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**NOTES FROM THE FIELD**

# When the "Field" Moves Online: Reflections on Virtual Data Collection during COVID-19

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## 1. STARTING A MULTI–COUNTRY RESEARCH PROJECT DURING A PANDEMIC

At the start of 2020, we were enthusiastic about beginning a multi-country, interdisciplinary research project titled "Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture as Green Infrastructure" (UPAGrI). Examining the sustainability and social well-being outcomes of urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA), the project aims to develop empirical evidence on UPA drivers, practices, and outcomes in rapidly growing cities and towns in India and Tanzania.[6]

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[6] Pune and Bengaluru in India, and Dar es Salaam and Morogoro in Tanzania. See the UPIGrI website for further details: https://upagri.wixsite.com/up-agri.

We were to begin scoping visits in February 2020 and have a project kick-off meeting in March, where researchers from Tanzania, India, and the UK would meet to conceptualize and operationalize the project, translating the ambitious proposal to actual research design and plans for research impact. However, as the spread of COVID-19 escalated into a pandemic, our plans were upended. Scoping visits, the essential first steps to more immersive, city-specific, multi-stakeholder engagement, became impossible. The project kick-off meeting was postponed and moved online.

The pandemic and the restrictions that came with it forced us to adjust to new ways of working and collaborating: we needed to completely reorient our approach to research and data collection. This field note describes our experiences with online data collection in Pune and Bengaluru during the first year of UPAGrI, January 2020–2021. We reflect on our methodological approach to, and experiments in, online data collection; the benefits and drawbacks of this approach; and the lessons others exploring online fieldwork might take away from our experiences.

## 2. PIVOTING, SLOWLY

Within three weeks of starting scoping visits and preliminary interviews with urban farmers in Bengaluru, we had to halt field visits because of India's national lockdown, which started on March 25, 2020. As we were uncertain about how long the lockdown would be extended for, fieldwork was put on hold indefinitely. However, since the project had just begun, we had the option of redesigning our plans. Reorienting to the new normal was not easy, personally or professionally. Given that the project envisaged collecting data through farm visits, participant observation, in-person farmer interviews, and farmer diaries, the inability to travel to the field felt crippling. Additionally, working from home, with its blurred work–life boundaries and increased care duties, presented further challenges.

In April 2020, we pivoted our approach, albeit slowly. We made progress on desk-based outputs, such as a systematic literature review that was a planned project output meant to be concurrent to the scoping visits. However, the inability to whet our readings with field visits was somewhat discouraging. As India's lockdowns continued into June, in-person field engagement remained uncertain. Our request to the funding agency, the British Academy, for an extension was granted, giving us much-needed breathing space.

While the pandemic restricted primary data collection, it offered new avenues of engagement. In July 2020, we took stock of alternate ways of engaging with stakeholders and conducting farmer interviews, drawing on resources such as the LSE Digital Ethnography Collective Reading List

(Glatt and Spector 2020) and "Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic" (Lupton 2020). We decided to use telephonic and online interviews to converse with urban farmers. Coincidentally, the pandemic facilitated this shift to virtual fieldwork since people from varied locations, ages, and income groups in India were increasingly moving to online platforms and social media for work and entertainment (Pinto 2020).

## 2. FROM IN-FIELD TO ON-SCREEN: EXPERIENCES WITH MOVING THE FIELD ONLINE

In July 2020, we revisited stakeholder lists developed between February and March 2020 and contacted potential respondents over email, phone, and social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Given the exploratory nature of the study, we used snowball sampling that is commonly used to identify "hidden populations" (Johnson 2014). Thus, we drew on our stakeholder lists for the initial conversations and then contacted other urban farmers suggested by interviewees.

In most cases, urban farmers readily agreed to interviews[7] since they were used to online interactions and training, even before the pandemic (Desai 2020; Srinath 2020). For government officials and institutional respondents, we sent interview requests via email, mirroring the more formal access practices typically used for particular stakeholders. When it came to the actual interviews, we intentionally experimented with various platforms including Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, and sometimes WhatsApp. This plurality was necessary to meet various respondents' preferences.

Urban farms and gardens in Bengaluru and Pune are typically located in and around peoples' homes, making these homes the "field". This meant that during interviews, respondents often gave us virtual tours of their balconies and terraces, rainwater harvesting setups, and composting containers. These interactions expanded our understanding of "being in the field" to something beyond "spending long periods of time in a site" and added to our understanding of the field as "multidimensional and socially constructed space" (here, homes and gardens) (Ramesh 2020: 30). Given the exploratory nature of our research, the interviews were semi-structured and conversational, with several interviews continuing beyond the scheduled duration. Respondents often shared photographs and videos of their gardens days and weeks after the interviews. Many chose to speak to

[7] In two cases, people we contacted were unable to set up online interviews because they felt farm visits would be more suitable to demonstrate the practices and outcomes of urban agriculture. For these cases (which were in Bengaluru), we conducted field visits in January 2021, after travel restrictions had eased.

us multiple times to discuss other aspects of their urban farming practices, mirroring the practice of repeat visits, commonly seen in traditional fieldwork.

This expansion of the field was also experiential—the field, typically understood as "out there" (Bengtsson 2014; Howlett 2021) also became "in here" as we conducted interviews from our home. A pressure cooker going off or a child taking online classes in the background were common for both interviewers and respondents, and soon, our families and personal lives became part of the "field". This shared experience of the pandemic equalized the interviewer–respondent relationship. People opened up in conversations more readily than they might have if we had gone as "professionals" to meet "respondents" in the "field" (their homes).

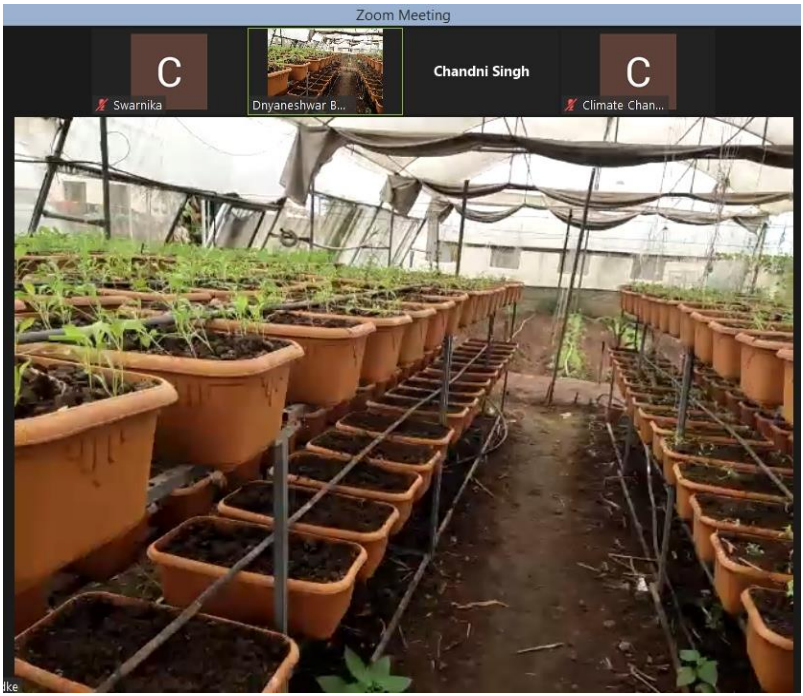


**Figure 1**: Observing Farming Practices in a Community Farm in Pune Virtually with Mr Dyaneshwar Bodke, Founder of Abhinav Farmers Club
**Source**: Authors

One of the luxuries of qualitative fieldwork, and which also makes it so valuable, is the opportunity to construct "ethnographic relationships" (Cavanagh 2016, 27), i.e., form friendships and develop ethical rules of engagement. Pivoting to online data collection did hamper initial cues and

more familiar processes of rapport-building, but it also led to other forms of insightful [8] engagement. The conversations also helped us build meaningful relationships: several older respondents said the conversations allowed them to reflect on decades of farming, while others noted that the discussions made them see their gardens in a new light.

**Figure 2**: Visiting a Terrace Garden in Bengaluru Virtually
**Source**: Authors

Along with these positive experiences, we also faced challenges. First, irregular internet connectivity and power cuts hampered the conversations, and sometimes elderly respondents had trouble logging into online meetings. In such cases, we would shift to audio calls over WhatsApp, as all respondents were familiar with the app. Second, we were unable to speak to as many government officials as we had hoped, in part because they had additional COVID responsibilities. Third, most of the conversations were only with the respondent unlike typical in-person fieldwork where researchers have the opportunity to talk to respondents' colleagues and/or

[8] For example, in August 2020, the research team and four urban farmers conducted an online session "Who Feeds Bengaluru?" to discuss the multidimensional benefits of urban agriculture. In February 2021, as part of The Nature of Cities Festival, three urban farmers co-hosted a virtual field trip with the research team titled "Garden City's Farming Habits: A Field Tour in Bengaluru, India".

family members. Finally, the online nature of the interviews may have led to a homogenisation of respondents: they were middle-class, educated urban farmers. None of our respondents was from low-income informal settlements.[9]

Over three months, between August and October 2020, we successfully conducted 51 interviews with a variety of urban farmers, perhaps exceeding what we could have done in our scoping visits.

## 3. LESSONS FOR MOVING THE FIELD ONLINE

Confronted with the "unprecedented nature" of the COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers have called for pragmatism around meeting pre–pandemic research objectives, becoming methodologically agile, and avoiding being extractive or exacerbating burdens on community partners and key informants (Ahmed *et al.* 2020; Dodds and Hess 2020). Below are key takeaways[10] from our experience of shifting to online data collection:

- **Online does not mean anything goes:** Using technology to conduct interviews was not as disruptive as we had expected. A few months into the pandemic, most of our respondents were well-versed in using online platforms. In situations where this was a problem, especially with older respondents, we used options such as phone calls. Second, we followed rigorous and ethical research procedures, just as we would have for in-field data collection. We decided on interview durations while setting up interviews and asked respondents for permission to record and take photographs. Although data collection moved online, we intentionally reminded ourselves to be mindful of peoples' time and privacy. One might

[9] Our desk-based review of literature and media articles tended to only report urban farming from middle and upper-middle class city dwellers. This made it difficult to identify possible respondents for remote interviews from low-income settlements. In subsequent field visits, we aim to address this by undertaking transect walks and participant observation in low-income settlements to make the narratives of urban agriculture more inclusive and representative.

[10] We recognize that our experience is mediated by certain privileges—the project had steady funding and the funding agency granted us flexibility by giving us a one-year, no-cost extension. Further, all team members were well-versed in using online platforms since those were used for other international projects. The different teams also had a good working relationship prior to the shift online and had adequate supporting structures (laptops, space to work from home, and fast internet to conduct interviews). Also, the nature of the field as primarily urban, where respondents were typically familiar with technology and could afford stable internet connections, and our methodological approach being qualitative and open-ended, also enabled us to "pivot" to online data collection through trial and error.

have to pay additional attention to these practices as personal and professional boundaries tend to blur when working online.

- **There is no travel, but everything takes longer:** While almost no time was spent travelling to the field, we found time management was still essential. Instead of interviewee fatigue, we often faced interviewer fatigue and had to experiment with interview frequency and duration. Overall, we moved from doing three interviews a day to just doing one so that transcripts and follow up questions/reflections could be written up. An hour-long interview typically worked best, though some respondents were more keen to converse and those conversations could go on for up to an hour and a half. If we saw signs of fatigue or distraction, we amended the interview length with the permission of the interviewee.
- **Acknowledge ethnographic hits and misses:** Ethnographic methods involve "hanging out", participant observation, informal conversations, and interacting with people other than the identified respondents. This was not possible in our online interviews. However, we found that repeat interviews and follow-ups through phone and email built a successful rapport that led to further conversations and meaningful bonds and eventually helped us establish a relationship with respondents. Months after the online interviews, we visited sites and enriched our online interactions, thus developing "thick" data.
- **Remote work needs more communication:** Typically, fieldwork involves reflective conversations within the research team, where one would go over the day's interviews, discuss leads and ideas, and plan for the next day. Working remotely, we found that the project team had to make space and time to connect more frequently. A 15-minute conservation right after an interview for quick reflection-sharing as well as additional bi-weekly discussions helped us share emerging findings and plan for future interviews. These additional meetings, though often exhausting, were essential and also made us aware of each other's personal situations, helping build more empathy and understanding within the team.

As "the field" moves online, experimenting with hybrid methods of in-person and online data collection are increasingly important. With travel restrictions easing in India, we are beginning to supplement current online data collection with immersive field visits. The pivot to online data collection was critical to continuing our research. The lessons from this online mode of working and data collection are instructive in flexible

methodologies, in opening up alternate spaces, and in reducing travel and associated carbon footprints. It has, for us, expanded the meaning and materiality of the term "field" and challenged normative ideas of data collection as only being embedded and in-person.

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