

# Research in Africa: Lessons learnt from participatory research in Kenya

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Research at the intersection of health and sustainability challenges in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) requires interdisciplinary and participatory ways of working, which bring together those 'on the ground' with researchers to develop actionable strategies with local and national policymakers.

Here we share reflections and lessons learned from research in Kenya, which informed a round table discussion held at EHPS 2019 in Dubrovnik. Traditionally, research in Kenya as in many countries across the global South has been top-down with researchers defining the research problem and the intervention and then going into communities to implement the research and program work. While this has worked over the years, many projects especially those with a component of action/intervention have faced sustainability and ownership challenges owing to a sense of disconnect by the study communities. Communities have expressed a feeling of alienation to the research and subsequent programs arising from this due to the research team's failure to engage with them in thinking through the research as well as the solutions.

Increasingly, the approach to research implementation is changing from being driven by the research team to participatory approaches where the study communities are partners in the

design of the research questions and interventions. This departs from the traditional approaches where study communities were recipients of the research and interventions whose design was largely led by researchers .

A participatory approach is being applied by the Complex Urban Systems for Sustainability and Health (CUSSH) project, an international collaboration partnering with six cities in Kenya, China and Europe. The CUSSH project seeks to deliver strategically vital research on the complex connections between urban development and health within city systems. One of the ways to achieve the project objectives is to use participatory methods to undertake continuous engagements with stakeholders in partner cities in order to test processes to help implement the transformative changes needed to meet sustainability and health objectives. In the Kenyan cities of Nairobi and Kisumu, the participatory approach has given hope to communities that there is change in the way researchers engage with them. It has also empowered them to raise critical questions to their local leaders with regards to government projects being implemented as well as the allocation and use (or misuse) of public resources. By holding workshops to discuss and prioritize the challenges the two cities of Nairobi and Kisumu are facing, the voice of city residents has been heard and their opinions taken into consideration in the decision to focus on spatial planning. Further, participatory approaches were applied in the decision to focus on waste-to-energy for Kisumu city in the application for funding from the Green Climate Fund (GCF).

## Lessons Learnt

After two years of engaging with County governments towards the implementation of the project, we have had some learning:

1. Defining the research agenda: The CUSSH model of participatory research has been an eye-opener with regards to the future of research in Africa. Communities, including local leaders, were given a voice at the discussion table to think through what to focus on. The resulting list of challenges that were felt to be pressing in the County went through several iterations of discussion. It was evident from the community that they were happy to be treated as key stakeholders in deciding the focus of the program and there is hope that they will be proud owners of any programs arising from this work. An important part of this process is for non-local researchers to allow those with lived experience of the context to lead in shaping the project, and to take time to listen and fully acknowledge different cultures, concepts and language in the formulation of the research agenda.

2. Politics sometimes trump public good: For northern partners looking to implement work in Africa, there is need to accept that sometimes political interests supersede public good that the research hopes to achieve. For the case of the two Counties in Kenya – Kisumu and Nairobi, there is need to take cognizance of the fact that county leadership is political and therefore some decisions will be informed by political interests of the office bearers. This in effect may delay work progress as decisions tend to be made slower given that most considerations are made from a political angle. While this may not be spoken directly e.g. “what political mileage do I get from your work?” it may be communicated subtly through certain informal comments about what appeals to the electorate. The research team must develop some political intelligence to state their interests without appearing to downplay the opinions of the political

class. In addition, the research team must be patient as some of the phases in their work that may seem easy to implement could take very long owing to the political decisions made by government partners. In addition, individual partners on the project whose tenure is based on political cycles may be changed or removed from office at any time in the life of the project. This calls for the researchers to be flexible and responsive when such changes happen so that they can quickly engage with new office bearers and take them onboard to ensure continuity of the work. It is important for research teams engaging with political offices to also guard against the use of their work as campaign tools as this could send the wrong message to participating communities on the utility of research data they provide, and research in general. To navigate the politics within government partners, it would be important for northern partners to have a local research partner who has clear knowledge of the local context; while also having a focal person within the government to hold their hands through the red-tape that is part of political offices.

3. Expectations- the realistic and the outrageous: One of the lessons coming from our two year engagement with county governments has been the expectations both of the government and communities. The research funding scene in most African countries is very competitive and there are few or no local funding opportunities from the government. So the news of a successfully funded proposal is usually well received as it gives hope that funding gaps can be filled. However, it also raises the bar of expectations and some outrageous demands can be placed on the program. This calls for honest and clear communication of what the project/program can fund, how the funds shall be disbursed as well as any contractual requirements needed between partners.

4. Equal partnerships: Where the research work is a collaboration between local researchers (in LMICs) and those from the global North, there is

need to create an equal partnership where the thinking and developing of the proposal for funding is done in a truly collaborative way to avoid creating a feeling of superior research teams over others. Some form of understanding on how the partners relate is important and this discussion should be held early in the life of the project to avoid misunderstandings that could undermine the progress of the work. This is especially important when dealing with non-research partners who may feel slighted if their contribution to the work does not seem to receive any acknowledgements.

5. Data and products: There is need for discussions on who retains the data arising from the research and ensure access to these by all partners. The development of products from the research such as papers and reports also need agreements on who leads and who makes it to the author list. Inclusion of non-research/academic partners as co-authors may be necessary even though their actual contribution in the writing violates the principles of authorship.

## Conclusions

The lessons we have learnt over the course of the CUSSH implementation remain crucial for other ongoing and yet to be implemented projects/programs in Africa. Research teams need to be well prepared to engage with governments that are quite political and whose decision making process can be rather slow, conflicting with project timelines. Further there is need to tame expectations so that governments and communities do not demand for deliverables that cannot be achieved within the time frame and funding of the project. Relationships that espouse equity are key to the success of programs implemented in the region and to cap it all, patience is a virtue that northern partners must cultivate alongside flexibility and responsiveness.



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