

UPDATE ON PROJECT PROGRESS 2020 – ADJUSTMENTS RELATED TO COVID-19

Due to covid-19, the project has been significantly delayed in 2020. After having seen its first case of COVID-19 in Colombia on March 6, numbers quickly escalated, and as of now (August 2021) Colombia has more than 4.8 million recorded cases and 120,000 deaths. The country went into strict lockdown late March, and since then a number of restrictions have been implemented, lifted and tightened several times on both national and regional level.

Our Colombian partners, the University Externado and the Ministry of health have been very challenged in 2020, as the university has been closed and the Ministry of health has been extremely busy dealing with COVID-19 related matters. Furthermore, all travel to Colombia by DIGNITY staff was suspended. DFC was notified about this March 16th 2020, and a no-cost extension was approved.

A quantitative household survey and in-depth qualitative interviews were planned to be kicked off in spring 2020. The quantitative survey, based on a data collection comprising 6000 questionnaire-based interviews focusing on conflict and mental health in five regions had been fully prepared, including sampling frame, survey instrument, identification and training of interviewers, and coordination with local Ministry of Health representatives. The study on secondary traumatization had also been fully prepared including questionnaire guide logistical organization- The design of the qualitative survey had started but was not fully developed when the pandemic hit.

However, it quickly became clear that these activities could not be implemented due to the restrictions and health risks associated. In addition, travels for research and meetings within Colombia became problematic. Instead, the research team intensified the number of virtual meetings, and it is an important lesson learnt that work can indeed be done remotely, both between Denmark and Colombia and between regions in the country.

To be prepared for any given development of the covid-19 situation, a contingency plan based on two scenarios was developed. In one scenario travel and meetings were allowed within municipalities, but not between regions. In the second scenario meetings and travels were also restricted within municipalities. Along with the contingency plan, some adjustments and changes were made to the project. The quantitative questionnaire was revised further in collaboration with University Externado and the Ministry of Health and adjusted to the current situation. Furthermore, an extra module on covid-19 was designed and added to the survey.

Furthermore, new local interviewers were hired to undertake the interviews. Previously, interviewers were not all based in the regions/municipalities where the interviews should take place, which would pose a risk to the project in case of travel restrictions. University Externado was responsible for the selection process as well as the training of the new interviewers. Finally, the sampling strategy was finalized and adjusted to the current situation in all project municipalities, along with the necessary protocols accounting for health and safety-measures.

To sum up, the following areas of the project were impacted/ needed adjustment during 2020.

- The activity-plan and its timelines
 - o A one year no-cost extension was requested and approved
 - o Field-work activities were delayed

- Budgets were adjusted
- Switching from centrally placed to remote and locally based interviewers, including planning and performing remote supervision
- Working conditions for all partners changed significantly.
- No live presence of DIGNITY in Colombia due to international travel bans

Apart from the data-collection some other project related activities, primarily lead by the Colombian partners took place, including:

- A preliminary analysis of the 15 departments, describing the characteristics based on Colombian national data to get more knowledge about the territorial distribution and characteristics of the vulnerable groups in the municipalities
- Territorial workshops with local coordinators to get local input for the design of strategies. This included an analysis of the territorial and municipal situation related to resources and access to institutional mental health. This included an inventory of routes and directories for the supply of mental health services in the project municipalities.

Luckily with these adjustments to the circumstances in 2020, we have now, during 2021, been able to continue our activities and we look forward to the rest of a productive 2021 as well as 2022.