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Navigating an interdisciplinary, multilingual project during the pandemic: teamwork is key



**Project Team members (Source: author)**

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Whilst working as a research assistant for Dr Briony Jones in November 2019, I joined a [project team exploring the search for victims of enforced disappearance in Colombia and El Salvador](#), specifically the legal frameworks and search mechanisms available for families and friends as they search for their disappeared loved ones. The team consisted of researchers from search organisations in Colombia and El Salvador, namely [Dejustica](#) and [Pro Búsqueda](#), the practice-oriented research institute [swisspeace](#) and the universities of Lausanne and Warwick. The project was funded by the [Swiss Network for International Studies \(SNIS\)](#). Considering the global scope of the project, it was managed by a remarkably small team of ten members. Five of them were working in [Dejustica](#) and [Pro Búsqueda](#) and played a vital part in the project by conducting the interviews of eleven different relatives and civil society actors in Colombia and El Salvador. Assessing these interviews alongside the legal frameworks and the actors involved in the search formed the basis of the project's analysis. Although the project team managed to meet a few times in person, it relied to a great degree on online collaboration from the start due to its international scope. As such, not much seemed to change when the world first plunged into lockdown back in March 2020. Whilst technology would always be necessary for a global project, the pandemic made online video calls even more essential. However, the ease with which the team worked together makes it easy to overlook the challenge of pulling-off an interdisciplinary, multilingual project, spanning organisations, time zones and languages, not forgetting the small issue of a global pandemic. So, what exactly made the project tick?

Throughout my time working with the team, I have noticed that the willingness of team members to learn from one another is crucial to the project's success. Being part of an interdisciplinary project requires that you step out of your comfort zone, that being the discipline in which you are trained, and learn about a topic from a new and different angle. The range of disciplines within the project was diverse, spanning from practitioners and academics who were psychologists to traditionally trained lawyers and to political scientists. This allowed the team to analyse the experiences of the families and friends of the disappeared through three main paradigms: the legal, the

psychosocial and the political. Regular communication, as a whole and in break-out groups, was not just a requirement but a necessity. It enabled the team to draw out how exactly these paradigms overlapped and combined to produce a lived experience for the victims of enforced disappearance. This was coupled with an open approach, which provided each team member the space and guidance they needed to understand such a complex topic. Personally, coming from a political science background, I found the team's constant willingness to explain the legal frameworks at play really encouraged me to cultivate my own ideas, and feel at ease in communicating them.

When lockdown hit, we were lucky to have already been working together for a year, so the online environment did not faze us. In fact, not only did the team seamlessly continue in its work, but the regular meetings became a much-needed point of familiarity during the uncertainty of those first lockdown days. This enabled meetings to feel fluid and allowed for spontaneity within meetings as we brainstormed ideas. This is crucial when analysing a difficult and emotional topic through not just one, but three distinctly different disciplines.

The importance of cultivating this interdisciplinarity has become increasingly apparent to me as I have been helping to write the last of the three resulting papers. The paper explores the intersection between the legal and social definitions of what it means to be a 'victim' of enforced disappearance. Six members of the team have helped to write the paper, which is based on the methodological guidance of Mina, a Swiss-based academic specialising in psychology, and Lisa, a Swiss-based lawyer, who coordinates the whole project. I wrote the introduction, delving into the sociological definitions of the victim's identity: Alejandro, a Colombian lawyer, and Ana, a Swiss-based lawyer, complemented this with outlines of the legal developments in both countries. Pamela, a Salvadorian psychologist, and Mina then analysed the interviews of the victims. Following this, Mina and Lisa edited the paper as a whole. All of our work on the paper took place through online conversations to explore the legal concepts and perceptions that victims had referred to across the disciplines, languages, and local contexts. Co-drafting a document on Google Drive meant that each of us could edit and see the edits of others in real-time, allowing us to work simultaneously on the paper and streamline our arguments. This short description provides a snapshot of the workings of an interdisciplinary project in reality.

Finally, what stood out most for me was the team's warm and welcoming attitude. This attitude lies at the heart of the project's success as a multi- and interdisciplinary project. Each team member not only brought something uniquely valuable to the table but was encouraged to actively develop their ideas across the disciplines; it is precisely this collage of different disciplines that has led to such rich analyses and conclusions.

**Author's Bio:**

[Bronwen Webster](#) completed her Masters in International Development at the University of Warwick in September 2020, during which time she became involved in the SNIS project whilst working as a research assistant for Dr Briony Jones. She also holds a Bachelors from the University of Warwick in German and English.