Lessons from research and innovation at the Frontiers of global development: Remote working looking forward
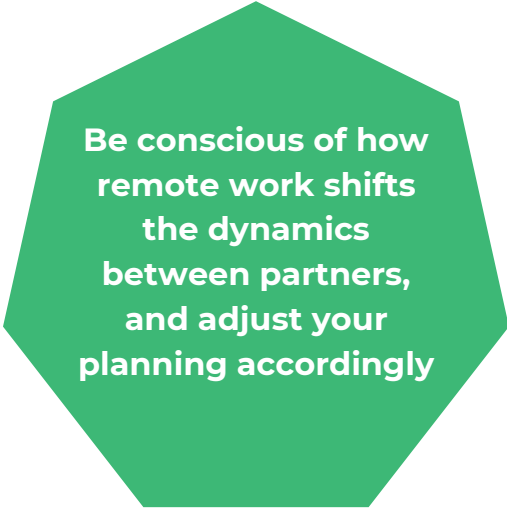
As remote working becomes more mainstream, researchers have found new methods, challenges, and benefits to working remotely. In this guide, we unpack the different ways remote working can shape researchers' experiences and some of the solutions to common problems. Reflections were gathered during a special session with the Frontiers community, led by Fiona Samuels, a Senior Research Fellow from ODI.

Impacts of remote working on research environments

Inclusion:
Remote working has forged new pathways for inclusion that in-person work did not previously allow. However, researchers should be conscious of the ways remote working has shifted the dynamics between partners, especially concerning 'on-the-ground' representatives. Participants noted the changes they have seen in their projects since incorporating remote working:

- Remote working has led to a shift in power dynamics to in-country partners, allowing them to take on more responsibility, become more empowered with greater autonomy, and be more invested in projects. Researchers must consider how to maintain these more equitable dynamics in the future.
- Working with community facilitators and giving them more responsibility can help foster communication with local groups. However, this may come with the need for improved capacity-building and training. When planning projects, researchers must consider the budget costs of these types of local collaborations and allow adequate time for community-led activities.

> **Be conscious of how remote work shifts the dynamics between partners, and adjust your planning accordingly**

Technology:
Thanks to technology, remote work as we know it can result in rich communication and projects previously deemed impossible. Yet, technology is not without drawbacks. Researchers must understand and overcome the obstacles that technology can create when working internationally. Participants discussed the positives and negatives of technology and the ways they have addressed them in their work:

Be aware that the technology tools you choose to use will impact who you can reach.

- Technology can facilitate smoother remote working conditions, but it is *crucial* to choose the right tools that work best for each project. For instance, mobile technology can exclude marginalised communities, such as older women in rural settings who may not have consistent access to mobile technology.
- Consider the mental health implications when asking communities to use technology more frequently.
- Plan for situations where challenges or disagreements must be resolved virtually.
- Be aware that remote tools, like online survey collecting and a stable internet connection, can have financial barriers which limits their usefulness.

Ethics:

Though remote working has allowed researchers to connect across the globe, ethics are critical to the development of research projects. Remote working has removed the person-to-person trust building that typically takes place through in-person meetings.

- Ethics are an especially important consideration in research projects and data collection, as well as in challenging or sensitive topics. Researchers must be careful to inform themselves on the ethics surrounding their planned projects from the onset.
- Trust building is an integral part of the research collection process. Prior to remote working, trust was often built through in-person interaction both from the view of researchers and other groups involved. With remote working, these dynamics have changed. Researchers must invest time to grow relationships and identify the right people for their projects remotely, sometimes even without meeting them face-to-face.

Flexibility:

Remote working requires flexibility to address an array of needs, backgrounds, and tools available. To develop a successful project, researchers must be prepared to adapt to different contexts.

- Flexibility in planning is key, from donor budgeting to timelines.
- Remote data collection requires a more qualitative and creative mindset when designing studies.
- Going forward, researchers must incorporate the learnings and benefits of remote working to merge remote and in-person arrangements.
- When collecting data remotely, the potential distractions that come with working from home must be prepared for. For example, interviewees might be responding from a busy location like a family home.

Consider using a mixture of tools and techniques: some things work better face-to-face, so be ready to be flexible.

Tools and tips

The following tools, resources and techniques were identified:

1. Combine the best insights from remote working and in-person data collection and tailor them to different projects. This can help overcome challenges that arise from completely remote or in-person work.
2. Use high-quality open-source data options. This can help ensure access to all project partners.
3. Do not assume everyone involved in a project has the same access to technology and the internet.
4. Build in time to get to know collaborators involved on a project. This could look like scheduling 'ice breakers' or virtual coffee breaks.
5. Tools like **Basecamp** and shared **Google Drives** can be helpful to project manage and communicate effectively while working remotely.
6. Applications like **Google Forms** or **Solstice.world** can be low-cost, effective tools for data collection.
7. Video meeting tools like Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams have been critical to remote working, but do not rely on only these applications to build relationships.

Resources

For more insights, tools and tips like the ones in this report, check out all the resources on the Frontiers programme website, including:

- Frontiers of development event insights
- Lessons from research and innovation at the Frontiers of global development
    - Remote working looking forward
    - Sector perspectives and working collaboratively
    - Diversity
    - Maintaining connections
    - Building sustainability
- Frontiers champions case studies
- Session lead, Fiona Samuels, has also compiled a list of helpful perspectives on **remote research.**