

# Practical guides for participatory methods

## Rivers of life

### Purpose

Through drawing of a river, this method helps to access and communicate personal experiences, and facilitate group dialogue around the issues that the groups themselves identify. The expectation is that, through staged group activities moving from individual activity to group discussion, trust and rapport can be built with the researcher, and between the participants.

Rivers of Life may be useful for practitioners and researchers who want to:

- generate reflection on experiences, enablers, influences and barriers or challenges;
- appreciate personal experiences
- generate dialogue
- identify and discuss the reasons behind the enablers and challenges,
- identify strategies for change.

### Things to consider

- The river is a symbol of one's life course which is appropriate in many settings, but can also be drawn as a road or in another way – allow flexibility for cultural preferences.
- The method can be used in any setting: if indoors, flipcharts can be put onto tables or walls. If outdoors, flipcharts can be placed on the ground, and locally sourced objects (e.g. leaves, beans etc) can be placed along the river instead of drawing.
- The method is accessible for all literacy levels. Professional staff often underestimate the capacities of less literate and marginalised groups and doubt that they will be able to use the method. This is never the case.
- The river/road will flow through the key stages of the person's life. Each participant creates a visual map of their life, represented by the river. They will add tributaries, rough waters, rocks, flowers, fish etc to represent positive experiences and challenging times. The river and detail can be drawn on a flipchart, or represented using objects placed along the river if drawing is challenging.
- Careful facilitation to allow individuals to present their river without interruption, and to enable constructive dialogue in the group stage, can build trust and rapport in the group. This is of

particular importance when sensitive topics are discussed.

- In some contexts and with some topics, it may be preferable to organise separate groups according to gender, ethnicity or religion.
- Since people are talking about their personal lives, they may share experiences that are upsetting. It is important to have appropriate safeguarding, counselling and signposting support in place. Working with a local organisation and co-facilitator is recommended, so that support can be readily provided if needed.
- The group should be no more than 8 people. Once all have drawn their rivers, one by one they present them, telling their story without interruption, but with gentle prompting if needed
- The group asks questions at the end. Once all have presented, the facilitator invites the group to identify common influences and challenges, and why these occur. A further step can be to prioritise these and agree actions.
- Recording: ensure that a notetaker records the discussion throughout, and especially Part B, ideally also with voice recording.



## Practical steps

### ***Part A: Drawing the river***

1. Introductions: present the theme and purpose of the exercise and the required time.
2. Determine a timeframe for the river; give each participant their own piece of flipchart paper and personal marker, and if appropriate some natural materials like grass, twigs, and stones
3. Provide the prompt question. This should include the timescale e.g. “what are the most important challenges you have experienced in your daily life, starting from before the pandemic, and during it, until now?”
4. You may add ‘what factors have helped you to cope?’
5. Draw example of a river by drawing your own at the front of the room in a bigger flipchart [be prepared to add in some examples from your own experience].
6. Use symbols to show positive and negative moments in your river/story. For example, crocodiles, rocks and turbulent waters can represent problems / difficulties. Abundant fish, flowers or calm water can be positive moments.
7. Prompt people to think if things started to improve or became worse along the way.

### ***Part B: Presentation and analysis of the rivers***

1. Invite each participant to present their river, asking others to listen respectfully, and to notice common and different factors.
2. Invite the group to identify key points (e.g. challenges, enablers)
3. Group discusses key points. Deepen discussion by asking ‘who’ and ‘why’ questions to understand more about why they happen, and what happens as a consequence.
4. Ask, what can we change? (e.g., who are the influencers and how to target them, who are the gate keepers to go through.)
5. Note down ideas of strategies and actions.

# Case study

This method was used between November 2020 and March 2021 in India and Nigeria, to explore the direct and indirect effects of Covid-19 on religiously marginalised groups experiencing intersecting vulnerabilities.

The research took place with people living in poverty, brought together in separate groups of men and women of each religious minority, and with comparator groups from the mainstream religion.

The selected sites were towns sheltering internally displaced people in Plateau State and Kaduna State in Nigeria, and urban slums in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka states in India.

Each inquiry group of 8-12 participants involved 2 steps.

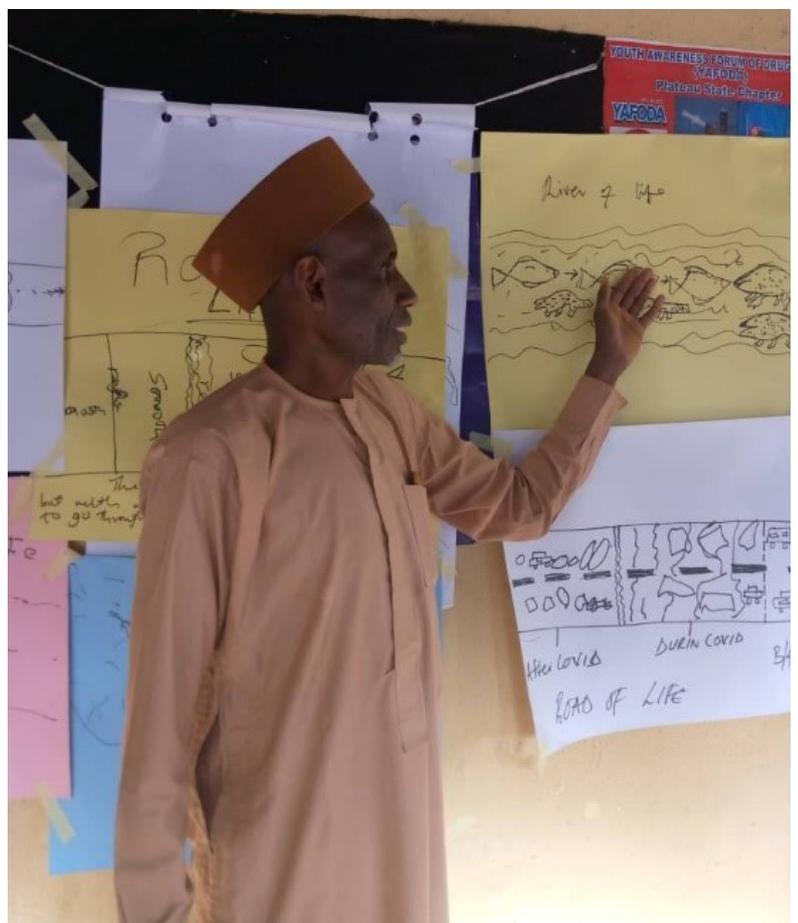
First, each participant drew or created their own River or Road of Life as a visual tool to help them to each tell the story of their life over the last 18 months, from before the pandemic, to their experiences of life in the shadow of Covid-19.

Second, the group discussed the issues that emerged, and ranked these in a PRA matrix ranking exercise to identify the most pressing issues.

The method enabled enhanced understanding of the lived realities of religious minorities in India and Nigeria:

In **Nigeria**: The research found that the pandemic has deepened pre-existing ethno-religious fault lines, and research participants spoke of government inattention to underlying contentions, as well as the state's discriminatory response patterns.

The experience of women and girls, especially those living in poor areas and in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), was disproportionately harsh due to an increased care burden for the sick, gender-based violence, and lack of state support.



*Muhammad Lawal narrates his river of life in Plateau State, Nigeria. Photo credit: Dr Dawood Abubakar*

In **India**: the research found that the pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health.



*River of life drawn by Dalit Hindu woman, Bangalore, India. Photo credit: Joshua Panagaraj*

Distress and despair due to hunger and loss of livelihoods during lockdown was acute amongst dalit Hindus, but also amongst Muslims who, already scapegoated were exhausted by targeting, harassment, and constant fear.

Muslim research participants were reluctant to report discrimination for fear of reprisals but eventually shared that they had experienced harassment and beatings.

People were able to talk about issues from their own perspectives and through visual as well as verbal media. They generated data which cut across researcher categories, and give voice to concerns that participants may have kept silent about, because of fear or shame.

The data that was generated and analysed by the participants themselves, enhanced our understanding of the ways in which the discrimination and insecurity experienced by people of religious minorities living in poverty during Covid, are creating short and longer-term negative impacts in their health, education, economic opportunities, and security.

The method allows participants to identify challenges and enablers themselves. The approach was successful in engaging marginalised and frightened people in contexts where there is antipathy towards external donors having an agenda.



# Related resources

- Howard, J. (2021) [Vulnerability and Poverty During Covid-19: Religious Minorities in India](#), Policy Briefing 7, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/CREID.2021.014
- Howard, J.; Para-Mallam, O.; Dayil, Plangsat B. and Hayab, Philip (2021) [Vulnerability and Poverty During Covid-19: Religious Minorities in Nigeria](#), Policy Briefing 6, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/CREID.2021.013
- Howard, J. et al (2021) [Understanding Intersecting Vulnerabilities Experienced by Religious Minorities Living in Poverty in the Shadows of Covid-19](#), CREID Intersections Series; Religious Inequalities and Covid-19, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/CREID.2021.012
- Moussa, Z. (2009). Tips for Trainers: Rivers of Life. PLA [formerly PLA notes], 60.

## ***Credits and other information:***

This guide was authored by Jo Howard with acknowledgements to Mariz Tadros and the Coalition for Religious Equality and International Development (CREID) team.

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Please email [participate@ids.ac.uk](mailto:participate@ids.ac.uk) with any feedback you may have, including examples where you have used this method in practice. For more information on participatory methods, please visit [participatorymethods.org](http://participatorymethods.org) where you can also find an electronic copy of this guide.

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