Going beyond “empowering” the most disadvantaged by “disempowering” ourselves: a response to global health’s equity issues through alternative research methods and team structure in the context of a project at the
start of the COVID pandemic in Kenya.

Chloé Roubert Tracy Johnson Micki Semler

The Global Health Network

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As applied anthropologists working in the “global south” on public health projects, we are purposeful in developing work practices that attempt to mitigate the power dynamics at play between us and the people whose lived experience we seek to understand. We see our role as social researchers akin to translators who are responsible for surfacing the experiences, emotions and belief systems of our participants, and passing this knowledge along to our clients with whom we will then identify priorities, develop strategies and design programming in response to it. Yet, and perhaps because of the very nature of the field we work in, it is impossible to overlook the fact that our work often perpetuates the unequal systems that we aim to dismantle. Our proposed paper will outline our experience of developing new research methods, team dynamics and analysis processes while engaged in a project aimed at identifying the social and environmental factors that amplify dimensions of maternal and infant vulnerability among highly marginalised families across low-resource settings in Kenya. For this project we used in-person ethnographic work, where we physically relocated to do research for the duration of the project timeline. Mobility limits created by COVID-19, however, pressured us to reconfigure our work process and explore new ways of facilitating qualitative ethnographic work. This prompted us to go beyond embedding ourselves in the particular research contexts to gather data, conduct analysis and generate outputs, and to value the fieldwork process itself as an opportunity to redistribute ownership and project accountability. Ultimately, our new way of working became a means of striving towards more equity, not only through research outputs, but through the research process itself. This paper will present these work methods and offer reflections on how, in the context of low-resource settings, the applied ethnographic work process can itself be a tool for direct impact.