



COVID-19 Country
IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS, GENDER, AND MIGRANTS AND
REFUGEES IN SOUTH AFRICA

METHODOLOGY REPORT

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Introduction

This document provides feedback on the progress of key informant interviews for the assessment of the impact of COVID-19, specifically on human settlements, migrants, and refugees as well as other vulnerable groups such as women and children. For the data collection process, the team aimed to interview 35 key informants for the human settlements section, particularly because this chapter had not been included in the first edition country report on the impact of COVID-19 in South Africa. In addition to the 35 interviews, about 20 key informants were targeted for the section on migrants and refugees.

Data Collection

To date, the team has sent emails to approximately 100 potential key informants, requesting their participation in the study by sharing insights and experiences on the impact of the pandemic on their respective areas of work or interest. Where possible, potential informants first received phone calls, which were followed by emails that contained an introduction letter, which outlined the purpose of the study, a consent form to be signed and a questionnaire that would guide the interview should they wish to participate. In cases where potential informants were first contacted on the phone and subsequently via email, their chances of agreeing to participate were higher. In contrast, those who were only contacted via email were less likely to be responsive, even after follow-up emails were sent.

Update on Progress

Out of approximately 100 potential stakeholders who were contacted either by email or telephonically, about 35 agreed to participate in the study and as such, 33 interviews have been conducted thus far with various institutions and organisations, including government departments, ward councillors, civil society organisations and NGOs. Of the 33 interviews that have already been conducted, about 23 were held with organisations related to human settlements, 8 with migrants and refugee related organisations and one with the ministry of women, children, and disabled individuals. Notably, the key informant interviews showed serious overlaps regarding the impact of COVID-19 on human settlements, women and migrants and refugees. For instance, homeless shelter organisations made stark distinctions in ways that the pandemic

affected women compared to men as well as the impact on citizens compared to foreign nations.

This indicates that the team has almost reached the 50% mark of the targeted 75 key informant interviews. Based on the interviews already conducted, about 42 interviews are still required – of which 12 would be conducted with organisations related to human settlement, another 12 with organisations for migrants and refugees, and the remaining would be with organisations that work with women. In the coming weeks, more interviews will be conducted given that three interviews have already been scheduled to be conducted over a period of three and more still are yet to be confirmed during the week.

Challenges and limitations

While the data collection process occurred at a faster pace and more conveniently compared to conventional methods, the process presented various challenges that would not have otherwise been apparent. With interviews taking place on online platforms such as Zoom, about three or four interviews could be scheduled per day, whereas only one or at most two interviews would have been conducted per day, had they been attended physically. Nonetheless, the challenges of online interviews reverberated throughout the process.

- 1. Poor internet connection:** The most common challenge related to poor internet connections by either key informants or interviewers. The conversations would be interrupted abruptly, making it difficult to hear the participants. Also related to this was challenges related to audio quality. At times, key informants would speak far away from the microphone of their computer or telephone devices, causing more interruptions to the flow of the conversation.
- 2. Loadshedding and low battery life:** On several occasions, key informants experienced loadshedding before interviews began, leading to re-scheduling and at times cancellations of interviews. Other times, the loadshedding would

occur during the interviews and the interviews would subsequently come to an abrupt stop. This too interrupted the flow of the conversations with participants. Although the interviews would be resumed at a later stage when the electricity had returned and the participants had reconnected to the network, it was difficult to rebuild momentum where the key informant shared freely and without reservations. This issue also presented when key informants would be interrupted by depleted batteries from their devices. Issues of load shedding and poor internet connections led to the cancellation of interviews at the last minute. Furthermore, cancelled interviews were seldom rescheduled due to the key informants' busy schedule, non-response or perhaps a loss of interest in the study.

- 3. Suspicions and mistrust of online platforms:** The interviewers observed some key informants were uncomfortable to speak openly sensitive topics. This was observed when a key informant about migrants and refugees in the country refrained from commenting on a sensitive issue and in stead proposed that a physical interview should be scheduled without recording devices. The key informant worked for an NGO that relies on government and other aid organisations for funding. Perhaps they feared that speaking against such organisations may threaten their relations with these organisations and may thus lose their support. It was evident that the informant wished to express her concerns of migrants and refugees in the country, hence the recommendation to continue the conversation offline. Perhaps the Zoom platform where information is recorded and can spread created an uneasiness that prevented one from speaking freely without filters. Being informed of the confidentiality of the interview process did not ease underlying fears and perhaps a mistrust of online platforms from some informants who represented organisations that work with vulnerable groups such as migrants and refugees.
- 4. Some key informants were simply evasive and vague in answering certain questions** not because of any mistrust or discomfort with the online platform, but because of observed prejudices against interviewers. The research team experienced overt and covert sexism, racism, and xenophobia. A top government official sought to change the topic and steer it towards his own interests. So bold was the official that he said he would rather have the

conversation “over a glass of wine”. This was experienced as being not only sexist but also racist. All the interviewers were African females. Xenophobic attitudes were also experienced when interviewing some stakeholders who had a reputation of working with refugees. One stakeholder’s prejudice regarding females with “foreign accents” openly hostile and aggressive. When two females with “foreign” accents interviewed this participant (White male), the interviewee would change his tone and resort to cold, short answers or simply decline to respond by stating he had no knowledge of the question. Another interviewee was hostile to African females who had identifiable local ethnic accents and foreign accents. In this case the stakeholder completely declined to respond to the questions posed by stating he had no specific views. However, when the same question was posed by a different interviewer (deemed to be politically correct), the stakeholder responded.

5. While the biases and prejudices of study participants might be deemed to be personal, the increasing boldness with which these biases and prejudices are articulated in the process of conducting research is concerning. The potential of stakeholders distorting data due to their inherent prejudices is a limitation. Attempts to silence the researchers was also a concern. A study participant on being probed about responses he provided, was bold enough to say he was only able to respond to the questions in the interview guide. Insisting on sticking to the questions without allowing for the space to interrogate participant views was considered a constraint to the key informant interview.

6. **Racism, xenophobia, and sexism:** The team of researchers on the human settlements, gender, migration, and refugee chapters mainly consisted of black, female and Africans. These identities seemed to spark prejudices and forms of discrimination at varying degrees. Some key informants showed hostility towards interviewers that spoke with native accents, especially those originating outside of South Africa. When asked questions by those who spoke in said accents, the key informants would present signs of irritation, provide one-word answers, or simply dismiss the questions, and would only respond positively when interviewers with Eurocentric (CNN) accents posed the same question or probed further. In another instance, the interviewer exhibited similar behaviour towards black and female interviewers. He refused to answer

questions or became evasive. Instead insisted on talking about things unrelated to the questions at hand. Fortunately, his black and female colleagues salvaged the situation by answering some of interview questions and providing guidance regarding external sources for additional information and reference.

- 7. Excessive bureaucratic procedures in government:** The process of scheduling interviews with government officials has proved to be the most difficult of all. Besides the general lack of response to requests of participating in the study, key informants from government departments and other institutions are harder to secure and the process is often lengthy. There is seldom a clear contact that leads to a specific government official that researchers wish to interview for the study. In the fortunate event that those contacted are responsive, the emails are often passed from one person to the next before they reach the intended party. In other times, some officials require the request for an interview to originate from those with higher ranks within the departments, which is near impossible considering the lengths and time it takes to get the attention of someone, let alone those with higher ranks.

[Conducting Research During a Pandemic](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has cornered the research community to innovate by making use of online platforms to gather not just secondary but also primary data. The strict COVID-19 regulations led to the suspension of all activities that were not deemed as essential, especially during the hard lockdown. Academic activities were included in the list of those deemed non-essential, and this posed serious challenges to traditional research methods, the most obvious being field work. However, online platforms such as Zoom, Google Meets and Microsoft Teams provided much needed relief from the pressures of mandatory confinements in homes, social distancing, self isolation, or quarantine. These platforms enabled research activities to continue, albeit with newer challenges as indicated previously.

Conducting Interviews via Zoom: For instance, conducting interviews through Zoom enabled interviews to fully engage with the content of the conversation without the

pressure of taking notes to ensure that important points are captured on note pads. Zoom has an option to record interviews, which the researchers utilised. All recordings are saved automatically into a computer folder once the interview has been concluded. Moreover, Zoom has a built-in transcription software that converts audio into text in real time. This allowed for interviewers to simply focus on the responses of key informants and probe further than would have been possible had their attention been divided between asking questions, probing, and taking notes. As a result of automated transcriptions, interviews were afforded the opportunity to pay attention to subtle cues from the key informants such as changes in tonality when discussing issues of varying sensitivities, awkward silence or stuttering when responding to uncomfortable questions. These are clues that interviewer may have missed had they focused primarily on taking notes or writing down responses.

Disadvantages of Automated Transcripts: The automated transcripts from Zoom also save time. Many can attest to the time-consuming process of listening to audio recordings of hour-long interviews and transcribing them, which takes twice as long as the recording and sometimes longer. As with recordings, zoom transcripts are generated and readily available as soon as the interview has come to an end. The transcripts are generated in a format that cannot be customised or easily be edited. Hence researchers needed to edit the file afterwards and format it in their preferred style. Although the Zoom format could not be customised, it could be shared or transferred to other computer devices. Unfortunately, the transcription option is only viable when an interview is conducted in English. When speaking a native language, zoom transcription settings would record information inaccurately. This mostly occurred when transcribing the names of interviewers and key informants that may be described as indigenous or native. For instance, Zoom would pronounce the name Karabo as Terrible. In other instances, key informants would use terms their native language to emphasize a point or phrase when they commented on certain issues they encountered in their line of work. Allowing key informants to express themselves in their native language was important creating safe and comfortable environment in which participants could freely express themselves without limitations. However, the Zoom transcripts missed these exchanges completely and in fact, censored key informants.

In fact, when interviewers and key informants alike pronounced words in non-European accents, the transcription service would engage an autocorrect mode, write words that differed entirely from what the participants said. As an American invention that is also headquartered in California, and has offices in Europe and Australia, it is evident that the software seems to only recognise English that is spoken in an American dialect. Any foreign dialect, more specifically an African one is not recognisable. This may be indicative of a lack of diversity, representation and more specifically, a discrimination of African or “minority” languages in the programming of Zoom software. While this may be an unintended consequence, it has and will continue to disadvantage Africans and other minority groups who may need the transcription services for various purposes.

Another issue that was encountered with Zoom is that transcripts would record time stamps when various people spoke as opposed to the names of the interviewers and or key informants. Given that the names are already visible when people login, it would be sensible for the transcripts to record the names of people as they spoke. This would make it difficult to determine the person who made various points, and the researchers would be required to listen to the recording again, verify this information and correct spelling errors, which is counterproductive against the intended benefits of an automated transcript. To manage this issue, the team would make use of the chat room where all participants would write their names, and state their names before commenting or asking a question during the interview process.

Unfortunate realities of working from home: Most key informants that participated in the interviews were working from home. This is one of the consequences of COVID-19 since the age of hard lockdowns where most economic activities were halted, and people were urged to stay at home. Fortunately, platforms like Zoom made it possible for many to work from home, attend meetings online and liaise with stakeholders anytime and place. While this may have been advantageous and enabled productivity, it presented newer challenges in research in a form of background noise or interruptions. One would often experience background noises of dogs barking, car movements or grass cutting machines, and these would drown out the voices of key informants, which negatively affected the transcription process. Similar issues were also experienced when there were multiple people speaking simultaneously. The

transcription service could only capture information accurately when only one person spoke at a time, and in a perfectly still environment that had little to no background noises.

Lessons learnt and way forward

Moving forward, the team is more aware of the challenges that are likely to ensue before and during interviews such as those mentioned above. The researchers are now more prepared to deal with said challenges to ensure continuation of interviews with little or no issues. For instance, in cases where key informants lack internet connection or have poor network, one of the interviewers calls the participant, puts the call on loudspeaker for others to hear and records the conversation for transcription at a later stage. Although the audio quality of dialling an informant telephonically is inferior compared to when they join directly via Zoom, the interview proceeds as planned and often without any issues. When cancellations occur, follow up phone calls are made almost immediately, and where necessary, regularly to reschedule interviews to a different date. Although some cancellations have not yet been rescheduled and potential participants have not responded to any communication, patience and persistence has seemed effective in securing interviews with others who had cancelled. Furthermore, the researchers are more aware of the prejudices of some interviewers and have devised ways to probe further for responses and continue the interviews without getting offended by some key informants' poor behaviour.