

CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

COVID-19 in African and Asian Drylands

Working Group Description:

This Working Group explores the impacts of COVID-19 containment measures in African and Asian drylands. Historically home to pastoralists, and covering 40% of the earth, drylands feature low rainfall and sparse vegetation, yet contribute significantly to national and regional economies. Dryland populations increasingly face challenges, from climate change, political fragility, and food insecurity to inadequate school and health systems, land-use conflicts, and poor infrastructure. While COVID-19 is an extreme event accentuating instability amongst already marginalized populations, dryland dwellers have long-term experience dealing with disasters (e.g., droughts, animal disease outbreaks). We are building an observatory that examines how people are responding to the pandemic's containment measures. To do so, we established research partnerships with local collaborative researchers—friends and research collaborators living in African and Asian rural communities who are sharing with us their perspectives on this disaster's socio-economic, political, and cultural implications. We are, in the process, developing a new research methodology, which is multi-sited, remote, and participatory.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Our Working Group is interested in exploring what might be specific to the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in African and Asian drylands; and how this might highlight both local vulnerabilities and opportunities. We seek to understand how this extreme event and its economic, political, social, and cultural aftershocks are experienced, understood, and coped with by marginalized dryland communities.

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. Local understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic and its containment measures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: What are perceived causes, symptoms and transmission mechanisms of COVID-19? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How is COVID-19 shaping perceptions of strangers? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What are the different sources of information on COVID-19?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 4</u>: How do elders explain this event? How, in their perspective, does this pandemic compare to past disasters and pandemics? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: What are religious interpretations of the pandemic?
2. Local responses to COVID-19 containment measures and governmental intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: What are the national containment measures and how are they observed at the local level? Which ones are voluntary/compulsory? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How are these measures locally enforced? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What are local perceptions of governmental action (e.g., political uses of the pandemic)? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: How are people reacting to them (i.e., conforming/circumventing/resisting)? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: How are people solving problems caused by pandemic-related restrictions?
3. Impacts of COVID-19 containment measures on food security.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: How has food security changed? For which reasons? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: What are the impacts on availability of food? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What are the impacts on access to food? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: How have food prices changed? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: What are dominant and alternative sources of food now?
4. Impacts of COVID-19 containment measures on mobility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: How have containment measures affected the mobility of people and/or goods? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How is the mobility of livestock being affected? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What are impacts on cross-border mobility and relations? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: What are impacts on rural-urban mobility? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: How are people responding to restrictions on mobility?
5. Economic impacts of COVID-19 containment measures and sources of support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: How have different economic sectors been affected by the containment measures? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: Have alternative sources of income appeared? Which ones? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: How are people supporting each other? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: Who and/or which organizations and institutions have provided support and relief? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: Where have people looked for moral and spiritual support?
6. Impacts of COVID-19 containment measures on land and water issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: How are the containment measures affecting ongoing and planned land reforms? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How are the containment measures affecting land-based investments (i.e., infrastructure, conservation, mining, agriculture, irrigation, energy production)? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: How is the pandemic affecting land- and resource-based conflicts?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 4</u>: Has local access to water changed? How? Why?
7. Impacts of COVID-19 containment measures on education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: Which schools have closed? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How have schools responded to school closure? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: How have families responded to school closure? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: How have students responded to school closure?
8. Impacts of COVID-19 containment measures on social, cultural, and religious practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: How are people responding to distancing measures? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: Which social, cultural or religious practices are under pressure due to the containment measures? How? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: Are people using traditional/local medicine to treat/prevent this disease? Which ones? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: How are people responding to the closures of churches and restrictions on traditional ceremonies?
9. Differential impacts of COVID-19 containment measures across demographic groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: What are the gendered impacts? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: What are the age-related impacts? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: What are the impacts on chronically ill people and on health professionals? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: What are the impacts on mental health?
10. Impacts of COVID-19 containment measures on environmental management and conservation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Question 1</u>: How are the containment measures affecting relationships between communities and protected areas? • <u>Research Question 2</u>: How are the containment measures affecting human-wildlife conflict? • <u>Research Question 3</u>: How are conservation workers affected by the containment measures? • <u>Research Question 4</u>: How are conservation-related tourism workers affected? • <u>Research Question 5</u>: How are government and community conservation institutions responding to decreasing funding?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

Because we are unable to conduct fieldwork under current travel restrictions, we have reached out to friends and former/current research assistants from rural and marginalized dryland communities to become our collaborative researchers. We have asked them to collect data and digitally send us texts and images. In doing so, they fulfill hybrid roles that raise methodological and ethical questions. They are, on the one hand, informants—sharing with us how the containment measures have upended their lives; on the other hand, researchers in their own terms—asking their own questions, developing their own insights and contributing to analysis. Our approach relies on sharing the authority over the field research process, acknowledging collaborators’ co-authorship in the production of knowledge; and offering a modest financial contribution for their time and expenses. Another issue is that since we have one collaborative researcher per community, triangulation of information becomes impossible. Moreover, our team’s social interactions are all conducted

online and, as some collaborative researchers are mobile over vast landscapes, we are contending with limited internet coverage. This is all uncharted methodological and ethical territory that deserves scrutiny.

The COVID-19 global crisis is accelerating the need for both creativity and a critical outlook on the benefits and pitfalls of digital research and (oxymoronic) “remote ethnography”. We contribute to these debates by examining and reflecting on our remote participatory process.

Other Frameworks, Considerations for Collaboration, and/or Resources:

The genesis of this Working Group and project lies in COVID-19-related discussions some of us had as participants in the European Union-funded *Drylands Facing Change: Interdisciplinary Research on Climate Change, Food Insecurity, Political Instability* COST Action (CA12633; <https://www.drylands.eu>). As we build the Observatory, our project is benefiting from additional collaborations. These include an Italian government-funded research project (2020-23) at the University of Padua (with AP, AKG), on changing land and water management in the Sahel in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This project’s collaborative researchers in Sudan, Chad, Cameroon, Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal will contribute data to the Observatory for one year. The Institute for Social Research in Africa (IFSRA), a research foundation based in Burkina Faso that promotes applied research on local development and territorial governance in Africa, will contribute data through its network of collaborators in Gabon, Guinea, Djibouti, and Madagascar. Collaborative researchers from Mongolia, Zambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania will also join our group through BB and TB. Finally, building upon our CONVERGE Working Group efforts so far, we have submitted a grant proposal to the COVID-19 Africa Rapid Grant Fund (South African National Research Foundation), entitled *Observatory of COVID-19 in African Drylands*.

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This COVID-19 Working Group effort was supported by the National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network and the CONVERGE facility at the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder (NSF Award #1841338). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF, SSEER, or CONVERGE.