Co-participation of Community Advisory Group to develop, execute and disseminate a Covid-19 qualitative research study in India

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Introduction: WHO has defined community engagement as “a process of developing relationships that enable stakeholders to work together to address health-related issues and promote well-being to achieve positive health impact and outcomes”. Community engagement is therefore both a process and an outcome. This abstract describes the impact of engaging a community in a qualitative research on Covid-19 in India. This qualitative study aimed to understand the experiences of health-care providers in giving; and Covid-19 patients on receiving health-care in tertiary-care hospitals of India. Purpose of community engagement was to improve the design and methodology of the study and to build trust and transparency among the stakeholders.

Methodology: The study team implemented a community engagement technique in the form of a community advisory group (CAG). The group comprised of relevant stakeholders (n=16) including physicians, nurses, policy makers/state health-representatives, Covid-19 patients and their caregivers. Throughout the research duration, CAG met thrice (i) study initiation (ii) progress and (iii) dissemination. The first CAG meeting was to engage members on research question, design and methodology. CAG met again after the data collection to provide different perspectives into the data interpretation. The last CAG meeting was to explore `non-traditional` dissemination techniques to expand reach of research findings and policymaking.

Results: We used CAG to engage the community on the following levels of participation: informing community about research; consulting with them on methodology; involving them at every stage of research and collaborating with them to co-design and co-conduct research. Key CAG contributions included: refining the data collection guide to make it culturally-sensitive, helping co-design and refine data collection methodology and recruitment procedure, co-observing project progress and giving recommendations for dissemination. CAG was an essential tool in our research, through which the stakeholders shared lived experience and ensured the work was guided by a robust understanding of the stakeholders involved.

Conclusion: CAG can be used as a catalyst for community engagement. It can facilitate the trust-building process and ensure that local priorities/concerns are reflected and prioritized in research goals and processes.