

# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

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

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# Introduction: Pandemic Perspectives – Doing Research Differently During Covid-19\*

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**Abstract** This article situates, against the backdrop of the Covid-19 crisis and the many systemic inequalities the pandemic has highlighted, challenges and opportunities for researchers and commissioners of research. It provides examples from social science research of how researchers have demonstrated agility and adaptation during the pandemic in a range of contexts. It summarises findings and lessons around access and engagement, consent, ethics and incentives, and power and perspectives. It concludes that research supported by the Covid Collective is providing useful insights for doing research differently, which in turn provides real hope for research to help transform knowledge and transform lives.

**Keywords** Covid-19 pandemic, social sciences, Covid Collective, research, research funding and commissioning, research ethics, power relations, research methods, knowledge ecosystems, research innovation.

## 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is a prime example of a universal, or international, challenge (Leach *et al.* 2020). The pandemic is highlighting the world's vulnerability to epidemics and infectious diseases, and the limited capacities for effective preparedness and response (Borgonovi *et al.* 2021). The disease and subsequent public health measures are having dramatic impacts on livelihoods, economies, and societies, with negative effects on those who are already poor and marginalised. It has laid bare systemic inequalities and injustices and raised questions of accountability, governance, and state–society relations.

Responding effectively to the Covid-19 crisis and in ways that address systemic inequalities in the longer term (Taylor and McCarthy 2021), however, raises many challenges – and opportunities – for researchers and commissioners of research.

This *IDS Bulletin* draws on experiences from social science research projects around the world supported by the Covid Collective<sup>3</sup> and provides concrete examples of how researchers have demonstrated agility and adaptation in a range of contexts. It offers insights and lessons for research, conceptually and practically, and provides potential directions for policy and decision-making around research prioritisation, funding, and support. Its aim is primarily to frame, explore, and conceptualise the challenge and opportunity of 'doing development research differently' during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This article introduces and illustrates the research challenges and opportunities arising from doing development research differently. It presents a summary of insights and lessons from emerging literature and the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, such as lessons around access and engagement, consent, ethics and incentives, and power and perspectives. It indicates how Covid Collective projects are providing useful learning for doing research differently, relevant to researchers as well as commissioners of research, and offers concluding thoughts as a bridge to the articles that follow.

## **2 Doing development research differently – the importance of social sciences and the role of the Covid Collective**

Research is helping to illuminate the multidimensional challenges of the pandemic and providing evidence about responses and potential ways forward. Medical sciences have played a hugely important role in the development of Covid-19 vaccines, epidemiology and the design of public health responses, and diagnostics and treatments. Fundamentally, however, all responses to the pandemic are social, even those that appear to be narrowly medical; social contexts and issues are always implicated. This is why social science is needed to inform all responses, even though those designing policy responses have not always listened to the evidence provided by social science research (Cairney 2021).

As the pandemic has continued, researchers have engaged in research from across the social sciences and arts and humanities, in the UK and internationally, complementing and often intersecting with the goals of important medical research. They have worked creatively, collectively, and collaboratively to ensure that co-created knowledge and evidence is made available to policymakers and practitioners. Undertaking research during such a turbulent period, often in very challenging contexts, has led to innovation and fresh approaches, incorporating different disciplines and a variety of perspectives.

Launched in October 2020, the Covid Collective sought to address emerging social science questions and needs arising in relation to the pandemic. Bringing together initially the expertise of eight partner organisations and coordinated by

the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Collective, an initiative developed by IDS and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO) Research and Evidence Division, involves 28 partners and supports 56 projects in 34 countries in South America, the Middle East, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. The Collective focuses on governance, social development and inclusion, conflict, and humanitarian thematic areas, and has two main aims: (1) to demonstrate the enhanced benefits of co-generation of research and evidence addressing the challenges of Covid-19 through a coordinated network of research organisations; and (2) to support evidence-informed action through knowledge curation, learning, and strategic communication.

The Collective has helped to forge new, effective solidarities, relationships, and collective action which can help tackle global development challenges. Its projects address a wide array of issues including, for example, the impact of Covid-19 on poverty; vaccine distribution and uptake; the life experiences of people who are marginalised through disability, exclusion, and displacement; and on the multiple ways in which communities, citizens, and policy actors have responded to the pandemic. Many of its findings are reflecting what is happening in real time in different contexts, whilst projects are also highlighting lessons and directions for mid- and longer-term responses that may help to transform the structural inequalities that have contributed to such a negative impact on people's lives.

Evidence has been generated about resilience in the midst of a pandemic, including new learning on factors that have helped determine more or less effective responses: for example, openness and trust in public authorities; recognition and empowerment of local authority and collectives; and about how social, political, and economic contexts shape what works well, why, and for whom. Projects are identifying and supporting processes of rights-claiming, as citizens are finding ways to gain new rights, as well as emerging citizen-state relations, and ways to promote greater transparency and accountability. It is also generating learning on how to tackle interconnected global challenges (e.g. climate change and biodiversity, poverty and inequalities, gender justice) in socially just ways. Fundamentally, its research seeks to provide evidence that supports transformations in perspective, worldview, and practice – including universality and mutual learning, and a genuine integration of social science within the evidence-informed policy landscape.

In addition to evidence and data on the impact of Covid-19, the projects are providing important findings on how social science research is itself evolving and adapting in the face of both challenges and opportunities. This *IDS Bulletin* highlights examples of what is being learned about processes of research; how researchers are doing research differently; and why this

matters. Its articles describe methodological innovation, and even transformative shifts in relationships between different actors involved in the research process. Each article approaches a different dimension of research, anchors its debate in relevant literature, provides real-life examples of the issues in concrete settings, and includes implications and recommendations for policy and practice. Its contributors are located mainly within the projects that the Covid Collective supports, with the addition also of a perspective from a funder that commissions research.

This *IDS Bulletin* asks and attempts to answer questions about the extent to which the pandemic is causing researchers, and those who support research, to revisit their understanding of 'how research is done', and why. It also explores how doing research differently is having an impact on generating rapid, useful, and credible findings. It considers what is being learned about approaches to research which may challenge existing assumptions about concepts and research methods, about engagement with actors and audiences, and about the value, use, and nature of evidence itself. Several articles reflect on what is being learned about changes in power and perspectives whereby contextual, structural, and intellectual norms are changing and potentially rebalancing knowledge asymmetries between the global South and North, and the extent to which the pandemic has catalysed changes to research commissioning and design. From these lessons, it considers the longer-term outlook of the impact of changes on established research approaches.

### **3 Doing research differently in context: challenges and opportunities from the literature**

The pandemic's lockdowns, border closures, and social distancing restrictions severely affected established research practice. Strategic challenges around the commissioning, design, and leadership of research quickly emerged, along with the logistical challenges of identifying and accessing participants, incentivising research, ethics, and safeguarding, especially among the most marginalised and vulnerable. In response, researchers and commissioners were forced to re-evaluate and adapt. Examples are emerging in the literature of practical and innovative solutions with a greater role for digital technology, flexible funding, and leadership by researchers in the global South (Strachan 2021; Araujo *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin* and de Haan and Sanchez-Swaren, this *IDS Bulletin*). The success of these solutions indicates their benefit to research approaches beyond Covid-19, and their contribution to broader development research debates around decentralised decision-making, equitable partnerships, and climate sensitivity (Amarante *et al.* 2021; Hall and Tandon 2017; Strachan 2021; Howard and Roberts 2020).

### 3.1 Access and engagement

One of the biggest research challenges has been how to identify and access participants remotely due to restrictions on face-to-face interaction. As well as finding alternative ways to identify participants and undertake sampling, research strategies have also quickly adapted to remote approaches to undertake the research itself, primarily by telephone and online (Hall, Gaved and Sargent 2021), enabling data collection to continue despite lockdowns and distancing. Positive experiences for participants are emerging, for example among people living in poverty who own telephones, indicating potential mainstreaming of the approach in the longer term (Rahman *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). Yet remote approaches can miss participants that do not have access to telephones and the internet, and can lead to ethical and safeguarding issues around safe spaces and data confidentiality. These issues disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and marginalised and are exacerbated in fragile, conflict, and authoritarian situations (UNCTAD 2020; Howard and Roberts 2020; Birchall 2021; Araujo *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*).

A number of approaches have been taken to overcome these issues and ensure that vulnerable voices are safely included in remote research. Researchers have used a range of channels (WhatsApp, Line, Facebook, WeChat, etc.), text messages, a cluster of phone numbers around a participant (the participant's spouse, close friends, etc.) to increase ways and success of contact, computer-assisted telephone interviews (where trained interviewers conduct live calls and can support longer questionnaires than other approaches), interactive voice response (a pre-recorded voice system to ask questions), and multimodal platforms (Strachan 2021). The benefits of remote approaches to participation have been noted in the literature, such as text-based focus groups offering greater confidentiality and being used to discuss sensitive topics, audio diaries helping participants to describe and reflect on their experiences, and video conferencing allowing participants to feel more comfortable in their familiar surroundings (Lenhardt 2021; Hall *et al.* 2021).

The range of technical approaches used as research methods which have evolved during the pandemic has underpinned innovative ways to ensure that vulnerable voices are safely included in remote research. For example, to ensure the active participation of people with disabilities, researchers turned to multiple channels (text, email, etc.), trained trusted friends and local authorities such as teachers to take telephone calls and interpret them for the participant, encouraged participants to draw their responses on paper and send them, and ensured that these approaches met with existing standards for disability-inclusive research through trained data collectors, accessible materials, and appropriate safeguards (Banks *et al.* 2021, this *IDS Bulletin*).

### 3.2 Informed consent, ethics, and incentives

In their article, Banks *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) note that evolving research and knowledge-sharing approaches should incorporate advances made pre-pandemic in inclusive, ethical research practice and principles appropriate for vulnerable groups (for example disability-inclusive research). They also observe that emerging lessons on issues of consent and ethics should complement, and in some cases enhance, existing approaches, taking as an example that choosing remote approaches during the pandemic has required adaptations to informed consent processes. The same review of disability-inclusive research found many ethics boards authorising oral responses over written ones, or permitting written consent through other means such as WhatsApp. Researchers have also turned to video dialogues to obtain consent (Strachan 2021).

Remote research can lead to ethical and safeguarding challenges. How to ascertain safety and privacy, especially if researching sensitive topics? Marginalised groups, such as women in some contexts, may be put in dangerous situations without the safeguards of in-person approaches. Examples arise in the literature of women being exposed to increased risk as a result of prolonged interaction on the telephone, or if found to be discussing sensitive topics such as sexual health or politics. The literature highlights that robust safeguarding and risk analysis for remote work is essential, and that the work should not go ahead if the risks to individuals are too great (Mani and Barooah 2020; UN Women 2020; Strachan 2021).

The issue of financial incentives for research participants has also been raised in the literature, given that the pandemic has led to lost livelihoods. There are wider sets of questions around this research issue, with implications for compensation of participants in all types of research in any context. Several Covid Collective projects have highlighted the expansion of using telephones in conducting research during the pandemic for very practical reasons, as some of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* describe. Researchers have been grappling with questions over whether participants should be compensated for their time, telephone, and data use, and if so, how this can be done remotely. Researchers have found ways to overcome this as telephone use has increased by including mobile money services and reloadable debit cards, the latter being sent to participants and loaded once receipt has been confirmed (Mani and Barooah 2020; Strachan 2021).

### 3.3 Shifts in power and perspectives

Given the restrictions in international travel, the pandemic has opened up space (online and in-person when circumstances have allowed) for researchers to interact. One outcome of the availability of more effective communication platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp) has enabled researchers, and

indeed those with whom they engage, to be better connected than previously. Rather than gathering for meetings and workshops which consumes resources (time, money, carbon emissions), research teams have been able to communicate and engage across time and space. This has meant enhanced opportunities for Southern-based researchers to interact with both Northern and Southern partners; it increases the potential for researchers in the global South to 'enter' research contexts in the global North. Positive experiences of online collaboration are emerging, with online etiquette and chat functions allowing a broader range of voices and perspectives to be raised (Howard and Roberts 2020). This is likely to be an area worth watching for its potential to transform international research partnerships and leadership by researchers in the global South.

For Southern researchers, international travel restrictions and online collaboration has helped to enforce the 'devolution of research activity to local partners' (Howard and Roberts 2020). There are many examples of Southern researchers taking the lead and re-imagining strategic priorities beyond those set by international agendas (Lenhardt 2021; Brooks 2020; Charvet and Ordóñez, this *IDS Bulletin*). Articles in this *IDS Bulletin* (Banks *et al.*, de Haan and Sanchez-Swaren, and Araujo *et al.*) also provide examples of how alternative arrangements around who is present in the fieldwork space are contributing to power shifts, and more equitable research and donor–research partnerships. Araujo *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*), for example, found various important factors: equal collaboration from the start; ensuring those in the field are in the driving seat and taking critical decisions with plenty of support; structured project arrangements with clear points of contact from the broader team; and working closely with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to identify respondents and understand how to work effectively with them.

Another aspect of empowerment identified through the articles involves changing behaviour and access to online approaches, helping to close the digital divide. Given pandemic travel and distancing restrictions, behaviour patterns have shifted towards online approaches and increased optimism for the success of online engagement, alongside a dramatic increase in demand for internet services. This has sped up government and private sector responses to increase coverage, leading to innovations such as Loon's network of giant internet-enabled balloons in Kenya (Strachan 2021). A blog from Feedback Labs noted that 'closing the digital divide for researchers in the global South will offer new opportunities to shift power and decision-making to the global South' (Pinet and Leon-Himmelstein 2020).

Charvet and Ordóñez (this *IDS Bulletin*) also highlight ways in which increased digitalisation has helped to reduce the barriers that many researchers in the global South face within international knowledge ecosystems, in turn supporting

efforts to decolonise knowledge for development by reducing inherently unfair structures that propagate and promote power asymmetries. It is important to acknowledge, however, that challenges still remain around digital divides, and many citizens are still digitally disconnected, or may experience constrained democratic spaces, resulting in those who are most (digitally) marginalised actually being marginalised further.

#### **4 Doing research differently in practice: experiences, perspectives, insights, and lessons**

The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* provide methodological insights for researchers, and many also offer important findings from their research relating to the impact of the Covid-19 virus. Grounded in the overarching context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the articles include reflections, findings, and lessons about the nature of research itself, drawing on the perspectives of the authors and their particular identities and positionalities. This combination of narratives presents, we believe, a unique collection of evidence and experience, which as editors we hope will prove both informative and stimulating to a wide audience.

Rahman *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe how, when Covid-19 hit, Bangladesh had been one of the fastest-growing economies in the world (World Bank 2019) with significant improvements to human development indicators. The authors explore observations that indicate where possible reversals to Bangladesh's socioeconomic trajectory are taking place, identifying socioeconomic groups that are being hit the hardest, groups that are showing resilience, and the sources of resilience. They focus on four major domains of development: agriculture, social protection, livelihoods, and education, using a research methodology which involved several rounds of telephone surveys from the onset of Covid-19. This method proved very successful with poor respondents in particular.

They draw a central conclusion: that a country such as Bangladesh must govern each stressful episode of volatility in ways that help systems and institutions emerge stronger than before. They propose that Bangladesh needs governance practices and institutions that constantly innovate and adapt based on first-hand experience and feedback on the ground, particularly through engagement with citizens and civil society. In short, Bangladesh 'must adopt a multi-actor, community-based, integrated model of development that embraces embedded informalities and is appropriate for the challenges of modern times' (Rahman *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*: 36).

To achieve this approach, the authors highlight the importance of empowering implementing and downstream agencies, and promoting a culture of learning and improvement amongst local governments, independent agencies, and ministries. They also highlight the critical need for functional systems of

feedback between civil servants, politicians, and communities. Only then can a learning and improving state possessing such characteristics successfully cope with the effects of a systemic crisis such as Covid-19. This understanding has been enhanced by a research methodology that is grounded in real-time iteration of the relationship between knowledge, learning, and action – different from the usual relationship between research and policy, and which has implications for how the research approach evolves.

Looking at a different dimension of Covid-19 impact, Lines *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) explore the challenges informal settlement residents face in accessing vaccines. Their article provides a snapshot of how global vaccine inequalities play out at the local level, with specific focus on the experiences of residents of informal settlements in four major cities in the global South. Their research highlights the context, methodology, and early findings of a three-month survey of community leaders living in 21 informal settlements in Harare, Kampala, Lilongwe, and Mumbai, and they present data that helps uncover real-time trends around vaccination rollout within informal settlements of particularly vulnerable cities, a significant topic of debate globally.

Their article also offers a nuanced set of reflections, highlighting the strong support for vaccination by community leaders who often act as local champions promoting uptake. The authors note, however, that these champions' efforts are often undermined by misinformation arising within (and from outside) communities. The ongoing lack of adequate vaccine supplies results in an insufficient number of vaccinated community members who can act as positive role models, and this may also discourage further uptake. Modelling of behaviours and a sustained flow of valid information seem crucial factors driving uptake in all the study settings for which the authors present findings. The article also highlights the evidence revealing that Covid-19 is much more than a health challenge. The authors highlight the point that prioritised access to Covid-19 vaccines is only one of many measures needed to help urban poor people and informal settlement communities recover from the effects of the pandemic and protect themselves against future shocks – health, social, and financial. The article adds to the wider discussion on doing research differently, as it stresses the importance of learning from the contextualised knowledge of local communities, a finding that other articles in this *IDS Bulletin* also emphasise, and which is also a growing focus of other social science research programmes in the context of the pandemic (Lees *et al.* 2001).

Writing on a quite different dimension of the Covid-19 crisis, Nemat *et al.*'s article (this *IDS Bulletin*) describes how the pandemic has affected people's livelihoods in the context of intensified conflict and prolonged drought, in two provinces of Afghanistan – Kandahar and Herat. The article reflects on the

research methods and approaches employed to investigate these overlapping crises, and the applications of these approaches to assessing the livelihoods impacts of Covid-19 in the context of conflict and climate change in Afghanistan.

The authors' reflections on their methodological approach reveal the importance of using longitudinal qualitative methods of analysis to understand the pathways through which layered crises can affect people's lives and livelihoods; whilst also embedding methods within a Q-squared approach to strengthen data triangulation. They note that methodological adaptation in contexts of crisis, coupled with combining complementary approaches, helps generate findings that can aid understanding of complexity marked by overlapping crises. In practice, the research findings indicate more clearly than before a context where Afghan households have suffered accentuated income loss and have often been forced into erosive coping strategies that further drive impoverishment.

The article by Araujo *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) explores how Covid-19 has exacerbated divides and distances between researchers located in and confined to different parts of the world, between researchers and respondents, and between state and people in informal employment. Focusing on a research study in Lahore, Pakistan, the article looks at 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 research was adjusted to enable the study to proceed. It highlights innovations such as decentralised decision-making within the research team, working with local civil society actors to access respondents, and using multiple approaches to design, pilot, and implement grounded questions on dense and private concepts.

The article by Banks *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) reveals how the pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalised people, especially those who experience multiple intersecting inequalities. People with disabilities have been generally underrepresented in research pre-pandemic, a situation further exacerbated by Covid-19. This article highlights key challenges, opportunities, and strategies for disability-inclusive research during the pandemic, drawing on experiences from ten country studies. In answering the question on how to adapt disability research methods and practices during the pandemic, it provides insights and solutions around research strategy, access approaches, use of technology, and mixed modes of data collection and dissemination. Advances highlighted in this article appear well set to become standard disability-inclusive research approaches beyond the pandemic, given the potential benefits to participants and practitioners. These disability-inclusive practices are also of

more general relevance for conducting research in a pandemic, and with the extremely marginalised. In this sense, disability is a lens that enables a focus on experiences of marginalisation in research, and how research practices can help overcome these.

Charvet and Ordóñez's article (this *IDS Bulletin*) explores research approaches from the perspective of a network of thinktank researchers located in the global South. The network to which the authors belong, Southern Voice, has an express goal to address asymmetries of knowledge production between the global North and the global South, which their article notes still persist. They also highlight that the Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced a wave of uncertainty that already existed, but which is generating increasing demand for different kinds of knowledge worldwide, the global South included. Against a backdrop of global crisis, they note a positive trend, that the digitalisation of international debates is helping to break down some of the barriers for participation and integration in the wider evidence ecosystem.

This article reflects on their review of global South research projects and information from Southern Voice's digital knowledge hub, and argues, drawing on examples, that further recognition from external actors of their work and the possibility to exert leadership sets new precedents for knowledge production and sharing. They conclude on a positive note that the continuation and encouragement of these trends can help lead to a reduction in knowledge asymmetries between the global North and South.

Finally, de Haan and Sanchez-Swaren (this *IDS Bulletin*) reveal how, just as researchers were quickly adapting to Covid-19 restrictions and shifting approaches to data collection, research funders were also re-evaluating approaches and addressing challenges to commission and to enable high-impact research amid rapidly shifting research and policy-influencing contexts. The authors, working with Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), reflect on the experiences of designing and delivering a research programme on a socioeconomic response to Covid-19 collaborating with partners across the global South, sharing learning around the importance of equitable partnerships, flexible methods and systems, and responses to locally driven priorities that supported research and knowledge translation practice.

The article highlights, among other aspects, the benefits that funders can offer to researchers through different forms of flexible funding. They also note the importance of understanding different types of research organisations within their specific contexts, acknowledging that all research organisations combine strengths and weaknesses. They observe that for funders to provide meaningful resources to research in the global South, they should enable researchers to do what they do best – positioning themselves in relation to key audiences and policy landscapes

within their evidence-to-policy ecosystem – whilst also bolstering support to international networks which bring added value by supporting and enhancing the impact of research amid rapidly evolving and uncertain contexts.

### **5 The Covid Collective as a source of learning and reflection for 'doing research differently'**

As indicated earlier in this introductory article, the Covid Collective arose in response to the challenges facing researchers, commissioners, and policymakers and the need for rapid, robust research that looked across a broad range of disciplines and contexts, drawing out, synthesising, and sharing key points and learning. It has intentionally provided research grants for new, innovative ideas from among social sciences, and arts and humanities researchers, particularly in lower- and middle-income countries.

Core to this *IDS Bulletin* are valuable sources of insight and reflection for researchers, and for those who fund research, provided by the Collective. These lessons on 'how to do research differently' have been informed by literature reviews, presentations from project partners that highlight challenges and practical solutions from their research contexts, and regular dialogues such as 'fireside chats'.<sup>4</sup> These varied fora have provided spaces for real-time feedback loops and connections that build into collaborations.

Important lessons have been learned about research processes and methods regarding the three themes highlighted earlier in this introduction: access and engagement; consent, ethics, and incentives; and power and perspectives.

On access and engagement, many of the articles highlight the advantages of research methodologies being grounded in real-time iteration of the relationship between knowledge, learning, and action, and how such approaches offer real opportunities to understand evolving relationships between state actors and citizens. This has helped provide detailed and timely insights on vaccination rollout and uptake, for example, or the emergence of trust between institutions and the communities they serve. Another key insight is the importance of learning from the contextualised knowledge of local communities, a growing focus of many social science research programmes more generally, but particularly in the context of the pandemic. This is important, clearly, when learning from the lived experience of citizens and community members in general, but crucial during the pandemic when researching the experiences and impacts of Covid-19 in very turbulent or dynamic contexts, such as in conflict-affected areas.

On consent, ethics, and incentives, some of the articles describe in detail how methodological adaptations have emerged in order to facilitate research being carried out, but which in turn bring some

potential challenges around ethics and consent. The use of mobile phones in particular is opening up possibilities for researchers to engage with citizen and community members, yet in some cases this may pose additional questions around the potential risks to safety of the research participants, as the article on research with people with disabilities demonstrates (Banks *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). The use of technology offers considerable opportunities for enhanced interaction, but also can raise concerns about data storage, access, and security. Unless addressed very intentionally, these issues could potentially lead to significant harm for research participants should sensitive data be accessed.

On power and perspectives, several articles highlight ways in which relationships within and between research teams and partnerships can be influenced through evolving forms of interaction. As referenced earlier, the article on trust in institutions in Pakistan (Araujo *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*) reveals how the exacerbation of distance could create further division and exclusionary processes within a research collaboration. Their research has shown that such divides can be addressed through research approaches, for example by decentralising decision-making within the research team. They also demonstrated the importance of widening the circle of relevant respondents by drawing on relationships of local civil society actors, and indicated thoughtful ways of engaging with respondents on sensitive issues by designing, piloting, and testing questions through an iterative process. Technological and digital innovations are also, in general, having a positive impact on research processes by helping to break down barriers to participation and integration in the wider evidence ecosystem.

The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* reveal implications not only for researchers, but for those who support research, including funding agencies. They suggest that narrow, technical approaches to supporting evidence mobilisation and use are often ill-suited to current contexts, and that funders should offer forms of funding that are more flexible and encourage innovation and adaptation. The articles reveal powerful examples of the ways in which policy change processes are highly politicised, contested, and messy; this implies that research funding should prioritise approaches that encourage mutual learning, support transdisciplinarity, and work across geographic and sectoral boundaries.

The findings in this *IDS Bulletin* also indicate the importance of support to research which puts strengthening research engagement with policy networks at the centre of research processes. This is not a new insight, and indeed, the evidence from articles in this *IDS Bulletin* add to a growing debate and body of evidence around the criticality of knowledge mobilisation, communication, and engagement in the essentially messy, unpredictable, non-linear interactions between evidence and policymaking (Georgalakis 2020) where power and politics play key roles.

The findings also shed light on how to apply a range of techniques and approaches to learn and adapt for impact whilst working to increase awareness and understanding of emerging evidence. They have helped to draw out commonalities, differences, and important learning across disciplines. This in turn is informing the identification of new questions or issues for research to build upon, and for wider, evidence-based engagement with key policymakers and decision makers.

## 6 Conclusions

As noted earlier in this article, this *IDS Bulletin* seeks to achieve several aims. Admittedly ambitious given the scale of the Covid-19 challenge, it intends to frame, explore, and conceptualise the challenge and opportunity of 'doing development research differently'. The articles to which this introduction have referred, and which follow in the rest of this *IDS Bulletin* draw on practical examples which the authors have encountered, and often responded to, in innovative, entrepreneurial, and dynamic ways. The challenges in doing so are not played down, however, as the authors and their research partners have witnessed at first hand the impact of doing research differently in generating rapid, useful, and credible findings. Their articles do indeed challenge many existing assumptions about concepts and research methods, about engagement with actors and audiences, and about the value, use, and nature of evidence itself.

This *IDS Bulletin* also provides perspectives from different actors within the knowledge-to-policy ecosystem. Authors belong to quite different interest groups: researchers, convenors of networks, funders; although it is worth remarking perhaps that they often have multiple identities and positionalities in relation to the issues being explored, the methods used, and the findings articulated. Boundaries between roles, knowledge, voice, and identity are frequently blurred, which perhaps reflects a wider acknowledgement of uncertainty as a prevailing characteristic of contexts where research is carried out. Yet, even in the midst of uncertainty, shifts in practices, behaviours, and attitudes are helping to break down existing boundaries that have excluded researchers in the global South, particularly. Lessons will continue to be learned and may be an important contribution to ongoing efforts to the significant, critical agenda around decolonising development knowledge.

The examples and experiences contained within this *IDS Bulletin* provide a snapshot of doing research differently in real time, in response to the challenges and opportunities of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet they also allude to doing research differently in the longer term by providing examples and successes, forced by the pandemic, that align with and respond to broader agendas to address asymmetries in research and knowledge exchange, and structural and intellectual shifts. The Covid-19 crisis and associated restrictions will reduce and end; new crises will come

along. But shifts in practice among researchers, policymakers, and donors, grounded in Covid-19 response, are well set to remain and further evolve.

The articles also highlight some important insights and lessons. They shed light on the value of multidisciplinary approaches and multiple perspectives in research, when seeking to understand complex and rapidly evolving problems. They offer examples of how 'development' actors are collectivising and co-creating knowledge in fragile, conflictual, and humanitarian contexts. They reveal a great deal on how researchers are adapting their research methods and approaches in the Covid-19 era. They offer lessons about ethical considerations when conducting research during a pandemic. Ultimately, they offer important insights on how Covid-19 affected research culture and the way in which researchers engage with citizens, communities, policy actors, funders, and fellow researchers through diverse forms of collaboration. In so doing, they raise many further questions, which will continue to be explored.

One further reflection, which the authors themselves have grappled with, is that the lessons being learned through the work of the Covid Collective which demonstrate the need to do research differently, are everyone's responsibility. As researchers, the editors of this *IDS Bulletin* acknowledge that to support the movement towards doing research differently, personal learning and transformation is also needed if we are to influence our own organisations in positive ways, and in turn help transform the institutions that shape so much of our lives. This view is supported by a powerful exhortation recently published by the African writer Ben Okri:

We have to be strong dreamers... We have to go right to the roots of what makes us such a devouring species, overly competitive, conquest-driven, hierarchical. We ought to ask questions about money, power, hunger... Our whys ought to go to the core of what we are. Then we ought to set about changing us. We ought to remake ourselves.  
(Okri 2021)

This *IDS Bulletin* was prepared at a point in time, with the input and generosity of partners, collaborators, and supporters who are committed to working collectively, as they respond to a unique, global challenge which has affected everyone, everywhere. The magnitude of the challenge is well defined, and the scale of the endeavour to continue innovating and adapting is clear. These articles do offer, however, an extremely important sense of hope, that by doing research differently, it may indeed be possible for researchers and those who support research to remake themselves, in order to help transform knowledge and transform lives.

## Notes

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- 1 Peter Taylor, Director of Research, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
  - 2 Paul Knipe, Director of Consultancy, Impact and Influence, INTRAC, UK.
  - 3 **Covid Collective.**
  - 4 The catalogue of rapid evidence syntheses through the Covid Collective can be found here: **Covid Collective Synthesis group** ([ids.ac.uk](https://ids.ac.uk)).

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