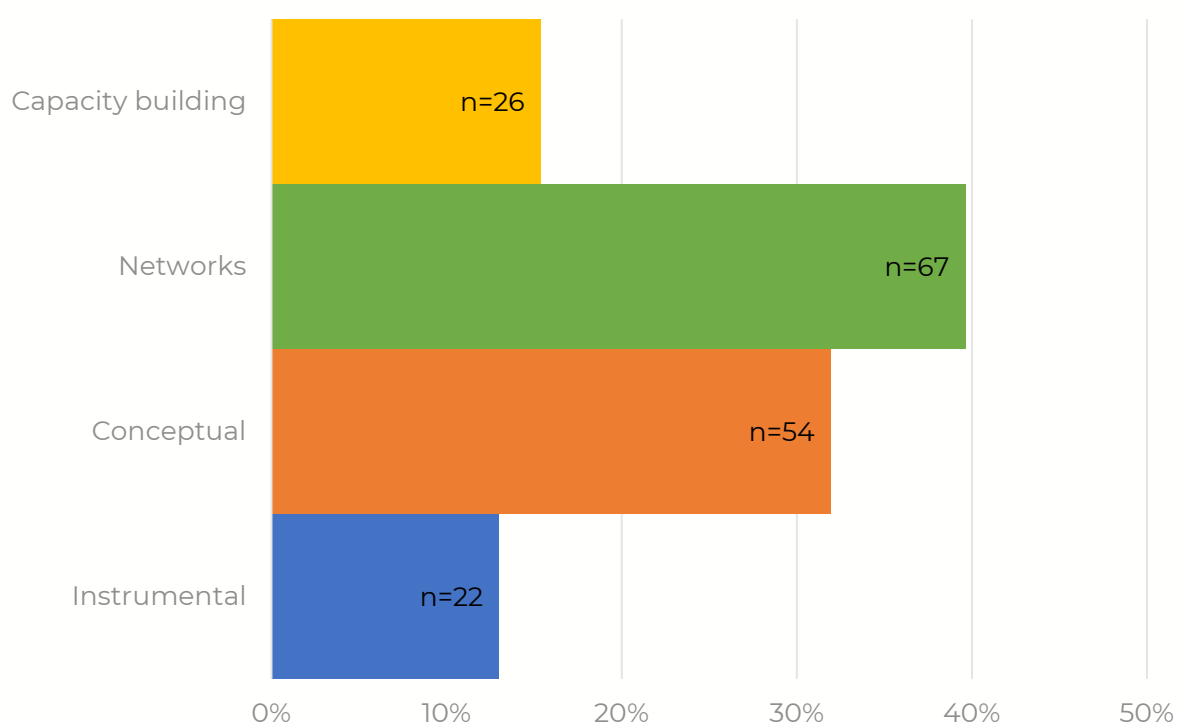
Source: Authors' own.

To further analyse the outcomes, we investigated how many projects supplied examples for each outcome category. Since projects could supply multiple outcome examples, the data was dichotomised to report presence or absence of the respective outcome category. Results show that around half of the projects sampled supplied examples of outcomes that fell within the networks outcome category (51 per cent), while the other half of the projects (49 per cent) did not. Similar results were found for the conceptual outcome category, with 48 per cent of projects showing outcomes related to this category. However, only a quarter (26 per cent) of the projects reported examples of capacity building outcomes, while instrumental outcomes on policy and practice were the least represented outcomes, with one-fifth (19 per cent) of projects reporting these outcome examples (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage of projects that reported at least one outcome example per outcome category
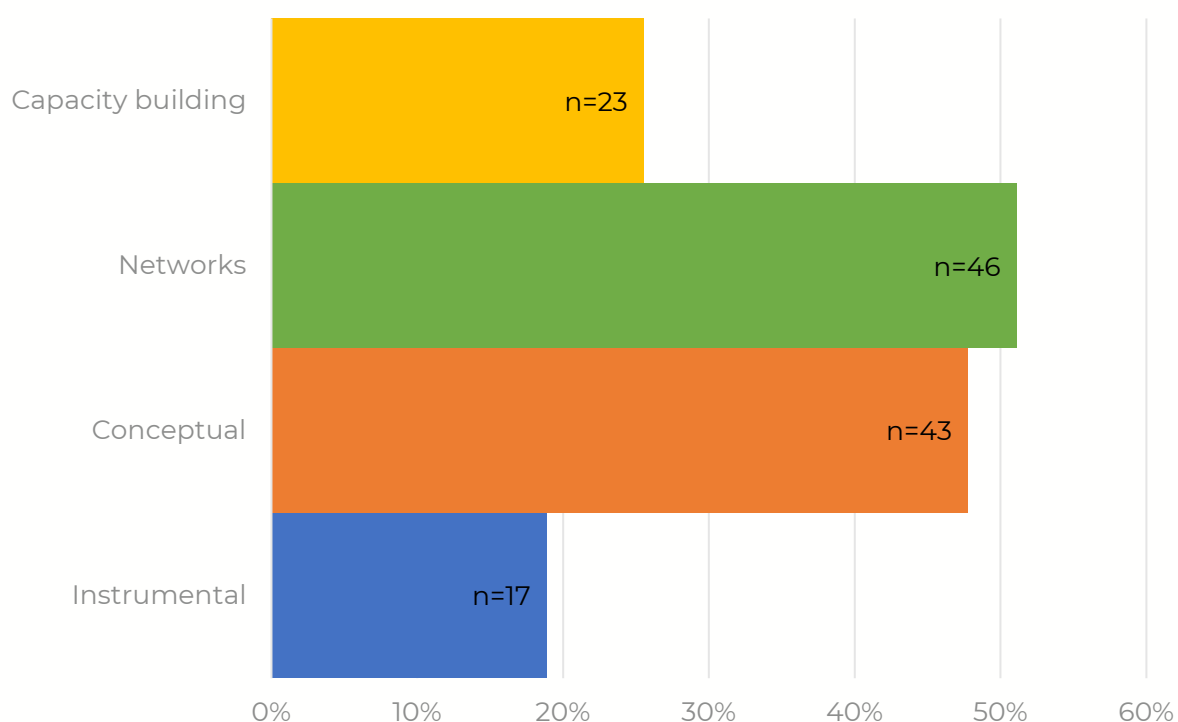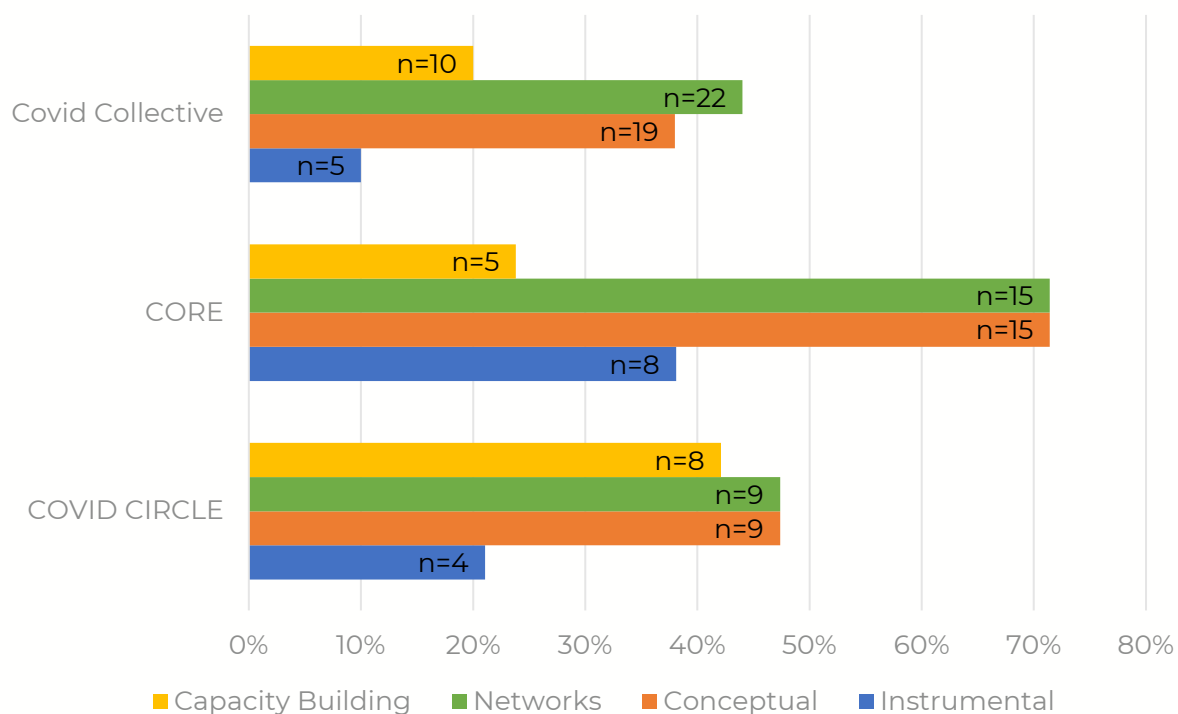

Note: N=90 for each outcome category

Source: Authors' own.

It is well established that instrumental impact takes time, and these findings aim to inform a conversation around the expectations and lessons learnt around achieving impact from research commissioned in response to the pandemic.

4.1.2 Outcome divergence between the initiatives

The data was analysed further to investigate the outcome distribution within the initiatives (see Figure 4). This analysis shows that the COVID CIRCLE initiative reported a higher percentage of projects with capacity-building outcome examples (42 per cent) than the other two initiatives (Covid Collective: 20 per cent; CORE: 24 per cent). There was a greater proportion of instrumental outcomes reported from CORE (38 per cent) compared to the other two initiatives (Covid Collective: 10 per cent, Covid Circle: 21 per cent). Of the CORE projects, 71 per cent reported networks outcomes, which compares to 47 per cent of the COVID CIRCLE projects and 44 per cent of the Covid Collective projects. In terms of conceptual outcomes, 71 per cent of CORE projects reported such examples. By contrast, 47 per cent of the COVID CIRCLE projects and 38 per cent of the Covid Collective projects exhibited conceptual outcome examples.

Figure 4: Percentage of projects reporting outcomes for each initiative

Covid Collective
- Capacity Building: n=10
- Networks: n=22
- Conceptual: n=19
- Instrumental: n=5

CORE
- Capacity Building: n=5
- Networks: n=15
- Conceptual: n=15
- Instrumental: n=8

COVID CIRCLE
- Capacity Building: n=8
- Networks: n=9
- Conceptual: n=9
- Instrumental: n=4

Legend: ■ Capacity Building ■ Networks ■ Conceptual ■ Instrumental

Source: Authors' own.

4.1.3 Disciplinary divergence not clear

Projects with a social science focus dominated this sample (78 per cent; 70 projects analysed). There were 11 projects with a social science and economics focus, and nine projects with a life science focus. All life science projects were within the COVID CIRCLE initiative, and most of the social science and economics projects were within the CORE programme (eight out of the 11 projects), with the other three projects funded through the Covid Collective. An analysis across the disciplines and the four outcome areas concurred with the overall results, with more outcome examples in the conceptual and networking categories and fewer examples in the capacity building and instrumental outcome categories across the disciplines.

4.2 Description of outcomes from Covid-19-related projects

4.2.1 Capacity building (26 examples)

Capacity building outcomes were categorised from the project reports into the following more descriptive areas of (a) strengthening the capacities of either researchers or intermediaries; (b) bringing new or improved approaches or strategies to support research uptake; and (c) building the capacity of beneficiary groups to participate or engage with research.

a) Strengthened capacities of either researchers or intermediaries

The analysis identified 11 examples of how projects were strengthening capacities of researchers and intermediaries (Covid Collective = 7, COVID CIRCLE = 2, CORE = 2). Outcome examples included project teams and research partners feeling more prepared to present clear messages to policymakers (CoCo.15), the creation of youth community champions to act as participatory co-researchers (CoCo.25), and the training of researchers and intermediaries which has led to the expansion of their skills and knowledge (CORE.1, CORE.20, CC.17, CoCo.2). CORE.1 researchers received training on how to identify the differentiated needs of women and marginalised groups to integrate these needs into research (CORE.1). This enabled researchers to develop research instruments to better integrate gender-centred participant engagement and analysis: 'The researchers have been trained on advocacy campaigns as well as identifying the right policy entry points to ensure they target the right stakeholders during in-country dissemination workshops.' (CORE.1)

Within the research team of the CORE.6 project, the management actively encouraged female researchers to enrol in training opportunities and to take on leadership roles in project activities such as project management; writing research reports and scientific manuscripts as the lead author; and participating in national and international webinars, conferences, and meetings (CORE.6). Involvement in such activities can build the capacity and skillset of the researchers.

b) New or improved approaches or strategies to support research uptake

The four examples of outcomes identified, all from the Covid Collective programme, included a local research team in Tanzania learning how to make their stakeholder engagement more effective (CoCo.15). The team also felt better trained in producing different media outputs as a result of the communications strategies that were developed together with the lead partner, Southern Voice. A project using the Timby platform as a new strategy to support research uptake saw positive outcomes from community leaders (CoCo.20): 'Community leaders were particularly enthusiastic about the indigenous-language and visual material and committed to keeping the platform "live" with the inclusion of further audio recordings and video material collected during visits to remote communities.' (CoCo.20)

c) Capacity of beneficiary groups to participate or engage with research

The analysis identified 11 examples of building the capacity of beneficiary groups to participate or engage with research (COVID CIRCLE = 7, CORE = 3, Covid Collective = 1): 'Rigorous training with research-based training modules and guidance helped them be more confident and active in sharing Covid-19-related information to the marginalised population in the community, and building leadership attitudes among the women and men youth volunteers.' (CORE.6) Among the examples were:

- Workshops with NGO staff and their beneficiaries to mutually understand the local context (CoCo.1);

- Training and counselling of volunteers from refugee camps and host communities (CORE.6);
- Improving digital literacy with training health workers for the use of digital and mobile tools (CC.8), and to enable wider community engagement with online support systems (CC.9): 'The development of digital literacy has enabled wider community engagement through e-clinics and online psychosocial support.' (CC.9)

4.2.2 Networks (67 examples)

Networks outcomes were categorised from the project reports into the following more descriptive areas of creating or strengthening (a) stakeholder platforms or spaces that bring different voices together; (b) engagement with key stakeholders; (c) partnerships with civil society, practitioners, policy, or other relevant groups; and (d) opportune alliances with diverse groups that inform the research process or expand the reach of the evidence.

a) Stakeholder platforms or spaces that bring different voices together

Of the nine outcome examples of creating or strengthening stakeholder platforms or spaces that bring different voices together, five were from CORE and four were from the Covid Collective. These outcome examples highlight the creation or strengthening of stakeholder platforms that are sustained spaces for interaction, rather than events or ad hoc interactions. Through innovative 'Policy Clinics', project CoCo.14 has established a network of 40 experts from multidisciplinary backgrounds (bureaucrats, academics, researchers, activists, and journalists) who have been sharing their expertise to validate the findings, identified potential policy gaps, and recommended possible solutions. This network has also shown interest in working together in the future. The Arab Hub for Social Protection from COVID was also created to provide a platform for policy discussion and future action (CORE.3):

> …we also hope it could bring together the different networks, organizations, experts, practitioners, researchers and activists working on social protection in the Arab region in an attempt to expand our Hub and create a 'network of networks'… which we envisage will encourage synergies, partnerships and cooperation on the regional and even the global level, will prevent any duplication of efforts in the future, and will allow efforts to feed into each other instead.
>
> (CORE.3)

The CoCo.19 research team were able to engage with associational representation from informal sector workers – in the shape of the Domestic Workers Union – to identify respondents, share their research, and to learn from their experiences of the pandemic. This engagement then formed the basis of a collaboration between the Mahbub-ul-Haq Research Center (MHRC) at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), a Covid Collective Partner, and the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Punjab (Pakistan) – the sub-national entity responsible for gender-based social protection in the entire province.

b) Engagement with key stakeholders

There were 15 outcome examples of new or strengthened engagement with key stakeholders across the three initiatives (Covid Collective = 9, CORE = 3, COVID CIRCLE = 3). Dissemination workshops, events, and conversations with stakeholders were identified in multiple project reports, which supported the opportunities for policy influence and impact. Workshops were conducted after the research and analysis stages of CoCo.1, which created opportunities to encourage discussions between migrants and local authorities (commune and district) on issues faced by migrants and potential migrants: 'Direct engagement of the district governor of Kandieng district [who chaired the event] was central to the success of the workshop in Pursat.' (CoCo.1)

The Centre for Educational Research and Training (CERT), a research partner on project CoCo.7, collaborated with the Chronic Poverty Advisory network (CPAN) to plan an event in Malawi on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on poverty. This collaboration allowed CERT's research to reach a wider audience of policymakers and development partners as well as providing an opportunity to learn about others' work and the broader impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Malawi (CoCo.7).

Research teams for project CC.14 disseminated a policy document that was distributed to Department of Health stakeholders and later used by stakeholders to push for the implementation of child health policies to strengthen health initiatives (CC.14).

c) Partnerships with civil society, practitioners, policy, or other relevant groups

In total, 18 outcome examples were identified (Covid Collective = 8, COVID CIRCLE = 7, CORE = 3) which created or strengthened partnerships with civil society, practitioners, policy, or other relevant groups. Co-creation of resources or proposals with partners (e.g., CC.16, CORE.13), sustained close contact with government ministries (e.g., CoCo.30), and knowledge and skill exchanges (e.g., CoCo.14) have led to the strengthening and extension of partnerships across the three initiatives analysed.

> The Ghana Health Service (part of the Ministry of Health) has been in close contact with the research team in Ghana throughout the research. They will be presenting the main findings to the Ghana Health Service, which can have a direct impact on the delivery of inclusive health services during and beyond the pandemic.
>
> (CoCo.30)

Active partnerships have also been shown to be a key component to effective far-reaching spread of resources in project CC.7: 'We have sought out and nurtured these networks and affiliations at global, country, and community levels.' (CC.7)

d) Opportune alliances with diverse groups that inform the research process or expand the reach of the evidence

Creating or strengthening opportune alliances with diverse groups that inform the research process or expand the reach of the evidence included 25 examples (CORE = 12, Covid Collective = 11, COVID CIRCLE = 2). Opportune alliances identified in project reports involved ad hoc opportunities to engage with external groups to expand the reach of the research. A partnership was established with Young Entrepreneurs Association of Cambodia (YEAC) to develop further publications and tools for the recovery pathways for the hospitality sector (CORE.7). The Rwandan Arts Council (RAC) shared preliminary findings of Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP) at Home with Rwandan artists and cultural organisations to explore the development of online engagement on a national level (CC.9): 'Relationships with stakeholders and partners will continue to inform the planned policy event to inform a national framework for developing online arts-based psychosocial approaches for young people in Rwanda'. (CC.9)

A partnership with the General Secretariat of the Presidency of Côte d'Ivoire also provided opportunities to the research team and increased their influence at the policy level (CORE.8).

4.2.3 Conceptual (54 examples)

Conceptual outcomes were categorised from the project reports into the following more descriptive areas: (a) building the awareness of an issue or putting it on an agenda; (b) engagement with the media and civil society to shift attitudes or create public pressure; (c) showing evidence of a shift in the dialogue and discourse around a particular issue; (d) uptake of an approach or use of evidence to inform design of interventions; and (e) stronger training methods and tools.

a) Approaches that have built awareness of an issue or put it on an agenda

The analysis identified 43 examples of how projects were making stakeholder groups aware of the challenges marginalised groups and other research participants were facing (CORE = 20, Covid Collective = 17, COVID CIRCLE = 6). Furthermore, it highlighted possible resolutions to these challenges and how the needs of these research participants could be the focus of planning or research agendas. Awareness raising or altering of perspectives due to the research findings was seen to take place through different approaches, for example at round tables (CoCo.15), presentations (CORE.1, CORE.16, CORE.17, CoCo.21), committee consultations (CC.13, CC.14, CC.15, CoCo.1, CoCo.50), and within different stakeholder groups such as state officials (CoCo.15), policymakers (CORE.1, CORE.12, CORE.13, CORE.14, CORE.16), and the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CoCo.1):

> The conventional project priorities of the commune development have been on infrastructure such as road, bridges, well construction, etc.; but the commune council, especially the Commune Committee for Women and

Children (CCWC) became more aware of the challenges facing women and children as well as ways to address their problems.

(CoCo.1)

The CORE.5 research consortium is in dialogue with the Gobernanza Democrática del PNUD América Latina (Democratic Governance of the United Nations Development Programme Latin America) and ONU Hábitat América Latina (UN Habitat Latin America) with the aim to improve effective governance systems. They are in conversation on implementing new forms of collective governance models based on the findings of their research.

b) Engagement with media and civil society to shift attitudes or create public pressure

Although most projects disseminated research findings to the media in the form of blog posts, news articles, podcasts, and interviews, one project employed more strategic engagement that aimed to create impact together with media professionals (CORE.14). Aside from direct policy dialogues with policymakers, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in Bangladesh organised a dissemination meeting to inform media professionals of the key issues and recommendations from the country case study. Journalists continued following up on the issues raised in the paper through interviews, op-eds, and budgetary reviews. This type of strategic engagement is expected to increase the momentum for public debates and potentially policy influence for take-up of 'build back better measures' in Bangladesh (CORE.14).

c) Evidence of a shift in the dialogue and discourse around a particular issue

There were three outcome examples from projects that highlighted a shift in the dialogue around the issue in question (CORE.4, CORE.8, CC.6). For example, a new perspective on the best ways to establish and locate actions to prevent irregular migration was provided to policymakers (CORE.4).

There was also evidence of technological innovation in developing a new method of medical equipment sterilisation based on modelling and other research that is better suited for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (CC.6). Findings have been discussed with stakeholders and could result in a shift in discourse and future follow-up research on this issue: 'The models provided great insight into the future design of the ethylene oxide production system and will be a useful tool for planning future experimental work.' (CC.6)

d) Uptake of an approach or use of evidence to inform design of interventions

There were six outcome examples of research informing the design of further interventions or studies (Covid Collective = 3, COVID CIRCLE = 2, CORE = 1). World Vision International (WVI), for example, used the Working Paper 'The Right to Protection of Forcibly Displaced Persons During the Covid-19 Pandemic' to inform the

rollout of a survey across multiple countries aiming to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on displaced populations across Jordan, Turkey, Colombia, Uganda, and other countries (CoCo.17).

Project CC.7 developed and disseminated new approaches and tools to collect evidence of impact through a database, which provides information to gain insights for improved or new approaches for positive parenting and its outreach:

> This database and analysis will provide us with invaluable information on the scale at which the resources reached the target population as well as information on which dissemination methods are most useful across geographies and contexts. Study findings will be used to refine and further inform future interventions that seek to support caregivers to provide positive parenting, and to manage their own and the children's stress.
>
> (CC.7)

e) Stronger training methods and tools

An online curriculum has been developed as a part of the MAP at Home project (CC.9). The online curriculum is hosted by a CampusPress website and provides an opportunity for young people to access online arts and psychosocial exercises developed by the MAP at Home team. The exercises provide step-by-step instructions and the option to upload any materials that young people develop (CC.9).

4.2.4 Instrumental (22 examples)

Instrumental outcomes were classified into the following more descriptive categories: (a) evidence of having influenced a policy document or statement; and (b) shifts in practice – the application of new approaches, methods, and practices.

a) Evidence of having influenced a policy document or statement

There were ten outcome examples of where evidence from projects has influenced or is in the process of influencing a policy document or statement (CORE = 7, Covid Collective = 2, COVID CIRCLE = 1). The CoCo.16 research team presented their research findings at the Seafood Working Group discussion, which directly related to key sections of the US State Department's annual TIP report that was being drafted. (CoCo.16).

The CORE.10 project report suggested that the results of the Food and Food Security Survey in Chile have been especially relevant – and have contributed – to deepening the policy discussion in the context of the new Chilean constitution which is in the process of being drafted (CORE.10): 'The results derived from the survey have provided new evidence and generated knowledge that have formed inputs for discussion at the national level.' (CORE.10)

The CC.5 project reported how the Ministry of Health identified that outputs from the project would be used to revise the National Strategic Health Plan that is currently being developed in Zambia:

> The recent repeal of the Nurses Act has changed the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Zambia (NMCZ) mandate to include specialist nursing practice. Therefore, the outputs from this project will contribute to the NMCZ as they formalise specialist nursing cadres.
>
> (CC.5)

b) Shifts in practice – application of new approaches, methods, and practices

There were 12 outcome examples of shifts in practice and the application of new approaches within the project documents reviewed (COVID CIRCLE = 5, Covid Collective = 4, CORE = 3). These included the creation of training resources and guidelines for practice under Covid-19 pandemic conditions (CoCo.15): 'CBGA [the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability] was asked by the Ministry of Women and Child Development to produce a training resource on gender-responsive budgeting with a focus on higher education.' (CoCo.15)

The South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC)'s Forgotten Agenda project provided key research-related insights into the challenges and barriers women with disabilities face in accessing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services (CoCo.35). These key insights informed the development of a module for the National Department of Health's Comprehensive SRHR Training Package for health-care personnel, contributing towards disability sensitisation and education of health-care personnel in South Africa (CoCo.35).

CC.5 highlighted changes in clinical nursing practices, with qualified and student nurses demonstrating an increased awareness of the Covid-19 disease and how to protect themselves, patients, and their communities through shifts in training packages for pre- and post-registration nurses to identify, assess, and initiate interventions for suspected or confirmed cases of Covid-19. This was important because students were being redeployed to dedicated Covid-19 clinical areas to support registered staff before this training was developed and delivered.

The CC.8 research project contributed to better digital and telephone health-care appointments by initially assessing how effective the appointments were and then identifying how training needed to be adapted to provide the best health outcomes (e.g., increasing trust of such telephone health services). Such outcomes have not yet been measured, but evidence is being collected to improve existing training for nurses, with the aim to increase levels of trust and the effectiveness of these remote health services.

4.3 Systems map of outcomes

The data on the different outcome descriptions identified by the rapid review have been further analysed using the online mapping tool Kumu to create a systems map to explore the patterns of how different types of projects have generated outcomes across the different outcome areas. This interactive visual representation enables deeper exploration of the patterns and pathway structures, with projects that appear in more central areas of the mapping exhibiting a broader range of outcome examples across categories than those on the periphery (see Figure 4).

Figure 5: Outcome categories by research project and initiative identified by the rapid review
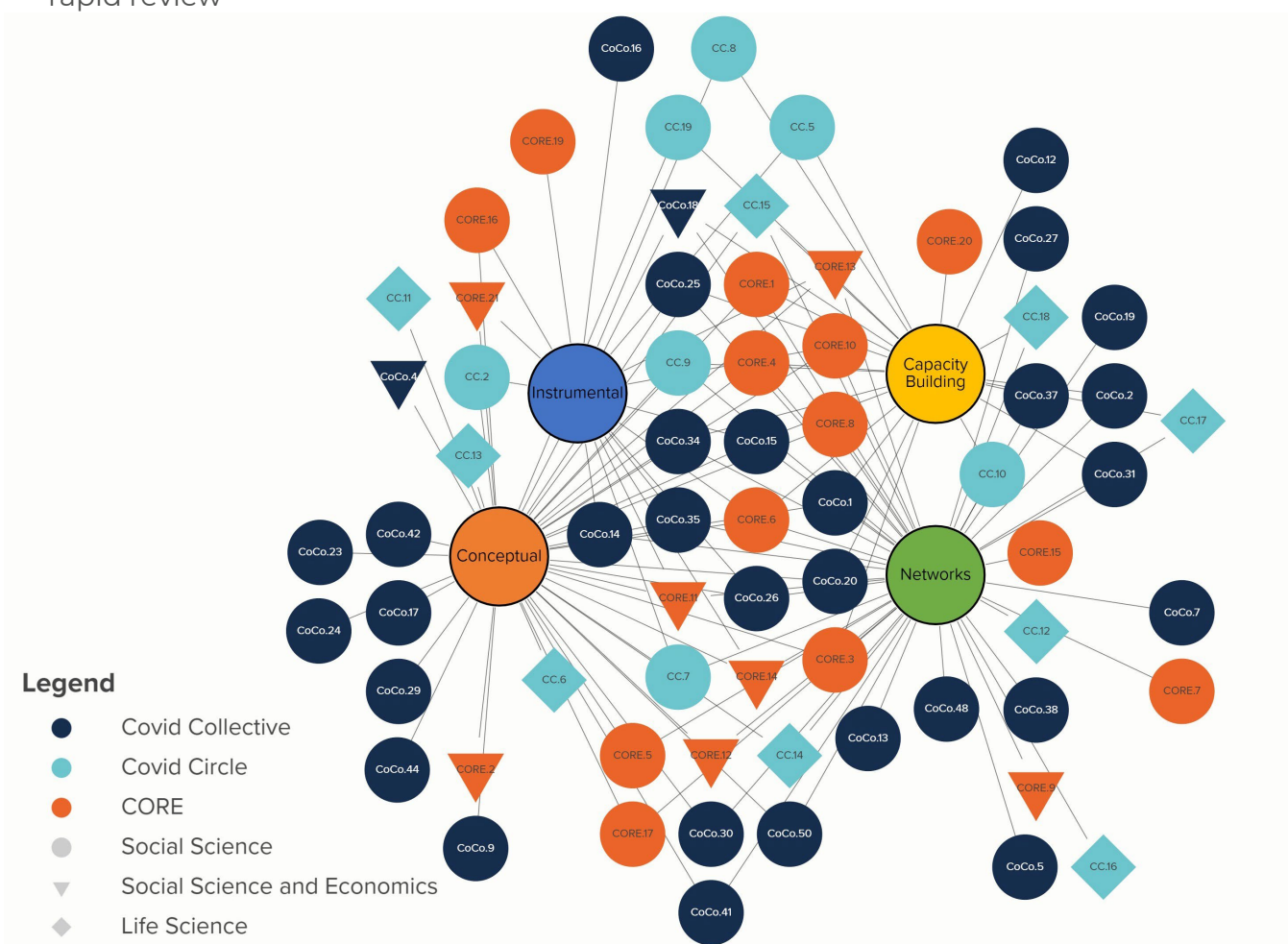
Note: This map was created using Kumu. An interactive version is available here: Pathways to impact in the pandemic – Kumu mapping.

Source: Authors' own. Created using Kumu.

5. Insights from the Fireside Chat

This section includes the additional views, examples, and perspectives that were shared during the Covid Collective Fireside Chat event on 27 June 2022. The insights shared and discussed helped to validate the findings of this rapid review, with many participants expressing that they could relate to the findings quite strongly. There were no significant disagreements with the data and findings presented.

It was not surprising for participants at the Fireside Chat that instrumental policy impact was the most lacking in examples from this study, considering the time since these projects had been implemented had been so short. Conversations tended to centre around aspirations for building on existing relationships or networks, whether focused on policy or not. This helped to explain and validate the fact that network and conceptual outcomes formed the biggest share of outcomes from projects that this study assessed.

The importance of well-embedded local partners and networks, e.g. influential actors such as government and civil society organisations (CSOs) to support pathways to impact, was emphasised. Without such networks, relationships, and importantly, trust, it is difficult to achieve impact over a short period of time. There were observations that certain organisations may have been better positioned to engage with research and networks of decision makers than others during the pandemic. Organisations that were already well connected to these networks seemed to be able to effect policy, possibly due to these existing relationships. It was also noted that an area of interest for future work could be the more informal networks that have been emerging as an indirect impact of the pandemic, due to the breakdown of the traditional supply chains and support networks.

Important to note is that the CORE project partners were identified and funded based on established networks and relationships. The CORE programme therefore already had an established presence in each context, with the institutional capacity to pivot work (e.g., to quickly adapt to play a humanitarian role), existing connections with marginalised and affected groups, and established links to policymakers. This may be a reason for the relatively high number of instrumental outcomes observed from this programme.

An example of the importance of international networks was highlighted in the presentation from a COVID CIRCLE project that suggested the involvement of the University of Cambridge in the project was important for decision makers in Nepal to connect with the research team, as it gave these decision makers more confidence in the project team to deliver relevant and quality findings. The relationships were said to be the most important aspect of this project. The close connections forged with decision makers were essential for continuing the lines of communication with the research teams; decision makers would only answer phone calls if they knew the person who was making the call.

Layering future funded work on to pre-existing networks could therefore support the realisation of pathways to impact and increase the speed with which change can occur. However, operating in this way may encourage working with the same set of partners continuously. The scope and diversity of partners, and the benefits these bring, should therefore be considered and assessed before this funding method is employed.

Following the presentation of the rapid review findings at the Fireside Chat webinar, it was suggested that flexible forms of funding would enable researchers to reframe projects in real time with a funder. This has been demonstrated in several projects. Some project teams were able to engage with IDRC Programme Officers in the CORE programme to re-evaluate and adjust project plans following the acceptance of research proposals, according to the changing local context. If a funder is not explicit about being flexible, many grantees feel they have to adhere to the original project design even if it is no longer the best fit. It was suggested by a participant that more evidence is needed to show funders that this flexible approach is useful.

Participants discussed the importance of building capacity in LMICs and decentralising the control and management of projects as much as possible to be able to adapt projects quickly to contextual pressures, including pandemics. More funding that enables organisations and networks in LMICs to develop responsive capacity was a recommendation and request to funders that was brought to the Fireside Chat. Investing in building the long-term research and evidence-generation capacities of research teams was also highlighted as vital to be able to respond to calls for research 'on demand'. However, the lack of funder interest in funding systems-level work compared to funding individuals and projects was also noted and would need to be overcome to ensure this approach could be possible.

'Mobilising resources' was suggested as an important outcome descriptor that should be included in future analysis to assess research projects. This is an important factor to support those in immediate need, with research teams playing an important role in engaging in discussions to help with this mobilisation. It was also suggested that projects involving national organisations can mobilise resources and gain traction more quickly than projects without the contextual knowledge these organisations bring. This is because they tend to know the key people and organisations to target with evidence, and may already be a part of these networks.

The Fireside Chat also highlighted the importance for projects operating in a crisis or pandemic of shifting the ratio of time spent on research to engagement, to ensure that more time and energy is given to interactions, seizing the moment, and knowledge translation.

6. Areas for further work

This report only encompasses a limited number of initiatives, funders, geographies, and disciplines. Adopting this approach on a larger scale would allow for more insights to be harvested, which in turn could lead to a better understanding of a complex picture and add greater value to the development sector.

The policy impact of the projects analysed will need to be looked at further in the future, as many impacts take a longer time to manifest from project inception to outcomes. This may also be the reason for instrumental changes having the smallest percentage of outcome examples in this analysis. There may also be a disconnect worth exploring between the instrumental impact on policy that donors are usually looking for when funding a project, and the focus and priorities of the implementing partners that may be pursuing an alternative pathway to impact. Looking back at intended and unintended outcomes and impacts would provide an interesting future study.

While these findings provide valuable discussion points, analysing the focus and pathways to impact for projects implemented during the pandemic compared to those implemented pre-pandemic would provide further insights into the impact of the pandemic on how projects were conducted and conceived. This would highlight whether the intended and realised outcomes have shifted because of the pandemic and if so, ensure better preparedness for working during future pandemics or other shocks. Comparing the methods and processes used across the three initiatives (CORE, COVID CIRCLE, and Covid Collective) would also likely identify further useful insights into how change happens.

While it was observed that gender was a cross-cutting theme and focus across outcome areas, further work to highlight the pathways to impact for the development of research instruments to better integrate gender-centred participant engagement and analysis would allow lessons to be learnt that could support the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The Outcome Harvesting approach used here is targeted at social science research projects. However, it is important to note that these outcome categories, particularly the instrumental outcomes that include policy influence, are not always the target for life science research. Therefore, a more rigorous study with amended outcome categories would be needed to fully identify the impacts and outcomes that are more targeted to the aims of life science research projects.

7. References

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