Effective engagement and involvement with community stakeholders in the co-production of global health research

Doreen Tembo and colleagues argue that small changes as well as larger system-wide changes can strengthen citizens’ contribution to knowledge in health research.

Involving a broad range of individual and collective perspectives in global health research outside of academic research is gaining increasing recognition as a mechanism for achieving a greater impact. This activity goes by many names (box 1). In the global north or a high income country, it is commonly called “patient and public involvement,” “engagement,” or “participation.” In low and middle income countries or the global south, these participatory processes are termed “community engagement,” “participation,” and “community engagement and involvement.”

Co-production, a core feature of community engagement and involvement, is common to health research in both the global north and south, with a range of potential benefits. It helps to ensure that health research contributes to building potential benefits. It helps to ensure that health research contributes to building knowledge bases, structural changes are needed to better embed co-production in global health research.

**KEY MESSAGES**

- Co-production of research is key to achieving more equal relationships in global health research and to delivering positive benefits to a wide range of stakeholders.
- Co-production requires investment in time and resources and a commitment to building trust between researchers and communities.
- To deal with the power imbalance between researchers and communities, and within research collaborations, it is important to include experiential knowledge and participatory methodologies.
- Global health research funders and institutions based in the global north can better support co-production by embedding best practices in their funding criteria and systems for career progression and reward.

Various challenges exist to the effective adoption of co-production in global health research. There can be no one size fits all approach. Nevertheless, there are some common challenges and enablers related to citizen centred co-production. These barriers and facilitators when co-producing research, centre on problems of politics, finance and resourcing, access and inclusion, relationship building, and community disengagement (table 1). We will refer to these challenges and enablers when we discuss the co-production principles in the following section.

The UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) co-production guidance and the closely related Unicef Minimum Standards for Community Engagement provide best practice guidance for research teams to navigate these key common challenges and enablers. In addition to step changes, which can be made by adopting the principles of power sharing, building relationships, acknowledging diverse perspectives, reciprocity, and respecting different knowledge bases, structural changes are also needed to better embed co-production in global health research.

**Sharing power**

Sharing power is a key facet of co-production (table 2). Global health research is shaped by power asymmetries or imbalances between funding bodies, research institutions, professional bodies, policy makers, and communities. The exercise of power often depends on who has the resources, the decision making power, and knowledge. These power dynamics and inequalities depend on whose knowledge is valued in interactions both within research teams, and between those teams and the communities with whom they engage.

A co-production framework seeks to redistribute knowledge based power and replace it with mutual learning between all participants in a collaboration.

Because such approaches to research are still new and may cause uneasiness among both researchers and communities, it is the responsibility of research teams to create mutual adaptive learning processes, thus allowing research questions and designs or plans to be amended. Such changes depend on emerging learning and skills building, and ensure researchers include divergent perspectives in their research.

Communities, on the other hand, can act alone by using existing constitutional and institutional structures to lobby for more power and influence within the co-production processes. When such structures do not exist, or when there is political interference, researchers can work with local leaders and political stakeholders to identify and build on local priorities. The Sonagachi project in Kolkata, India is a good example of aligning project priorities with the priorities of those in power (local politicians) and involving local gatekeepers as project team members, to access, involve, and ultimately empower marginalised female sex workers.

Some funders and organisations, such as the Canadian International Development Research Centre and the UK NIHR, use mechanisms to level out power differentials in global health research. Their methods include supporting communities and civil society, such as non-governmental, user led, or community based organisations, by providing flexible budgets or funding, which communities and user groups can use to ensure culturally appropriate and user led research design and practice.

**BMJ**: first published as 10.1136/bmj.n178 on 15 February 2021. Downloaded from http://www.bmj.com.
Box 1: Terminology for partnering with communities

Many terms are used to describe how researchers form partnerships with non-academic communities. The lack of universally agreed and defined terms can lead to a lack of clarity about shared values and scope of activities, and relevance to other researchers and communities. It can also hamper discovery and synthesis of evidence from the literature. The UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) distinguishes between terminologies by defining involvement as an active partnership with patients and the public, participation as researchers providing data for research, and engagement as researchers sharing research outputs with stakeholders, including patients. Internationally these terms are generally used interchangeably, and other terms, such as user or consumer involvement and citizen participation, are also used. In the context of global health, community engagement encompasses many different levels of the consultation-collaboration/partnership/co-production-control continuum of involvement. Organisations such as Unicef, however, use the term community participation in a similar way to patient and public involvement, to indicate a more active form of partnership with communities. The NIHR has adopted the term community engagement and involvement to encompass the full spectrum and levels of partnership with communities.

Tropical Diseases “Malaria and bilharzia in southern Africa” study, for example, demonstrates how communities were encouraged to set up community advisory boards, which were given funding to cover research costs for community engagement.

Building and maintaining relationships

Building relationships of trust with communities is a time, resource, and labour intensive process. Key facets of building sustainability and trust include establishing responsive mutual communication with communities and building capacity for research by encouraging participatory approaches, such as citizen science. An example of a programme which builds local research and community capacity is the Kenya Medical Research Institute Wellcome Trust research programme in Kilifi, which works to build up familiarity with research in the surrounding communities, and involve them in various projects.

Much research funding is limited to five years or less, resulting in involvement of communities on a project by project basis instead of developing long term relationships with researchers. Encounters are often transactional and focus on getting a project completed. Such short term interactions, especially if there is no lasting benefit to the community, can be counterproductive or exploitative, leading to community disengagement, especially if researchers do not share their results. Future researchers wishing to engage these communities will need to determine why they are disengaged and work with them to develop joint research.

Although some research centres in the UK successfully build relationships with communities, it is more usual for researchers to recruit a small group of people who can provide insights from their own experience. When views of the community are sought, a representative from a civil society organisation is sometimes involved. This approach saves time and cost, but presents only one perspective on research. When such a representative is necessary—for example, on a funding or ethics committee, it is crucial to ensure that the concerns of marginalised groups are included, by regular meetings with them. For example, the NIHR piloted a community of practice of public members who discussed what research should be prioritised, with a rotating representative from this community attending the prioritisation committee. The pilot was evaluated by NIHR and learning was shared and discussed with the community of practice members.

Research organisations have a key role in ensuring that the development of relationships with communities, and civil society organisations more broadly, becomes a valued, and professionally rewarded academic activity. For example, some universities have introduced community engagement and involvement as a criterion for career progression. Effective communication of opportunities for community members to learn more about research into their health condition, and building their research and professional skills, contributes to community engagement.

Including all perspectives and skills

A major concern for health research is that educated older, often retired, middle class...
individuals, or more organised groups are most likely to be involved. Co-production becomes more inclusive when a plan is established for dealing with communities in culturally acceptable ways, taking into account local needs and capabilities. The research team needs to identify and communicate with all relevant stakeholders, including vulnerable and marginalised groups. Such approaches will minimise resistance, distrust, and unrealistic expectations from the community.

A specialist with knowledge of co-production processes will always be needed within health research teams. Many funders advocate transdisciplinary research teams so that together with the usual disciplines, such as clinical or public health research, epidemiology, health economics, and statistics, a broader range of social sciences, humanities, non-academic disciplines, and communities are also included. For example, the research team for the Malaria and Bilharziasis in Southern Africa (Mabisa) study had diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including non-academic members. Community members used their knowledge of the local area to assist scientists in generating sophisticated maps, which acted as a starting point for designing environmental adaptation strategies for reducing vulnerabilities to vectorborne diseases. The inclusion of such expertise will ensure that the cultural and societal factors that might influence the engagement of communities are taken into account. Nevertheless, to ensure culturally appropriate community engagement, all members of a research team should be trained to carry this out.

Researchers need to be mindful of the jargon sometimes used in academia and health and how it can create barriers to collaboration. Meeting places that are welcoming to all should be used. Community members might not feel comfortable meeting in institutional environments, which might exacerbate the power imbalance between communities and academics or professionals. A positive consequence of the current coronavirus pandemic has been “digital democratisation”—the ability to allow people to co-produce research regardless of location, albeit subject to the availability of equipment and connectivity. That said, we also recognise that some people are digitally excluded, and researchers need to find ways of bridging this divide.

**Reciprocity and respecting and valuing different knowledge bases**

Reciprocity is essential to co-produced research. Funders of global health research need to reconsider the rewards and impact of co-production. Communities which devote their time, effort, and knowledge to shaping a research study should determine what benefits they receive and should be empowered by the processes. For example, benefits that empower communities might range from remuneration, skills training with certificates, access to research institution facilities, learning more about research and particular health conditions, and networking. The community can also be involved in determining what outputs of research are produced. Thus, the community might favour dissemination through methods such as plays, puppet shows, or comics, rather than purely through peer reviewed papers. The Planet DIVOC-91 comic is a key example of how the researchers worked with youth and other community stakeholders in low and middle income countries to provide information about covid-19 and research. Methodological hierarchies in global health research tend to favour quantitative rather than qualitative approaches, and yet it is qualitative approaches that often are used. Furthermore, experiential knowledge continues to be considered anecdotal, while the values of expert knowledge are increased within health research. Research teams need to place equal value on different types of knowledge, particularly the lived experiences and contextually specific knowledge of community partners.

The funders of most global health research do not yet mandate community engagement and involvement, despite the plethora of guidance to enable researchers to achieve co-production. A number of funders, including NIHR, insist on community engagement and involvement in research proposals and consider it a key criterion for funding. This approach might lead to a generational shift in the global health sector, making co-production the norm.

**Where we can go from here: recommendations for action**

Radical action is needed to embed co-production. It is worrying that during the current pandemic, the level of community engagement and involvement has reduced despite clear guidance on how to carry out ethical and valuable work in an emergency. This illustrates the tenuous position of co-production. Within emergency responses, co-production can be achieved by setting up rapid response community...
CO-PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Academic journals can follow the lead of The BMJ, the NIHR Journals Library, and others, which require reporting on patient and public involvement. Journals could encourage the publication of research results on co-production, including the use of new methodological approaches, or by encouraging co-authorship by non-academic community members.

To achieve change, we need to think internationally about how the quality of research in universities and in health ecosystems in the global north and south is assessed. In the UK, the Research Excellence Framework is the mechanism whereby the impact of universities’ research is assessed, forming the basis for the allocation of funding. This framework could incorporate a mechanism that values and rewards the outputs of co-production (for example, the total number of peer reviewed articles that are single authorship or lead authored with community partners; evaluating how the research contributed to strengthening local community participation, skills building, research literacy, or creative engagement) and measures the effect of research on people’s lives.

Universities can better align their reward and recognition mechanisms to encourage co-production. Academia and research funders also need to value transdisciplinary and team science, and the inclusion of skills that foster co-production. The curriculums for research methods need to embed the development of knowledge and skills for co-production.

Currently, government use of science and evidence in responding to the pandemic, and the spread of disinformation and mistrust, is being debated globally. Citizens and communities increasingly disseminate knowledge. On the one hand, the pandemic has uncovered underlying systemic health and socioeconomic inequities and, on the other, created a new set of possibilities for global health research that decentralises power and values co-production.

We thank the UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and Department of Health and Social Care staff who provided input into the paper based on their personal views. These included Katalin Torok, senior research manager for patient and public involvement and engagement, UK NIHR; Patrick Wilson, head of global health communications and stakeholder engagement, UK NIHR; and Aaronjay Tidball, global health research programme officer, science, research and evidence directorate, Department of Health and Social Care, UK. We are also grateful to Pippa Coutts, policy and development manager, Carnegie Trust, UK, who was also involved in the roundtable discussion which informs this paper. The roundtable focused on approaches and challenges when engaging end users in the co-production of global health research.

Contributors and sources: DT and GH co-wrote the article, and collaborated on the production of the UK NIHR guidance on co-producing a research
CO-PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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Cite this as: BMJ 2021;372:n178
http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n178