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KNOWLEDGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS: TRANSFORMING RESEARCH-TO-POLICY APPROACHES

Issue Editors **Andrea Ordóñez Llanos** and
James Georgalakis



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Introduction: Lessons for Locally Driven Research Responses to Emergencies*

Andrea Ordóñez Llanos¹ and James Georgalakis²

Abstract This article summarises learning from Southern-led research designed to influence the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The case studies are drawn primarily from the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) programme, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The article examines: (1) the characteristics of local research institutions' organisational readiness in times of crisis; (2) the form and function of knowledge that is fit for purpose in emergencies; and (3) knowledge processes and engagement strategies for rapid mobilisation. Organisational readiness hinged on the strength of research institutions' networks, access to key decision makers or affected communities, and resources and capabilities that allowed them to mobilise quickly. Hyper-local knowledge, combined with inclusive research methodologies, facilitates the positioning of research for use in emergencies. The pandemic has demonstrated that local and national research organisations are well placed to deliver impactful research, as both critical friends of government or outsiders advocating for change.

Keywords knowledge translation, knowledge mobilisation, research uptake, Covid-19, global South, development studies, thinktanks, emergencies, public health, socioeconomics, impact.

1 Introduction

This issue of the *IDS Bulletin* sets out learning from rapidly mobilised Southern-led research designed to influence the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The eight case study articles are drawn primarily from the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) programme, which is a three-year rapid research initiative funded by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The programme brought together 20 research projects across 42 countries to understand the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic and to generate better policy options



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for recovery. The case study authors and their institutions are from the global South and provide unique insights into the research response.

Ramos E. Mabugu *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) explore their experience of working in close partnership with the Government of Zimbabwe during the early stages of the pandemic to model economic and fiscal measures for relieving the impact of Covid-19 and promoting recovery. Ana Carolina Ogando (this *IDS Bulletin*) reflects on the rapid design and delivery of a mixed methods longitudinal study with nearly 2,000 informal workers across 11 cities in the global South and North. Helani Galpaya *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) share their reflections on seeking to influence Sri Lanka's digital and infrastructure responses to the pandemic amid the country's ongoing economic crisis. Benghong Siela Bossba (this *IDS Bulletin*) sets out the work of the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) to implement large-sample research in the formal and informal sectors in Cambodia. In Farah Al Shami's article (this *IDS Bulletin*), the author takes a deep dive into the challenges of promoting social protection reform in the context of the politics of coloniality in Arab countries.

Sameen Nasar *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) reflect on the strategies applied by Bangladeshi researchers to create a knowledge network between researchers and implementers responding to the impact of the pandemic on Rohingya refugees. Ricardo Fort and Lorena Alcázar's account (this *IDS Bulletin*) of the work of the Group for the Analysis of Development (Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo, GRADE) in Peru tells the story of how community-based initiatives such as soup kitchens worked in parallel to the state's response to the food insecurity experienced during the pandemic. Finally, Jennifer Cyr *et al.*'s case study (this *IDS Bulletin*) provides an assessment of the potential and limitations of collaborative governance in Latin America as a means to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable citizens.

An Institute of Development Studies (IDS)-led knowledge translation support function accompanied this research cohort and provided space for learning and reflection.³ This *IDS Bulletin* is intended to capture some of that learning and make it available to those seeking to promote a locally driven, evidence-informed, and equitable approach to managing multiple global crises.

There have been numerous studies and reviews unpacking the lessons of the pandemic on research. These, however, tend to focus primarily on the methodological and implementation aspects of research, particularly in the global North (Guleid *et al.* 2021; Nind, Coverdale and Meckin 2021; Richardson, Godfrey and Walklate 2021; Tremblay *et al.* 2021; Vindrola-Padros *et al.* 2020). Although there is an emerging literature that seeks to identify

the key qualities of knowledge translation in low- and middle-income countries (Combaz, Connor and Georgalakis 2023), it is not framed specifically around rapid response research. Work has been undertaken to identify some of the special features of Covid-19 response research in the global South and the concerns of Southern researchers around the need for more equitable evidence-informed interventions (Taylor and Knipe 2022; Grant *et al.* 2023). This *IDS Bulletin* seeks to contribute to this literature by exploring a series of case studies from Southern research institutions who designed and delivered research during the pandemic to help shape policy and practice responses and longer-term recovery. This demands a focus on the characteristics of Southern research organisations that were able to mobilise quickly, the types of knowledge that were needed in these unique circumstances, and the processes that facilitated engagement and influence.

CORE provided an ideal sample of Southern-led rapid response research to explore these inquiry areas. The projects in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East successfully mobilised less-heard voices and engaged nationally, regionally, and internationally with policy actors and practitioners.⁴ Their research has addressed the ways in which the pandemic has deepened existing vulnerabilities while seeking to advance gender equality. The emerging body of knowledge has important implications for all those concerned by an increasingly uncertain world characterised by the poly-crisis (Price 2023; Rohwerder 2023; Saha 2023).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We provide a brief overview of CORE programme rapid research responses in areas such as the use of digital technologies by research teams. We then address three areas of learning: (1) the institutional factors that enabled research organisations in low- and middle-income countries to respond swiftly to the pandemic; (2) the characteristics of knowledge that can be best positioned to respond to a global challenge with local implications such as the pandemic; and (3) how organisations mobilised knowledge in an emergency with care and intent.

2 Overview of the CORE programme rapid research response

The Covid-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to researchers and policy analysts who responded to IDRC's call for rapid research on the socioeconomic impact of the crisis in low- and middle-income countries. However, amid the crisis, various innovative and adaptive responses have emerged. This *IDS Bulletin* highlights several of these and showcases notable examples.

One of the significant features of the rapid research response to the pandemic, which is common among all case studies from CORE, has been the explicit use of digital technologies

in research projects. By leveraging online platforms and tools, researchers have been able to facilitate collaboration across geographic boundaries and engage diverse stakeholders. These digital approaches have opened new avenues for research, particularly in contexts where mobility restrictions limit in-person interactions.

Research institutions have embraced collaborations and partnerships. Despite the challenges of lockdowns, research teams have found innovative ways to work with various actors to achieve their goals. Collaborative approaches have led to transformative outcomes that have benefited all parties. Researchers have also demonstrated the adaptability of these research methodologies. These include using existing data and information in new ways, collecting new data to respond to pressing challenges, and developing innovative models and approaches. Examples of this approach can be seen in projects such as the South Asia thinktank LIRNEasia (Galpaya *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*), which repurposed data from past surveys to study the impact of lockdowns on children's education, and later adapted their data collection to identify issues with cash transfers during an economic crisis.

Overall, the rapid research response to the pandemic has revealed a range of innovative and adaptive research approaches. By adopting digital technologies, collaborations, and diverse methodologies, local researchers can respond to unprecedented situations and make valuable contributions to policy and practice.

3 Institutional readiness in times of crisis

No research organisation or government seemed ready for the pandemic despite the warning signs.⁵ During this high-stakes period, certain institutional characteristics proved important for the engagement of evidence with emergencies. Organisations have a relevant history to draw upon in such moments, and it is essential that they can turn institutional credentials into credibility and readiness. All case studies highlight the importance of a range of pre-existing intangible assets acquired through the years. These include credibility and legitimacy, the capacity to mobilise and capitalise on existing relationships, and the talent to deploy them creatively.

At the onset of the pandemic, researchers began framing policy problems and positioning them on the public agenda. They relied heavily on their perceived credibility to get a foot in the door, whether with policymakers, the media, or affected communities. Public health crises demand fast responses, and political and civil society actors seek known partners for assistance. Research institutions' credibility therefore rested on their responsiveness, expertise and, most crucially, their knowledge of the context.

Existing networks both prepared researchers to respond rapidly to the demands for evidence and shaped their responses. Across the case studies, we see a spectrum of evidence and policy interactions, from the deeply government-embedded model to the more peripheral or outsider approach. Some organisations were well positioned to pursue multi-level strategies of leveraging awareness of evidence and promoting its use. Hence, these pre-existing networks and relationships serve diverse purposes and occur in various contexts. They can relate to working with communities, government officials, or international organisations. Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), for example, highlights the importance of having solid, pre-existing relationships; in its case, with worker organisations in different cities in the global South. The WIEGO case highlights that institutional readiness cannot be disassociated from long-standing, interpersonal relationships that ultimately served as both a medium for rapport and bonding and an anchoring to grass-roots realities even without face-to-face interactions (Ogando, this *IDS Bulletin*).

In contrast, it was the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP) researchers' long-standing investment in partnerships and close personal relations with government officials in Zimbabwe that gave them a niche insider status. This facilitated the co-production of economic modelling in a political environment that favours centralised decision-making and homegrown research (Mabugu *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). The authors state: 'In our view, it was not just that the findings were timely and could be translated into policy user formats... at the root of it were partnerships' (*ibid.*: 46). Likewise, the CDRI (Benghong Siela, this *IDS Bulletin*) was building on 30 years of experience in policy research in close formal and informal partnerships with governmental actors: '[R]egardless of the shock of the pandemic, CDRI already has an advantage in terms of linkage to the policy formulation sphere' (*ibid.*: 100).

While institutional readiness may be linked closely to long-standing, interpersonal, and networked relationships, both CDRI and PEP acknowledge that there are political and structural dimensions to this in which both visible and hidden power shapes whose knowledge counts (Gaventa 2006). Benghong Siela (this *IDS Bulletin*), in relation to the CDRI in Cambodia, reflects that scholars are sometimes undermined, and the political system is driven by patronage networks, with limited space for research to influence policies. In Zimbabwe, some of the officials who helped open doors into government were former university students of members of the PEP research team (Mabugu *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). These types of deep personal relationships in a highly centralised government decision-making structure, that was open to evidence-informed policymaking, may have facilitated PEP's engagement but presumably closed doors to other potential sources of evidence.

Most cases reveal the importance of trust; however, it is not necessarily easy to build it in times of crisis. As the Asuntos del Sur case study reveals (Cyr *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*), building trust with new partners during the pandemic was difficult, and this may not only affect the project's response but may shape the organisation's future partnerships. As the authors highlight:

The restricted opportunities for trust-building during a pandemic may, over time, impede the creation of new and potentially fruitful partnerships. On the other hand, the pandemic may help to consolidate existing relationships, enabling partners to more easily activate and collaborate on problems in the future.
(*ibid.*: 204)

Trust is not only related to existing relationships, and the ability of institutions to quickly build new ones, but also to the wider political context. For Farah Al Shami (this *IDS Bulletin*), the ability of the Arab Reform Initiative to influence thinking and policy around the inadequacies of MENA's⁶ social protection systems to support the most vulnerable during the pandemic was a 'daunting task' (*ibid.*: 111). The Arab Reform Initiative's mode of engagement was largely outsider lobbying and partnerships with academia and activists in an environment in which broader politico-economic and governance factors are driving Arab states away from assuming responsibility for nationwide social assistance (*ibid.*). Under such circumstances, neither PEP's highly embedded model or CDRI's semi-insider strategy were applicable or even desirable. The Arab Reform Initiative's institutional readiness was therefore derived from an understanding of the political context and its ability to engage across multiple levels and across diverse stakeholder groups, including the raising of wider public awareness.

Finally, institutional readiness translates into the ability to deploy resources and begin to work fast. To do so, institutions require a deep knowledge of their context and suitable funding relationships. For example, the WIEGO team (Ogando, this *IDS Bulletin*) used its knowledge of different occupational sectors of informal workers to anticipate the challenges respondents would have in taking part in research that covers sensitive and difficult topics related to the impacts of the pandemic. Crucially, the case studies featured here all benefited from the rapid release of funds by a Northern donor through a semi-closed call. This funding mechanism built on a set of pre-existing, and in some cases very long-standing, relationships and provided the grantees with the flexibility to re-focus or adapt existing projects. Thus, institutional readiness entails a constant interplay between personal and institutional capacities and relationships. The combination of a strong research team backed by a sustainable organisation is required for credibility, trust, and capacity to deliver rapid response research in crisis conditions.

4 Knowledge fit for purpose

The experiences shared in this *IDS Bulletin* employ a wide range of research methods as well as approaches to promote the use of knowledge by key stakeholders. In general, the examples highlight the key characteristic of knowledge that is fit for purpose as being a combination of how well it is positioned for use, and inclusivity. Positioned for use or relevance entails that it is directly applicable to a practical problem or question. Research sometimes also plays a critical role in framing the problem, not just its solutions. Furthermore, knowledge needs to be accessible. It should be available in a format that matches the needs of diverse stakeholders so that individuals who need the knowledge can find it and use it effectively. Knowledge that is positioned for use must be actionable and should be flexible and adaptable to different circumstances, providing insights or solutions that can be implemented in real-world situations to solve problems or make decisions.

However, this is about more than just research relevance, which largely exists in the eyes of the beholders, who may include powerful actors. It is also about an inclusive research process that is built on highly contextualised knowledge. There is a common thread among the case studies that highlights the value of what could be described as hyper-local knowledge, and its use to inform policy and practices. This is knowledge that focuses on an in-depth understanding of ground-level issues instead of more universally applicable findings. For example, for the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, Bangladesh, it was essential to understand the service delivery at refugee camps from the recipient's point of view and to integrate community perspectives (Nasar *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). Such methods can be adapted and sensitised to local contexts, where, for example, the BRAC team faced unique challenges such as Covid-19 misinformation, food insecurity, lack of economic opportunities, and inadequacies with food rations during and before the lockdown (*ibid.*).

In some contexts, evidence gaps and the imposition of low-quality international data threatened to undermine the Covid-19 response. Al Shami (this *IDS Bulletin*) reflects on 'data poverty' in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon whose census data are more than 25 years old. National unified social registries are rare, and quantitative or qualitative social care data is incomplete. Under these circumstances, pseudo-sampling by foreign organisations and policy analysis that is subject to bias and a poor understanding of local context create deep knowledge inequities. Therefore, the role for local and national research organisations to shape their own inquiries is an essential characteristic of knowledge fit for purpose.

Ogando (this *IDS Bulletin*) argues that traditional research methods often prioritise academic rigour over practical relevance, which can result in research findings that are disconnected from

the realities of people's lives. In contrast, the co-production of knowledge, which involves engaging with diverse stakeholders throughout the research process, can help ensure that research is grounded in local contexts and responsive to community needs. The case study also highlights the importance of using multiple forms of knowledge, including academic and non-academic sources, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of complex social issues.

For CDRI (Benghong Siela, this *IDS Bulletin*), its local expertise was supplemented by additional capacities that helped it meet some of the challenges of conducting research in less structured areas such as the informal sector. It established a technical advisory team as a part of its research consortium. The advisory team consisted of a gender expert, an economic expert, and a gender and macroeconomic expert.

Hence, we can see how positioning evidence for use, inclusivity, and locally engaged research are inseparable. The rigour or quality of Covid-19 response research rested on both the ability of research teams to frame their projects for local and national actors and deliver highly contextualised and locally driven evidence. International research organisations and agencies may appear to be poorly positioned to deliver this hyper-local and responsive research that combines sociocultural and political understanding with direct access to communities.

5 Mobilising knowledge in an emergency with care and intent

Building on these dimensions of organisational readiness and the key elements of knowledge that is fit for purpose in a pandemic, we can identify some recurrent themes that challenge traditional notions of linear processes by which research project outputs are produced, and then used by different stakeholders. While these simplistic concepts of research uptake may have their limitations during periods of stability, they are rendered entirely obsolete during a crisis. What the case studies showcase is that: (1) mobilising knowledge is underpinned by the entire engagement processes and cannot be related to specific outputs; (2) these processes need to be purposeful and responsible; and, finally, (3) that researchers need to remain flexible about how to deploy their analytical skills to support stakeholders in resolving the problems.

While knowledge mobilisation, planning, and monitoring tends to focus on outputs and specific activities that target particular stakeholders, the case studies focus on the entire knowledge process: the research methodologies, the networking, the relationship building, and approaches to engagement. A whole range of knowledge translation or uptake tools are available, and researchers deploy them throughout the life of a project. The flexibility required includes the ability to navigate complex political realities. In some cases, impact is possible when a

balance can be struck between responding to demand for evidence and influencing that demand. For example, PEP in Zimbabwe experienced a 'coincidence of wants' and successfully negotiated a form of collaborative economic modelling in which the research team were able to influence what was being modelled (Mabugu *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*).

A key component seems to be not only engaging others but doing so with intent and care. Ogando (this *IDS Bulletin*) highlights that WIEGO's case study stresses the importance of an approach that is non-extractive with participants of research and which is sensitive to the difficult experiences of individuals during the pandemic. The author summarises: 'By engaging with care, researchers were able to transmit the notion that the research was not only **on** workers, but **with** and **for** them' (*ibid.*: 65). In practice, this also entails concrete choices that value participant engagement such as covering the costs of participation or giving sufficient flexibility to accommodate interviewees' needs and schedules. This research engagement is then followed up by careful consideration of how to present the data and stories collected, to respect the research participants and enhance their voices in the process.

Flexibility in terms of the activities covered by a project is essential. The case of GRADE highlights the additional knowledge work required to translate research into policy and practices and how research institutions have capacities to support decision makers and implementing partners in the process (Fort and Alcázar, this *IDS Bulletin*). The example of its work with public institutions showcases an array of strategies that may seem beyond the scope of a research project, but which are essential for success. While working with *ollas comunes*,⁷ the team was asked by the relevant ministry to survey these spaces to improve the support they could provide them. However, the research team had some hypotheses from their experience working in the field, that the initial database that the ministry was working with was dated and did not include the most marginalised neighbourhoods, and that the newer marginal settlements were responding to the crises through different alternatives. Although the team prepared the survey to support the ministry, the most important part of their work was to demonstrate, through very explicit data, how the ministry needed an overhaul of their approach.

Finally, there are indications from the case studies that how organisations responded to the pandemic may have a longer-term impact on the future of these organisations. Researchers have developed new skills and capacities, including the ability to use digital tools for data collection and analysis, as well as the ability to present research findings in a clear and accessible way for different audiences. These new capacities and strengthened networks and relationships will continue to be important for ensuring that

research is accessible and relevant to various stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, and community members.

6 Conclusions

The paradox of research during the pandemic is that Covid-19 both vastly increased operational challenges and empowered local and national research organisations. As researchers and institutions based in the global North found themselves grounded, and the urgent need for local knowledge and highly contextualised learning grew rapidly, many Southern research organisations found themselves in a prime position to respond. However, organisational readiness to do so was dependent on the strength of their networks, access to key decision makers or affected communities, and their ability to mobilise quickly. In the case studies reviewed here, this last attribute was largely dependent on funder flexibility and responsiveness.

It was both researchers' embeddedness in local and regional contexts and their ability to frame evidence for specific audiences that determined their success. The pandemic exposed governments' reliance on outdated data. It has challenged academic rigour in the absence of local knowledge. It has accentuated the necessity of access to civil society and advocacy movements in politically closed spaces. Finally, it has emphasised the central importance of knowledge mobilisation as part of the whole research process, delivered with intent and care. This all highlights just how essential locally led research is for pandemic response and for development more broadly.

It is unlikely that anyone can put this genie back in the bottle, even if they wanted to. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that local and national research organisations, with the right international flow of resources and support, are eminently well placed to deliver impactful research. Their hyper-local knowledge, flexibility, and unswerving focus on the real-world influence and wellbeing of affected communities has not just demonstrated their utility in times of crisis but suggests their superiority over international responses. We must harness this energy and expertise as we face multiple global crises that will require unique blends of local and global research collaboration and innovation.

Notes

- * This *IDS Bulletin* was produced as part of the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) Knowledge Translation Programme, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), which supports the translation of knowledge emerging from the CORE initiative. Supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), CORE brings together 20 projects to understand the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, improve existing responses, and generate better policy options for recovery. The research is being led by local researchers, universities, thinktanks, and civil society organisations across

42 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors, or IDS. For further information, please contact: c19re.org.

- 1 Andrea Ordóñez Llanos, Executive Director, Southern Voice, Ecuador.
- 2 James Georgalakis, Director of Evidence and Impact, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 3 **Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) website.**
- 4 See the **CORE documented stories of change.**
- 5 The world was warned by the World Health Organization (WHO) that 'highly pathogenic coronaviral diseases' (other than Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)) could be the next great international health crisis (WHO 2018).
- 6 Middle East and North Africa.
- 7 'Communal pots', similar to soup kitchens, whereby local communities pool their resources to supply food for everyone in the neighbourhood (Fort and Alcázar, this *IDS Bulletin*).

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