

GOAL Research Brief

Research co-production within humanitarian health: reflections on our practice

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Summary

This research brief summarises the research paper: [Research co-production within humanitarian health: reflections on our practice](#).

Research co-production is recognised as important for humanitarian health actors. In this paper, we examined the role of co-production within a multi-partner research collaboration in Lebanon, through using interactive reflection sessions and interviews with research team partners. We found mixed understandings of co-production among our team and siloed efforts to co-produce within our partnership. Factors influencing the collaboration included the challenging Lebanon context, COVID-19, institutional power dynamics, budget and time constraints, difficulties in engaging service users and availability of stakeholders to co-produce. The use of collaborative data analysis was highlighted as particularly useful in embedding co-production principles.

Introduction

The concept of co-production of research has become increasingly relevant for humanitarian health actors, amidst growing recognition of global power hierarchies which often result in “local” actors being excluded from decision-making within research collaborations. Co-production in research refers to a horizontal relationship between researchers and research participants to undertake research that can inform action. Co-production involves critical reflection on power hierarchies and taking intentional steps to address these.

While there is greater awareness of the problems with traditional research collaborations, research co-production risks being used superficially and there has been limited exploration of its use in research in humanitarian settings. We sought to respond to these challenges by reflecting on co-production within the [GOAL project](#), which aimed at strengthening the mental health system for Syrian refugees and host communities in

Lebanon through a collaboration between the National Mental Health Program of Lebanon (Ministry of Public Health), the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), ABAAD, St Joseph’s University of Beirut, War Child Holland (Lebanon), and Positive Negatives/Beyond Text. Co-production was recognised as an important part of the GOAL project. Partners attended a training session on co-production principles and a small group of research team members developed a plan for embedding co-production into the research during development of research questions, protocols, data collection tools, coding, analysis, writing-up and sharing findings.

Methodology

To reflect on the use of co-production in GOAL, we used a collaborative process. We firstly facilitated a reflection session using an online collaboration tool (“Jamboard”) which allowed members of the GOAL research team to anonymously contribute thoughts on power dynamics within GOAL, what worked well, challenges, and ideas to improve collaboration. Following this reflection exercise, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with members of the GOAL team. Key findings were presented to the GOAL

team, who were invited to provide anonymised feedback using “Jamboard”. We recognise the challenges in separating our positionalities and identities from the research process and our reflections on the co-production process.

Findings

Four broad themes were identified: (1) mixed understanding of co-production, (2) co-production successes and challenges, (3) co-production across research stages, and (4) future opportunities for co-production.

1

Mixed understandings of co-production

Across interviews with GOAL team members, we found different understandings of co-production across different levels, including between partner organisations, between actors from different organisations, and between actors within the same organisations themselves.

2

Overview of co-production successes and challenges

Participants discussed a range of successes and challenges related to co-production, which we group across the eight categories below.

How Power is Considered

Multiple participants discussed various types of hierarchies within GOAL, for example, the power held by academic institutions and the power held by lead actors of each partner organisation and by workstream leads. Some participants reflected on how power may shift

depending on which partner organisations are involved in particular components (e.g. research design or data analysis). There were mixed perspectives on whether power has been discussed in GOAL, reflecting the varied roles of GOAL members across the project.

Funding Situation

Participants generally shared the view that the flexible nature of the funding and budget management of GOAL helped enable co-production by being responsive to identified research priorities and needs. However, there was also recognition of LSHTM as lead actor as it was the budget holder. Participants shared that following cuts to UK overseas aid funding, which resulted in severe cuts to the GOAL project budget, partners' voices were taken into consideration in the re-budgeting process.

Governance

Participants described efforts to integrate co-production on the governance level, including the existence of the GOAL Advisory Committee, which includes service users. Participants also gave the example of the Management Group Meetings as facilitating co-production by facilitating more "inclusive" decision-making.

Service User Inclusion

Although service user involvement was present during several stages of the project, participants noted a lack of inclusion of service user and refugee perspectives overall. Participants gave the example of service users being present at the project kick-off meeting as a step towards co-production. However, many participants noted that the service users who were involved were "experts" (Interview 1, Lebanon-based) and that there was a lack of diverse representation of service users who were "typical" service users (Interview 11, Lebanon-based). Participants agreed that involving service users and refugees was generally challenging.

Decision-Making

Participants generally agreed that most decision-making in GOAL was collaborative and shared between partners. However, some partners expressed that taking a co-production approach to decision-making can sometimes be "slow" or too time-consuming. Another participant also attributed delayed decision-making to poor responsiveness by some actors

because they were overloaded. Implementing co-production was also difficult because of team members being used to more hierarchical ways of working. Staff who are not usually given opportunities to share their views were less comfortable when invited to give their opinions: “I was surprised a lot of times in the beginning, like, ‘Oh, you want me to present in this meeting?’ Like, really?” (Interview 1, Lebanon-based).

Lebanon Context

Participants described a high degree of flexibility when accommodating for the challenges that arose from working within the Lebanon context, including the Beirut Blast and challenges related to Lebanon’s financial crisis including internet access and electricity cuts in Lebanon.

COVID and Remote Working Impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to co-production within the GOAL project in general, affecting the ability to build personal relationships. Some felt remote working using Zoom increased unequal power dynamics since not everyone felt confident participating in Zoom calls and Lebanon-based actors were less likely to have access to private spaces to participate in calls. However, others mentioned that remote work enhanced co-production practices because of the overall flexibility that was applied across GOAL.

Capacity-Strengthening

Participants indicated that capacity-strengthening efforts have been helpful. A few participants suggested capacity-strengthening could have been more “mutual” with greater involvement from Lebanon-based actors, while recognising the heavy workload of these actors.

3

Co-production across different research stages

Participants gave several examples of co-production in the scoping phase of the GOAL project, for example during the kick-off meeting when co-production was intentionally discussed. Others suggested the process was less inclusive during the proposal-writing stage and that co-production was integrated after the study had already been designed. The design of protocols and tools was discussed as being inclusive, collaborative and flexible, but also time-consuming because of how inclusive it was. Participants

observed that the protocol development and tool design process could have benefited from more engagement from senior staff.

Multiple participants mentioned collaborative coding as a stand-out approach to co-production during data analysis, in which the team members who had collected data were also involved in analysing and coding transcripts and then jointly writing the academic papers. This meant: “[n]o matter what is your experiences, what is your status, what is your position... you have the same power to have an input, to have something to say” (Interview 14, Lebanon-based). Participants also described changing from solely requesting feedback in writing to verbal opportunities to provide feedback, to make it easier for co-authors to collaborate.

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Future opportunities for collaboration

Suggestions for improving co-production included clarifying decision-making hierarchies, having additional opportunities for reflection on co-production and increasing interaction between stakeholders throughout the process.

Conclusion

Our study highlights the importance in coproduction efforts of ensuring a wider range of stakeholders are involved in shaping the research questions and that stakeholders understand the nature and scope of co-production, that efforts to co-produce should not be siloed or relegated to the responsibility of more junior staff, that sufficient resources are devoted to co-production, and there is space for reflection on power dynamics within the research collaboration.

Full paper available at:

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