

Co-research approach: Learning from remote solutions in times of a pandemic

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Abstract

There is on-going critique that research often lacks transdisciplinary approaches, which means that local communities tend to be perceived as research subjects rather than research partners. With the coronavirus the metaphorical remoteness of researchers to their “research subjects” also becomes a physical one. While researchers usually travel to research sites, the pandemic forces many to switch to digital and remote strategies. Here, co-research cannot only offer a participatory approach that aims at democratising the way how knowledge is created but also a solution to work remotely while incorporating the lived-out realities on the ground. This factsheet summarizes the experiences of doing co-research remotely. It concludes that co-research is a strong tool to do valuable research in times of a pandemic, while more efforts need to be taken to identify, create and use appropriate, digital platforms of communication that facilitates a more inclusive participation of local communities in research processes.



Introduction

Name of the methodological approach

The methodological approach described here is called the co-research approach. Following Paganini & Stöber (2021), co-research stands for community research and can be regarded as an even more consistent and inclusive version of participatory action research (PAR).

Literature review

There is scepticism about including local populations in qualitative research. One of the principles in social sciences is a “neutral” researcher, who looks at a local community from an outside position. The statements and findings from the researcher should be clearly assignable to him or her and not be an outcome of the close involvement of locals. The notion behind the notion was to avoid that research results be biased. In the 1980s this principle was challenged by a new paradigm, where research should rather include the perception of local com-

SLE method briefs are created from the practical experiences of our alumni in their interdisciplinary research projects. Lessons learned and good practices are compiled. In each brief, we present the method that is explained clearly, step by step, and with the help of practical examples. With its method briefs, the SLE aims to support researchers and practitioners who are active in solution-oriented and transformative international development work by providing insights into hands-on methods in a structured manner, so that the wheel does not always have to be reinvented.

The Centre for Rural Development (SLE) is affiliated with the Albrecht Daniel Thaer-Institute for Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences in the Faculty of Life Sciences at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Its work concentrates on four branches: international cooperation for sustainable development as a post-master degree course, training courses for international leaders and experts in the field of international cooperation, research on sustainability issues, and advisory services for universities and organisations.

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munities. New participatory research approaches found more and more acceptance in the qualitative social research community. Nevertheless, research tackling agricultural or societal challenges still tends to perceive local communities as mere information sources or end users of new scientific knowledge or technologies. This perception can lead to short-lived impacts, rarely adopted technologies and limited dissemination of new knowledge at the local level (Paganini & Stöber, 2021). Critics speak out against this dominant institutionalised knowledge system for perpetuating inequality and holding power over systemically marginalised groups. Participatory action research (PAR) is a common approach to countervail these critiques -- by actively integrating these individuals, actor groups, or communities in research. Following Reason & Bradbury (2001), PAR aims at developing practical solutions that are useful for people in coping with everyday problems by making use of their situational and local knowledge and experiences. It builds upon the belief that those who face problems have much of the information and analytical capacity needed to solve them (Greenwood & Levin, 2006). Co-research makes use of these principles and extends PAR. An emphasis on democratic decision-making and the promotion of participatory processes within research lead to a co-creation of knowledge that is said to increase the control of local actors over their own situation. In this regard, co-research is understood to be a more radical, in the sense of consequence and inclusivity, form of PAR (Paganini & Stöber, 2021). Locals are not simply integrated into research. They rather become the main actors as they set the agenda and co-design the research. They co-decide on hypotheses, methodology, and sampling. They are actively involved in the analysis, interpretation, scaling, sharing, and application of the results and recommendations. This provides agency within research, ownership over the results, and empowerment as solutions are actively generated by the ones directly affected.

Reference

The experiences portrayed in this factsheet draw from the SLE study project “COVID-19 lockdown and local food systems: Food security and agency

in South Africa’s marginalised communities - A perspective from the Cape Flats and St. Helena Bay” in 2020. The study portrayed the status of household food security in five research sites during the lockdown in South Africa by applying the Food Insecurity Experience Scale. Further, it analysed food systems with a food justice lens, mapped the local food environment and highlighted community challenges as well as local coping strategies.

Choosing the right methodological approach

With the spread of COVID-19, the overseas study projects (OP) initiated by the SLE were not feasible in their usual form in 2020. Travel restrictions demanded research be switched over to a digital and remote design. Following the principle of doing no harm, ways needed to be found to produce local knowledge without being present in the study region. But how can remoteness be tackled without ending up doing armchair anthropology? Or put differently, how can local voices be integrated in research in times of a pandemic? The aim was certainly not to set up a project in a country marked by its post-apartheid characteristics, in which knowledge creation is exclusive and processes of marginalisation become reproduced. The aim was rather to bring communities who are rarely heard to participate in research. The study team envisioned a reciprocal commitment for a joint purpose, even without being able to interact in face-to-face scenarios, and on providing ownership to the ones most affected by the consequences of the pandemic.

Co-research revealed this exact possibility of working collectively, of exchanging situational experiences and of sharing responsibilities. Not due to the fact of being forced to work remotely and being reliant on help on the ground, but by the fact that transdisciplinary and cross-cultural research is valuable research to address wicked problems such as food insecurity, the co-research approach was utilized to research “with” instead of researching “on” the voices that need to be given a platform.

“If I had to describe co-research, I would say that those who are concerned, or who are most affected by specific challenges are involved in the conceptualisation of research. So, even before you start the study and before you apply for funds, you should agree on what are the key issues for them. The initial meaning is that the research is driven by them because local solutions can only be driven by local actors”. (Statement about co-research from a key informant in South Africa on the 22nd September 2020).

Co-Research in theory

Aim of the method

As the statement above reveals, the aim of co-research is the democratisation of the knowledge process. Through an active integration of marginalized voices, research becomes a process of co-designing and co-creating. Thereby, localized solutions are generated that speak directly to the ones involved and therefore potentially serve a long-term impact.

Description of the method

A starting point in co-research is marked by researchers partnering with local communities in a joint project. Thereby, community members themselves become researchers by getting involved and planning all phases of the research. At first, this translates into a joint conceptualisation of the research, i.e., research questions and research framework are discussed and jointly agreed upon. They are not carved in stone but rather subject to steady reflection and adjustable to the needs of the involved parties throughout the course of the project. After the research design is clear, data collection can start.

Through a mixed-method approach, a diversified data set can be gathered collectively, which is then subject of a joint analysis process and lastly triangulated with the help of a wider community.

Again, it is crucial to reflect not only on the methodology and the results, but on the process as such. This necessitates taking a step back as a scientist and to give room to co-researchers to spark ideas on which data is important, which contextualisation the data needs, how it can be gathered and explained, and how it should be interpreted. Thereby, co-research tends to generate results that are highly localized and situational – an outcome that is also subject of criticism as it questions the scalability of the approach. Self-determined involvement of co-researchers can be seen as the heart of the approach. This has to happen organically and pro-actively and cannot be influenced by the researcher. The freedom to choose and correspondingly allocate commitment marks a process of co-researchers taking over



Figure 1: Team canvas South Africa (Source: own elaboration)

ownership and of acquiring agency within the project. With this involvement, conclusions are highly practicable, results can then be spread through a) up-scaling processes to reach influential actors like politicians, academia and civil society organisations; b) out-scaling processes to integrate a wider community which might nourish long-term societal transitions; and c) processes of scaling-deep to create local awareness for pressing challenges and to foster behavioural change.

Co-research in practice

Composition of the team

The SLE study project was mandated by the Urban Research Farmer Club, a group of urban farmers in Cape Town and Weskus Mantjie a female fishing cooperative based in the fisher settlement St. Helena Bay, located a hundred kilometres north of Cape Town. They not only mandated the research but also actively shaped the project by playing an active part in all its phases. Through previous projects implemented by the SLE (Paganini et al., 2020) they have already been familiar with the co-research approach, which was very beneficial for the actual project. They are practitioners who are involved in food systems through urban farming, small-scale fishing, and community educational work. They are locals, who

“When I was thinking about co-research, what came into my head was the *kwanza*, the annual celebration by African cultures. It is celebrated over seven days and for each day there is a principle. On the third day, we celebrate *ujima*. It is a collective work and responsibility. The *ujima* is to build and maintain the communities together and make our brothers’ and sisters’ problems our problems to solve them together.”
(From a presentation of a co-researcher in Cape Town on the 19th of August 2020).

speak IsiXhosa, Afrikaans and English -- and at the same time activists, who know how to moderate workshops, facilitate processes, conduct surveys, and mobilise communities. Closely intertwined with the co-researchers (as friends, community or even family members) are the enumerators. They have been particularly active in the sphere of data collection. Moreover, the OP benefited from having academic advisors who provided insightful comments by being experienced locally, as well as highly knowledgeable in academic discourse on food systems. Further, partners like the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Brot für die Welt, INKOTA-Netzwerke.V., and Solidaridad helped in scaling results and advocated for changing the dominant narrative on food into one that fits to and can be used by local communities. All actors involved directly and indirectly in the OP are presented in Figure 1.

In responding to the research mandate, the SLE study team elaborated a research concept aligned to SLE's action- and decision-oriented research working process. To present first ideas and to get to know each other, a kick-off workshop was held. In the evaluation of the workshop, participants regretted that the workshop was too input-heavy and too academic on the part of the the SLE. The SLE team reflected on this and concluded that the ADR terminology might not be fully appropriate for this co-research project. Thinking in outputs, objectives and impact was not bound to the interest of the actors involved. Moreover, it even deterred actors to talk freely on their objectives, expectations and needs. It became obvious that co-research in this project is not about proofing one's ability to understand the practices of development cooperation or to do academic work accurately, but rather extending one's role as a researcher to a service provider. In co-research, scientists adapt their scientific demands to the needs of the community, the partners, or even subordinates them if necessary. In co-research, science ends exactly at the point where non-academic partners are left behind.

Overall, this co-research project required the SLE study team to act as facilitator, trainer, catalyst, or communicator, as well as to anticipate which role is needed at whichever time in order to serve the partner co-research consortium in achieving their agenda and goals.

To countervail the discontent created by the first workshop, a second workshop, named the consortium meeting, was held. Much more room was given to partners and co-researchers to voice their needs and expectations (see Figure 2). By getting more involved in co-research and facing the reality of remote research, the SLE study team felt like taking an outsider position within a team of community representatives, civil society actors and academics that already knew each other. They all transported pre-established social relations that were not necessarily visible, not to mention understandable, for a new researcher entering this project sphere. These social relations were not only situated in a project context but also in a historical context of apartheid. Here, the heterogeneity of the involved parties was challenging. This not only applied to race, but also to education and gender. Research became a subject of compromise and hybridisation. A language as well as a platform had to be found that served all partners -- not only the privileged parties of the project.

Throughout the project phase, team calls were held to identify the tasks at hand, e.g., measuring food insecurity and deciding how to achieve targets. The SLE study team provided periodic updates on the status of the different project tasks via a monthly newsletter. A research concept and methodology that answers the demands of the co-researchers in the study was developed in easy-to-understand language. Also, a handbook about conducting household surveys was created for the enumerators in an easy-to-understand design. Ongoing communication was maintained not only by e-mail, but also by several WhatsApp groups that always provided re-

“With the research being **co-research - it is participatory**. I become part of the research. I'm not just a subject of research. It's a joint contribution to findings and I get to give an input. This way I know the work. The findings are presented to me, I'm able to give my opinion and I'm able to sort of defend it or speak about the whole work when I'm supposed to. It brings us closer to our communities unlike research that provides one-size-fits-all-solutions. This one is tailor made because being a co-researcher means that I'm part of identifying a problem, and I'm also part of coming up with a solution. So, that particular solution will speak directly to me”.
(From a presentation of a co-researcher on the 19th of August 2020).

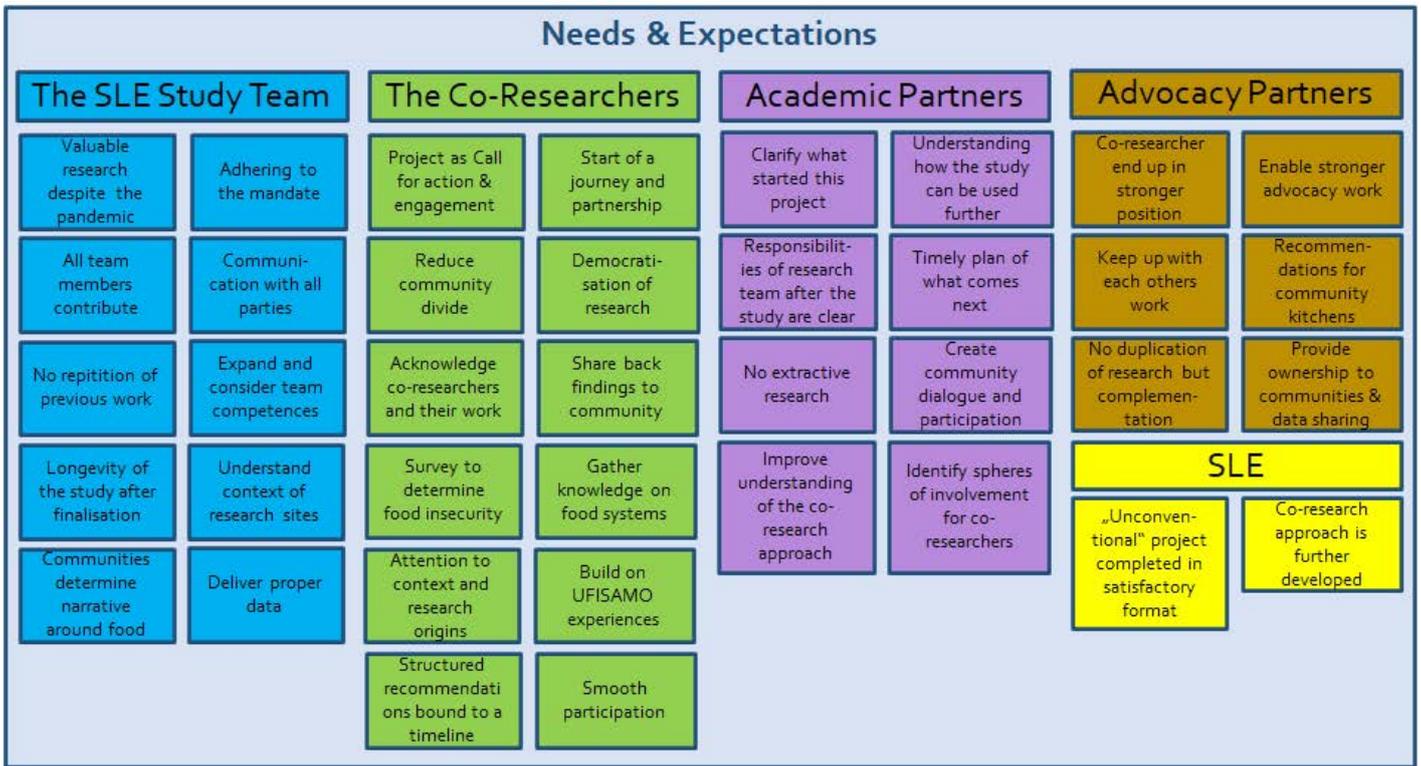


Figure 2: Needs and expectations of the actors involved in the OP South Africa (Source: own elaboration)

searchers with ‘food for thought’, which proved its usefulness as the channels diminished technological barriers to enter dialogue on both sides.

Special features of data and data collection

The research project inhibited data acquisition processes and a rather implementation-driven process. It has been of utmost importance that co-researchers be experienced with the approach beforehand and that trust relationships had been built within previous projects. Thereby, the SLE study team could build upon previous best practices and entered a space in which commitment was high on both ends -- in Germany as well as in South Africa.

The data acquisition started with a household survey capturing the food security status of more than 1,800 households in research sites. The survey was developed by the SLE study team and revised by co-researchers with the help of academic advisors. Next, enumerators were chosen together with co-researchers, and the SLE study team organised an in-

tensive data collection training workshop. It served in making the enumerators familiar with the digital approach, to explain what is essential for survey respondents to understand, and to address content related questions. During enumerator training a buddy principle was established. Each SLE postgraduate was appointed responsible for one research site along with one to two co-researchers and one to two enumerators. In close collaboration, individual strategies to reach the number of respondents in individual research sites were elaborated, implemented, and progress was steadily documented. Due to the pandemic, face-to-face interview scenarios were only conducted if no alternative was possible. Most data were gathered digitally, either through telephone interviews, lead and documented by the enumerators, or by sending the respondents a link via WhatsApp and Facebook groups to do the survey individually.

Also, a mapping task force was established in order to map the food environments of the research sites. As data on informal food related businesses is rare

“The research tradition has to adapt and not just to do research. Co-research has several loops where we have a constant process of reflection. Feedback, reflection and checking where the research should go. So, it is highly dynamic and sometimes hard to predict. And it is not so easy to find funding for this type of research as you can’t predict the outcomes, because along the way they might change”. (Statement about co-research from a key informant on the 22nd September 2020).

Research phase		Advantages	Challenges
Co-research Approach	Establishing the partnership & planning the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-established relationships of trust Well-experienced co-researchers Community driven project proposal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-research structures have to exist beforehand How to move within pre-existing structures: finding one's role, understanding the groundwork Raising dust as outsider by addressing the local challenges
	Conceptualising & designing the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agency in setting research design and focus for co-researchers Adapting design and focus to local context Trans-disciplinarity brings new perspectives and ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-research not easily compatible with ADR terminology and structure Importance of serving different roles and anticipating when to switch roles Uneven power relations How to ensure everyone gets heard? Which platform and language to use?
	Implementation & data acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-researchers as entry points to communities Sensitive research through shared food insecurity experiences Local knowledge: site specificities, language, networks and activism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many side products to get everybody in the boat Many differing communication channels Technical disturbances: load shedding, missing technical equipment, drop-off in meetings, delayed start of workshops
	Analysis & triangulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contextualisation of findings Sharing back results to the ones directly affected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding results of focus group discussions without having participated No direct interaction/exchange
	Scaling & advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community driven outputs Networking character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Divergent interests of partner consortium

Direct involvement of SLE Study Team

Indirect involvement of SLE Study Team

No involvement of SLE Study Team

Figure 3: Advantages & challenges along the steps of a co-research project (Source: own elaboration)

and ever changing on the ground, a team of enumerators and co-researchers was working together with one team member of the SLE study team to generate data locally via GPS and to jointly create food environment maps via Google my Maps. This was the groundwork for establishing more nuanced food environment maps with spatial analysis software. Moreover, the photo-voice method was applied to investigate community challenges and coping mechanisms in light of the pandemic. Theoretical underpinnings were elaborated by one SLE study team member, whereby co-researchers undertook a randomized sampling technique to identify individuals to participate in the course of taking photos. Data acquisition was complemented by interviews with key informants that were purposively sampled by the SLE study Team. Key informant interviews were led digitally from Berlin and served in generating more in-depth information on South Africa's food systems.

Co-researchers steadily voiced the importance of research not losing sight of its relation to the communities by doing data mining. Thereby, co-research-

ers and enumerators were excellent entry points to the communities and to other stakeholders such as ward councillors. They knew the research sites by heart, were well connected in their neighbourhoods, and were active in community projects related to food. They were aware of local media channels to use, such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups, to reach out to a high number of respondents in the context of very tight time frames accruing from project onset. Moreover, they were fluent in the local language and therefore able to advise on the translation of the household survey and to oversee the implementation of the household surveys. As the statement shows, co-researchers were best suited to talk about sensible topics such as food insecurity, and they even encouraged respondents to participate when they initially withdrew from responding to an academic survey. Together with one of the academic advisors, they also organised and implemented focus group discussions to triangulate the findings with local communities. The SLE study team also offered interested household survey respondents the study results adapted to their specific site location in a two-page, easy to read document to provide feed-

back information to local communities.

Advantages and challenges of the approach

The advantages and challenges of the co-research approach utilised for the OP in South Africa in 2020 can be retraced along different research phases in Figure 3.

Lessons learned

Co-research is a powerful tool in democratising research processes and in co-creating local solutions. However, it necessitates a solid groundwork and cannot simply be stomped out of the ground. To build a common understanding of the challenges and relationships of trust between researchers and co-researchers is a process that has to unfold and normally takes years. This led to an understanding that the SLE study team is partaking in a well-advanced process that was started beforehand and will continue after the OP. In sum, the whole process can be considered as co-research, whereas the OP alone does not claim to have fully concluded all steps of co-research. Co-research was not kickstarted by the SLE study team, and hence also entailed learning by making mistakes. Self-reflection and the articulation of doubt together with the co-researchers proved to be viable when noticing mistakes, as it created an underlying consent that an upright interest in the project exists on both ends. It further spurred a common understanding that even though SLE team members were not the ones fighting battles on the ground in South Africa, they are perfectly able to genuinely work together with local people directly affected.

Co-research can be done remotely and hence also functions as a strategy to comply with travel restrictions. Nevertheless, without being able to make first-hand experiences on the ground, some aspects of research are, without doubt, more challenging. First, the SLE study team felt uncomfortable and unsure in writing about the local context of research sites. Second, the SLE study team could not partake in community workshops where the findings of the study were triangulated. Due to time constraints and impromptu documentation, outcomes of these workshops were also only loosely discussed in Berlin. Considering the importance of the triangulation phase, remoteness especially in this specific research phase can be demotivating. A way forward would be to limit the corpus of research while setting a focus on the interpretation of results. That would mean allocating more time and resources in the triangulation of the results. It could, for example, be beneficial to fully record workshop sessions. Also,

external community writers could be considered for hire to write on-site regarding research regions to counteract the challenge of confronting armchair anthropology.

Aforementioned considerations were aggravated further by the fact that the whole project had to be implemented digitally and remote. Given the fact that “[...] communication between people is the most necessary and, at the same time, the most difficult aspect to manage in the facilitated space of co-research” (Paganini & Stöber, 2021, p.12), project work additionally had to stand up to technical disturbances that complicated communication. Drop-outs in digital calls due to load shedding and a loss of interpersonal exchange have to be explicitly named here. At the end, digital work also amplified the debate as to who can actually participate in digital undertakings and therefore in itself raised the intrinsic question of co-research by asking, “who is being heard and who is not?” Future projects need to further elaborate on the possibilities of having digital safe spaces that are not only comfortable and accessible for academics and practitioners of development cooperation but also create inclusive and accessible environments for marginalized communities to discuss and interact in an unbiased way.

The SLE study team has been more than happy to be part of the co-research OP in South Africa. The role as a facilitator was novel to most of the team. However, through ever increasing internalization, the facilitation aspect developed into a strong motivation to keep up the work. This resulted in an overall positive feedback on the study from academia and partners. In retrospective, it can be said that a) research successfully happened in a trans-disciplinary manner and b) considerable findings could be generated even in times of the pandemic. Finally, it can be noted that the impact of the study is characterized by a partner consortium that actively uses the SLE study, works on additional outputs, and proposes follow-up projects.

Further Reading

Practical Application

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