Whose Crisis? COVID-19 Explored through Arts and Cultural Practices of African Communities

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ABSTRACT

The "Whose Crisis?" project is in response to a continually evolving global health pandemic, COVID-19. In this context, the dominant discourses have been generated in the Global North, overwhelmingly by a minority of wealthy and powerful authors, reflecting narrowly on a crisis that, while impacting the whole world, is experienced in vastly different ways. This article frames and contextualises data from this project through an introduction to the background, contexts, and methods of a project designed to reflect the lived experiences of, perspectives on, and responses to COVID-19 in vulnerable communities across sub-Saharan Africa. The project has been carried out by a large team of collaborators who prioritise the lived experiences, customs, and needs of the communities engaged through a culturally responsive and arts-based research approach. The article points to the methodological implications of arts-based research to explore plural perspectives in participatory ways, and the socio-political possibilities of amplifying the voices of under-represented and under-served communities in Africa, in terms of global health in a pandemic context.

(1) CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION

The "Whose Crisis?" project is an urgent response to a rapidly evolving global health pandemic whereby the Global North has led (by example and economic pressure) the response to an emergency affecting communities all over the world.[1] Immediate cultural production, critical commentary, and public policy have been showcased and circulated globally with substantial affect – this may prove to be the most documented pandemic in history. However, the dominant discourses are generated in the North, overwhelmingly by a minority of wealthy and powerful authors, reflecting narrowly on a crisis that, while impacting the whole world, is experienced in vastly different ways.

This article provides the background and contexts of the "Whose Crisis?" project and provides information about accessing the open access data that has resulted from it. The project is a culturally responsive and arts-based initiative, designed to reflect the lived experiences of, perspectives on, and responses to COVID-19 from nine diverse but vulnerable communities, spanning five sub-Saharan African countries. The project has been carried out by a large team of collaborators who prioritise the lived experiences, customs, and needs of the selected communities through direct and dynamic engagement. Collectively, we aim to explore how arts-based and participatory research methods can be used in situated ways to reveal marginalised perspectives about the pandemic (specific methods are detailed below). Furthermore, we aim to understand what can be achieved when the voices of under-represented and under-served communities in African contexts are amplified, particularly in terms of global health in a pandemic context.

Historical and present-day public health issues and pandemics, such as Ebola, HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, have influenced the progress and cohesion of much of sub-Saharan Africa (Osseni, 2020). These issues are ongoing in many places. On the one hand, this means that the continent is already 'weakened' and susceptible to further health issues, but on the other, it means that the continent is logistically and mentally experienced and prepared for such events. COVID-19 may not be the most severe threat to public health or mental health for many in African communities, but it is one that has exposed new complexities and increased attention into what is understood as 'global health' (Kaseje, 2020). The pandemic has brought into focus the complexity and interrelatedness of physical and mental well-being with cultural and societal structures. It has highlighted the need for responses that can bridge this complexity, that reflect on the global diversity of human experience, and provide a more balanced understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasingly, artists, writers, singers, philosophers, and theorists are providing commentaries, support, and responses to this global pandemic. Yet, these voices are primarily from the Global North, articulated through Northern cultural practices and products from those with access to communication technologies, capacities, and resources (e.g., Fekadu, 2020; Lamb, 2021). This article, with the data it frames, is part of a wider project aimed to re-balance the narrative. With an overarching focus on the data generated, we begin with a theoretical positioning relating to the arts-based methodology adopted for the study. The article then provides details of the locations of where the study took place, the participants engaged, and the methods of data generation developed. Finally, a brief overview of themes emerging from data analysis are provided to guide further engagement with the open access dataset.

(1.1) THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is positioned within a framework of socially engaged arts (e.g., Abdulla, 2016; Helguera, 2011; Prentki & Preston, 2009), in conjunction with cultural practice and communications (Chen & Morley, 2006; Eze, 2014). Socially engaged arts describe the broad scope of arts and creative practices that are intended to have social impact and effect change. This includes but extends the long history of theatre for development practice that has been established in Africa over the past 60 years (Mda, 1983), incorporating performance, radio drama, and participatory theatre models. This movement has contentious origins and impacts that are entangled with the broader history of colonial development since the Second World War (Pompêo Nogueira, 2002). To build on and ethically extend the long and

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1   *https://www.whosecrisis.org/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

established history of socially engaged arts, this project takes up socially engaged arts with an explicit commitment not to 'develop' but to *pay attention*. In other words, not to disseminate information from elsewhere, change behaviour, or propose new practices, but to witness, listen, and learn from lived realities that are often absent from prevailing discourse. Informed by decolonial methodologies (Harding, 2018; Santos, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), the research team are committed to participatory engagements that foreground the lived experiences of communities and households in rural and peri-urban African contexts, whilst ensuring a wide global witnessing of these voices.

(1.2) RESEARCH CONTEXTS, PARTICIPANTS, AND DATA

The research team and some of the participating communities worked together through partnerships forged and supported over the past five years through the Sustainable Futures (SF) Global Network.[2] The SF Global Network is a large, interdisciplinary community of researchers, artists, educators, students, development workers, and farmers who share a commitment to decolonial and participatory approaches to the multi-dimensional aspects of sustainability (including social, spiritual, political, and ecological sustainability). At the outset of the pandemic, the day-to-day working practices of the SF Global Network suddenly shifted, as did their priorities and perspectives. As a large group of like-minded researchers and peers, we came together to consider the best ways to support our Network Hubs (country-based network groups) and our partner communities. To this end, the "Whose Crisis?" project was conceived and co-designed through virtual meetings and workshops, building from existing areas of expertise and knowledge of best practice.

The biggest and founding chapter of the SF Global Network is the Sustainable Futures in Africa group (SFA). Based on the locations of the five SFA hubs, the geographical context of this research spans nine locations across those five countries in sub-Saharan Africa, ranging from urban and peri-urban to rural. Peri-urban refers to areas in which the rural and urban meet through the expansion of urban contexts into rural areas. Specifically, the areas include: Alebtong and Banda in Uganda; Mbando and Shanganani in Malawi; Kwaluseni, Vuvulane, and Mbabane in Eswatini; Ìtagunmọdi and Ajibode in Nigeria; and Old Naledi and Damochujenaa in Botswana. The authors of this work include one team member from each SFA hub, in addition to a team member based in Scotland, UK.

Participatory design, capacity strengthening, community engagement, and data generation has culminated in a digital record of the stories, performances, images, opinions, and lived experiences of COVID-19 in (economically, environmentally, and culturally) vulnerable communities. *Table 1* provides details of the number of participants directly involved in data generation methods, their vocations or positions in their communities, and the specific locations in which the data generation took place. The information in *Table 1* has been extracted from fieldnotes. The locations were intended to include a variety of contexts (as mentioned above) and the specific communities were selected based on pre-existing partnerships between researchers and community leaders or members. After this overview of scope, each research context is described in more detail to illustrate the range of contexts and their pertinent characteristics.

(1.2.1) Alebtong and Kampala in Uganda

The Alebtong District is located in Lango sub-region in Northern Uganda and is bordered by the districts of Otuke, Amuria, Dokolo, and Lira. The population of this district is approximately 227,370.[3] The district is mainly occupied by the Langi people and a few Kumam and Iteso. Alebtong district has two counties and nine sub-counties. This study took place in Apala sub-county in Amonomita, Obim, Abagoimany, Atinkok, Abiting, and Okwangole parish.

The major economic activity in Alebtong district is agriculture and over 80% of the population engages in subsistence farming, despite the region's susceptibility to prolonged dry spells. Culturally, communities in Alebtong district are conservative and to a large extent they still honour their traditions (e.g., conventional gender and generational roles are adhered to, and

COUNTRY AND REGIONS OF PARTICIPATION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	TYPES OF PARTICIPANTS	LOCATIONS OF PARTICIPATION
Uganda:		Community members; religious leaders; health practitioners; students; teachers; police officers	Health centres; police outpost; primary school; local NGO; parish community halls; unplanned settlements (slums)
Apala	123		
Banda	52		
Malawi:		Artists; students; cultural practitioners[a]; healers and health practitioners; community members; teachers	Marketplaces; health clinics; outside schools; public spaces
Mbando	32		
Shanganani	38		
Eswatini:		Artists; community members; retailers; farmers	Churches; community kitchens; personal homes and farmhouses; market places; street/public spaces; community clinic; inside cars; under the trees; garden tent/hall; shops
Kwaluseni	57		
Vuvulane	69		
Mbabane	15		
Nigeria:		Traditional council members; community members; retailers; health practitioners; religious leaders	Community halls; participants' residences; motor garage/parks; health centres; shops; community centre; market square
Ìtagunmodi	34		
Ajibode	65		
Botswana:		Artists; students; cultural practitioners; traditional healers[b]; community members; teachers	Community hall; playground; school; arts centre; homestead; public outdoor spaces
Old Naledi	79		
Damochujenaa	6		

Table 1 Research participants by number, position, and research locations.
Note: [a] A cultural practitioner describes a member of the community who is engaged in using cultural practices, for example music, craft, story, to communicate, educate, or mediate between groups.
[b] A traditional healer describes a holistic healthcare provider that works with indigenous knowledges and natural remedies to support health.

birth, death, and coming of age ceremonies are practiced). Normally, there is a high sense of communality during marriage and burial ceremonies, celebrating the birth of twins, and local brew drinking in the evenings, among others.

In Kampala, research was carried out in Banda. Banda is an informal settlement area with a cosmopolitan population that is found in Nakawa Division of Kampala district. Most residents in Banda live from hand-to-mouth, whereby many get their daily livelihood from offering casual labour to the residents and businesses in the nearby capital city of Uganda. Given the above socio-economic and socio-political contexts, the communities in Alebtong District and Banda in Kampala are vulnerable and anything that disrupts their livelihood, as occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, worsens the already unstable situation.

(1.2.2) Mbando and Shanganani in Malawi

Mbando is a community located in the South-Eastern region district of Machinga in Malawi. Machinga district has a population of 735,438.[4] The Mbando community is situated in a remote rural area, with livelihoods provided primarily through farming and fishing.

Shanganani is a village in the border district of Mchinji, where the district borders Zambia to the West, Mozambique to the Southwest, and other districts of Kasungu to the North, and Lilongwe to the East. The district has a population of 602,305.[5] The area is characterised by high levels of migration and cross-border trade with the neighbouring Zambian population.

(1.2.3) Kwaluseni, Vuvulane, and Mbabane in Eswatini

Kwaluseni (located in the Hhohho region) is a predominantly peri-urban area located in close proximity to the Matsapha Industrial Site and Manzini urban city in Eswatini. The district has a population of approximately 320,651.[6] Due to the Industrial Site, there has been a steady contemporary influx of jobseekers in the greater Matsapha town, which has consequently led to the rapid growth of 'cheap' informal houses or rental units. The area of focus is also interconnected to Manzini city as the city serves as the country's economic hub due to its provision of employment opportunities, retail stores, government services, among others.[7] Some labourers who work in Manzini reside in the Matsapha peri-urban areas. Kwaluseni is also home to one of the main campuses of the University of Eswatini (UNESWA).

4   *https://malawiplus.com/machinga/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

5   *https://malawiplus.com/mchinji/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

6   *http://citypopulation.de/Swaziland.html* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

7   *https://mzcitycouncil.sz/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

In the town of Vuvulane (in the Lubombo region), the project partnered with the *Vuvulane Orphaned & Vulnerable Children Outreach Foundation (VOVCOF)*[8] *which* has been deeply involved in the COVID-19 community response in the town and surrounding areas. Lubombo, with a population of approximately 212,531[9], is one of the poorest regions in the country. The region is severely impacted by drought and environmental stress.[10]

Additional street-level interactions in micro-communities within the capital city of Mbabane were also conducted to supplement the data, together with semi-structured interviews with project partners representing various development sectors in Eswatini.

(1.2.4) Itagunmodi and Ajibode in Nigeria

Itagunmodi is a rural community located in Atakumosa West Local Government Area of Osun state, close to Ile-Ife, Ilesa, and Ifewara in Osun State, Nigeria. The area has an approximate population of 94,100.[11] It is an ancient community of Osun state, renowned for its gold mining activities in the location. It is headed by a traditional King and is populated with heterogeneous communities, mainly Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo peoples. Rural communities in Nigeria, such as Itagunmodi, are characterised as having poor infrastructural facilities such as untarred roads, under-resourced health centres, high rates of illiteracy, undernourishment, and poverty (Adelabu, 2019). The key occupation of the residents in Itagunmodi is farming of both staple and cash crops.

Ajibode is a community located in the Akinyele local government area within the Ibadan metropolis, located in the southwest region of Nigeria. The area has a population of approximately 211,811.[12] Ajibode is headed by a traditional Ruler (Baálé) who resides in the community. The community is made up of heterogeneous groups, but mainly Yorùbá, Hausa, and Igbo peoples. As an urban settlement, the location is characterised as having good infrastructural facilities such as tarred roads, resourced health centres, and high rates of literacy and levels of education (many professors and university staff are residents). The community is divided into four wards, with each ward headed by a ward chairperson. Few people in this area engage in farming and trading, with the majority based in the business and public sectors.

(1.2.5) Old Naledi and Damochujenaa in Botswana

The first study site in Botswana is in Gaborone, in a slum settlement commonly known as Old Naledi. Old Naledi is a low-income, densely populated urban neighbourhood, with approximately 20,000 inhabitants (Statistics Botswana, 2014). Residents mainly comprise rural and poor individuals from across the country who migrated with the hope of getting employment. The population is therefore multiracial, multinational, multicultural, and highly vulnerable due to poverty levels, precarity of employment, and poor living conditions.

The second site is in a remote area about 400km from the capital city, called Damochujenaa. Damochujenaa is a village settlement in the Central Eastern part of Botswana, in the area of Mmadinare. It has approximately 1,500 inhabitants including a majority of the population living in poverty and depending on agrarian and cattle-based income streams (Statistics Botswana, 2014). Residents are multilingual; they mainly speak Setswana, some speak English, and a few speak Sesarwa (most likely due to intermarriages) (Water Utilities Corporation, 2020).

(2) METHODS

Research and engagement in communities was taken up in layered and context-specific ways, including entry protocols, information sharing, and ethical exchanges of gifts and symbolic gestures. These actions are highly situated but include seeking permission from the traditional

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8   *https://www.vovcof.org/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

9   *http://citypopulation.de/Swaziland.html* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

10   *https://www.globalsustainabilityhub.org/eswatini-swaziland-sustainability-issues/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

11   *https://www.citypopulation.de/php/nigeria-admin.php?adm2id=NGA030004* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

12   *https://akinyele.oyostate.gov.ng/about-lgalcda/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

leaders of the community, providing accessible information about the proposed activities, and sharing appropriate gifts. Engagement and data generation methods involved full consultation and collaboration with community leaders. Where researchers felt that they needed additional support in relation to communicating in local languages or building relationships with participants, community liaisons were employed to assist and guide the work. The specific realisation of research methods varied from place to place and were adapted in response to each community to ensure the appropriateness, effectiveness, and clarity of information generated. Adaptations included the process of facilitation, the method of documentation, the predominance of one method over another, and the use of play strategies or collective practices, such as eating, walking, and making art or food together, to mediate the method of research. While a detailed description of practice in each place is beyond the scope of this paper, the dataset provides explicit documentation of the situated methods in practice, and below we describe the most common methods taken up in general terms. The languages used in each context varied between local/regional languages (Luo and Luganda in Uganda; Chichewa in Malawi; siSwati in Eswatini; Yoruba, Hausa, and Pidgin English in Nigeria; Setswana in Botswana) and English, depending on the preferences of the participants. Where needed, community liaisons were employed to support researchers who were not fluent in the preferred local languages.

(2.1) COMMON METHODS OF DATA GENERATION

(2.1.1) Walkabouts or "roaming focus group discussions"

The researchers, community liaisons, and community members moved around the communities together. Through this activity, researchers observed and documented the community members' day-to-day lived experiences and responses to COVID-19 (e.g., observations and conversations related to mask wearing, the practice of social distancing). In addition to observation and orientation of the research context, this method enabled the generation of impromptu encounters with individuals or small groups on the street. Researchers used these opportunities to ask brief questions or provide short, creative prompts based on the project aims. Local artists and poets joined in some of these walkabouts and created artwork based on some of the discussions and topic areas being discussed.

(2.1.2) Storytelling

Across the diverse research locations, participant communities in this project greatly depend on oral communication. Since the study aimed to explore the community members' lived experiences, perceptions, and responses to COVID-19, listening to the respondents' narratives or stories was an essential tool for understanding their conditions. Both group and individual storytelling methods were taken up. In groups, youth, middle-aged, and elderly people shared their stories relating to their lived experiences, perceptions, and responses to COVID-19. Individual storytelling became important to engage with people who participated in their professional capacity (e.g., community development officers, primary school teachers, local defense and police officers, and health care professionals). In addition, researchers identified willing community participants to share or re-enact significant events that they had personally experienced during the pandemic, or to narrate stories of other individuals that they could represent (e.g., church or family members). In this way, story was used to highlight other issues being faced and the exacerbation of challenges during this time. In all cases, stories were primarily facilitated or supported with active and collective listening, in some cases prompted with additional questions and provocations.

(2.1.3) Songs

Songs reflecting the COVID-19 pandemic were often already created in the communities we worked with. During our engagement with the communities, local singers, choirs, and music groups, both formal and informal, male and female, were invited to share their music. Across the communities, the music was said to bring strength and hope, explanation, context, or background, or advice relating to the pandemic. The songs were sometimes, but not always, accompanied by musical instruments, but in their performance, always accompanied by movement and dance. In some contexts, the research team supported the creation of songs and dance, in the moment, with community members. The process of creation, as participants

brainstormed and explored various elements of the songs, generated revealing data in addition to the final outcomes. The processes sometimes involved the performance or adaptation of traditional songs, gospel music, or contemporary pop songs, and on other occasions, were entirely new creations by the singers themselves.

(2.1.4) Drama

In a similar way to song creation, various groups from across the communities used roleplays and scene creation to share their experiences of the pandemic, responding to questions and prompts from the research team that asked participants about the effects of the pandemic on their lives, their understanding of it, and their responses to it. These dramatic inquiries were sometimes constructed by drama groups that existed prior to the research, and other times were co-created with the support of the research team. Overall, they revealed the behaviours and emotions experienced or witnessed through the pandemic, representing community members, police and law enforcement, visitors to the community, amongst others.

(2.1.5) Drawings, murals, and photography

Various visual art techniques were taken up across the communities, including drawing workshops, mural making, and participatory photography. In most cases, these methods were pre-empted by discussion, written and spoken commentary, and collaboration with local residents and visiting artists. The co-creation of visual media allowed for a distinct way to transform dialogue and conversation into tangible objects that could further be shared and discussed, adding extra layers of depth to both the process of inquiry and the results. This also allowed for a 'giving-back' opportunity, whereby participants were able to keep the artworks that they had created, receive printed copies of photographs, and retain the public murals in their communities for years to come.

(2.1.6) Documentation of day-to-day cultural practices

Across all contexts, careful attention was paid to the resilience, impacts, changes, and roles of everyday cultural practices in the time of the pandemic. Research teams visited churches, social gathering places, markets, and other celebratory and community fora. Through video, photography, and observation, the data documents how these practices and spaces looked and functioned during this time. In some cases, gatherings were shifted to 'hidden places' (e.g., a private dwelling), or cancelled altogether; in other cases, social distancing and reduced numbers changed the dynamics, experience, and meanings of events.

(2.2) CURATION AND PRESENTATION

This paper and the open access data it is accompanied by, is part of a broader phase of practice in co-curation and dissemination. The co-curation includes the selection, editing, framing, and representing of data in the form of digital artefacts and embedding them into digitally mediated narratives through web design, interwoven texts, and relations with resources and materials. This includes the co-creation of reports and presentations for the participating communities, the co-creation of social media postings, policy briefings, and academic analyses. Dissemination puts the work into relation and into action with wider stakeholders, publics, and influencers. Explicitly involving Southern and Northern collaboration, this article and accompanying dataset is part of a broader plan to ensure a dynamic and wide engagement with this work.

(2.3) ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Project-wide institutional approval was acquired for the overarching project from the University of Glasgow, UK. In addition, region-specific ethical approval was additionally acquired in all contexts via the applicable bodies (through partner universities, government ministries, and community heads).[13] In accordance with these frameworks, consent was obtained from participants via recorded verbal statements or signed consent forms. This consent was predicated upon

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13   The community leader in each community provided recorded verbal ethical approval for the research to be undertaken as proposed. In addition, ethical approval was reviewed and granted by: University of Botswana, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Eswatini, Botswana Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, and Malawi Ministry of Health.

accessible information about the research in the form of Plain Language Statements or project presentations (depending on the form and language preferred by the invited participants). In addition, the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time was clarified. However, formal institutional ethical approval documentation, with accompanying consent forms and project documentation, albeit important, were not considered sufficient for the ethical approach taken in this study. Ethics are culturally and contextually specific, and institutional frameworks can jeopardise ethical partnerships if taken up in isolation of other culturally responsive practices. In addition to institutional processes, therefore, the research team collectively undertook ethical training, led by the Project Manager and Lead Investigator drawing on expertise from a project Advisory Group (consisting of senior network members from each country). The ethical considerations of this project relate to the nature of the arts-based and participatory methods as well as the topic under investigation. Arts and cultural practices require personal contribution of perspective but also emotion, intuition, and expression. The engagement with research on this level can often lead to research encounters and data that are more sensitive and vulnerable than conventional datasets. Furthermore, the topic explored is one of a highly contentious and variously understood health threat, positioning people in terms of their own well-being, mortality, loved ones, and livelihoods. The training provided the research team with an opportunity to establish a common approach to ethical research practice, which was based upon the principle that the first and most important stakeholder of the research is the participant. Accordingly, the method, the documentation, the outcome, and the impact should accommodate that person's position and needs. Only from integrity in that endeavour will other layers of practice and research impact take hold. Finally, the researchers adhered strictly to local guidelines relating to the prevention of COVID-19 transmission and provided re-usable facemasks to communities taking part.

(2.4) DATASET DESCRIPTION

The data generation from this on-going research began in November 2020. It is stored in the Enlighten repository and can be accessed via the following link: *http://dx.doi.org/10.5525/gla.researchdata.1196*. The data is available via a "Request for Access" function within this repository due to the size of the data files included in relation to the downloading capacities of common web browsers. Further information, selected data, and updated outputs are available via the project website.[14] The excluded data includes that which includes highly sensitive material, or that which a participant has requested to exclude. All data in the repository has been organised by (a) country, (b) medium (i.e., song, text, interview, etc.), and (c) related themes. All data is therefore searchable by these three categories. These categories are also added as labels (sub-titles) on each data file that includes the actual photographs and videos.

(3) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research project has supported interconnectivity across diverse and under-represented contexts amid the COVID-19 pandemic as evidenced by the collective process of site-responsive methods within a shared methodological framework, and the co-curation of open access data. Through the methods engaged, a plurality of perspectives from communities across sub-Saharan Africa have been exposed, explored, and shared. From this, digital artefacts and documented data vary from audio narratives to written accounts and stories, from images to performances, songs, and photographs of cultural artefacts.

This is an on-going project that does not fall neatly into a time-bound linear project model, with results emerging from early on in the community partnership development. Partnerships in relation to this COVID-19 research have been active since June 2020 and continue to evolve. Furthermore, through the curation and shared access of data, project members and stakeholders will continue to analyse and apply findings and insights from the data for an undefined time period. Indeed, the design of this project was focused on a decentralised, situated, and responsive approach to international and multi-site research. Not only does this require a revision of fixed research designs that assume pre-designed methods and planned outputs, but it also requires a more flexible approach to time, as teams navigate partnerships,

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14   *https://www.whosecrisis.org/* (last accessed: 4 November 2021).

data, and processes of analysis and dissemination throughout an evolving pandemic and with a very diverse set of stakeholders that range from community members and civil society organisations to national and international bodies.

A full discussion of the findings is not the intention of this article. However, for the purposes of data curation, high level analysis was required to take place. As a result, a series of virtual participatory analysis workshops (that included colleagues from across the five research teams) were run to discuss the data and engage in collaborative thematic analytical processes. At the time of writing, there are five main areas of learning (which we describe as themes) that have emerged from the data. These relate to: Gender-related inequities and injustice; Work and livelihoods; Social, cultural, and emotional change; Youth and children; Faith, spirituality, and religion; Understandings, beliefs, and knowledge of the pandemic. Each theme represents an area of critical impact of the pandemic in the participating communities. In many cases there are commonalities across communities' experience (e.g., the increased vulnerability of women and girls as unwanted pregnancies and domestic violence has increased), while in other areas, the impacts have been experienced very differently (e.g., some communities have experienced significant disruption to their ability to enact cultural and social practices, whereas others have prioritised this above fears of COVID-19 transmission).

(4) IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

As data analysis and knowledge exchange is underway, two broad results characterise the emerging findings: (1) The plurality of perspectives and experiences of the global pandemic illustrating the disconnect between 'universal' approaches to global health in this time and 'local' realities; and (2) The knowledge, power, and capacity of locally driven, culturally responsive collaborations to influence behaviour, health protection, and sustainability.

The impact, sustainability, and legacy of this work is yet to be seen, but built into the project design, the work is positioned to:

1. *Increase regional and international awareness of the experience of COVID-19 at a community and household level in sub-Saharan African communities*

The outputs and findings generated will support communities to mitigate the threat of COVID-19 in their contexts. Global and regional publics and authorities are being made aware of the disconnect between universal approaches to global health and local realities of individuals and communities.

2. *Increase community cohesion and empathy*

The critical valuing of perspectives and new and repurposed community-based practices and solutions to the pandemic have supported a level of engagement and understanding both within and across communities.

3. *Raise public awareness and influence policy in relation to local responses to the pandemic*

The open access availability of the data and findings through the project website and Enlighten data depository creates a platform for understanding and exchange with and for societal, health, economic, government, and public stakeholders to encourage experimentation, action, and growth beyond the funding period.

4. *Shift the balance of cultural perspectives on global health*

The digital and communication capacities developed through this project have directly increased awareness and collaboration across a plurality of voices, realities, and perspectives in relation to health and well-being in our interconnected yet currently mis-represented world.

In the short term, outputs are informing global and regional publics of the disconnect between universal approaches to global health and local realities. COVID-19 has necessitated a shift away from 'normality', and the arts have a vital role in guiding what new ways of being we might try to achieve in the future (Carey, 2020). This project is challenging dominant global imaginaries, and in doing so, it is positioned to impact the design and delivery of aid, global health research, and the development of related strategy and policy. Stakeholders of this data

include international development-related researchers in both the academia and the third sector. The data can be used to exemplify the plurality of responses to the pandemic, but also to highlight the knowledge and insights that are held in cultural and arts practices that cannot easily be translated into traditional qualitative or quantitative research. In the longer term, the findings and capacities developed from this research will support increased awareness and collaboration across a plurality of realities and perspectives, and influence future international research and teaching programmes in our interconnected yet currently highly mis-represented world.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Mia Perry: Conceptualisation and writing original draft

Dane Mathendele Armstrong: Methodology, data generation and input into original draft

Bosco Exson Chinkonda: Methodology, data generation and input into original draft

Richard Kagolobya: Methodology, data generation and input into original draft

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