

# IDS Bulletin

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## **PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES: WHY DIFFERENT VOICES AND VIEWS MATTER**

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# The Distances that the Covid-19 Pandemic Magnified: Research on Informality and the State\*

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**Abstract** What does research on informal sector workers and the state entail in the time of Covid-19? The pandemic has limited possibilities for in-person interactions and required adaptations in research approaches. These challenges are exacerbated when the subjects of the research are informal sector workers with limited access to technology and undefined spaces of work. In this article, we argue that the Covid-19 pandemic has magnified distances: between researchers located globally; between researchers and respondents; and between the state and people within informal employment. However, these distances also create new ways of working and opportunities for doing research. We discuss the challenges faced in the field, document the adaptations introduced to ensure robust research in difficult settings, and set out the limitations that remain. We also examine the ethical dimension of confronting dangerous misinformation related to the pandemic while conducting interviews, and the questions it raises about the distance between research and prescriptive advocacy in academia.

**Keywords** informal sector, Covid-19, qualitative methods, study design, gender inequality, state-citizen relations, Pakistan.

## 1 Introduction

In the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic in the summer of 2020, we developed a proposal to study the impact of the crisis on informal sector workers in a major metropolis of the global South. There were several reasons for this. The informal sector defines a majority of the workforce in such cities, and informal sector workers often overlap extensively with the poorest

populations (Chen and Carré 2020). Informal workers have been particularly vulnerable to the health and economic impacts of the pandemic worldwide. Not only are they often at greater risk of infection because of their public-facing jobs or inability to adapt workplaces, but they also tend to have less access to social protection and a shallower safety net upon which to rely in hard times (Gallien and van den Boogaard 2021; WIEGO 2021). Evidence suggests, for instance, that almost 1.6 billion informal workers worldwide were affected by containment measures, while working in some of the hardest-hit sectors (ILO 2020; Schotte *et al.* 2021). For female workers, the pandemic also exacerbated their unpaid care work burdens because of school and creche closures, which in turn affected their ability to work (Boatang-Pobee *et al.* 2021).

Despite this greater risk, the voices and experiences of informal workers during the pandemic have largely been excluded from common research approaches. Phone surveys – the most relied upon technique during the pandemic – are particularly likely to exclude low-income populations, while informal workers often work in less visible spaces, while being represented, if at all, by associations that are less likely to be contacted by researchers. The corresponding risk is that greater policy attention is paid to the better-documented and more visible experiences of formal workers – and, indeed, evidence suggests that informal workers have often been neglected by policy responses to provide relief and social protection (Gallien and van den Boogaard 2021; van den Boogaard *et al.*, forthcoming 2022).

Recognising this, we believed that it was critical to capture the experiences of informal workers to come to a more complete understanding of the impacts of the pandemic and the implications for engagement with the state and, in turn, for public health outcomes. Informal sector workers' engagement with state institutions are tenuous in regular times, and we expected that this may have worsened during the pandemic, with important implications for levels of trust and, consequently, for compliance with pandemic containment measures such as lockdowns, vaccines, and social distancing measures.

We situated our research in Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city, in a partnership between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). Calculations based on the Government of Pakistan's Labour Force Survey estimate that 70 per cent of all waged and own-account work in the city takes place as part of the informal economy (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2018). Necessitated by Covid-19, we originally considered undertaking remote data collection through phone interviews and dividing roles within the team between design and data collection. Principal investigators in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Lahore, most with restricted travel opportunities, would lead on conceptual and methodological

design, and Lahore-based research assistants would lead on data collection in the field. Both strategies have been a common feature of pandemic-era research projects (Archibald *et al.* 2019; Strachan 2021).

As work started during the pandemic, the limitations of this research design quickly became obvious, and we found that several 'distances' had to be bridged to continue our research. First and foremost was the spatial distance necessitated by the pandemic – between researchers and respondents because of lockdowns and barriers to using technology, and between different members of an international collaborative research team.

The second distance was between theoretical concepts, such as 'the state' and 'gender inequality', and the quotidian ways in which expressions and language are experienced by informal workers and then shared with researchers. This is a pre-pandemic conceptual 'distance', but we argue that it has been exacerbated during the pandemic, not least because of researcher positionalities and their possibly very different experience of the pandemic even when they share the same urban spaces as research participants.

A third distance was between research and prescriptive advocacy in academia, highlighted in this case by the ethical question of how a researcher should respond when confronted with dangerous misinformation related to the pandemic while conducting interviews.

In this article, we look at the challenges that these spatial, conceptual, and ethical distances present; the ways in which some pre-pandemic distances between researchers and informal sector workers (including socioeconomic divides and related power dynamics) were exacerbated during the pandemic; and the ways in which we adjusted aspects of our research to enable our study to proceed. Our main responses to these challenges included decentralising decision-making within our research team, alongside regular debriefs with the entire team; working with local civil society actors to access respondents; and using multiple approaches to design, pilot, and implement grounded questions on dense and often personal concepts.

We believe that the ways in which our research changed and adapted speak in important ways to some emergent and more prevalent issues within research. In contrast to the newly received wisdom of pandemic-era research, we ultimately saw in-person interviews as necessary because technology-led research methods are not ideal for in-depth research involving vulnerable populations with little access to technology.<sup>12</sup> This finding reflects similar conclusions from researchers in conflict-affected settings, another usual candidate for distanced research (Bond, Lake and Parkinson 2020; Taylor *et al.* 2020). We found that these

discussions also help to highlight and problematise inequalities and hierarchies in research processes by stressing the need to situate decision-making with in-person researchers rather than with distant project leads. They also bring to the fore the need to engage with respondents' own perceptions and understanding of theoretical concepts rather than centring pre-conceived ideas about what these mean (Abedi Dunia *et al.* 2020).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We set out current methodological debates around pandemic-era adaptations in Section 2 and look at the challenges of doing this in Lahore with informal sector workers. In Section 3, we describe how our project changed and adapted throughout the pandemic. Section 4 concludes with a short discussion of implications and of the challenges that remain.

## **2 Researching informality in times of Covid-19 in Lahore**

Globally, the most common adaptations, or methodological 'fixes' in conducting research during the pandemic, have been phone interviews and online surveys, which have defined much of the work published in 2020 and 2021, as well as some adaptations to conduct qualitative and ethnographic research mediated by technology (Hall, Gaved and Sargent 2021; Howard and Roberts 2020; Howlett 2021; Krause *et al.* 2021; Reñosa *et al.* 2021). These adaptations have ensured the continuity of research efforts during a time when the world was essentially 'closed for business' – thereby enabling critical insights into how people were faring at this unprecedented time and capturing the ways in which their lives and livelihoods were being impacted by the pandemic and state responses to the pandemic.

Yet, the use of these methodologies assumed and required access to technology. Online surveys require both more advanced technology (such as smartphones at the least) and some level of technological literacy and comfort with online platforms. This is still limited in parts of the world (UNCTAD 2020). The growth of mobile phone coverage over the last decade means that phone interviews can reach a wider population, but these too have limitations. Alongside patchy network connectivity, people may not trust those on the other side of a cold call; within households, women may have more limited access and less privacy during interviews; and patience with long conversations may be limited so that phone interviews are best suited to conducting short surveys. Researchers have also spoken of phone interviews being extractive and 'lacking emotions which social science research needs' (Banerjee 2021).

A group that is particularly hard to research through these methodological fixes are those that work in the informal sector in urban centres. Research with informal sector workers has presented challenges even in pre-pandemic times (Gallien 2021; Tellado, Lepori and Morla-Folch 2020; Vershinina and

Rodionova 2011). Common issues have, for example, included difficulties in identifying and accessing the workers, creating a space for conversations that is safe and confidential, navigating demands on workers' time, and the complex power relationships between researchers, workers and, at times, interlocutors such as worker organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These challenges are particularly relevant for women, who are overrepresented in informal and insecure jobs in many low-income countries (Moussié and Staab 2020). Women's time availability and mobility are limited due to their greater burden of unpaid care work and exclusionary gender norms (Hassan and Farooq 2015).

During the pandemic in Lahore, we found that informal sector workers' lack of access to technology – in particular with phones falling victim to asset sales during the crisis – discomfort with phone interviews, and undefined spaces of work made them a particularly difficult group to identify and research. Yet, this varied considerably by sector and the socio-spatial context of workers within it. As is the case in comparable cities of the global South, the bulk of informal workers – approximately 71 per cent in this case – are associated with informal retail such as market vending, subcontracted home-based manufacturing, transportation, and domestic and community work (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2018). These four sectors formed the focus of our research, and we planned to interview 25 respondents from each of the four sectors, eventually using periods between lockdowns to have socially distanced, in-person interviews in open spaces with respondents.

This was fairly easy to manage with men who work in the street-vending and transport sectors. They remained publicly engaged in their respective trades, making it easier to approach and recruit them for interviews when the retail and public transport sectors were not closed because of lockdowns. The public-facing nature of their work also meant that conversations with our researchers fell in with the usual activity of socialising with colleagues and clients at central hubs. However, these hubs – usually large commercial centres spread across the city – made it difficult to carry out sustained conversations on a range of complex issues.

A different set of challenges was encountered in the case of domestic and home-based workers, in large part due to the female-dominated gender profile of the two sectors. Interviewing domestic workers in their places of work is often neither possible nor appropriate, highlighting important power dynamics of the interactions between informal workers, employers, and us as researchers. Home-based workers, on the other hand, operate out of low-income residential neighbourhoods across the city and can only be reached through employment intermediaries or a small set of NGOs and associations working for the rights of such

workers. In these instances, we found that it was also more difficult to speak to informal workers privately, with family members often present. To speak with workers in these sectors, we waited for periods when Covid-19 rates were low and sought consent to speak in the offices of our civil society partners. This did not, however, deal with all the 'distances' we faced in doing this research. We detail these distances next and outline the ways in which our research strategy was responsive to our ever-changing context.

### **3 Spatial, conceptual, and ethical distances during the pandemic**

#### **3.1 Negotiating spatial distance – the need for innovation and flexibility**

Early in the research process, we abandoned the idea of doing qualitative research on the phone, our only mediated option given the lack of access to online technology and platforms by informal sector workers in Lahore. Phone coverage in Lahore is extensive but unequal between women and men. Nevertheless, in keeping with the newly received wisdom of pandemic-era research, we tried conducting some interviews on the phone when we first started this research and Covid-19 rates had spiked in April 2021.

Differences between these and initial pilot interviews conducted face-to-face during an easing of distancing measures in March 2021, confirmed that the difference in quality was too extensive to make telephone interviews a feasible option. On the phone, respondents provided very brief answers, could not be drawn into more open-ended conversations, and seemed to be unsure and in a hurry to end the call. Phone calls were also characterised by the frequent breaking of voice, lags in reception, and dropped calls. There was little opportunity to ask for clarification or get deeper into conversations because respondents quickly grew frustrated with follow-up questions. Their unease with these interviews was summed up well by one respondent who remarked after a moderate-length call with an unclear connection, 'My ears have given up and so has my arm'.

We thus decided to stick to our preferred research strategy – in-person semi-structured interviews that would allow deep conversations with respondents – and realised early on that we would need to adjust our research timelines to allow for face-to-face interviewing, as and when this became possible through the rise and fall in Covid-19 rates in Lahore. While this raised the ethical concern of doing research in settings where people had not been vaccinated fully, we considered and debated these issues in detail, ensuring that all researchers followed public health guidelines such as social distancing and masking, that interviews were conducted in open or well-ventilated spaces, and that all respondents and all researchers were comfortable with having such contact at this time. Research was paused multiple times to ensure that we were following national guidelines.



However, conducting in-person interviews was not straightforward. For example, the first interview with an informal worker in the transport sector went as follows. Team members had decided that the most accessible way to identify such workers for the pilot phase would be to interview rickshaw drivers at the stand outside LUMS. Two researchers went across to the campus but found that the rickshaw stand had been deserted due to campus closure. They then stopped a driver looking for rides nearby and asked if he would be willing to be interviewed. He agreed, but given that the university gates were closed, he offered to drive them to a park nearby. As soon as the interview started, security guards patrolling the neighbourhood arrived and asked them to leave because parks too were closed due to social distancing measures.

With no other available option, they conducted the interview while seated on a road divider, the only accessible patch of grass in the vicinity, with traffic passing on both sides, making it difficult for them to hear each other clearly or take notes with ease. Roadside conversations such as these were a regular feature of interviews with male workers in the street-vending and transport sectors (conducted mostly by male researchers in the field team, given their own ease of mobility and gendered access to respondents in commercial hubs). This was both because few other options were available during the pandemic, and because respondents usually insisted on having conversations on the spot rather than committing to a later time.

Interviews with women (conducted exclusively by female researchers in the field team because of gendered norms around access to respondents) presented a different set of challenges during the pilot phase. We accessed women workers in the domestic and home-based contracting sectors through NGO partners that work regularly with them. For domestic workers, the intermediary suggested that the most accessible location for the interviews would be their office spaces, with social distancing measures, masks, and good ventilation maintained. However, team members sensed that respondents were not at ease, possibly because of the formality of a conference room setting for what were meant to be informal conversations, and which would, in other times, have been conducted as close to their own familiar spaces as possible.

They therefore decided to move interviews closer to workers' homes. We agreed to avoid their own homes, both because this was unfeasible during the pandemic, and because there was little privacy available with most family members spending more time at home due to school and work closures. An option was the larger home of a schoolteacher in a neighbourhood that our NGO partner identified as one with many home-based women workers. Many of their children attended the school where the teacher was employed, so she was a familiar and trusted

person for our respondents. This worked, and it was clear that respondents' familiarity with the teacher and her house made them comfortable and relaxed.

Interestingly, the most relaxed and deepest interview our team of female researchers had during the pilot phase was one conducted with a woman in a shrine. The setting simultaneously provided an open-air space and one where women sitting together over an extended period did not attract attention (social norms restrict women's mobility in most public spaces in Lahore). A team member reflected:

*One respondent mentioned how difficult it is to step outside her house, for all the harassment that happens on the streets. But the comfort with which our respondent occupied space within the shrine made it evident that they are used to this space and so our interviews went smoothly. This was also the most comfortable I had felt during any of our interviews. I recognise that being allowed in the shrine comes with certain restrictions, such as an informal gender segregation and dress codes, but a visitor to the shrine is barely ever asked (overtly or covertly) to justify their presence within that space, even during Covid-19.*

Our ability to do in-person interviews during the pandemic thus depended on three critical factors. First, we had to remain flexible as to how we were going to do this research, recognising, as have most researchers during this time, the need for contingency planning and that the best laid plans might mean little in the field (Krause *et al.* 2021). Second, we worked closely with NGOs both to identify respondents in the informal sector and to understand how to ensure their safety and comfort during the pandemic. Third, our terms of collaboration and engagement within the team were equal from the start – research assistants based at LUMS were part of the core design team and defined the terms of field engagement.

We realised in the pilot phase that members of the team who would be in the field in Lahore would need to be in the driving seat for field-based decisions, even if they were junior members of the research team. Team leads thus focused on an intensive online training process that ensured a high level of familiarity and comfort with the interview guide; ensured an extended pilot phase; developed a schedule of regular interactions and bimonthly debrief sessions; and designed a debriefing template that the Lahore team filled out after each interview. Beyond this, our field research team took the lead in making most of the critical decisions that would ensure the success of our research strategy in a difficult context, with others available to collaboratively find solutions to sticky challenges in biweekly sessions.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2 Reducing conceptual distance – adapting dense concepts to respondents' realities

A substantial, pre-existing distance between researchers and respondents in the informal sector is defined by how ideas of 'the state' and 'gender inequality' are conceptualised by the former and experienced in everyday life by the latter. Our earliest pilot interviews quickly revealed that our interview guide embedded assumptions about, for instance, which state actors were central to the respondents' lived experiences that did not resonate with the reality encountered by the field researchers. For informal sector workers in Lahore, the 'surface area of the state' (Heller 2013: 9) is limited in general and shrank further for most during the pandemic – informal workers were less likely than normal to interact with state representatives, as public services were cut back or went online. Frequent lockdowns in commercial localities also meant that spaces for interactions with the state were reduced further.

We needed to better understand and connect with the quotidian ways and language in which informal workers experienced and understood their interactions with state actors and institutions during the pandemic. The same applied to how they understood and experienced gender inequality both inside and outside their homes. This conceptual challenge was not unique to the pandemic context but heightened as the surface area of the state shrank and the pre-existing knowledge base on this was limited. The first step was to work with civil society partners through 'scoping interviews' to improve our understanding of interactions that take place between workers and the state.

We heard that informal workers, particularly men working in transport or as street vendors, interact mainly with the state through 'coercive' regulatory or law enforcement authorities, and that this has remained unchanged or even intensified during the pandemic, with police authorities checking retail and transport sectors for compliance with lockdowns and social distancing regulations. However, interaction with other state representatives, such as at municipal offices and public hospitals, has been limited by the pandemic. An option was to use these details to make our interview questions more specific. However, our field researchers had a different idea.

We revisited the interview guide, but with the field team in the lead so that they could draw on their experiences from pilot interviews. They decided on a shift in approach. As one member reflected, 'Our approach to better conceptualise the state involved a crucial shift from demarcating and animating the state via our interview questions to allowing our respondents to sketch an image of the state for themselves'. This meant moving away from questions that focused too narrowly on what respondents thought of pre-identified branches and institutions of the state, their interactions with them, and changes in their views and opinions about these institutions during the pandemic.

Instead, we decided to offer respondents the space to define and interpret the presence or absence of the state in whatever way made most sense to them. This brought to the fore variation in how informal workers across different sectors interact with the state now and how they have done so in the past. It also alerted us to the unevenness of state capacity when it comes to regulation and redistribution. For example, in the complete absence of any code of regulation and a system of granting licences, street vendors are frequently targeted by anti-encroachment operations in commercial and residential districts of Lahore.

In contrast, a relatively higher degree of organisation within the informal transport sector gives some informal workers greater political power, with relatively frequent strikes and collective action against traffic authorities and regulatory interventions. Within the 'privatised' form of work seen in the domestic work and home-based sectors, interactions with the state remain unstructured, though with reports of frequent harassment by police authorities. Such contextual variations in state interaction and regulation became more tangible through the narration of personal interactions with the state by informal sector workers.

Allowing conversations to be led by respondents' own interpretations of the state and for interviews to become more co-constructed in the participatory tradition (Lyons and Chipperfield 2000) led to an improvement in the type of responses we got and a higher comfort level of our respondents. Earlier, respondents had seemed to get visibly shy or uncomfortable with some questions, which team members took to indicate some embarrassment connected to a lack of opinion or knowledge about institutions of the state that we were asking about. This was especially true of female respondents, who seemed reluctant to deal with questions about interacting with the state, insisting that they do not leave their homes to interact with state actors.

To help illustrate our point and elicit responses, the team initially tried to disaggregate 'the state' into everyday activities, such as getting an ID card made or paying bills. However, with the ID card process largely standardised and bill payments taking place via mobile services like easypaisa, we realised that there was virtually no face-to-face interaction with state actors. However, when we moved beyond questions about actual interactions to instead open up space to reflect on perceptions of the state, its visibility in their lives, and its responsibilities towards citizens and workers during the pandemic, women became far more vocal. Their expectations, disappointment, and at times even their rage, were communicated more clearly through this approach.

Similarly, we found male respondents were particularly closed to discussing gender inequality, especially if this called for reflection

on how women experience the state and informal sector work differently. We were interested in drawing out both men and women on their perceptions of gender inequality, but this proved difficult. We shifted strategy again, but in the opposite direction of what we did in asking about the state – instead of asking about perceptions, we asked now about actual practice and personal experience. So instead of asking whether they thought there was gender inequality in interactions, we talked to men and women about their own experiences of work, the state, care responsibilities, and changes in these during the pandemic.

Researchers started by asking conversational questions about the household and their children and how things had changed for them during the pandemic, and then transitioned towards asking how women in the household had been affected, especially in terms of their care responsibilities. This worked to some extent in having men discuss the links between greater and gendered care burdens, strained incomes, and increased tensions at home, including talking about estrangement and divorce in some cases.

The concept of trust was equally elusive, and the solution here was to ground it in questions about the pandemic and vaccines. The initial plan to ask about how institutional trust had changed during the pandemic did not work for the reasons discussed above – broad questions about trust led to generic and abstract answers about a lack of satisfaction with state actors and institutions. It was also difficult for respondents to separate out their perceptions before and during the pandemic. However, we found that questions about the pandemic, the effectiveness or necessity of lockdowns, and willingness to get a vaccine quickly led to quite focused answers about levels and types of trust. Respondents talked easily about beliefs, disbeliefs, and conspiracies around the pandemic. We followed these tracks to ask why they held particular beliefs, their sources of (mis)information, why they thought state actors might be involved in any conspiracies they mentioned, and how wide-ranging they thought these beliefs were.

In summary, our ability to conduct research on dense and sensitive concepts in a difficult context depended on an additional three critical factors, including learning from the pilot phase to adapt each of our central theoretical concepts to the reality and language of our respondents; emphasising narratives of respondents' experiences and allowing these to lead the interview; and delegating more agency to the field research team in redesigning the question guide and our research strategy. While some of the challenges were heightened during the pandemic, our experience points to important lessons for researchers in 'normal' times, including the value of input from research participants at early stages of research to better capture how they understand, experience, and articulate research concepts.

### 3.3 Confronting the distance between research and practice

In conducting interviews during a pandemic, we have been confronted with a particularly intriguing ethical question that is inherent in much research but became particularly visible in this context: to what extent should, or can, researchers as theoretically 'neutral' observers of data remain distant from advocating for behavioural change when confronted by a fast-moving crisis? We were led to reflect on the traditional distance between researchers and advocates when we found that research participants were regularly sharing misinformation about the pandemic and vaccines with us in interviews. We were careful in ensuring that our field researchers were not responsible for introducing any conspiracies or misinformation about the pandemic to respondents.

However, many times, our respondents would discuss harmful or wrong information about Covid-19 and the vaccine. This misinformation became evident through vignettes of the vaccine being magnetic, made of human organs, and reducing life spans (a particularly pervasive belief was that people who got the vaccine would die within two years). Some questioned why vaccines were being given to healthy adults instead of to Covid-19 patients, some argued that the vaccine was useless because they knew someone who had contracted the virus despite getting a dose, while others claimed that the government was grotesquely exaggerating numbers to receive aid that they were subsequently misusing.

This trend of misinformation reflects broader challenges of rumours and misinformation around public health crises (e.g. Chigudu 2020; Wigmore 2016; Wilkinson and Leach 2015), though the structural inequalities, power dynamics, and histories of marginalisation of informal workers may make them particularly distrustful of the state and related public health information.

Being confronted with this misinformation raised an important question to us as researchers: do we have a duty to correct misinformation on vaccines when health outcomes are at stake? Field researchers described 'an invisible burden' on their shoulders to correct harmful misinformation, though simultaneously they felt unsure about their role in doing so as researchers rather than advocates, doctors, or public health officials. As our research centrally explores the concepts of trust in relation to the state and public health measures, there was also the concern that sharing or correcting information about the vaccine would unduly bias responses to interview questions.

After extensive discussions within the team, we decided to incorporate a discussion of vaccines and misinformation, including sharing public health guidelines on vaccines, the personal decisions of researchers to get vaccines when available, and information regarding vaccination centres, as well as honestly answering any questions that respondents posed about vaccines

and public health guidelines. However, we deferred all questions and discussions about this to the end of the interview to ensure that they did not bias responses in any way. Respondents' reactions to these conversations varied – while many reacted in a broadly positive and friendly manner and said that they would consider the perspectives offered, others remained unconvinced. Some became noticeably quieter and unresponsive, reinforcing for us the importance of leaving this conversation to the end of the interaction.

#### **4 Implications and limitations**

In this article we have discussed key challenges that we faced in studying informality and the state through an international collaboration during a pandemic, reflected on some of the ethical challenges it presents, and documented some of the strategies we undertook to pursue robust research in difficult contexts. This has included changing data collection and interview strategies to allow for more flexibility, cooperating closely with civil society organisations, and building new partnerships. Bridging conceptual divides has required an iterative process of revising our language and emphasising different narrative structures to better capture the reality of the state and state interactions in terms of how research participants experience them.

By way of a conclusion, we reflect on the limitations that remain, as well as their implications. There are at least three limitations that are important to highlight. First, the work in this project is ongoing – what we present in this article represents reflections across the team based on what we have learned so far. Further issues may – and likely will – arise, including with some of the strategies we have adopted. Finding robust answers to our research questions will remain a challenge going forward. On top of that, communicating these answers and engaging with policymakers, including by pushing back against harmful policies and suggesting alternatives, is in itself a part of what this project can offer some of the communities it has engaged with, and where delivery is still outstanding.

Second, what we describe here are changes and adaptations in our efforts to close the various distances inherent in this type of research – we do not imply that these distances have been overcome. There are a range of ways in which these distances remain and are structurally embedded in the spaces in which we research, and the ways in which research is conducted.

Third, both the research itself and the adaptations discussed here are embedded in and structured by the wider constraints of our research project – this includes the changing context of the pandemic in Lahore, the availability of our funding, and the timeline associated with it. We hope that some of these discussions are of interest to other researchers during this time, without implying that they are universally applicable.

The adaptations that we have used throughout our research highlight some wider and perhaps more hopeful implications about doing qualitative research during this difficult time. We highlight two in particular. The first implication has been that the traditional divisions between roles and responsibilities within research teams are sometimes more easily adjustable and traversable than is sometimes argued. Extending conversations about key theoretical aspects of projects beyond research leads and expanding the input of more junior researchers beyond implementation questions are possible, especially in a context where technology enables conversations across distances at little cost. With some publishers, widening authorship is not a difficult conversation – as evidenced by the authorship of this article. This is of central importance beyond the context of the pandemic, not merely because it is a part of changing hierarchies and exploitative practices in knowledge production, but also, as highlighted above, because forming research questions and concepts in conjunction with a wider research team and research participants can help bridge conceptual distances and sustain better research beyond the pandemic context.

The second implication is that complex qualitative work remains possible, even in the context of the pandemic. Given the difficulties involved in doing many 'traditional' forms of in-person fieldwork during the pandemic, much research has recently either pivoted to questions that can be answered with already available data or turned to 'quantitative fixes' – forms of data collection that do not require face-to-face interaction, such as online surveys or computer-assisted telephone interviews. While we recognise the virtues of such tools to answer some questions, and especially to conduct 'rapid response assessments', relying on these tools alone can exclude vulnerable populations and limit the types of questions we can ask.

There are substantial trade-offs and difficulties in conducting conceptually complex qualitative work in these contexts, as we have highlighted throughout this article, and may experience again when we seek to publish our findings. However, there is an imperative to finding 'qualitative fixes' and developing methodologies that can maintain participatory and inductive aspects, even in difficult contexts. This is because only such work can both keep inherently qualitative questions at the centre of academic debates and engage with populations that are already at a geographic, administrative, technological, political, or conceptual distance from more easily available methodologies.<sup>14</sup>

### Notes

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- 12 See Baczko and Dorronsoro (2020) for a more detailed discussion of the need to return to in-person fieldwork.
- 13 Naturally, there are still substantial challenges in managing a research team across multiple countries during a pandemic, ranging from arranging online trainings to the limitations of virtual workshops. These challenges have been the subject of many discussions in the past few months, so we do not expand on them here.
- 14 See here for a discussion of this **in the context of studying informality during the Covid-19 pandemic in Buenos Aires**.

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