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PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES: WHY DIFFERENT VOICES AND VIEWS MATTER

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Positioning Research for Impact: Lessons From a Funder During the Covid-19 Pandemic*†

Arjan de Haan¹ and Emma Sanchez-Swaren²

Abstract The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the value of robust, policy-relevant research to inform decision-making and heightened the need for evidence-informed responses to address worsening inequalities. While international development research has the potential to contribute to a more equitable world, research funders grapple with how to ensure that their support best enables researchers to respond to evolving evidence demands and influence policy and practice. This article reflects on lessons emerging from one of the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) rapid-response initiatives and highlights the ongoing experiences of our research partners in influencing policy to address the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. We conclude that flexibility of funding, promoting Southern leadership and embedded partnerships, and ongoing support for amplification of research results help to ensure that research is positioned for impact amid constantly evolving priorities. This has implications for research funding practices and underlines the importance of addressing inequities in access to research funding.

Keywords international development, Covid-19, research, policy influence, research funding, inequalities, gender.

1 Introduction

As Covid-19 engulfed the world in early 2020, decision makers everywhere were faced with a rapidly growing list of challenges, priorities, and policy choices. The pandemic reinforced the value of robust, policy-relevant research to inform decision-making. It also soon became clear that this included the need for evidence-informed policy responses to address long-standing inequalities made worse by the pandemic.

In that context, research funders were challenged to ensure that their support best enabled researchers to respond to evolving

evidence demands and to influence policy and practice. This article reflects on lessons that are emerging from one initiative in the field of development research, by Canada's IDRC. In March 2020, IDRC launched the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) initiative which provides funding to Southern-based research organisations to generate evidence for more equitable response to and recovery from the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. This initiative funds 21 projects across 42 countries,³ and includes dedicated support for knowledge translation and peer learning.⁴ This article documents case studies, contributed by CORE partners, to highlight ongoing experiences of conducting research and informing pandemic-response policy.

Based on this, we reflect on the opportunities and challenges donors face in supporting locally led research, and what practices donors – and research organisations – might prioritise moving forward, including funding modalities, promoting Southern-led research, partnerships, and ongoing support for amplification of research results.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2, we begin by situating this reflection within the broader context of research funding inequities. We then present four key themes: in Section 3, flexible funding in response to crisis; and in Section 4, positioning knowledge for impact; bolstering community responses; and adapting methods for a rapidly changing context. Alongside these reflections, we include case studies from our research partners of these dynamics in action. Section 5 concludes with lessons that the development research community can take forward from these experiences.

2 Unequal access to research funding

A discussion of Covid-19's role in exacerbating inequalities, and the role of research in addressing this, must recognise the structural and long-standing disparities in access to research funding for Southern organisations. Analysis for Covid-19 research funding globally reveals that only a very small proportion of funding for Covid-19-related research is dedicated to low-income countries and involves local researchers.

A review by the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) of the first seven months of Covid-19 research funding in Africa found that only 5 per cent of funded projects involved at least one African country, and only about 3 per cent of total research funding was directed to research in Africa (Antonio *et al.* 2020).

Global health research has been strongly dominated by Northern institutions, and it is not clear whether this has been reversed during the pandemic. Norton *et al.*'s (2021) analysis of over 10,000 health projects in the database of global Covid-19 research established by the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) and the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious

Disease Preparedness (GloPID-R) initiative shows that only 16 per cent of projects involve at least one official development assistance (ODA)-recipient country and only 15 per cent take place exclusively in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

In economics, there is a similar Northern dominance, as recently documented by Amarante and colleagues (2021) and Rodrik (2021). Cavanagh and colleagues' (2021) analysis of data from the American Economic Association registry of randomised controlled trials revealed that since the pandemic there had been a decreased proportion of the trials in Africa, and a decreased participation by female researchers.

Moreover, Pinho-Gomes *et al.* (2020) highlight the under-representation of women in article authorship, with lowest representation of African female scholars. Reviews of publication trends pointed to a decline in articles published by women during the pandemic, likely driven by disproportionate increases in care work, disparities in teaching responsibilities, and greater risk aversion with regard to pivoting to new projects (Vigliante 2020).

These inequalities matter more than ever, given the global nature of the pandemic, its unequal impacts, and the need for locally specific responses. We now turn to the IDRC response to support local research.

3 IDRC response: flexible funding in response to the pandemic

Global research funders responded rapidly to the onset of the pandemic in early 2020.⁵ IDRC supported six initiatives in response to the crisis, ranging in focus from refugee health to food systems to artificial intelligence.⁶ This article draws on the lessons of the CORE initiative, which provides funding to Southern-based research organisations to generate evidence for more equitable response to and recovery from the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic.

While the scale of the pandemic was unknown when this initiative was launched in March 2020, our assessment was that the severe impacts of lockdowns on livelihoods and inequalities warranted prioritising research on the non-medical dimensions of the pandemic. We focused this on three broad thematic priorities: macroeconomic policies for relief and recovery; supporting the essential economic activity and protection of workers and small producers; and promoting democratic governance and effective, accountable responses to the pandemic. Across the themes, we placed particular emphasis on promoting equitable responses and recovery that takes into account the needs of those most impacted.

Flexibility of funding was key to this initiative. IDRC's targeted call for research proposals offered relatively flexible funding along the above-mentioned broad themes, with few geographic limitations.

Research organisations could use the funds to continue or pivot existing research in light of new Covid-19 constraints or propose new areas of research in response to the crisis. This flexibility was prioritised as – back in spring 2020 – the trajectory of the pandemic was of course unknown.

This flexibility was made possible by two factors. First, IDRC built on its extensive network in the policy–research community in the global South, built up through decades of programming. Second, we took forward the findings of the external evaluation of IDRC's Think Tank Initiative (TTI) – which supported Southern national thinktanks over the course of a decade – which had shown that relatively flexible funding had effectively enabled recipients to engage meaningfully with policymaking and navigate the uncertainty of policy influence.⁷ As a rapid-response effort, the CORE initiative did not include the core funding elements of this earlier initiative, but it did take forward these lessons on donor flexibility as key to achieving policy uptake objectives.

Within the initiative's broad thematics, research organisations were able to define context-specific research questions and methodologies and adapt to evolving policy priorities. While Covid-19's impacts vary dramatically across settings, certain common findings are emerging: significant job loss, especially in the informal sector; interruptions to health services and education; increases in women's care burden; rising food insecurity; shrinking civic space; and with exacerbating inequalities across all these.

The flexibility of the research support also promoted collaboration across contexts. Most projects supported under the initiative are multi-country in focus, and several are multi-region. The majority work in consortia of multiple organisations, with some partnerships established from project inception and others emerging as projects progress. Flexibility in the research funding enabled partnerships to emerge organically around pressing research needs and opportunities for comparative learning, while supporting institutions to pivot ongoing work to respond to the pandemic. The networks that have emerged have also enabled the sharing of data and comparing of evidence across contexts, as well as the exchange of good practices for carrying out quality research under the current conditions.

4 Findings

4.1 Positioning knowledge for impact: embedded partnerships

Positioning research for impact and influence is paramount for all development research and for IDRC.⁸ Despite the global nature of the pandemic, the articulation of its impacts and needed policy responses are deeply contextual.⁹ Key to embedding research in context is situating it within these policy spaces, and thus creating effective research–policy partnerships.¹⁰ Several CORE projects provide examples of these principles in practice.

The institutions supported by this IDRC initiative range from independent thinktanks to academic institutions to global or regional research networks. Each of these positionalities informs how researchers are seeking to influence policy with the evidence they are generating. Researchers have established direct partnerships with officials at different levels of government and tailored research questions to address their most pressing policy needs. In other instances, researchers were able to align their work with the priorities of the civil society organisations, working to raise the voices of those being left behind in pandemic responses.

The following description of the work by Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE)¹¹ in Peru is an example of working with both government officials and civil society. In efforts to address growing food insecurity in the country, GRADE works alongside groups of vendors to amplify their perspectives and seek more inclusive policy responses. Their approach highlights the importance of adapting partnership strategies to address the priorities of different actors – in this case national and municipal policy institutions as well as the private sector.

Case 1: Flexibility to respond to changing policy priorities

Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), a private non-profit and independent research centre in Peru, is bringing a gender lens to understanding the role of food systems, labour markets, and social protection to address socioeconomic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project supports healthier food systems by developing tools to enable more efficient local food markets and reduce the risk they pose for spreading diseases. The research supports sustained food security by exploring novel ways to ensure that food supplies reach vulnerable groups, especially during the anticipated severe economic downturn. GRADE concentrates on solving immediate problems while creating more efficient and gender-inclusive systems. By taking time to understand the dynamics of their knowledge users, they are able to shift their activities to respond to community and policy needs and priorities.

Initially, GRADE worked with the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) to design a national survey assessing whether community-based food security strategies (namely, *comedores* (communal kitchens) and *ollas comunes* (common pots)) were meeting the needs of the most vulnerable. Political changes led to turnover among officials and difficulty progressing this partnership. GRADE then turned to the municipal level, where they worked with the Municipality of Lima to design a protocol for providing support to

ollas comunes, which are community-led efforts in poor neighbourhoods to share food in times of disaster. These are located in poorer areas and not subsidised or officially recognised.

The Municipality of Lima was in the process of creating a database to register the city's *ollas comunes*, and to gather food donations from private entities to distribute to them. Recognising this opportunity for evidence to inform this effort, GRADE helped to design and evaluate an additional programme on nutrition management and organisation, aimed at empowering the women who lead the *ollas comunes*. GRADE also resumed work with MIDIS at the national level on a new strategy to identify and prioritise vulnerable areas and determine *comedores/ollas* that should receive food support. GRADE thus supported this new strategy by convening MIDIS, the Municipality of Lima, and the Ministry of Defense to identify synergies and shared objectives.

GRADE also collaborated with groups of women food vendors to develop an online shopping platform with digital payments, which was tested and then rolled out in four markets. Training vendors on the use of the app and digital payment methods is expected to help close gender gaps in financial inclusion, technical skills, and entrepreneurship. To strengthen credibility of this approach and increase the likelihood that it is scaled nationally, GRADE partnered with the Peruvian Bank Association (ASBANC) to systematise and evaluate the results of the digital payments initiative. It has attracted the attention of the Ministry of Production, and GRADE has been made a member of the executive task force for the improvement of food markets.

Gaining proximity to public officials required approaching them from the perspective of understanding what their priorities were and identifying ways GRADE could support those goals, rather than pushing a project agenda. Systematic reviews of protocols and laws clarified the dynamics of these actors and their needs, and built trust. This up-front investment in building and understanding pathways to impact at different levels will better position GRADE to influence policy decisions as the partnership progresses, drawing on their grounding in community efforts.

Contribution by Ricardo Fort, Principal Investigator,
Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo

To ensure that research is likely to have an impact, the research agenda cannot be driven only by assessment of knowledge gaps; priorities need to be shared with users or stakeholders, throughout the research process. Several CORE projects are promoting sustained interactivity through inclusion of policy actors in project-steering groups, to establish feedback loops and ensure that research remains demand-driven as policy needs evolve alongside changing pandemic realities. For one project measuring Covid-19's impact on poverty at a national level, endorsement from inception by government officials allowed researchers to seek their input on the variables to be studied, tailoring these to address specific policy needs. Another project led by the Economic Policy Research Centre focuses on the pandemic's impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Uganda. It brings government officials from relevant ministries into conversation with representatives from national SME business associations. Project dissemination workshops and steering group meetings ensure that actors deliberate together on appropriate responses and objectives.

In Pakistan, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) harnessed its long-standing relationships with key policy actors to promote mutuality and policy adaptability.¹² SDPI included high-level ministries' representatives in its project advisory group, seeking their input on the project approach from the inception and creating ongoing feedback loops. When government actors declared that a Food Security Dashboard was their top priority, SDPI began to work closely with the Ministry of National Food Security and Research (MNFSR) and the Food Security Advisory Council on a Food Security Dashboard that monitors prices of essential commodities at federal and provincial levels (Alvi 2020). The Dashboard has since been approved by the prime minister and launched with MNFSR. The research has gained traction through SDPI's Public Policy Dialogues, which bring together policymakers, the private sector, academics, and development partners for open dialogue.

The Southern-led research network Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP) further demonstrates the advantage of contextually embedded research in conjunction with capacity building for policy influence. Through its Policy Outreach Committee,¹³ PEP supports local teams, often comprising early-career researchers, to develop research that is relevant for and communicated strategically to country-specific stakeholders. By assigning the Policy Outreach Committee members as mentors to these local researchers, PEP builds local capacity and ensures that research addresses current (and evolving) policy questions and is positioned for use.

Case 2: PEP's approach to building bridges between research and policy

The Partnership for Economic Policy's (PEP) approach is premised on the belief that evidence produced from an in-country perspective, by empowered and engaged local researchers, results in better policy choices, more sustainable development outcomes, and more inclusive policy debates. As a network, PEP facilitates collaboration between local researchers and stakeholders to produce contextualised, policy-relevant evidence while strengthening the capacity of these researchers through training and mentorship programmes, including for policy analysis and outreach.

Through this approach, the PEP-supported team in Pakistan held periodic meetings with officials from the National Planning Commission to share their latest findings and discuss evolving policy needs. Each meeting led to identifying a new set of policy scenarios for the team to analyse. After presenting the results from their third round of simulations, the team found out that their initial findings had helped inform the formulation of the 2021–22 federal budget. Specifically, in light of the team's simulation results, the Federal Bureau of Revenue decided to extend the tax relief programme for another year and introduce a targeted subsidies programme for agriculture. The findings also influenced the National Tariff Commission's decision to reduce tariffs on imports of input and intermediate goods in order to enhance industrial competitiveness.

In Nigeria, the PEP-supported project was integrated into the working agenda of the special Economic Sustainability Committee, created by President Buhari in March 2020 to develop the country's crisis response and recovery plan. The Committee – formed of high-level representatives from various government agencies – not only informs the research agenda, but also monitors progress and results through periodic reports by the PEP-affiliated researcher.

In Zimbabwe, the PEP-supported team's influencing strategy focused on the National Covid-19 Task Force. In June 2021, the lead researcher was invited to present the research and findings to the Chairperson of the Task Force, the Minister of Defence and Security. The Minister immediately presented these findings to the Cabinet and conveyed that the government intends to implement some, if not all, of the resulting policy recommendations.

Contribution by Marjorie Alain, Director of Communication, **Partnership for Economic Policy**

While the impact of these efforts is still bearing out – and pathways to impact are never fully linear – our programming experience suggests that previously documented strategies for effectively embedding knowledge users in research projects hold true under pandemic conditions. Partnership with knowledge users opens avenues to policy influence through access to national committees and working groups. This access is particularly vital in a crisis context, with its heightened imperative to shorten research to impact cycles, and with its increased demands on policymakers.

The inclusion of CORE-supported researchers in pandemic-response committees and government task forces speaks to the embeddedness of the institutions themselves in the broader policy context and emphasises the value of existing connections between researchers and knowledge users for research uptake. The demonstrated value of this embeddedness underscores the importance of investing in local research and partnering with institutions with existing access to the relevant policy actors.¹⁴

Even the best designed project feedback loops – through advisory committees or steering groups – can be impacted by political events, shifting political interests, institutional changes, and staff turnover. Adaptability to changing policy contexts has been made possible by the contextual knowledge of the institutions and individuals carrying out the research, including existing in-roads, networks, and capacity to engage. In two of the PEP projects, in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire, the research mentors that support the early-career researchers reported playing a key role in helping the projects adapt to the specific and changing circumstances.

Research funding that prioritises positioning knowledge for impact can support researchers in embedding knowledge users and policy actors in projects. In particular, project design, team composition, and budgets, in our view, should include 'research uptake' or 'knowledge translation' plans, and donors can support learning about the capacity for research uptake.

4.2 Bolstering community responses: research amplifying diverse voices

The examples above highlight how researchers engaged with government officials responsible for pandemic responses. Ensuring that citizens' and community voices are part of and reflected in the research and policy recommendations is equally critical. The pandemic has demonstrated that this is particularly true in the context of weaker state capacity (and/or 'political will') and, for example, when the most vulnerable, such as migrants and informal sector workers, are invisible to government statistics or thinking.

The CORE-supported project led by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) points to the

power of partnerships between researchers and civil society groups.¹⁵ Its work shows how researchers can play a key role in connecting community-level priorities and government action. WIEGO's approach is helping to ensure that the needs of those most impacted by the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic inform policy decisions and create awareness of the commitment and effectiveness (and limitations) of community-based responses. The work includes working with grass-roots organisations and networks to generate the evidence that fuels their advocacy.

Case 3: WIEGO's approach to co-production: grass-roots leadership in research

Through a longitudinal study spanning 12 cities, the global network WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) is investigating the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on informal workers' livelihoods (WIEGO 2021). Over 90 per cent of workers in developing countries are informally employed, with higher rates of informal employment for women. The pandemic has had catastrophic impacts on these workers. WIEGO uses a mixed-method approach that combines a survey questionnaire with in-depth stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions. To inform responses to this crisis, WIEGO has partnered with membership-based organisations (MBOs) of informal workers.

By conducting research in partnership with MBOs, WIEGO generates results that will be used by their partners in their ongoing advocacy processes that impact on their livelihoods. In Thailand, WIEGO partnered with the Federation of Informal Workers of Thailand and HomeNet to present a targeted list of demands to the Minister of Labour, who in response convened two Ad Hoc Committees. These led to agreements to reduce social security contributions for informal workers, expand access to ministerial rehabilitation centres, and open a Covid-19 check-up centre, as well as to the introduction of a new Informal Worker Law within the National Assembly.

In partnering with MBOs such as HomeNet and the Federation of Informal Workers of Thailand, WIEGO is adopting an approach honed and developed over the years through a range of collaborative, multi-city studies. This approach is characterised by co-production, fostering collective ownership over the research process and results. Through partnership with HomeNet and the Federation of Informal Workers of Thailand, the respondents are included in the survey process via existing relationships. By participating, they

connect with and gain access to a window of support or mutual aid from the partner organisations which they belong to. Organisations involved in the study are generally able to connect respondents to available resources from government or other non-governmental agencies. Also, the MBOs of informal workers are the primary data owners. Data and reporting for their use is prioritised and tailored to meet their needs. The main indication that WIEGO achieves this ownership is the regular use of this data in advocacy with governments for meeting policy demands.

This approach to co-production and shared ownership requires flexibility in research design and budgeting. It may involve the need for extra resources for researcher trainings, translations, and even compensation to participating workers as a form of mutual aid. It may also require flexibility with timelines, as worker organisations juggle multiple priorities in addition to the research partnership and may need additional time for data collection. WIEGO aims to strengthen the research, policy analysis, and advocacy capacity of the MBOs they partner with, while rejecting Northern-centred, extractive, or top-down research approaches. Conducting research with partner organisations makes it more likely that results are used in context – often shared back and validated with the respondents themselves.

By embedding research in relationships and in context, the resulting data is richer and more reliable. Tools are often designed in close consultation with local organisations and local researchers. Working in partnership with MBOs means that interviews and surveys with workers are often being conducted by individuals whom the worker knows – or by a representative of an organisation they are a member of. These relationships of trust can facilitate more precise data collection, which WIEGO then analyses with its partners, which is particularly crucial in a rapidly changing crisis.

Contribution by Ana Carolina Ogando, Research Associate; Marty Chen, Senior Advisor; Jenna Harvey, Global Focal Cities Coordinator, **Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing**

WIEGO's experience and the examples shared above underscore the importance of funding locally led research, with organisations that are embedded in the context within which they are seeking to affect change. It also highlights the value of investing in organisational strengthening of these institutions. Their connectedness means that they are best able to respond to emerging issues, as demonstrated in the extreme by the pandemic.

4.3 Approaches and methods: research for a rapidly changing context

While the pandemic led to a surge in demand for evidence, both on pandemic impacts and policy effectiveness, health risks and mitigation measures posed limitations on the ability to conduct research. Lockdown and travel restrictions limited collection of empirical data, with telephone interviews and other remote methods replacing regular fieldwork methods.¹⁶

The pandemic context highlighted the value of a varied set of research approaches and methods. On one side of the methodological spectrum, PEP research applied simulation techniques to assess the impact of Covid-19-related measures and the associated social protection interventions. With a need for rapid insights at national scale and in the absence of reliable household surveys and macroeconomic data, these simulations help answer questions identified by government partners. This approach compares scenarios without and following shocks, with the hypothesised shocks based on labour force or enterprise surveys where available, often relying on telephone surveys.

On the other hand, WIEGO's approach has a participatory emphasis. It uses mixed methods to promote the co-production of evidence (based on existing relationships), and in-depth exploration of the level and depth of the impacts of the pandemic. Qualitative analysis helps interpret and nuance the quantitative data, as it adds the 'human dimension' as well as context to the 'data'. WIEGO applied a longitudinal approach, again facilitated by continued partnerships, to secure a comprehensive tracking of how the multidimensional crisis (with the economic, health, food insecurity, and care crises interlinked) and multi-year crisis (with multiple waves of the pandemic, new variants, repeat restrictions and ongoing recessions) has impacted distinct occupational groups of informal workers.

During the pandemic, virtual methods have predominated, and many research teams have relied on telephone surveys. This inevitably leads to new challenges. For example, it has increased the need for ethical reviews to assess pandemic-related risks for both researchers and research participants. Ensuring that all groups are represented in surveys, and particularly under the circumstances of lockdown, and creating private and safe spaces for research participants has been shown to be particularly important.¹⁷

The pandemic's impacts on the conduct of research extended beyond the choice of methodology. One project that adopted telephone-based surveys found that they experienced higher refusal rates than pre-pandemic.¹⁸ Lack of internet access in certain locations or among specific groups (e.g. low-income, female-headed households) limited intersectional perspectives being reflected in research samples. Also, capturing data that

disaggregated gender beyond binary categories was more challenging by telephone, where questions of this nature could be considered sensitive or cause offence. The project employed an innovative e-diary approach to gathering qualitative data – which entailed respondents documenting 14 days of their lockdown experience through messages, images, videos, and voice clips shared via WhatsApp – but only people with smartphones could be reached via this method.

To address the lack of visible cues and limited interpersonal connections, WIEGO's research teams worked to establish a sense of empathy and deep listening over the telephone. The inclusion of open-ended questions at the end of the survey allowed respondents to speak freely about concerns they held and challenges they were facing. These open-ended questions not only captured elements of workers' lived experience, but also worked to establish a rapport with the respondents.

None of the changes in methods are out of the bounds of existing methodological approaches, and some may contribute to improvements in research approaches in the long run. Institutions found ways to choose the most applicable methods from their arsenal of methods – such as PEP modelling, GRADE building on earlier work, and WIEGO leveraging their networks. The ability to adapt methods, shift timelines, and, in some cases, pivot research focus has been and will continue to be essential both to obtaining robust data and responding to changing evidence demands. However, the ability to adapt quickly, pivot, and articulate different voices relies on strong, multidisciplinary research capacities. For research funders, this also requires funding modalities that are aligned in terms of both long-term support to build needed capacity and short-term flexibility to respond to circumstances.

5 Conclusion

Supporting and carrying out research during and in response to an ongoing pandemic has been an exercise in adaptability and responsiveness. The heightened urgency for solutions, changing policy priorities, and unpredictable research conditions have intensified existing challenges to promoting evidence-based responses to socioeconomic inequalities. The reflections in this article offer a glimpse of how researchers are responding to these extremes, and how funders can support this.

From an IDRC perspective, a call for enhanced support to Southern researchers is neither new nor surprising. The contribution of this article is to show how funding dedicated to supporting Southern research has been able to contribute to locally relevant responses, while also informing global practices and debates. We are doing this with the insights gained halfway into the programme, which allows us to assess how organisations are positioning themselves for impact, with some indications of

successes. This has not been without missteps and challenges. Of course, much more analysis could usefully be done.

At this point, the following themes are emerging as important elements of impactful development research. Mirroring earlier IDRC experience, particularly around the TTI, we are seeing during these exceptional circumstances the value of relatively flexible funding (see also Rose and Estes 2021). Local needs vary and change, and so do opportunities for research to support inclusive policies. While this heterogeneity makes drawing clear-cut conclusions more difficult, we see evidence that a range of stakeholders' needs can be met when research organisations have the flexibility to set research priorities.

We are also learning lessons about the types of research partners and approaches that are effective in positioning evidence for use. Leveraging existing connections and nuanced understanding of policy dynamics in their context, researchers are pursuing a range of strategies for impact: from working closely with government officials, to brokering private–public partnerships and dialogue, to partnering with established civil society and grass-roots organisations. We believe that there is significant value in research funders supporting this diversity of approaches.

Finally, we are seeing the value of sustained support to local organisations. Support over the long term helps promote the embeddedness of research organisations, enabling them to build trust with relevant knowledge users through consistent engagement. It also allows for the strengthening of methodological capacity within institutions over time. These two elements – embeddedness and methodological adaptability – have been key to positioning knowledge for use in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The global research community has responded to the pandemic with significant efforts to support responses with timely evidence – recognising both the global nature of the crisis and the heterogeneous impacts. However, inequalities in research funding have persisted, across geographies and social differences, including gender. This imbalance predates the current crisis and its implications for pandemic recovery are still emerging. Supporting local policy-focused research will continue to be a priority in the ongoing pandemic and recovery from it.

Notes

- * This *IDS Bulletin* was funded by the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) through the Covid Collective. The Collective brings together the expertise of UK- and Southern-based research partner organisations and offers a rapid social science research response to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19-related development challenges. The Covid Collective cannot

be held responsible for errors, omissions, or any consequences arising from the use of information contained. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the Covid Collective, or any other contributing organisation. For further information, please contact: covid-collective.net.

- † This article has been written by two staff of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) who were directly involved in the implementation of the initiative described here. The views expressed here are those of the two authors, and do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors. The article includes direct inputs from IDRC's partners (see boxes in Section 4). The conclusion drawn and errors in the article remain the responsibility of the two authors.
- 1 Arjan de Haan, Senior Program Specialist, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.
- 2 Emma Sanchez-Swaren, formerly Program Officer, Democratic and Inclusive Governance Division, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.
- 3 See IDRC news story '[New Projects Address Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Populations](#)'; this includes grants to organisations and for projects with a network of organisations.
- 4 Southern Voice has created a **digital knowledge hub**, which draws on 700 resources produced by its members; the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) supports IDRC and the research partners to maximise the learning generated across the research portfolio and deepen engagement with governments, civil society, and the scientific community: [Covid-19 Responses for Equity \(CORE\) Knowledge Translation Support](#).
- 5 The response in clinical trials is described in Park *et al.* (2021); a similar overview of socioeconomic research is not available to our knowledge, but, for example, ResearchGate's 'Covid-19 research community' lists 26,352 contributions (as of 10 September 2021).
- 6 **IDRC's response to Covid-19** amounted to a CA\$54.6m investment, in more than 65 countries. The CORE Initiative allocated some 20 per cent of the annual budget, in the first quarter of the financial year.
- 7 This was documented for the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) that IDRC implemented during 2008–19, in the external evaluation by Christoplos *et al.* (2019): 'Flexibility and grantee discretion have been central to achievement of [TTI] outcomes since the choice of what is the most appropriate public policy to adopt on a specific issue at a given time and context is never predictable or straightforward, even under the best of circumstances' (p5). 'The efforts of the TTI grantees reflect a recognition of how policy influencing processes are based on relationships and networks' (p6). See also Rose and Estes (2021).
- 8 IDRC's **RQ+ framework** assesses research quality not only on technical merit, but also on the positioning of the research findings for influence and impact. Assessing the impact of

- research requires qualitative, grounded assessments of local context.
- 9 For example, Adams *et al.* (2021) describe the specific pandemic impacts in Africa, the role of demographic age structure, and stress that pandemic mitigation measures need to consider the multiple impacts and context-dependence of mitigation measures.
 - 10 Georgalakis and Rose (2019) and Georgalakis (2020) highlight three aspects of effective partnerships: bounded mutuality, sustained interactivity (with a focus on engagement from project start), and policy adaptability. See **PEP's approach** to supporting researchers to develop such engagement.
 - 11 **GRADE website.**
 - 12 **SDPI website.** The institute's Covid-19 research is described in its **Covid-19 blogs.**
 - 13 See **PEP Policy Outreach Committee.**
 - 14 This was also a key conclusion from a discussion hosted by the Center for Global Development (CGD) and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA): both existing policy–research partnerships and the nature of partnerships are critical (Rose and Estes 2021); also, as mentioned, highlighted (pre-pandemic) by Georgalakis and Rose (2019).
 - 15 As far as we are aware, there appears to be a lack of reflection on research process led by advocacy-focused organisations, but see Mayne *et al.* (2018) and Pollard and Court (2005).
 - 16 Strachan (2021) describes the main challenges on research methods caused by the pandemic.
 - 17 UN Women call on local governments to **ensure safe spaces**, including the strengthening and expansion of shelters, helplines, and counselling adapted to the crisis context.
 - 18 See **Research ICT Africa.**

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