

COUNTDOWN researcher challenges during COVID-19 imposed ‘lockdown’

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The global lockdown due to the novel corona virus diseases (COVID-19) has caused widespread challenges to health systems including public health programmes to control and manage Neglected Tropical Diseases. The [COUNTDOWN](#) researchers and partners virtual meeting held on May 5th, 2020 gave an opportunity for researchers across six countries including Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, the USA and the United Kingdom to share their challenges and lessons learnt during this lockdown period.

Key challenges discussed were centred around the effects of local and international travel restrictions on field activities, additional commitments of researchers either involved in COVID-19 related activities or family duties, and the mental health challenges associated with being locked down.

A key challenge faced by all the researchers was the impact of the virus and the associated lockdown was having on research activities. Across all partner countries, field activities for NTDs, a major part of the work of COUNTDOWN researchers have been suspended or postponed. Due to travel restrictions and local lockdowns, researchers can no longer have face-to-face interactions or conduct primary field work. As such, researchers are forced to work from home and have adapted to other means of communication. Meetings, trainings and workplans are developed online through platforms like Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, and Zoom.

In Kwara (Nigeria), COUNTDOWN planned an onsite visit to establish new partnerships with peer-researchers on a study on wellbeing and psychological support for people affected by NTDs, and to conduct a photovoice training session for research peers in March 2020. This had to be done remotely through Zoom and Skype for business. In Liberia, Microsoft Teams and the google software “slido” was used to conduct a stakeholder mapping process for potential participants in a participatory health research to develop and pilot a case management guide for Female Genital Schistosomiasis (FGS) as seen in Figure 1 below. On a single platform, researchers were able to suggest stakeholders and prioritize potential participants of the FGS study.

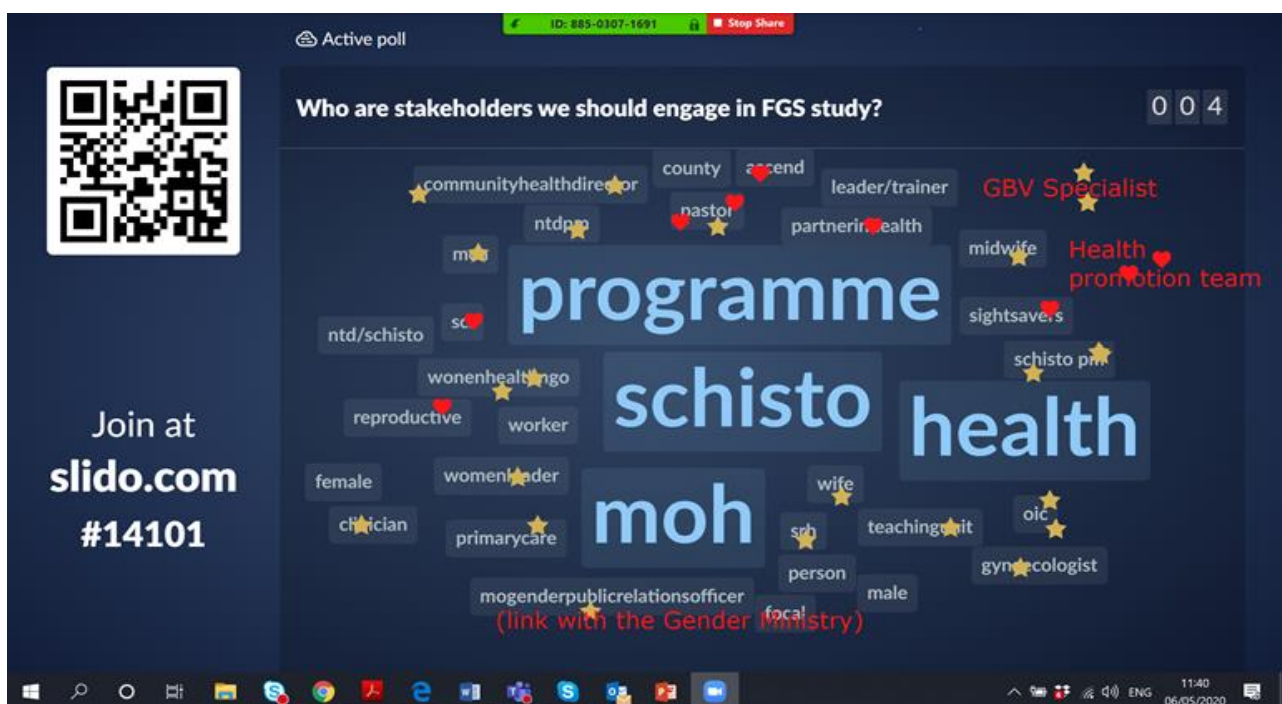


Fig.1: researchers map potential participants for a participatory health research study on FGS

Though working from home has kept activities going, it has also been challenged with inconsistent internet connectivity and power source outages especially with researchers in countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, researchers have sought to acquire extra power sources and have subscribed to multiple internet suppliers, which are all associated with extra cost. Moreover, the logistics around the organizations of online trainings and meetings need to be taken cautiously as the security of online platforms is uncertain with meetings at risk of being hacked.



Photo: @UnitedNations on Unsplash

COUNTDOWN researchers have been involved in COVID-19 related interventions. This has been especially the case for researchers who are health professionals. In the UK, COUNTDOWN researchers volunteer in the national health service (NHS) attending to COVID-19 patients in hospital. The research team in Ghana offered their laboratory to support the COVID-19 testing response in collaboration with the national lead institute for COVID-19 testing.

Researchers in Liberia support the national incidence management team and COVID-19 test centres. These have led to increased teamwork, with researchers supporting each other when and where there might be a void. How NTD researchers have been redeployed during this pandemic will be further discussed in a subsequent blog on *“The Adaptation of Neglected Tropical Disease Platforms (NTDs) in the Response to COVID-19”*.

Home schooling and childcare have been additional duties carried out by researchers across all six countries. With schools and businesses closed, researchers who are parents to school-aged children are forced to home school, and those with younger children have to care for them without assistance. These clash with working hours and disrupt ongoing and work schedules. Researchers have resulted to working with flexible schedules, with increased support from team supervisors and employers.

Physical distancing imposed during this lockdown did not only stop researchers from going to work, but also limited access to normal daily activities. This provokes mental health issues such as loneliness, particularly for researchers who live alone, and anxiety in a time where the near future is uncertain and unpredictable. COUNTDOWN researchers have weekly online meetings which serve as a means of socialisation.

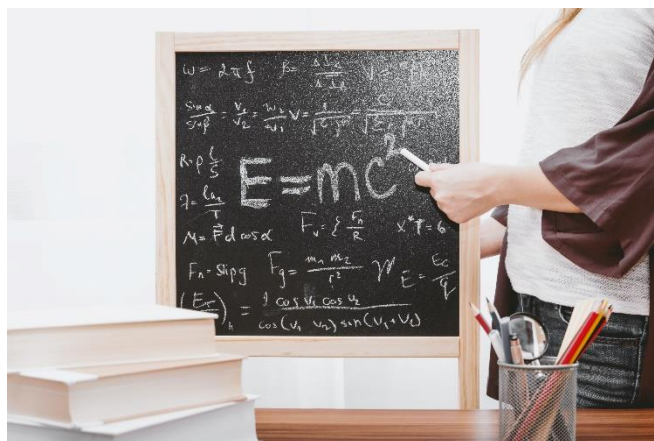


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In the UK, researchers have weekly check-in meetings and social quiz and entertainment time. How researchers have adapted to the new physical distancing lifestyle to maintain effective work will be discussed in subsequent blogs on *“A Day in the Life”* of COUNTDOWN researchers.

The emergence of COVID-19 as a global pandemic led to abrupt changes to the work and lives of many, including COUNTDOWN researchers on NTDs. We have been challenged with adapting to the new lifestyle of physical distancing with the awareness of the uncertainty of when some normality returns and the nature of the what the new normality will be.