PEER RESEARCH & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

Durham University

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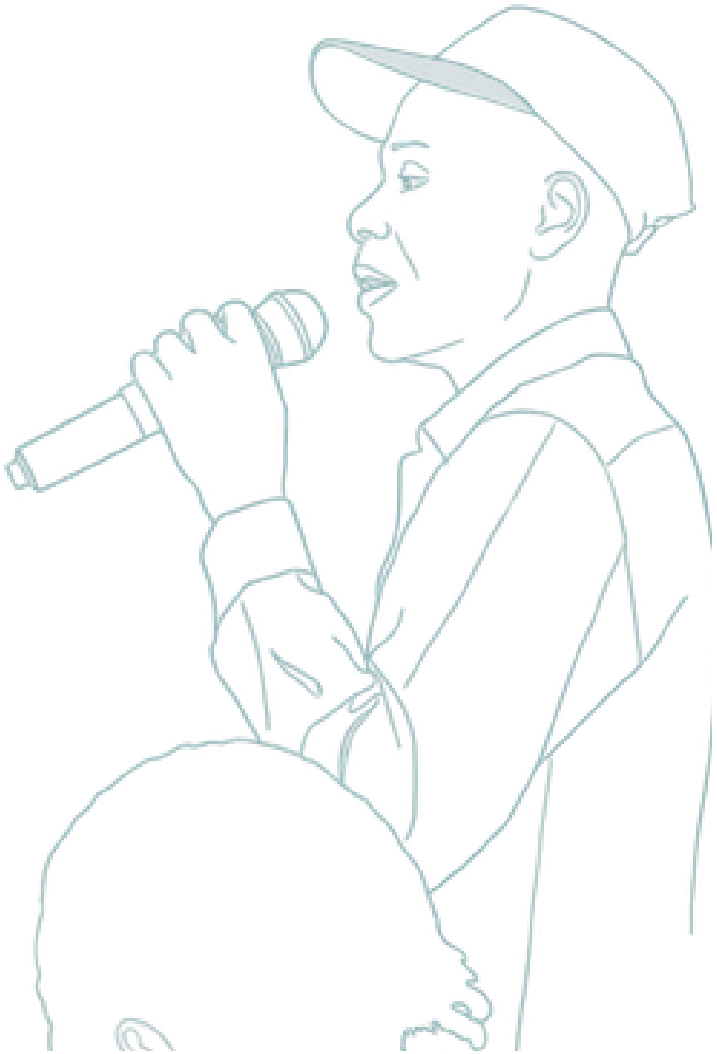
UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE

Welcome!

This toolkit is designed, firstly, to help you [professional researchers such as academics and NGO research staff] develop a programme of peer research that can be used, in a collaborative way, to build joint academic/NGO/community understanding of issues that are challenging well-being in marginalised communities.

Secondly, it suggests pathways to strengthen community engagement, so that work towards resolving the issues identified can commence. The emphasis throughout is on helping address the challenges experienced by particularly disadvantaged groups who find it difficult to get their voices heard and so initiate positive change through community-building and an ethics of care.

The toolkit is shaped round our experiences of transport/mobilities research with disadvantaged populations in Africa (plus a small amount of recent mobilities research in the UK), but could be adapted to other thematic areas.



This toolkit was prepared by Gina Porter, Sam Clark, Bradley Rink, Bulelani Maskiti and Georgia Ryan.

We wish to acknowledge the many peer researchers, research assistants and research collaborators whose contributions in diverse projects over the last two decades have helped us shape this toolkit.

SECTION 01

Peer Research

What is Peer Research?

Peer research is a participatory research method whereby those people directly affected by an issue are actively involved in developing and driving research to explore it. They are typically community members who conduct research within or about issues affecting that community. Peer research tends to be locationally embedded, involving subjects from the same social or generational group (Yang and Dibb 2022, The Young Foundation 2025, Porter et al. 2026, Thomson et al. 2026)[1].

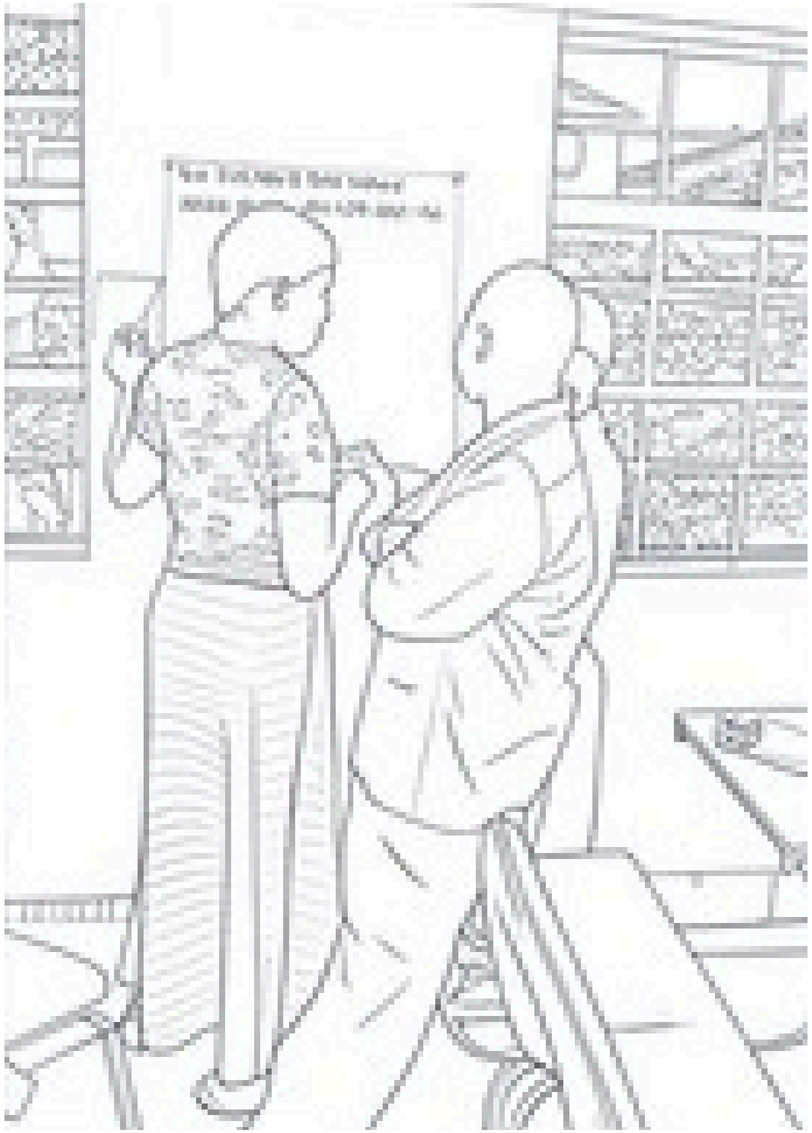
Why use Peer Research?

Peer research can be a powerful route to community engagement, ensuring that the research focuses on what the community identifies as critical issues. Some of the reasons for using this approach include the following:

- It can offer a powerful base and complement to conventional academic research.
- It can help build community trust, especially when aiming to work with hard-to-reach groups [e.g. women, children and youth, marginalised populations] and/or on particularly sensitive topics [e.g. harassment, violent crime].
- It draws on the Peer Researchers' and the community's lived experiences – they have insider experiential expertise.

Yang, C. and Dibb, Z., (2022) Peer Research in the UK; The Young Foundation (2025) Sharing power, showing understanding, September 2025; Porter, G., Rink, B., Murphy, E., et al., (2026) Engaging citizens from low-income communities in transport planning: experiences from peer research studies conducted in three African cities. Journal of Transport Geography, 130, p.104484.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2024.104109; Thomson, G., Rasgado, M.C., Harris, C., Schroeder, D., (2026) Engaging and supporting Community Researchers in Low and Middle-Income Countries: An Integrative Review. Wellcome Open Research, 10, p.531.

- It can help identify and shape key research questions.
- Peer Researchers' insider understanding, empathy and sensitivity (honed through initial training regarding ethics etc.) can support collection of high-quality data.
- Peer Researchers benefit from learning new skills, making valuable connections beyond their community, possibly leading to educational and/or employment opportunities and building self esteem.
- In some contexts, it may be the only feasible route into building a strong understanding of key local issues e.g. fragile neighbourhoods where outsiders are highly suspect and vulnerable to attack. In this case it will be essential to conduct a careful risk assessment and ensure that Peer Researchers resident in that location only work with people they know well [friends, family, neighbours]. In such cases it will be important that individual Peer Researchers are appointed from different sectors of the community.

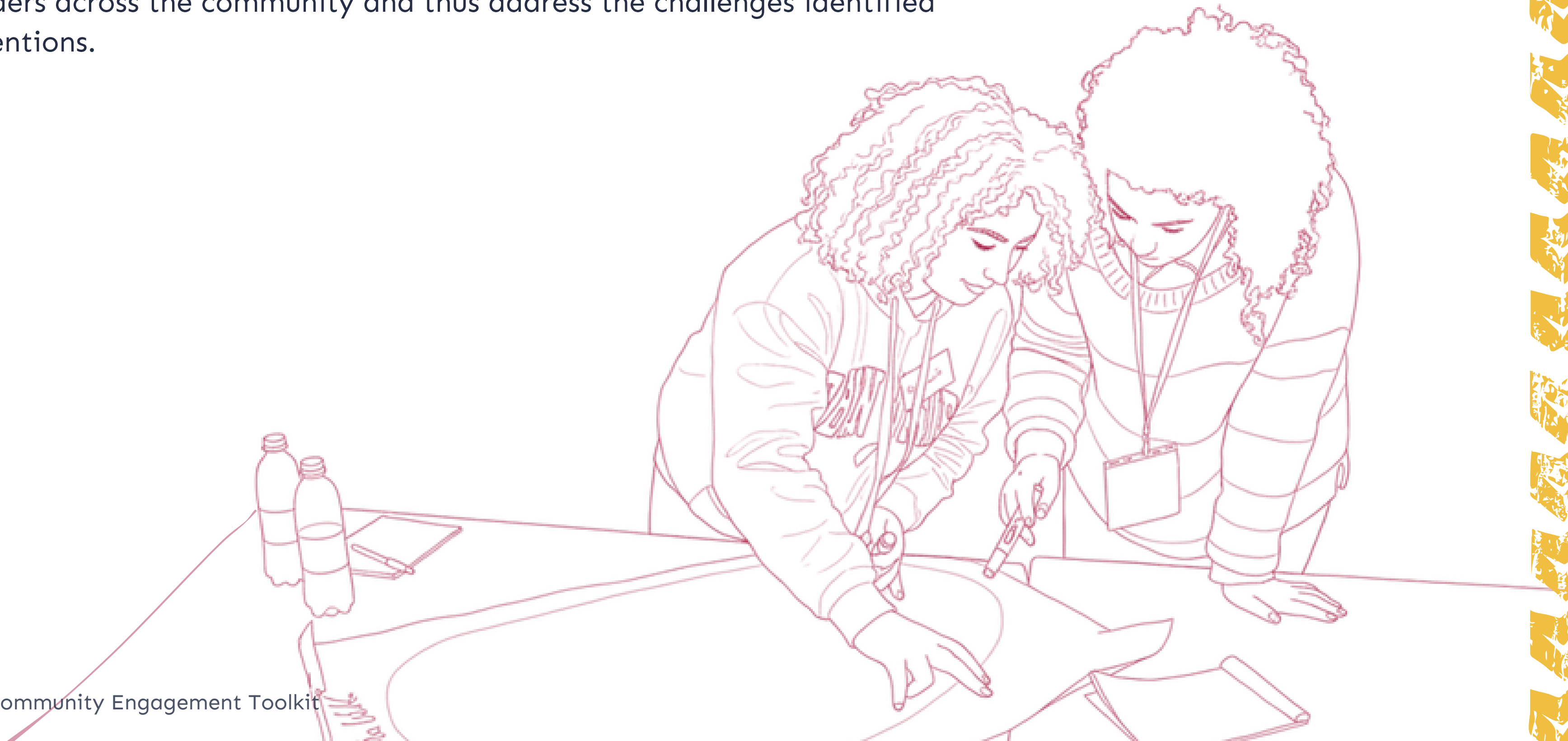


However, peer research can be challenging, unless all elements of the programme are carried out with great care. Working with Peer Researchers brings substantial obligations and responsibilities. Confidentiality regarding community information gathered and safe-guarding of Peer Researchers will be core concerns. Setting a fair and equitable rate of remuneration that recognises time and effort expended can be particularly difficult, advice from relevant local organisations and other key stakeholders aware of relevant contextual factors is usually helpful.

How was this toolkit developed?

This toolkit was developed for building academic/NGO collaboration with hard-to-reach marginalised groups. It is aimed at specifically improving understanding of the mobility challenges faced by communities when they try to access essential services and goods. Initial work with children (2002 onwards, initially drawing on field trials in India in collaboration with an Indian NGO with experience of peer research) was followed by research with older people, young unemployed women and young unemployed men in low-income neighbourhoods across Africa, in both rural and urban settings.

In each study the Peer Researchers were members of the specific cohort on which the study was focused i.e. children worked to understand the challenges faced by children of around the same age living in their neighbourhood; older people worked with other older people in their community, etc. The emphasis throughout has been on sharing power and understanding across the team in order to develop sound research findings that might also enable productive engagement with wider stakeholders across the community and thus address the challenges identified with positive interventions.



Before you get started: general considerations

Before developing a Peer Research programme it is important to ensure that you have the basic conditions and resources necessary to complete the programme. Five elements are key:

1. A clear identified need for the research in the focus community(ies).
2. Potential to recruit appropriate Peer Researchers from the focus community(ies).The project team will need to define selection criteria specific to project needs (for instance required literacy levels).
3. Sufficient funds available to cover all Peer Researcher and community engagement activities envisaged. This should include travel and food/accommodation as necessary for team members, plus fair payment for the time they are required to spend on the research. Funds will need to cover Peer Researcher time for the initial training plus subsequent data collection, data analysis and feedback meetings with the wider community, wider policy and practitioner group, plus media engagements etc. Community engagement will need to cover costs such as meeting room charges, appropriate refreshments etc.
4. Sufficient time should be committed by the supporting team of professional researchers. The time span may extend long after the formal completion of the co-research programme, through extended community engagement and personal engagement with individual Peer Researchers needing ongoing support.

There also has to be a preparedness to work flexibly, taking on whatever challenges may arise during the programme. Challenges might include unanticipated changes in composition of the team, for instance, or in local context [e.g. political, economic or health factors impacting the programme], all with time and resource implications.

5. A firm commitment to ethical standards, including an ethics of care. These standards need to be developed and agreed at the start of the project by the project participants and maintained throughout the programme. A careful preliminary assessment of potential risks to Researchers working in the proposed study neighbourhood will be essential, together with necessary precautions for maintaining safety. Professional researchers/institutions tend to hold greater power, so ethics need to emphasise protecting and strengthening more marginalised research partners [i.e. promoting a shift towards more equal relationships across the whole project team and collaborating community].

It is important to support the Peer Researcher and community's own unadulterated voices and avoid any manipulation/reshaping of their arguments. Subsequent to the research, Peer Researchers should have the opportunity to co-author project outputs, but the emphasis, throughout the project, needs to be on the wider community's needs and aspirations (not the personal advancement of the Peer Research team who will have gained significant advantages through their roles). This is why regular community engagement is so essential.

An outline of likely key activities

This section introduces the basic stages that are likely to be important for a successful project (though not necessarily as a linear progression). It makes the assumption that funding has been sourced based on a realistic budget and takes into account the assumptions listed above under 'general considerations'.

- Preparatory baseline work in the study community - identification of key marginalised group and their challenges.
- Preliminary reflections on potential research foci.
- Obtain approval of community leaders for the research.
- Identify and contact local NGOs/CBOs.
- Identify and contact others outside the community who might be able to help make change happen, e.g. local policy makers and bureaucrats, in-country donor representatives, practitioners appropriate to the proposed topic (including the private sector).
- Build alliances and recruit them to participate in a project advisory group – henceforth called the Consultative Group.
- Outline study design.
- Formal ethics approvals (from funders, academic/other institutions concerned).
- Peer Researcher recruitment.
- Initial training week for Peer Researchers (five days recommended).
- Post-training support to independent research by the peer research team [possibly just 10 days if this is all the time Peer Researchers can commit or all the funding that is available. It may be necessary to spread the post-training research days over a longer period than initially planned – flexibility is important].
- Analysis of field data by peer research team and other collaborators.
- Participation of whole team, including Peer Researchers and community representatives, in stakeholder meetings with the Consultative Group, including relevant policy makers and practitioners etc.
- Peer research and community engagement to decide on next steps.
- Media engagement to disseminate research method and findings.

What size of peer research team?

The size of team is likely to depend on the following factors:

a) The availability of financial resources to pay Peer Researchers and local assistance to support the Peer Researchers when they are collecting data. Time constraints on formal local research collaborators usually mean that it is necessary to recruit additional early career Research Assistants.

b) The availability of recruits able to commit the necessary time for the project. Each Research Assistant may be able to support no more than two or three Peer Researchers because of the likely support needed once the Peer Researchers are working independently after the training week has been completed. Peer research teams in our mobility project have ranged from six to 12 per neighbourhood.

Working with a large peer research team can be challenging due to issues around duty of care etc. and will need a commensurately large team of supporting Research Assistants.

Recruiting Peer Researchers
[henceforth PRs]

- PRs are recruited to undertake research with individuals in the same (e.g. age/gender/social/work) cohort and who are resident in the same neighbourhood.
- Recruitment is best done in consultation with local NGOs/CBOS working with the relevant age/gender cohort. Discussion with them may enable contact with potential PRs likely to exhibit empathy and sensitivity when working with the cohort concerned. Advertisements may be placed through the NGO/CBO, or through wider media, but community credibility is crucial.
- Recruitment information needs to emphasise key requirements: membership of the cohort [e.g. gender, age, population characteristic such as disability] on which the research is focused; residence in the same neighbourhood [length of residence required may depend on theme etc.]; availability for the required minimum number of days to cover training, post-training research work and Consultative Group engagements.
- There may be complex relational dynamics operating in the study community. Try to recruit a diversity of PRs that can engage with different sectors (e.g. both Muslim and Christian PRs were recruited in a women's mobility study in Abuja, Nigeria).

- It is advantageous to work with literate PRs able to write up basic material they have collected themselves online or in hard copy (in their local or preferred language). Their initial work tends to centre round reporting in-depth interviews with their peers in the community and personal diary writing and associated engagement in data analysis with the team.
- Supporting PRs who have no literacy skills and are only able to record their data in oral form can be challenging (though CWC Bangalore have conducted research with child labourers very successfully - this requires specialist skills and a realistic timeframe for data collection and analysis).
- The PRs must be able to commit to the time required of them for the training week, for a subsequent period of independent data collection [10 days minimum] and occasional days meeting with external stakeholders. PR learning will continue through the project. It is not confined to the training week.
- If the PRs are children below the age of 18 years (as well as the required legal approvals needed in the given context) it is essential to have child, parental and school approvals in place and to ensure there will be no clash with teaching/schoolwork/domestic task requirements.
- Short interviews with prospective PRs prior to starting the training week are important. These will cover project requirements, PR expectations and some preliminary background on the PR [e.g. education, interests, length of time resident in the neighbourhood, community engagement]. Further information about PR backgrounds will emerge over the training week but, if more is required, this can be gathered through in-depth life history interviews with each PR towards the close of the training week.

Recruiting Research Assistants [henceforth RAs]

Community-based PRs will need intensive support, especially when they commence working independently in the community. The team leaders will benefit from additional support from locally recruited RAs who can keep daily contact with each PR and have some knowledge of the local context. They can help monitor progress and provide a preliminary sounding board if questions and problems arise (while also maintaining close contact with the team leaders so that any significant issues can be addressed immediately).

- These are usually local early-career researchers - academic or NGO staff – ideally resident in or with a good knowledge of the study neighbourhood and able to allocate sufficient time to the full project.
- Ideally, the RAs have some background relevant to the topic being researched, some background in qualitative research methods, and an openness to working with less-advantaged people.
- Gender balance is preferable but will depend on the research focus and target groups.
- A preparatory meeting [c. 2 hours] will be necessary to explain the PR concept and the aims and objectives of the project that is being developed.
- Further training of the RAs may be best conducted during the PR training, so the RAs learn alongside the PRs and build strong contact with them.
- It is important to finish each of the training sessions with a review of RA experiences, questions etc. [once PRs have left].

Setting up a training week

The following sections outline procedures used in a training programme with community PRs working on transport and mobility issues. Past experience suggests that a training period of around five consecutive days works well to ensure adequate sustained preparation for subsequent independent research activities. The following considerations are needed prior to training:

Find a suitable venue, ideally located within or close to the study community.

Ensure adequate food and refreshments are booked for the full training week [e.g. warm drink and small snack on arrival, mid-morning drink/snack, buffet/sandwich lunch, mid-afternoon snack].

Materials: a minimum of one hardback notebook for each PR, pens, one flipchart, large A1 sheets of paper, a set of variously coloured marker pens for each Peer Researcher.

Conduct a full assessment of safety risks to researchers working in the proposed study neighbourhood. Ensure risks are monitored throughout [and subsequently across the whole programme].

This should be suitable for the whole team, bearing in mind local norms including possible religious requirements.

Clear instructions communicated to training participants to facilitate travel to and from training each day.

Possible schedule for a training week

Throughout training the emphasis is on developing a co-constructed project, with input from all participants, but emphasising that the PRs have key local knowledge and different ways of knowing what will be essential to success of the project. The PRs are experts in their own communities. Everyone - including experienced academic researchers in the project - needs to listen carefully, and be open to these learning opportunities.

The following day-by-day schedule in preparation for PRs independent field research has worked well in recent research with a mobilities theme in diverse contexts across Africa, but could be adapted to other foci. The specific structure of each day needs to take account of the PR team's skills and progress with individual exercises. It may be advantageous, for instance, to delay the first interview practice until Day 2 and it may not be possible to meet with the Consultative Group till after the conclusion of the training.

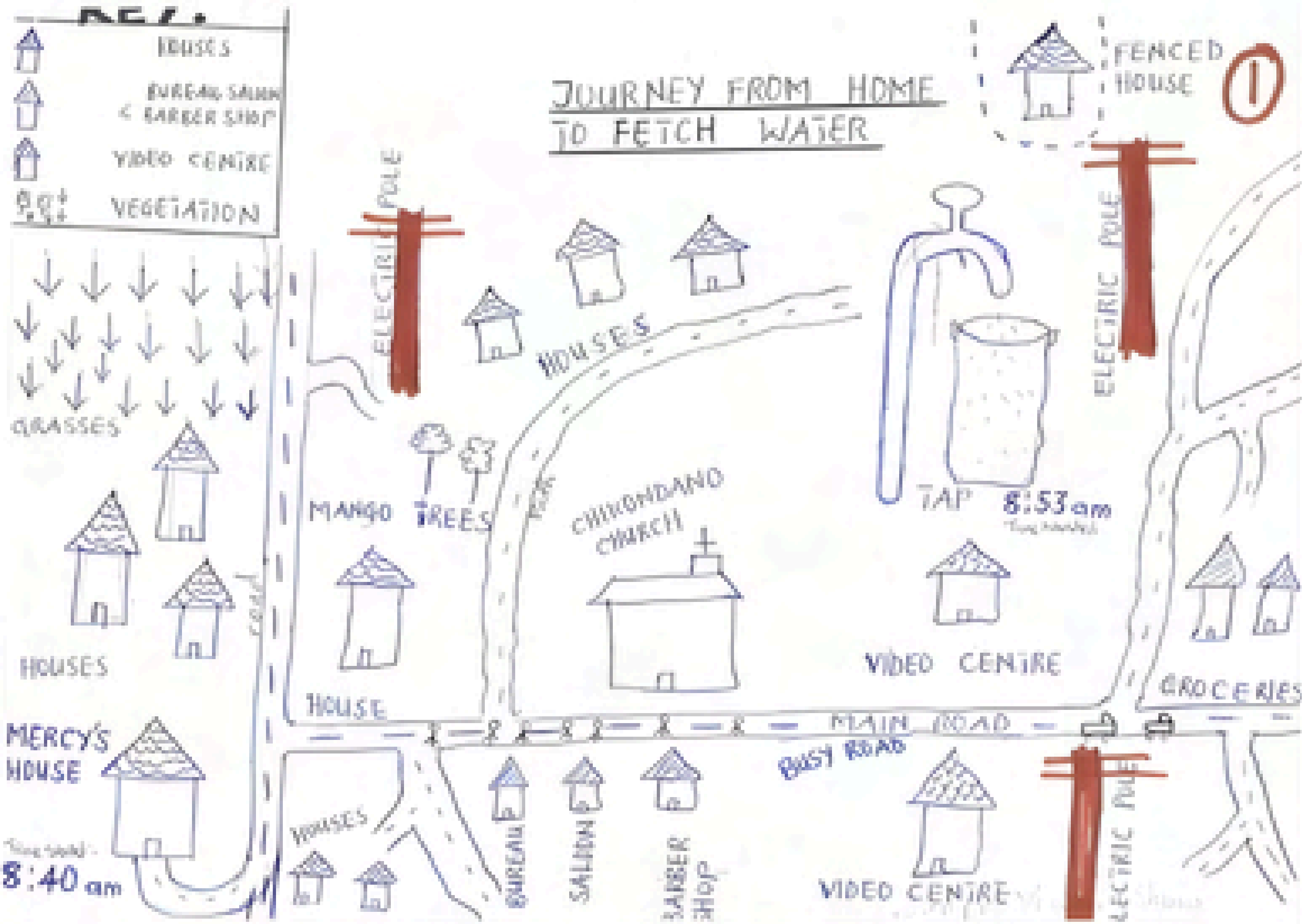
In some projects we have presented a range of methods, and PRs have selected those they felt most comfortable with. Thus, some projects have incorporated activities different from those outlined below, such as asking each PR to keep an ethnographic diary outlining their daily experiences and reflections on the field research: what went well, what difficulties arose, how they felt about this. The diaries worked particularly well with child researchers who often enjoyed this activity and seemed to benefit from reflecting on their emotions. In another project, where funds allowed, PRs subsequently took on some quantitative survey data collection, with survey questions shaped by their previously collected qualitative data.

Day 1: Morning

- Introductions from the whole team [PRs, RAs, academic/NGO research collaborators]- name they like to be called, where born, how long lived in the neighbourhood they live in now, anything else they would like to mention? What they are hoping to get out of joining the project?
- Whole team discussion and agreement of ground rules [e.g. arrival and departure times, not interrupting or speaking over others, not using mobile phones during teaching sessions, confidentiality of discussions here, whether to allow photography in the training workshop].
- Housekeeping, including circulation of PR informed consent forms for photography during the training week. This needs to include information on where any approved photographs will be displayed [teaching only, website, conferences etc.].
- Setting expectations: explain what PRs can expect from the project [e.g. payments for daily travel and work inputs (daily cash payments often preferred by PRs); certificate at end of a successful training week, second certificate for independent fieldwork completion; experience that may help with education, livelihoods or wider well-being].
- Talk through the wider project aims and objectives.
- Introduce tasks PRs will practice here, then try out in their community [e.g. interviewing, personal mobility diaries, participant observation] and wider contributions from follow-on meetings with local stakeholders.
- Field times best for practical work? [afternoon/early evening?].
- A **preliminary mapping exercise** can help ground the project. PRs work in small groups, drawing and discussing what they see as key features of their community, e.g. major routeways (to help shape the rough map), places they see as important to their daily lives, safe spaces and dangerous spaces. [A3 sheets and felt tip pens]. N.B. The ongoing discussion is the important element in this exercise, not the quality of the maps.
- PRs asked to reflect on the neighbourhood where they live [work in small groups, then present]: good things; bad things.
- Individual PR life histories often enter the discussion as they reflect on their experiences in the neighbourhood.
- Understanding each PR's past experiences [previous places of residence etc.] will be important for appreciating their interview reflections and analysis.
- Discussion can then be directed towards the project key themes [e.g. for transport, women's everyday travel; children's challenges on the journey to school etc.].

Day 1: Afternoon

- Interviewing techniques – two of the collaborator-leads demonstrate good and bad interview techniques. The questions are shaped round the last journey made by the interviewee.
- First demonstrate a really bad interview (no personal introductions, no explanation of interview purpose, takes photo without permission, uses a big clipboard, keeps asking questions and doesn't listen for answers, general rudeness and dominating behaviour, argues with interviewee, phone distractions). PRs are asked to pick out our faults - usually a good ice-breaker!
- Then a good interview exchange [respectful introduction, explain reason for the interview, ask permission to interview, assure anonymity, agree to stop at any time if the interviewee doesn't to continue]
- Discussion on how to ask interview questions that will provide detailed information: who? when? what? where? how? why? tell me about...
- Discussion about reportage of interviews emphasising the importance of noting the respondent's words verbatim where possible. e.g. "I have.." **not** "He said he has......"
- PRs then undertake a preliminary trial of the basic interview procedure, working in pairs, with attention to key courtesies (introduction, reason for interview, permission etc). They each take a turn as interviewer and as respondent. Each asks "Can you tell me about your journey to the workshop this morning?" They note basic questions and responses to their questions in their notebook. Each PR then reports back to the group. From this point onwards through the training workshop we remind PRs regularly about the importances of noting down the interviewee's direct words verbatim where feasible but keeping identities of individual respondents anonymous.
- PRs [depending on progress in Day 1] may be asked to try out a first interview at home with someone from the same cohort whom they know very well – e.g. a sibling, friend [around same age, same gender]. Subject matter will depend on project focus [e.g. my daily travel to work in this neighbourhood]. They should make notes in the interview, so they can report back on Day 2.
- What sort of problems do PRs think they might encounter when they interview? Discuss potential ways of dealing with these. Emphasise importance of maintaining confidentiality of individual respondents' identities.
- Final recap on the day – good things about today, anything we need to change?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Day 2: Morning and Afternoon

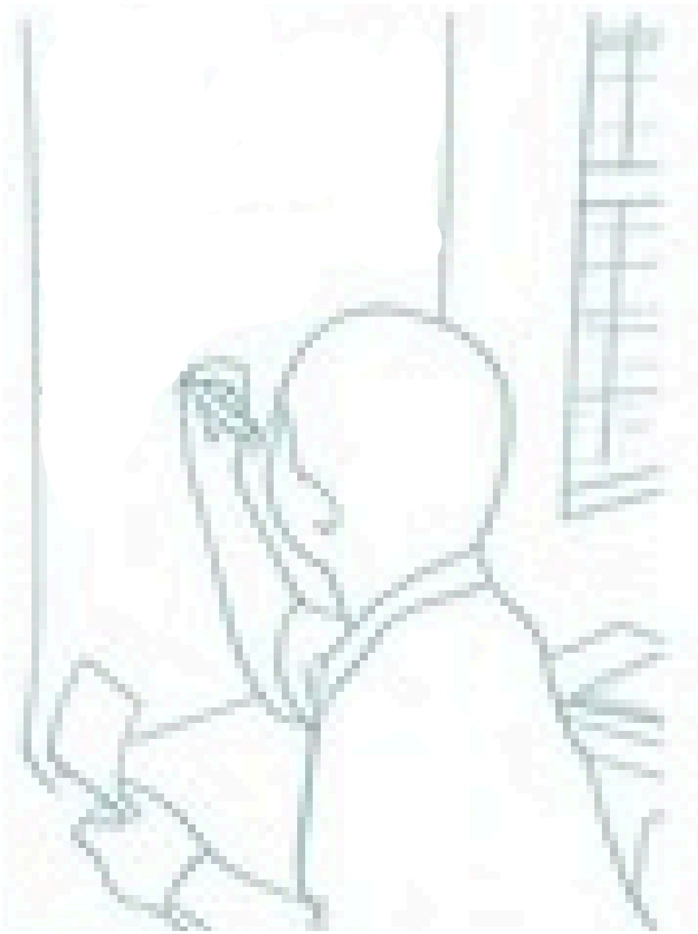
- Recap of Day 1 - feedback session from whole group.
- Each PR reports back on their interview of the night before, reading from the notes they have prepared – attention to direct reportage of respondents' words verbatim.
- Open discussion of the interviewing experience – what worked, challenges.
- **Introducing Ethics** – discussion of things we can do/must not do as a researcher (introductions, respect, permissions, anonymity of respondents, preparing a project information sheet, voice recording).
- **Ethics exercise** - project information sheet and obtaining consent.
- Each PR drafts a project information sheet for researcher introductions in the field (i.e. basic project information, explanation that this is a training exercise, anonymity of respondents, PR's name, phone contact/email contact of local project leader and local RA).
- RAs practice verbal introductions using the information sheet, then request consent to conduct the interview [verbal or written confirmation depending on context and preference of respondent].
- **Preparing an interview schedule for use in the project interviews:**

  1.**Thematic questions**: PRs start to develop an interview schedule directly focused on the project theme and their own experience. PRs work firstly in pairs [drawing on their personal experiences/reflections]. This is followed by a group discussion of likely key issues that will need to be covered [i.e. now including all team members].
- 2. **Basic participant information data**: PRs and team work together to review basic information required once interviewees have given consent to the interview, prior to moving to the interview schedule. Details will depend on project focus but the list is likely to include date and location of interview, gender, age, length of residence in study community, occupation. Discussion may be needed on potentially more sensitive questions such as marital status and education and whether/how to explore these issues. Emphasise this information does not need reporting verbatim, unlike the main interview questions.
- **Preparation of question cards** - RAs prepare their own interview cards with basic information required on one side, a checklist of key topics/questions on the other. [Small cards e.g. index cards that can be kept in a pocket – handy reminder of key information needed].

- Read more [i.e. link to draft ethics advice sheet, example of a project information sheet, consent form, and participant information list plus full interview schedule for a research project on young men's mobility in a Cape Town township.]
- **Field exercise: trial street interview with a suitable respondent** - to be conducted on the street in a place close by the workshop if safe to do this. Split into twos, each group supported by one RA/project collaborator. [One peer researcher asks questions, one notes responses, others observe and help if issues arise].
- If there is time interview another person on the street in the neighbourhood [swap interviewer and notetaker between first and second interviews].
- If the location is too dangerous/inappropriate for the trial, this could be conducted by each PR with an RA or other PR.

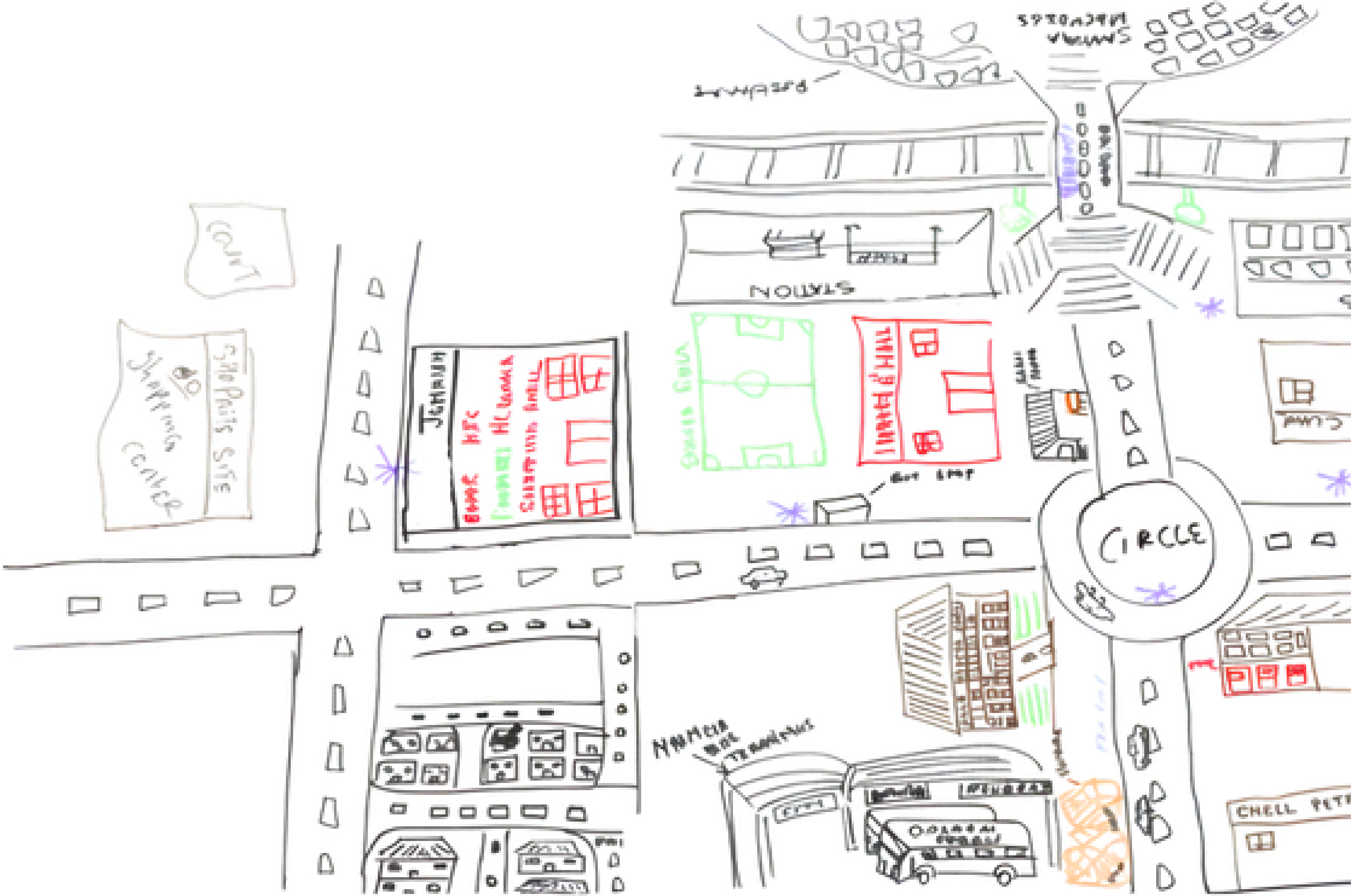
Day 3: Morning

- Recap of Day 2 – what went well, what went less well?
- Full report on PR home neighbourhood interviews [each PR in turn reports verbatim from notes followed by questions/comments from the full group].
- Discussion of findings emerging from research so far.
- Group discussion: Key themes? key challenges? What else do we need to know? [For transport research could extend to e.g. thoughts on skills, strategies, tactics, aspirations for safer travel, impacts on access to services/livelihoods.].
- Possible further amendment of checklists by PRs to include such additional topics.
- Possible discussion of additional topics that provide broader context on the project theme e.g. perceptions of work in the transport sector.



Day 3: Afternoon

- **The importance of field observation** – discussion regarding sight, sound, smell, weather, atmosphere.
- **Field trial of participant observation** close to the workshop site [use all senses, not just sight]. PRs each find a suitable vantage point on a nearby street and note observations for c. 30 minutes.
- Report back by each PR, then discussion.
- **Ethnographic travel diaries** - each PR to reflect back on this morning's journey to the workshop and write it up as an ethnographic travel diary: how you travelled [including walking component], time, cost, good things, bad things, senses, emotions. What would have made this journey easier/better? What else should we be noting? Present this to the group – each person in turn.
- **Travel home exercise** - PRs note in detail their journey home from the workshop tonight: how travelled including attention to walking component, time, any costs, difficulties, good things, bad things, emotions. What would have made this journey easier/better? If PRs feel it's acceptable and safe to do so, take some pictures that help show features of the journey [e.g. road crossings, waiting at the bus stop, traffic queues etc., but no pictures of individual people].
- Are there skills/strategies that would help you to walk better/more safely/more speedily?
- **Second in-depth interview exercise -** at home with another person you know from the same cohort.
- Write up the interview and travel home diary tonight and bring in to read/discuss tomorrow.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SHOPPING CENTER
CIRCLE

Day 4: Morning

- Recap of Day 3 – what went well, what went less well?
- Report back on travel home stories from ethnographic diary [any skills needed that would help improve travel home?] Group discussion and reflections.
- Report back on in-depth interviews conducted last night. Group discussion and reflections.
- **Mobile interviews exercise** - A short walk of 10-15 minutes in the vicinity of the workshop - PRs in pairs with one person acting as respondent, the other as researcher, then vice-versa [prioritise personal safety!]. The PR walks alongside the respondent and asks them to point out good and bad things about the journey as they go, observing carefully what happens along the walk. If easier remember observations and note them down as soon as you leave your respondent – include approximate age, any other significant observations about the respondent, where they are going and why, whether journey is usually undertaken alone or with others; thoughts triggered by landmarks or encounters with others; reflections on anything relating to the journey or area you walk through, including insights on livelihood, health, caring responsibilities (e.g. caring for children/siblings) plus any other details learnt about the respondent.
- Use a camera to take some pictures as you walk, if it's safe and appropriate to do so. Avoid taking pictures of individuals unless you have their permission first – reminder on **ethical rules.**
- Report back on mobile interview; discussion.

Day 4: Afternoon:

- Preparation for whole team meeting with Consultative Group members on Day 5.

Day 5: Morning

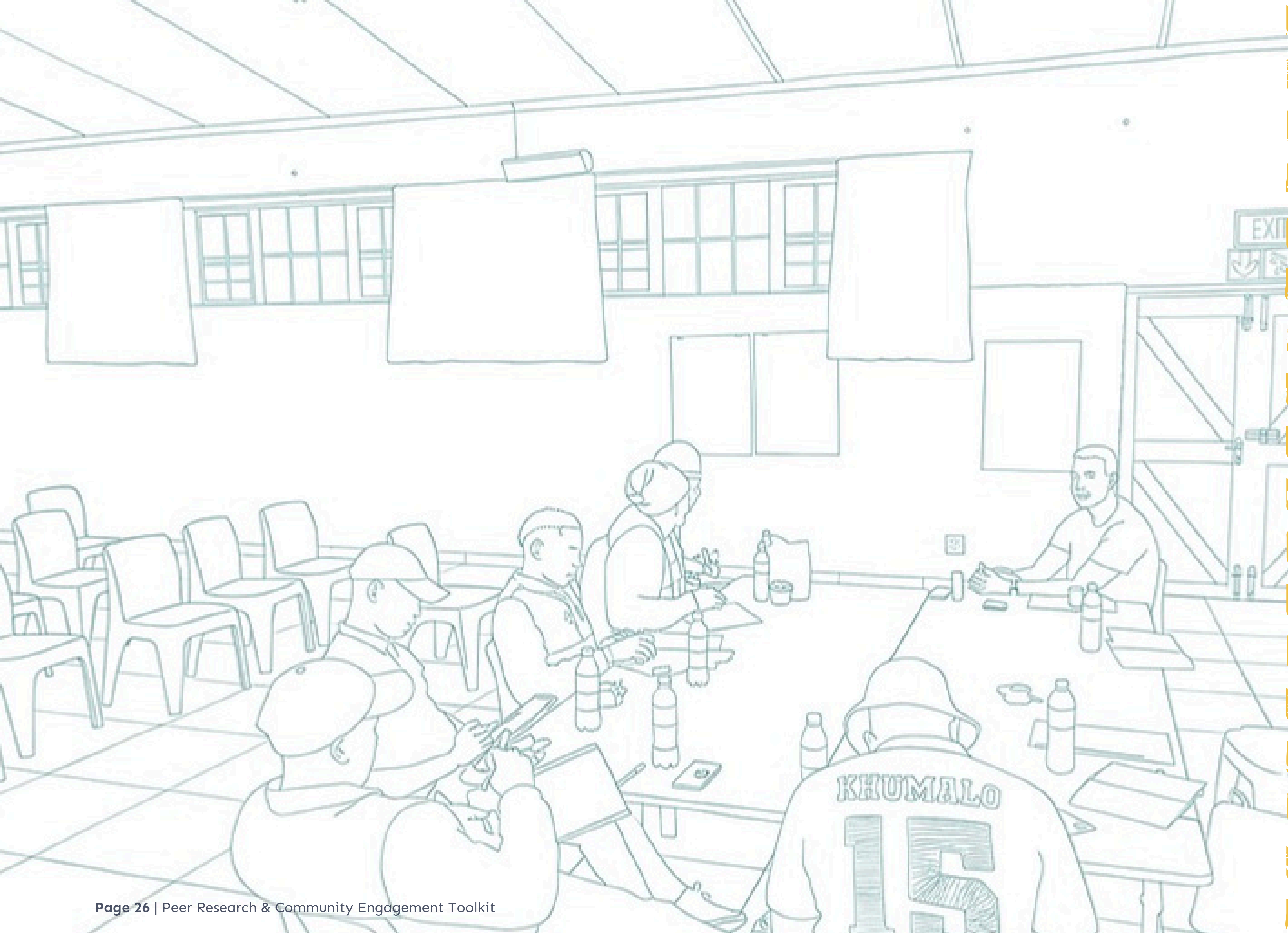
- Whole team meeting with project Consultative Group.

- **PR Life histories -** if insufficient information has emerged during the training week, RAs or collaborating team members may undertake in-depth life history interviews with each PR on day 5 in order to explore in depth how their prior experiences are shaping their perceptions of their community interactions, findings etc. This can be important, for instance, to understand the impact of migration.

Day 5: Afternoon

- Planning for the independent peer research: numbers of days will depend on agreement with PRs, but needs to be a minimum of 10 days [not necessarily consecutive days].

  Key activities to be completed [Two tasks each day]:
  - One interview per day. Ideally a mix of types:
  - Stationary interviews in a safe space [e.g. home] - aim for overall balance between different types of people within your cohort if possible, e.g. unemployed and employed; school-going and out-of-school.
  - Mobile interviews [if safe to do these].
  - Interviews at a transport hub [if safe to do these].
  - One personal ethnographic travel diary per day [to be written up daily - all travel details of the PR's day, including waits at transport hubs – where to and from, why travelled, travel challenges. any job search activity. any use of mobile phones in place of transport. If many journeys undertaken on a particular day just list all, then write up one of these in detail.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Supporting Peer Researchers post-training

It is important to ensure PRs are fully supported once they are researching independently.

Each PR needs to know which RA and/or project collaborator has particular responsibility for supporting them.

Daily check-ins/debriefing by phone or WhatsApp with an RA may be sufficient unless problems arise, in which case the RA concerned will need to meet with the PR in person.

Agreement is necessary as to when and how PR data will be submitted [individual anonymised transcripts or sets of transcripts; typed or hand-written; language of reportage; any concerns regarding veracity etc.].

Consultative Group and any other stakeholder meetings need careful preparation so PRs are well prepared to present and discuss their evidence/analysis without fear of intimidation by people who may be perceived as powerful others. Where child PRs are concerned this tends to require a few preparatory sessions where posters are prepared and presentations rehearsed.

Potential community dissemination activities will need full discussion with and agreement from the PRs but will also benefit from ongoing discussions with community leaders. A preliminary dissemination meeting to which all community members are invited is often the preferred first action.

SECTION 02

Building community engagement

This section examines strategies that can help promote community engagement in a research project from its initial conception through to dissemination of findings and the identification of potential actions/interventions. It draws principally on experiences of two recent projects in which young unemployed young men, trained as community Peer Researchers, investigated travel safety issues in their own township community (one in Mossel Bay, two in Cape Town, South Africa), then worked with the community to disseminate their findings and explore potential solutions. The emphasis is on knowledge for action.

Who do we need to engage?

Stakeholder mapping is a vital component when looking how best to engage the community, bearing in mind that communities are not homogenous.

If a Peer Research methodology has been adopted, stakeholder mapping will commence with PRs through informal conversations during their training week and can be firmed up through a specific mapping exercise on the final training day. The map will need review as firm research findings start to emerge in the project, since additional relevant key community actors may be identified. [In Mossel Bay the original list drawn up by PRs included ward councillors, youth organisations, local government, transport operators such as taxi drivers, and law enforcement. A later review revealed the importance of also encouraging Neighbourhood Watch groups to participate in dissemination meetings]. The stakeholder mapping review will be crucial for the community dissemination phase.

How can we encourage community engagement?

Community engagement will need careful preparation, bearing in mind that the community has probably had prior negative experiences of externally generated actions and may well be highly suspicious of any new initiative.

Lack of public trust in external experts is common in marginalised communities and among particularly vulnerable groups within them. It is essential to build trust across the community to ensure meaningful participation.

Remember that peer research can be a powerful route to community engagement, ensuring that the research focuses on what the community identifies as critical issues.

An initial meeting with community leaders should take place before commencing the research to ensure there is full transparency about the objectives of the project and emphasis on encouraging community ownership.

Use of informed consent forms can help protect community participants who provide research information. These should ensure confidentiality/anonymity of participants, indicate what data protection procedures are in place, and provide contact details of the team leaders. However, community members may be suspicious of requests to sign forms, in which case it may be necessary to request verbal consent (as in recent peer research projects in South African townships).

Community leaders should be full members of any project Consultative Group. The Consultative Group can bring together a wide range of potentially significant actors to aid project progress. It is aimed at garnering advice and support, ensuring wider dissemination of project information and ideally influencing policy. It will have been set up at/prior to project inception and in a multi-year project ideally meets at regular intervals (suggested three times per annum). It will bring together the Peer Researchers, other project team members, community leaders, relevant government staff, NGOs, practitioners, private sector, academics and others relevant to the specific research theme (e.g. transport unions, police).

A meeting with community leaders will be essential when preparations are made for community dissemination of findings.

There may be complex relational dynamics operating within the study community. Avoiding elite capture (e.g. by politicians or other interest groups with a different agenda) is important. Starting a programme with community-based Peer Researchers working actively with the wider community should ensure a focus on the understandings and needs of the community – but it will be particularly important that the community keeps control throughout.

Communication needs to be clear and specific throughout. Dissemination of information needs to be in the appropriate local language(s) and language kept as non-technical as possible.

Encourage PRs to talk about the community dissemination phase whenever they engage with community members during the research phase – what would be the best first dissemination action?

If some key community members seem reluctant to engage, understand why they are reluctant and make any necessary adjustments – e.g. define a role that key stakeholders can play when the community dissemination work takes place.

Review the overall project strategy – are there alternative ways to reach those reluctant to engage without putting undue pressure to bear? It may be necessary to work through specific gatekeepers or community leaders they admire to ensure they feel they can be important contributors.

Consider co-design and strategic distribution of posters across the community that present eye-catching images, text and info-graphics in relevant local languages (following receipt of permissions): they can highlight key findings for varying levels of literacy and language. Also, low-cost innovative gizmos that might generate interest in the project (e.g. branded mini torches for communities where a key finding is the serious security problem at night due to inadequate lighting/load-shedding).

Practical preparations for a first community dissemination meeting

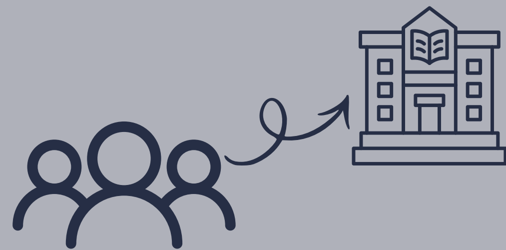
A general dissemination meeting to which all community members are invited is a common first action in community dissemination.

Consider the language in which the dissemination meeting and associated communications will take place.

Use community channels to make sure people are fully informed about the purpose, venue and timing of the dissemination meeting.

Ensure enough small snacks and drinks for the projected number of participants at the meeting [and extra in case more turn up].

Discuss detailed organisation first with community leaders [following up on previous engagements through the Consultative Group meetings], then advertise widely in relevant local languages through public media, social media, local CBO offices, local libraries, schools [re. youth participation] etc.

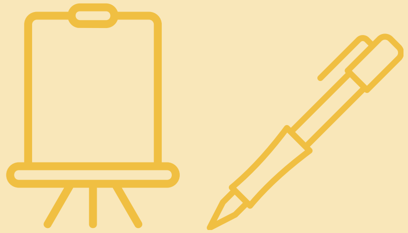


Consider the venues for the dissemination meetings - preferably a safe community-owned space easily accessible on foot and by public transport. Needs to be large enough for likely maximum numbers with enough chairs to seat all.

Distribute invitation letters (e.g. via WhatsApp) and a keep a record of who has been invited and by what means. Community members whom the PRs have interviewed should be included in this invitation list.

Discuss potential roles with the Peer Researchers – and provide the support necessary to ensure they are well prepared in advance for the roles they might take on e.g. presentation of their findings; thinking about facilitation techniques.

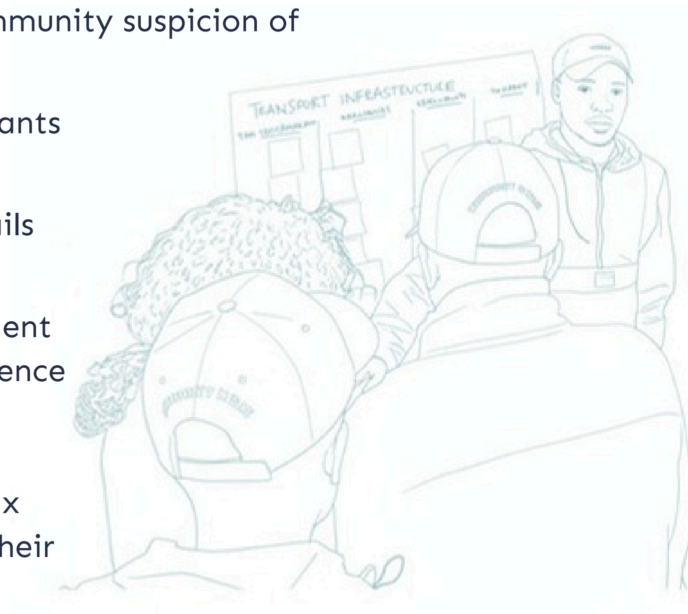
Materials needed: c. 10 large poster-size sheets of white paper, sticky tape/blue-tack, post-it notes, pens, preparation of a register for meeting participants to sign [Name, organisation, contact information.]



Timing of dissemination meetings and workshops needs to be suitable for participants – e.g. for women's participation, avoid times when they are expected to be preparing food at home.

Running the first (post-research) community dissemination meeting

- Once a first community meeting has been planned, encourage PRs to promote this, emphasising community ownership of findings achieved through the PR process. [Collectively they will have engaged with a substantial number of community members during their research].
- Put a strong focus at the initial community dissemination meeting on community ownership of the study and the potential power of the community to initiate change. Emphasise how community engagement with the findings is essential to exploring next steps - potential follow-on interventions and their implementation.
- Keep external staff roles at meetings/workshops to a minimum given potential community suspicion of others' hidden agendas.
- Define a role for key stakeholders to play in the workshop -i.e. Engage the participants in direct discussions and decisions.
- Ensure there is a register of participants and that all sign and provide contact details to enable post-meeting feedback.
- Peer Researchers should ideally lead meeting presentations of findings and subsequent discussions (i.e. not the academic or NGO collaborators). They have the direct evidence from their research with community members but may be initially nervous about making a presentation. [They are likely to need support, including a pre-run of presentations and how they will handle meeting questions/comments]. A team of six PRs could each briefly present their own perspectives on the research process and their findings in the relevant local language.



- After short presentations of findings by the PRs, and community questions, engage all participants directly in subsequent activities:

1. **The full team will have picked out key themes central to the research findings – discussions in the community meeting will help identify c. 4 for follow up now in the break-out groups.**
2. **Prepare large sheets of paper, one per theme, well-spaced round the hall. The headings for each poster might include: The issue/problems. The challenges. Who is responsible [for resolving them]? What time frame [for action]?**
3. **One/two PRs take charge of running each theme discussion group.**
4. **Invite all meeting participants to the break-out session - they can join whichever theme interests/concerns them most, discuss and put key observations on post-it notes under the headings provided. PRs can help prepare these if asked to by participants who have limited literacy skills. All discussion should be in the community's own language preference(s).**
5. **After c. 30-45 minutes, invite all participants to move together round the room and discuss each theme in turn i.e. a world café approach. The initial group for each theme presents their conclusions to the audience [using the post-it notes], then all remaining participants comment/question. Additional notes may be added to the wall chart.**

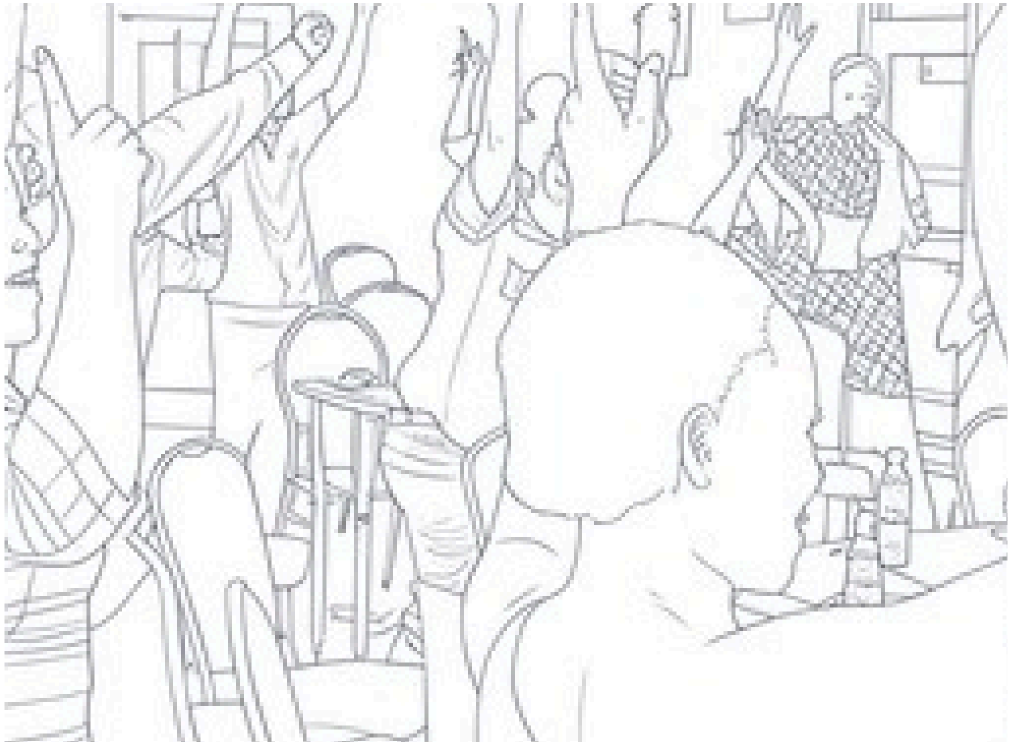
- Meeting roundup of conclusions and agree potential next steps.
- A group photograph of all who wish to be included.
- Meet with the PRs post-meeting for joint reflections on/reactions to the meeting – who participated, who held back, what are the best ways to promote future action.
- Draft a short meeting report for preliminary review by the PRs.
- Ensure the agreed report is circulated to all attendees in relevant local language(s).
- Follow up with media contacts for wider dissemination. Disseminate key meeting conclusions and potential actions in local media, including social media.

How best to engage with the media?

- Choose the most relevant media outlets - radio, TV, newspapers, social media (the right platforms) to reach the target audience.
- Develop a persuasive argument as to why media outlets should support the project dissemination.
- Keep it local and relevant to context.
- Keep trying – the media may be slow to take an interest in the project theme. Can you link your research theme to current media focal interests?
- If feasible, try for a full media day.
- Once an engagement has been secured, ensure the PRs are available to present their findings on that date/time – rehearse a few times in advance, taking on the media presenter and PR roles.

Dissemination for the community beyond the community

The benefits of dissemination through a project Consultative Group: For dissemination/intervention purposes it may well be necessary to engage with a wider array of individuals beyond the immediate community who will be important if the community wishes to undertake some interventions within the community. The Consultative Group could include ministry staff, local government officers, NGOs and CSOs, enforcement agencies [police etc.] and media.



Care will be needed in negotiating dissemination meetings that involve non-community stakeholders such as ministry staff, given that PRs have led the research but professionals may well fear losing status and control. PRs will need support as they prepare for such meetings.

Further reading

Interest in peer research, community engagement and associated participatory methods is growing. Here is a selection of relevant publications (many around transport and mobility and/or African contexts because these are in the field we are most familiar with).

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