

Rubbish, Resources and Residues - Field Report 02 (September 2022)

Social research and the uncertainties of a pandemic: report from the field in Karachi and Faisalabad

By **Suneela Ahmed, Mansoor Ali and Saeeduddin Ahmed**

Suneela Ahmed is Associate Professor at NED University of Engineering and Technology, Karachi. Mansoor Ali is a Researcher at the Water Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC), Loughborough University and a Visiting Academic at NED University. Saeeduddin Ahmed is Associate Professor at NED University.

1. Background

In November 2019, an International Research project was approved by the UK's British Academy, with extensive fieldwork in Pakistan and Ethiopia. The project was titled [Rubbish, Resources and Residues: Waste and Well-being in Ethiopia and Pakistan](#). Alongside technical issues on the handling of waste quantities, types, and sources, the research also examined institutional issues and policies such as decentralisation and the rise of private utilities. The research explored the intersection of official systems of waste management with the informal waste and recycling economies. Social dynamics and the role played by households and communities in integrated approaches to waste management was a further focus – and the research methodology comprised extensive fieldwork in low-income areas and among waste workers and waste pickers, including the influx of migrants and refugees into cities. In Pakistan, the research also addressed the competition for access to waste sources and jobs and its impact on the relatively stable but gendered and hierarchical control of waste work by various gatekeepers in Karachi and Faisalabad. These included those hereditary occupational status groups customarily associated with dirty work.

The research aimed to explore questions in four areas:

1. In what ways have changes in waste generation, collection, disposal and

- recycling impacted low-income urban dwellers as waste collectors and recyclers?
2. To what extent do municipal services reach low-income groups and what is their participation in community level waste management practices?
3. What are the changes in access to and competition for livelihoods by different groups, customary waste workers and newcomers to the city and what is the relevance of social identity and stigma in this regard?
4. In terms of governance, how pervasive and sustainable are hybridised waste management systems that embrace both the formal and the informal?

The research timetable overlapped more or less exactly with the rise of COVID-19 globally and in Pakistan. As the research project began its work in early December 2019, Wuhan in China entered the news. Within a few weeks a new vocabulary had emerged, and a majority of the world's population came to know the meaning of 'social distancing', 'self-isolation', 'lockdown', 'smart lockdown', 'rapid testing', and 'R rates' and deal with the ubiquity of handwashing, antibacterial gels, masks and digital meetings. On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and all countries were asked to take measures. By April 2020, a number of countries had already adopted restrictions in terms of lockdowns, travel bans and the suspension of indoor gathering. Governments, philanthropic and commercial sector

organisations made commitments to invest in vaccines. Within a few months, the world had become a very different place.

As a result, the direction of our research had to be adapted to accommodate this global challenge. The initial research design included two national teams, one in Pakistan and another in Ethiopia, as well as an international team based in LSE Cities at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The initial phase of the research project was a literature review. As this involved desk-based work it was not affected by the pandemic. However, the next stage of the research was designed to include site visits, site documentation and field research, as well as interactive workshops in which British-based and Ethiopian partners were to fly over to Pakistan. The face-to-face workshop was cancelled and a new plan for completing the research had to be devised. Although there was an expectation or hope that within few months everything would return to normal, this did not happen and adjustments and changes had to be made, sometimes on a weekly or monthly basis.

This field report presents the impact of COVID-19 on the research process from the perspective of one of the research teams based in Pakistan and the UK and how new methodologies were adopted and tried through implementation. Overall, it is a narrative describing the conduct of the research with the rise, fall and uncertainties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. It is presented within an epistemological analysis and literature review based on the social science research methodologies adopted and how they need to be adapted in the face of uncertainties such as this pandemic.

The objective of the paper is to present what we learned in the process of conducting the research under changed conditions, in terms of pursuing qualitative research largely virtually, while at the same time ensuring rigour and trust in the conduct and analysis of the findings. The first half of the report is based on a brief review of the social research methodology and its application. The second half connects it to lessons from the findings of the actual research conducted, examining its impact on the collaboration between LSE Cities and NED University of Engineering and Technology, Department of Architecture and Planning.

2. Methodology

The proposed methodology involved qualitative research methods, including observations of the physical and social environments of low-income case study areas, semi-structured and open-ended interviews with community members and people involved in waste collection and recycling, alongside key informant interviews with those involved in or concerned with solid waste management and related urban policy.

The research and its objectives were advanced via ethnographic and sociological methods. The focus on solid waste management and the recycling, reuse and reduction of waste were explored not only in terms of the physical but also the social, economic and cultural dimensions of waste. In each of the chosen case study areas for Karachi, the focus was on how the physical collection of waste was linked to economic and social indicators and to larger intangible realities around perceptions of waste and people associated with it.

Consequently, the restriction on travel and fieldwork due to COVID-19 impacted on our interactions with people, managers, supervisors, workers and representatives of local communities, as well as observations and measurements related to waste itself and the way it was managed at street, neighbourhood, and city levels. Furthermore, workshops were proposed at the outset and the conclusion of the research to consult with national level policy makers, planners and other research users and influencers involved in urban development across the two cities in Pakistan, as well as academics from relevant disciplines. These too were hampered by the pandemic and have not taken place to date.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on the research

The COVID-19 restrictions, the fear associated with them, and related uncertainties all impacted the research in Pakistan in three different ways:

- First, restrictions on travel resulted in the need to change all activities requiring international and local travel. This had a direct impact on planning and methodology workshops, which were initially planned as

face-to-face events during the inception phase.

- Second, many of the stakeholder meetings and interviews could not be conducted physically due to the requirement for social distancing. Furthermore, many public offices shut down during the lockdown period, and many basic services, especially waste collection, were disrupted.
- Third, the constant uncertainties relating to fieldwork and site visits meant that forward planning was disrupted, with constant contingency measures needing to be taken to overcome or safely work around these restrictions.

Predictions about the extent of the crisis were constantly changing and it was almost impossible to plan ahead. Direct engagement with the residents in low-income areas was difficult but not impossible, the team on the ground had to be careful to avoid any unnecessary risk to themselves or their informants. National travel between Karachi and Faisalabad was also affected as a result of COVID-19 with the domestic flight schedule disrupted and the closure of its borders by the Punjab Province.

Despite these constraints, alongside the challenges posed by the restrictions on access and mobility due to COVID-19, the inherent flexibility embedded in the ethnographic method, including its reliance on the generation of data from site documentation and observation in the field, provided opportunities for adaptation.

4. Mitigating the impact of COVID-19

With the national and international media full of news about COVID-19, it was difficult for the UK-based team to assess the risks and possibilities on the ground. Clear communication with the research leaders and funders was a key first step. The local researchers and their organisations had to clearly communicate the very real challenges posed by working in the proposed research locations and what conditions and risks they were willing and able to accept. The team in Pakistan had regular meetings with the UK team to communicate short- and long-term changes to the research plan. These were regularly conveyed to the funders through the

reporting mechanism. A key message and outcome was moving from a linear and certain direction of travel in the research to a more iterative and flexible approach. It was important that we prepared plans which were adaptive in nature and that included various possible pathways. There was recognition and willingness by team leaders and the researchers to tweak the research design as per the ever-changing requirements. The research team adapted the methodology accordingly.

A good understanding and use of digital tools was necessary to move forward. Those digital tools, which allowed for presentations, note taking and recording and playback of discussions were used. As the universities in the UK and Pakistan were already moving to digital modes of communication and teaching this shift was not as challenging as it might otherwise have been. This was also possible due to the investment in larger infrastructure in the form of hardware and software, which was already in place. Enabling field researchers with mobile phones, connectivity, cameras and video-making equipment was more challenging and this had not been included in the original budgeting. The research team again adopted a flexible approach, learning new skills in digital communication and data collection methods. Adaptability in the use of research methods was key in the situation we were faced with and allowed us to work with a number of possible plans.

Alternative methods of data collection ranged from telephone interviews to video conferences, with the help of a link established with a local activist through his mobile connection. In some cases, a validation interview was arranged with the local activist to triangulate the findings. Triangulation was also done through personal site-based observation and existing knowledge. Triangulation was independent of the perceptions of the subjects being studied.

The local activists in the field remained important links who helped connect the researchers with the research subjects. The quality of the research data obtained was ensured through thorough preparation before the start of data collection, regular communication between the research team, and the local residents and activists who were trained on the importance of observation, note taking and validation, as well as protocols around avoiding transferring health risks to the local residents.

The majority of the key informant interviews were done online, using zoom virtual meeting software in which country collaborators and researchers from the UK also joined. The online meetings were recorded, and notes were taken, later transcribed and circulated. The data relied on personal subjectivity in terms of meanings, associations and understanding of the research questions and there was less opportunity for clarification and follow-up than might have been the case in face-to-face interviews.

Interviews were also conducted over telephone wherever necessary, to avoid direct contact with the people being interviewed. Such interviews were recorded, and the recording was shared with the country collaborators for review and for identification of any gap, which were triangulated or re-visited.

Nevertheless, a good number of interviews were also conducted at case study sites. In such cases, standard operating procedures (SOPs) for countering possible exposure to COVID-19 were observed. Meetings and interviews were conducted outdoors with no more than three people together and spaced at least one metre's distance apart. Face masks were worn throughout the interviews as per SOPs. It was possible to note and engage with subjectivist stances when using this method of data collection, as body language, reactions and other symbols and signs could be observed in context. Hence, this data helped in cross verifying data obtained from other sources, but they also unearthed other realities observed and interpreted during analysis.

Before the onset of COVID-19-related restrictions, the researchers from the UK were to visit Karachi and partially conduct and oversee the fieldwork, with the transfer of skills happening in a learning-by-doing context but due to restrictions, this could not happen. The country-based collaborators, with the help of research assistants and the community-based gatekeepers and facilitators had to conduct the fieldwork alone and with only virtual oversight and advice from the UK-based collaborators. Fortnightly virtual meetings between the UK and country-based teams and monthly team meetings with the larger research team including those based in Ethiopia, helped with effective coordination and these meetings generated vital cross-learning as well as feedback on the data collected.

Adopting a case study methodology also involved mapping the case study areas, taking pictures and conducting interviews with key people identified in each locality. The role of the gate-keeper-facilitator was critical in terms of making the best use of time and in generating contacts and interview or focus group sessions with local people. The adoption of case study methodology made it possible to generalise the findings to the city level, based on selectively chosen in-depth area case studies.

Furthermore, as Karachi was the home city of the country collaborators, it made it a little easier to oversee and undertake data collection and to do the research, as proximity allowed flexibility and for us to conduct interviews and make site visits as per convenience, and at times when movement was relatively relaxed in terms of the ebb and flow of government advice and restrictions. However, this was not the case for Faisalabad, the other city which formed part of the research project in Pakistan.

Faisalabad could only be visited for a short period of three days and only once the Province of Punjab opened its borders. Even then, extra effort had to be made in planning and coordination to keep the COVID-19 impact minimal. Nevertheless, the three-day visit allowed the researchers to create connections within the academic and government offices, which were then followed up virtually at a later date, to implement a similar methodology as was used in Karachi. While in Faisalabad, a number of on-site interviews were also conducted with the municipal waste workers known as 'sweepers' and other stakeholders involved in the solid waste collection and management in the city. Academics involved in the study of solid waste generation, collection and disposal at the Government College, University Faisalabad and at the Agriculture University of Faisalabad were also interviewed face to face, following strict SOPs. Focus groups with the sweepers were conducted in open air sites, keeping an appropriate distance between participants. Similarly, a visit to the site of Afghan waste pickers and recyclers in their sorting yard was also conducted in the open air and as per SOPs.

Further data was obtained from Faisalabad through online key informant interviews once back in Karachi, with a researcher appointed to document and write up in-depth case studies. Although some of the observations and clarifications possible in face-

to-face interviews were not feasible, the fact that some of these online interviews were recorded and subsequently analysed further, allowed for aspects such as the confidence and tone of the voice of the people responding to be noted, as well as when voices trailed off or reflected hesitation or uncertainty.

5. Conclusion

The use of ethnography and data collected through a number of social research methods allowed us to adapt to changing conditions and the measures necessary to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on ourselves, the researchers, and on the overall research. COVID-19 restrictions stretched the country-based team considerably, requiring an iterative and adaptive approach to the research by

everyone concerned. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, it could be argued that the participation of field workers and the delegation of tasks was improved. Both country-based and UK-based collaborators lost out from the peer-to-peer learning that comes from working more closely together. However, engaging with the field workers on the ground and building the capacity of community-based champions meant greater decision-making freedom on ground level for country-based researchers and this was very important. COVID-19 also taught us to be more resilient ourselves, without being reckless or taking unnecessary risks. Responsibility was onerous, taking care not to transfer risk to others, such as our field workers and the communities we researched, something we avoided by vigilant oversight and strict observance of the SOPs.

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