

## LIVE Q & A | Doing Research Assessment in Bolivia

*These are live questions and answers, from the webinar, 'Doing Research in Bolivia: bridging the research gap and improving development policies' held on 1 December 2020, based on the results of the Doing Research assessment in Bolivia. The answers have been edited for clarity, and to maintain anonymity. The answers are provided by the team that worked on the DRA report in Bolivia.*

**Q. How to convince a society (including its political and economic leadership) that local researchers able to carry out useful quality research can feed into public debate and policy discourse? What would be the most effective ways of achieving good results?**

A. Supporting investigative quality and strengthening capacity building at the local level with updates on public policy and adding to their knowledge to effectively contribute to public debate and political discourse in Bolivia.

**Q. Why social science research is so undervalued in contexts in which prevail persistent social problems such as extreme poverty, there is an impossibility of achieving national coverage in basic services like drinking water, education and health or in which there are deficient conditions of food provision for large numbers of the population?**

A. Because key aspects of social science research are not prioritized and it is left to the central government and ministries to design strategies that do not respond to reality. Therefore, the actions are not effective when facing extreme poverty in the country and designing concrete actions for food security that would benefit the most vulnerable groups.

**Q. Is there anything that the social sciences did wrong to explain the systematic disconnect between those produce research and those who need to use it? Where does the responsibility lie?**

A. Yes, the studies that were carried out in Bolivia were excellent contributions to the social sciences at the time, but ended up being very elitist with excessively abstract analyses that responded more to international research criteria than to reality itself, which made us lose sight of the connection between theory and practice.

**Q. What can be done to improve standards of social research in Bolivia? The Report mentions peer-reviewing. How would this tool operate in the Bolivian case? Who would be the peer reviewers? Is there not need also of non-peer reviewers who can assess research from their points of views?**

A. Creating a national research system that favors competition and access to information generated in the country would contribute to an improvement of current research practices in Bolivia.

The peer review process must necessarily be a part of the creation of a national research system, thus improving its quality by undergoing all necessary steps and fulfilling all evaluation

requirements (quality of research and writing). However, in our case, the role of peer reviewers such as scholars, professors and researchers would not only remain in measuring production under international standards, but also focus on favoring the progress of the research local and its contributions to the design of public policies in Bolivia. In this sense, the perspective of experts and highly experienced stakeholders, who are not necessarily “peers” could be useful when considering different sources of validation.

**Q. A big challenge ahead seems to be to articulate common interests and common goals in the large society. What steps to give in that direction zas the social sciences are concerned?**

A. The social criteria to articulate common interests and objectives should take into account the following steps: recognize the contributions of local researchers who are linked to social studies, enable spaces for debate for the researchers within the framework of the national social science research system, to effectively bring policymakers closer to researchers in the field of social sciences.

**Q. REGIONAL DISPARITIES. Is there any possibility to develop information on regional educational and scientific disparities among the different states and departments in Bolivia? Taking into consideration, institutions, research inputs and outputs, human resources, financing, etc. This data could help to promote policies or research assessment evaluations that include regional/areas/institutions with less well-stablished research capacities within the country.**

A. Yes, since this aspect is key in terms of breaking the existing isolation between the different local and regional research centers. Joint initiatives activities could be financed and monitored from a pilot center that articulates the three main regions in the country, which in turn are connected with the smaller local areas and where investigations are being carried out. If this works properly, it could help to promote policy or research evaluations.

**Q. GENDER. Is there any possibility to consider gender distribution of production? This data could facilitate designing and applying "fairness" principles and/or equity strategies for the participation of traditionally excluded groups from research systems (women in a minimum of parity, early career researchers, etc).**

A. Yes, the study showed a broad participation of men and women in different research centers and this is considered very positive for further developing inclusive research.

**Q. INDICATORS. Possible use of a diversity of databases that reflect both the production disseminated in international repositories as well as in regional database.**

A. The study evidences that the applied methodology has contributed to develop a significant database at the local and regional level that can be disseminated internationally.

**Q. How do you prioritize and promote research-based policies in a populist regime, where policies are implemented by the whim of public officials?**

A. It is a complicated task, since this would require to work at different levels of public administration to internalize that the design of public policies must go through an academic review and empirical evidence giving it a scientific character.

Creating a national, participatory and democratic research system, recognizing the political and all diversities in Bolivia could be a starting point to help in this endeavor.

**Q. Have you identified a trend favoring pluridisciplinary approaches in social sciences in Bolivia?**

A. Yes. However, it is noted that there is a lot of weakness on this approach given the fact that there are stagnations between disciplines since each of them preserve their own research methods and models without generating an effective knowledge flow.

**Q. What about connections existing between researchers, and academic institutions in general, and the rest of society?**

A. According to the study, there is very little connection between researchers and academic institutions with the rest of society. There is no discourse that allows civil society to connect with the production generated by researchers and academic institutions.

**Q. How severe is the "brain drain" of scientists in Bolivia? Are there any incentives for highly skilled scientists to stay in the country?**

A. Bolivia is currently among the countries with the largest percentage of migrating professionals (all categories) in the region along with Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Chile, and Paraguay. Factors such as the lack of professional recognition, unemployment or a lack of research support are major 'push factors' and need to be worked on when considering potential incentives

**Q. What are the next steps for Doing Research program?**

A. We are working hard to include new countries in the program, and possibly cover one or two entire regions. We are interested in learning about trends at the regional and global level.

**Q. How do you think the Environmental, political and Legal dimensions will affect the researches in Bolivia in the future after COVID-19**

A. Very positively, because a lot of awareness has been generated among civil society and academic institutions.

**Q. How can think tanks, NGOs and Civil Society Organizations deal with the persecution and harassment from the government?**

A. Rigorous institutional and policy frameworks that clearly establish the rules of the game are essential to support the operationalization of an effective research system and ensure accountability/transparency in research activities at a country level.

**Q. It seems that the issues that go to research are defined by the political environment, and yet, policies seem to ignore research. Is that something that GDN found in other countries as well?**

A. It's a very common conundrum, and Bolivia is not the exception. As we know, even in countries that have a very sophisticated research system, politics does not necessarily follow evidence, let alone celebrate it. Even in the hardest environments, however, there are people within the government machinery that work to change that. These reports want to open up a national conversation about this topic, based on systematic evidence on the status quo.

**Q. Are there any renowned or high-quality Bolivian journals?**

A. Yes, there are and there were... but usually they depend on personal efforts and dedication. Even when an institution hosts a journal, its continuity depends on personal commitments. A journal called Kollasuyo marked a lot in Bolivian thought, more recently, Tinkazos (PIEB) was a very interesting journal. And recently IISEC of the Catholic University is publishing interesting papers. But most of research is published in papers or books.

**Q. Have you noticed important differences in the conditions of doing research between La Paz area and Santa Cruz?**

A. Yes, the conditions differ, starting from the fact of La Paz's proximity to government entities and closer access to data and the number of private entities that carry out research activity under a different focus. According to the study, it was observed that the information generated in the country has low diffusion at the national level, which forced Santa Cruz to develop its own databases under private initiatives to analyze the problematic of the country.

**Q. Why a national coordinating body would be necessary? Would not be a risk for freedom of research when the government is so interventionist as the current populists?**

A. We agree that it is too risky to trust research on a central State controlled body. Nonetheless, we need to expand the research network and work on a system to connect all institutions and people... that connection will strengthen our research practices.

The interviewees in the study agree that a "body" should be created at the national level despite the risks that may be generated by the excessive centralization of the design of public policies. Despite this, as mentioned before, a greater contribution is expected without jeopardizing the freedom of investigation.

**Q. Most of research on social sciences is made by institutions with clear ideological framework or even biases (independent of which ideology they stand). So policy advices are**

**related to their focus and approaches rather than to be applicable to Bolivian needs and reality. What do you think on this regard?**

A. Yes, this reality exists in the perspective that in the last 3 years there has not been a serious debate on social science research in Bolivia where studies are compared from the perspective of the public and private sectors.

**Q. The 3 pillars for sustainability are Social Economy and Environment, what do you think about adding this third pillar to your assessment?**

A. We consider it a priority. The environmental issue responds to the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals 20-30 (SDG) in the perspective of eradicating poverty and promoting social and environmental well-being for all.

**Q. To what extent international funding, including from US, interfere in research agenda in Bolivia?**

A. International financing is conditional on world agendas, which in many cases are not suited to the immediate priorities of a given country. Therefore, the proposals must arise from the research agenda of a country, where local issues and needs are considered. The role of funding agencies must be collaborative and support local researchers to go beyond funding stage (development, innovation, exchange). As per the study, the interaction with international funding agencies considers multiple tailored funding opportunities for your local projects through mostly a strong and reliable global network.