# Dealing with field work withdrawal: Community-based documentation of Kam

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ELDP project: Documenting Kam

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Hello everyone and welcome. Today, I will discuss remote field work and how I adjusted my documentation project of Kam to the pandemic situation.

# Kam, a Niger-Congo language of Nigeria

- No published analysis before 2018

- Finished grammar and lexicon in 2020
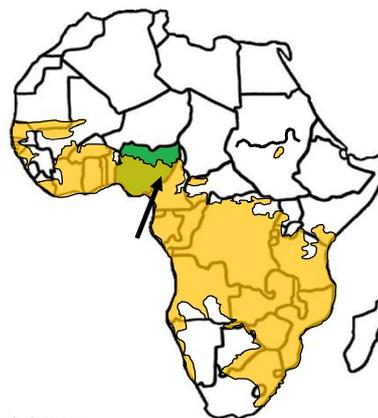
Kam in Niger-Congo

Kam is a Niger-Congo language spoken in central-east Nigeria, in Taraba State.

Before 2018, there was no published analysis. A few years ago, I started a PhD project on Kam with the support of LLACAN and the AdaGram project in Paris. In 2020 I finished its first grammar and lexicon. *

ELDP proposal: Kam documentation

After I finished my PhD, I submitted a 2-year ELDP proposal to further document the language. I wanted to collect a corpus of natural interaction, a representative record of traditional culture, and I wanted to produce an expanded dictionary and grammar.

ELDP was happy with my proposal and wanted to fund it, starting in June 2020.

But then, of course, in early 2020, the pandemic shook the world and forced everyone to rethink their plans for the next few years.

ELDP invited their grantees to adapt their project to the new situation and to consider travel restrictions and community health concerns.

# A **revised proposal**

**Community-based documentation**
- Sending equipment to the community
- Training community members
- Build on earlier experience with annotation tools

Many **logistic, administrative and interpersonal challenges**

I was curious about these challenges, and I wrote a proposal where data collection and analysis would be based more in the community. I would send equipment to the community, I would train my collaborators to use the equipment, and we would build on the earlier experience they had during my PhD project working with tools like ELAN and SayMore.

It was obvious from the start that this plan would have to overcome a lot of challenges. Some were clear: we would somehow have to get the equipment to the community without travelling, we would have to find a way to set up a payment system and we'd have to find ways to transfer data over an unstable internet connection.

Other challenges were more difficult to anticipate. I did not anticipate that sending money online is a very different thing from giving people money in person, at least socially speaking. And I did not anticipate all the institutional administration that I would have to communicate to my collaborators in Nigeria.

# Remote field work elsewhere



Of course, I'm not the only person who's in this situation, and a lot of thought has gone into remote field work over the past year and a half.

I did a literature search and most of the resources I could find are blog posts, podcasts, panel discussions and conference presentations streamed on YouTube.

There's not much peer-reviewed research on the topic yet. But there are a lot of valuable perspectives and experiences. And more publications are on the way.

## Structure

1. **Why** do remote field work?

2. **Considerations** of remote field work

3. **Kam documentation** project

In this talk, I will give an overview of some issues that come up in remote field work projects and I summarize my own work plan for the Kam documentation project.

First I will discuss why and in which circumstances we should consider remote field work. Next, I will present the main considerations people face when they start a remote field work project. And finally, I will outline the Kam documentation work plan and workflow, showing how I try to address these considerations.

Why do remote field work?

So, why should we do remote field work?

e.g. Bowern 2020; Singer 2020; Gutova 2021
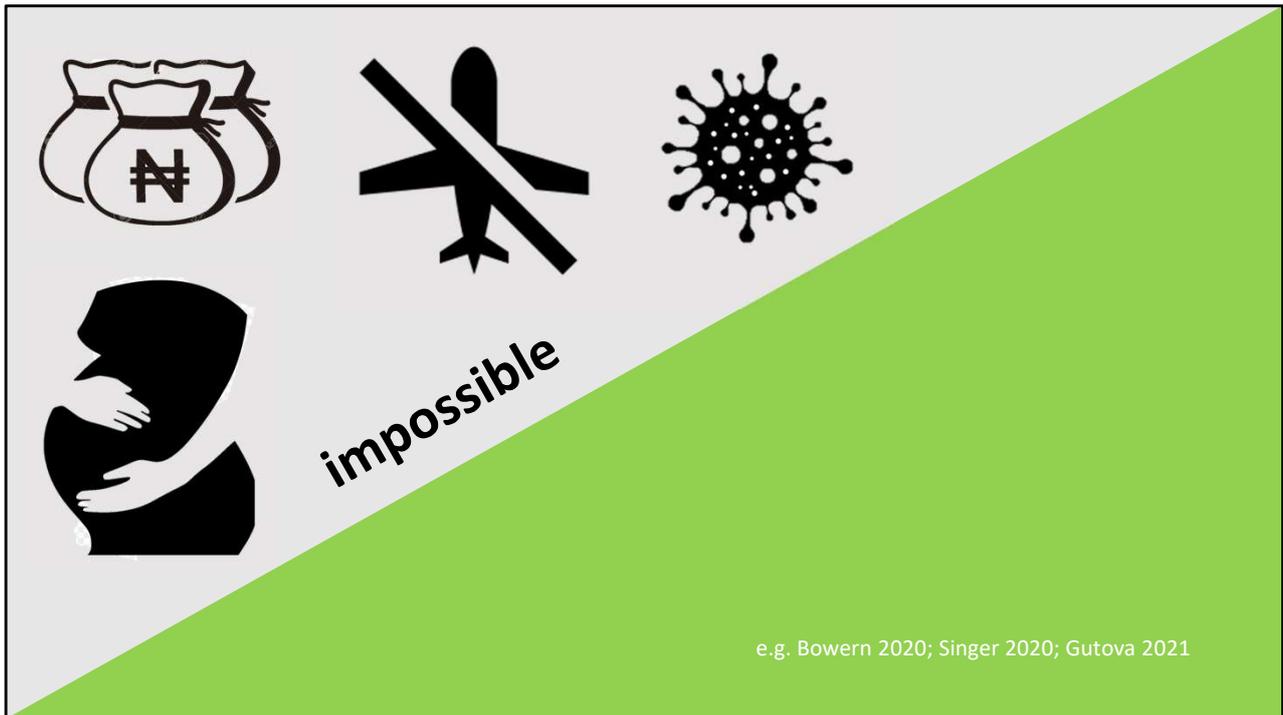
I had to consider remote field work because it would have been irresponsible and impossible to travel because of COVID-19 * restrictions.

But remote field work projects have been going on for longer than the pandemic and there are plenty of other reasons why travel could be impossible. A place may be inaccessible because it's physically difficult to reach. Or there may be safety concerns such as crime, war or disease. And there are other reasons why travel could be risky or prohibited.

We may not have funding for enough field trips.

Or we may not be able to travel because of personal life changes. This is something that has come up in the literature more than once,  with some people finding creative and successful ways around these restrictions.

e.g. Grzech 2020; Tsutsui Billins & Gibson 2020; Scerri et al. 2020; Mettouchi 2021

impossible

desirable?

Griscom & Harvey 2021
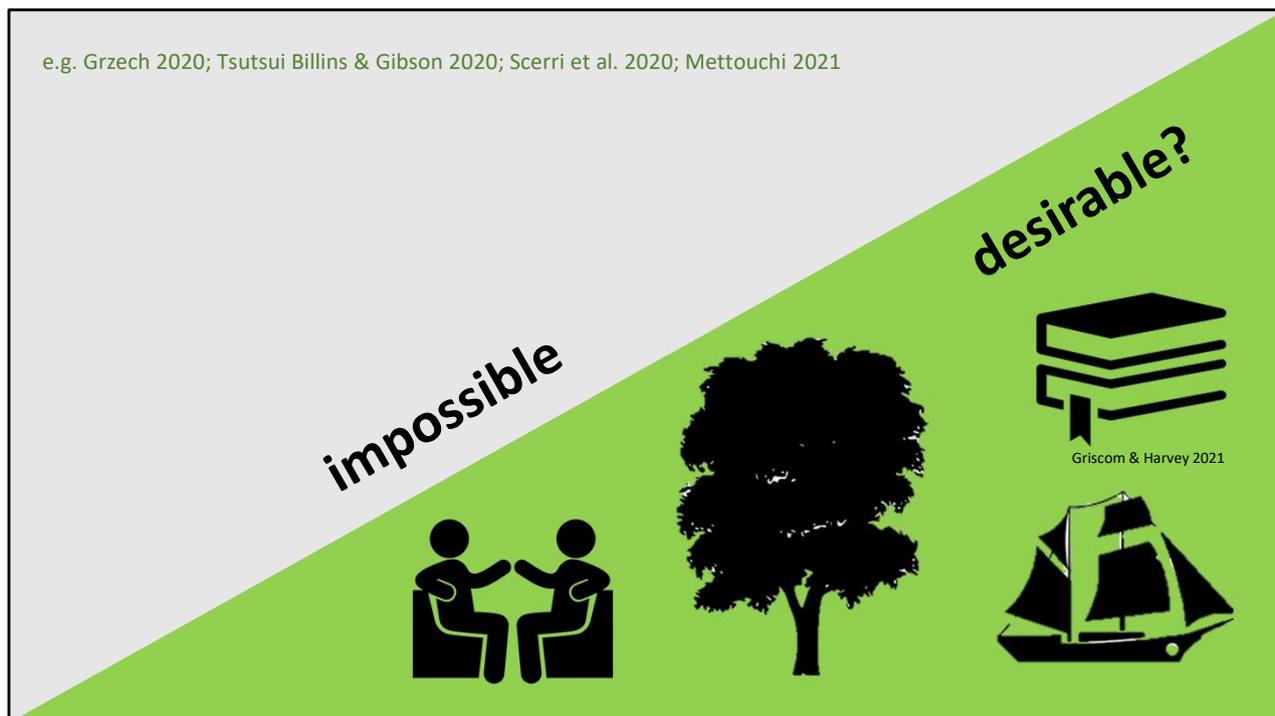
But even when travel is possible, it's not always desirable to travel.

We want to find ways to put the community central in a documentation project, and not the researcher. Ideally, we don't want a project to be dependent on field trips by an outsider and we want the speakers of the language to have more agency, more control over how their language is documented.

Recording by local collaborators also has advantages for the data quality: speakers make a more comprehensive record, they have access to more knowledge – sometimes unexpected knowledge that we can't just elicit during a field trip. Speakers also spark more interaction in recordings.

Not unimportantly, airplane travel damages the environment and if there are ways to limit this, we should seriously consider them.

Finally, in many cases, traditional field work carries echoes of colonialism or at least white-saviourism that we do not want to sustain. We sometimes think that we're empowering communities by documenting their languages, but this empowerment really depends on how we do our work. In some cases, documentation with limited

agency by the community could actually contribute to an inferiority complex that some minority communities already experience.

# Remote field work considerations

Collaborating remotely comes with its own set of challenges.

**Technical**　　　　**Social**
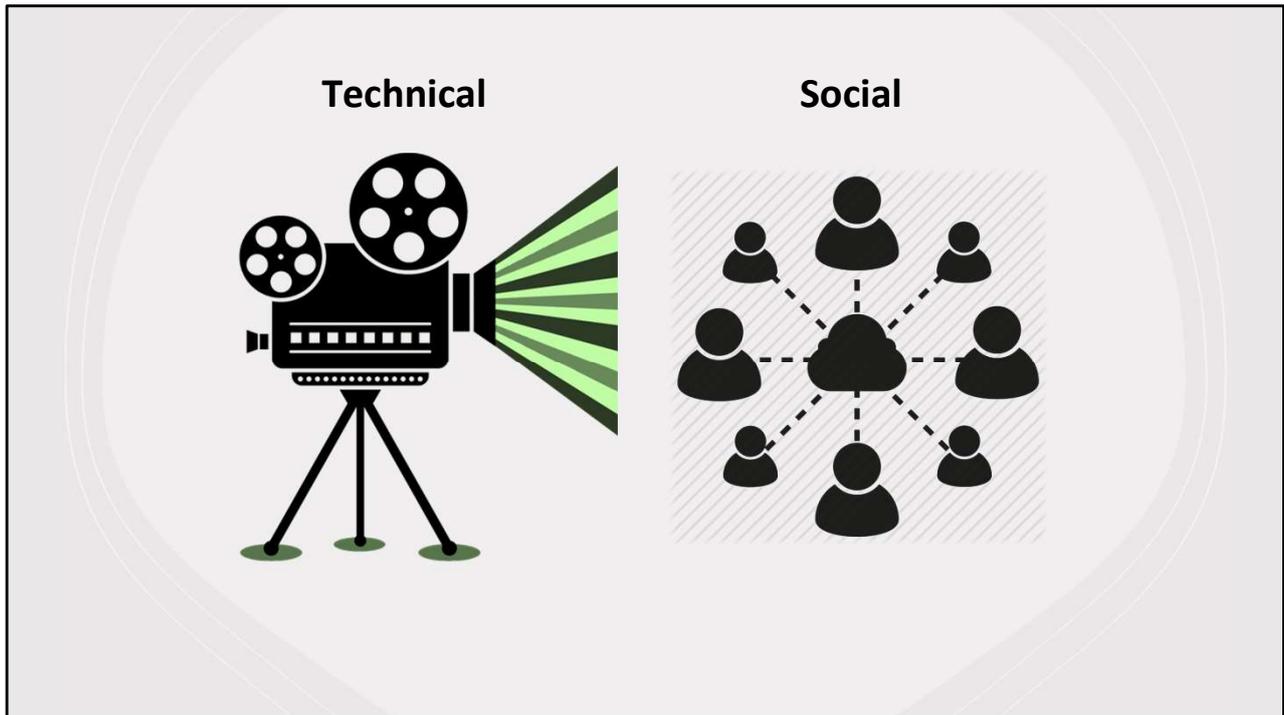
There are two sets of considerations.

The first set are technical considerations. How will we set up the project so that we can work together over a distance? How do we facilitate recording in the community? How can we transfer data? How can we keep communicating?

The second set are social considerations, relating to the human aspects of the project. How do we keep a healthy dynamic between the project leader and the collaborators? How do we create a strong local support network for the project? Which social and cultural factors do we need to keep in mind in a remote documentation project?

Equipment

Training
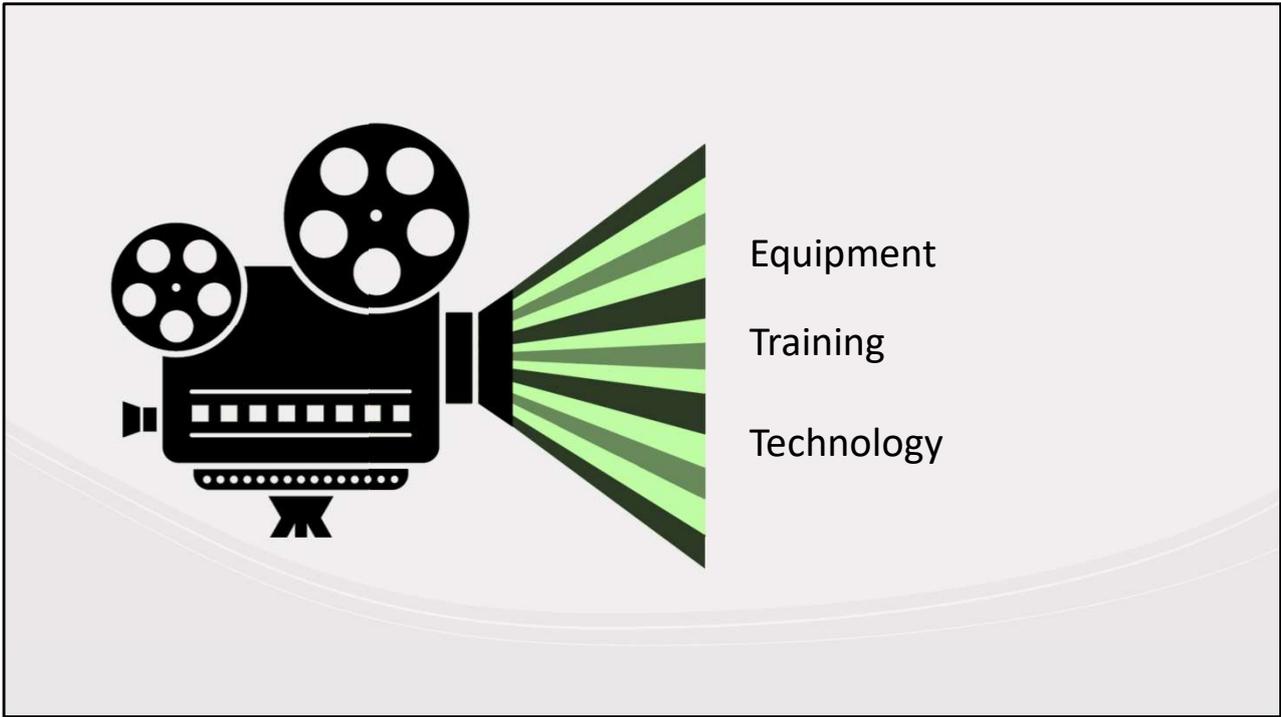
Technology

There are three technical considerations: equipment, training and technology.
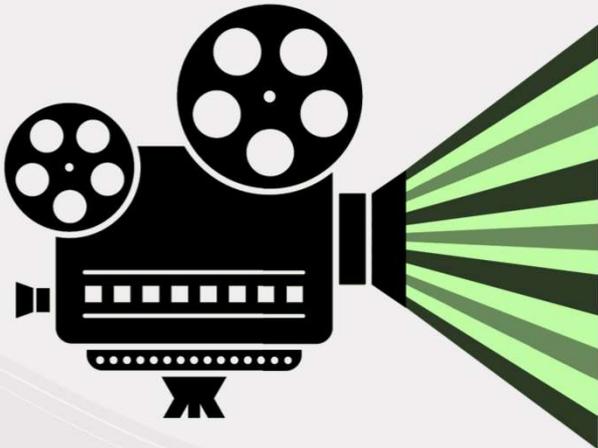
**Equipment**

- Accessible
- Supported (power & data)
- Locally valuable (laptop, phone)

Cf. Tsutsui Billins & Griscom (2020)

The equipment should be accessible, supported and valuable in the community context.

Equipment is accessible if it is easy to use. A camera and microphone with a simple 'record' button is often better than recording devices with many different functions that need to be set up.

Equipment should be supported. It should be possible to charge the equipment locally. And it should be possible to transfer data between the host institution and the community. Where this is tricky, there may be solutions such as solar power and frequent travel to a nearby place with better internet.

Equipment should be maximally useful in a local context. Laptops and phones are valuable in many communities. They can create access to knowledge and jobs. This motivates people to use them and to gain more experience. And it also adds to the mutually beneficial character of a remote field work project.

Equipment

**Training**

- Equipment
- Computer
- Transcription

- Documentation & linguistics
- Ethics
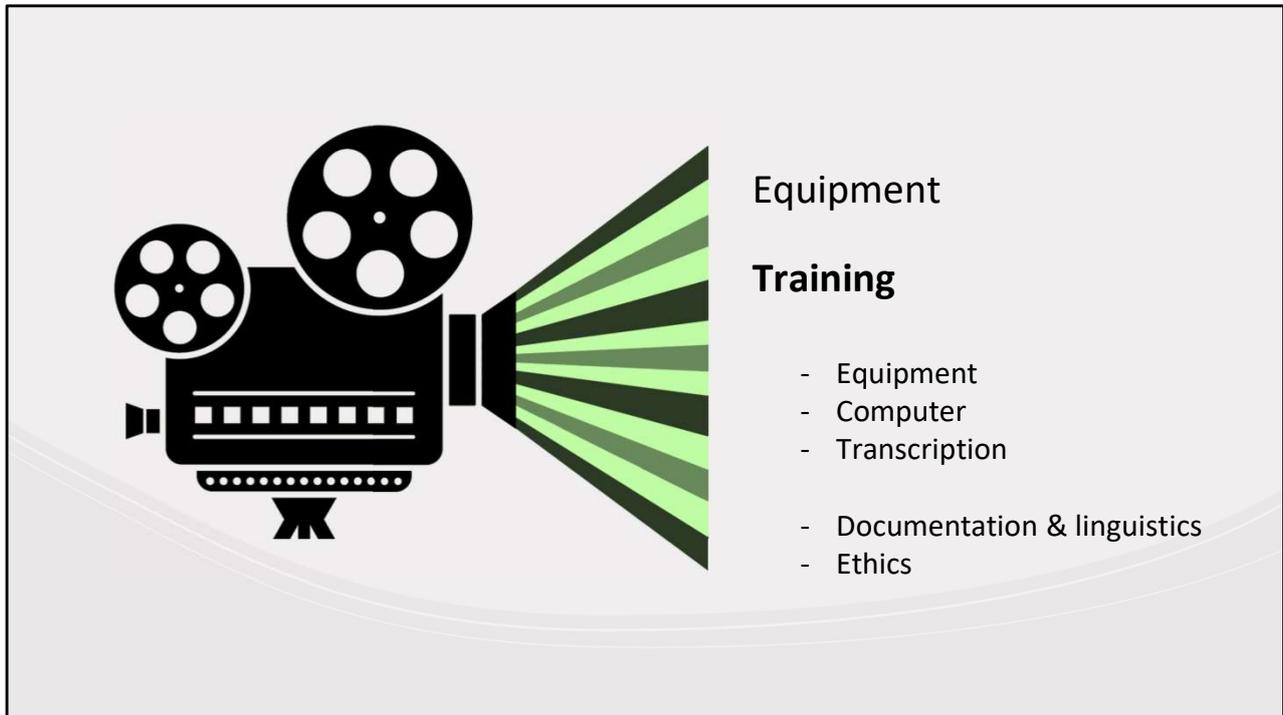
Local collaborators will almost always require training. Training to use the equipment, to use a computer, to transcribe recordings or to orally annotate recordings.

We also need to be clear about the goals of documentation, linguistic research and the goals of the project. This usually stimulates discussions and motivates people to work effectively, keeping clear goals in mind and separating important from less important decisions. And it helps everyone in the project to come up with new ideas.

Finally, we need to communicate about the ethical and legal aspects of data collection and transfer. We have to discuss informed consent, intellectual property rights and what it means that the recordings will be kept in a repository that is accessible beyond the community.

Training is an important challenge and can be done partially virtually, partly through self-teaching if we provide the right support, and partly by local teachers.

Equipment

Training

**Technology**

- Digital (money and data transfer)
- Accessible (BOLD, social media)
- Adapted to local infrastructure (solar energy, internet cafes, intermittent network)

e.g. Boerger (2011); Rice & Dagua (2021)
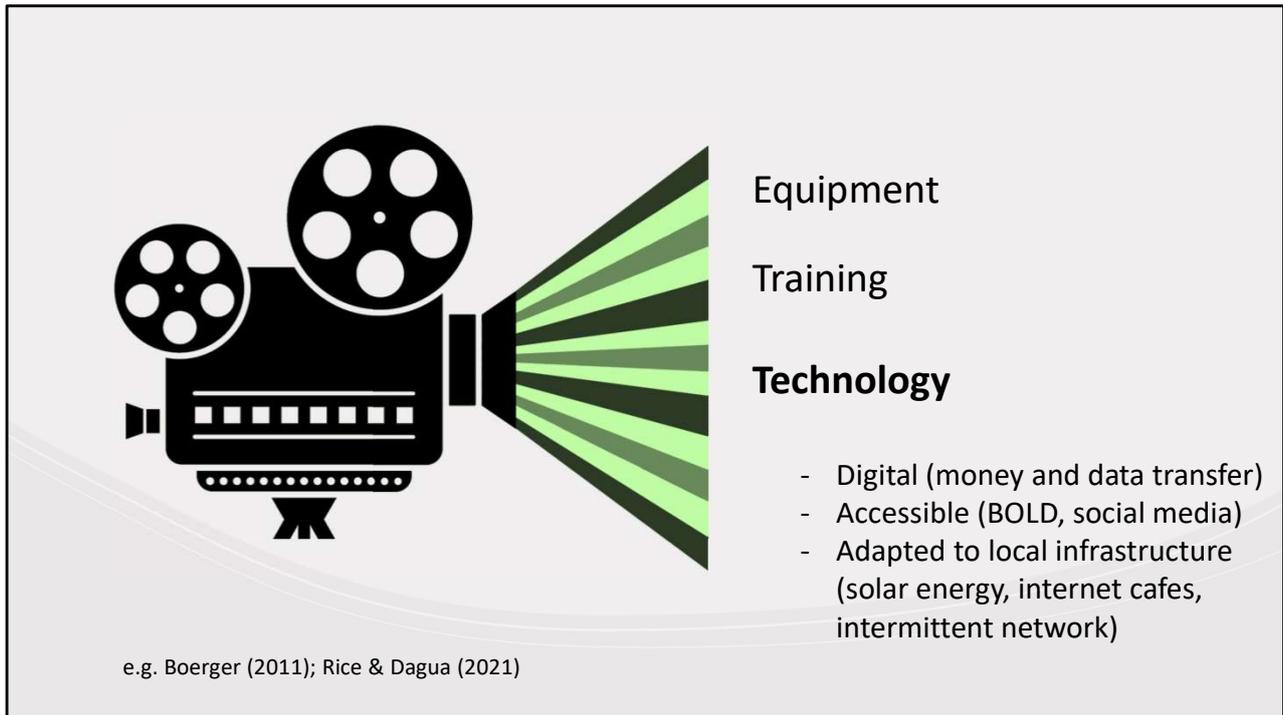
Remote field work is most effective if we embrace new technology beyond that which we're traditionally concerned with in linguistics.

Digital ways to transfer money are essential to remote collaboration. Often, services like Moneygram and Western Union work, but in some cases, we need to get creative and try to understand how currency trading works.

There are many free and paid cloud services that can facilitate digital data transfer between the host institution and the community, including Google Drive and Dropbox.

Again, accessibility is an important consideration. In some communities, it will be difficult to collect written transcription of the target language by consultants, and it may be more interesting to do oral documentation, where people carefully respeak texts and record spoken translations in another language, like the Basic Oral Language Documentation approach that was pioneered a little over ten years ago.

If people are already using social media, this can make communication very efficient, and social media can help add a sense of digital presence with the community to the

researcher and a sense of engagement to community members.

The technology we use should be adapted to the local infrastructure.

* Solar energy may be the most appropriate and affordable power source. Or there may be internet cafes where people can do transcription.

* Alexander Rice has set up a transcription workflow that uses YouTube's subtitle system as a transcription and translation tool, which people can work with from internet cafes.

* Intermittent network may be a problem; in which case we could consider frequent travel to a place with a better internet connection. Or hiring local couriers to carry hard drives back and forth to a place where the files can be uploaded.

Whenever we see unexpected challenges, there is usually some local solution to this problem that we have not thought about. Electricity, internet and long-distance communication have reached almost every corner of the world now and in most communities, there are people who know how to work with them.

Agency

Relationships

Support network

Holton et al. (2021)
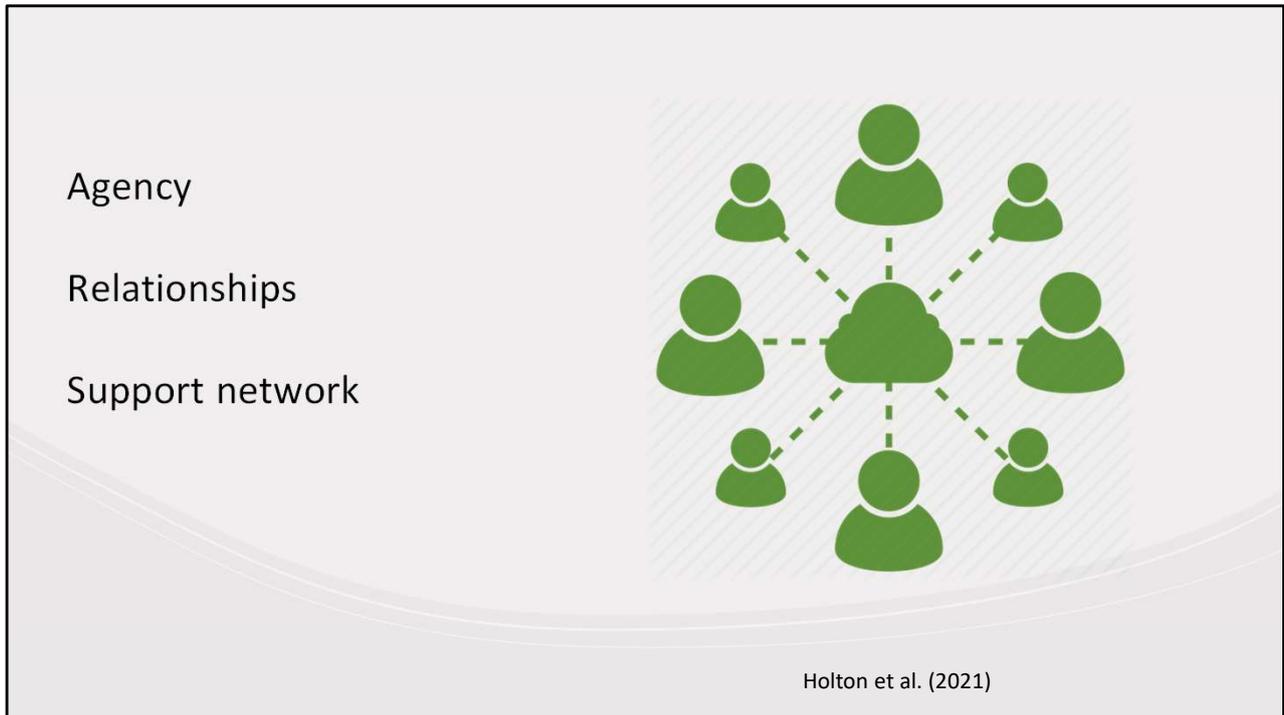
I gave an overview of the three technical considerations: equipment, training and technology.

There are also three social considerations: the agency of the community in the project, maintaining good relationships among the different parties involved, and maintaining a local support network around the project.

**Agency**

- More control for the community
- Avoid perceived hierarchies
- Communicate as friends
- Be digitally present
- Share and make accessible

Holton et al. (2021)

Remote documentation projects present an opportunity for more control over the project by the community.

There are also some possible pitfalls with a remote documentation project, however. The outside researcher could be seen as an outside 'boss' who hires people to collect data in the community to whom the collaborators simply report. Or the local collaborators may develop an internal hierarchy which limits free interaction between the project and the wider community.

To avoid these kinds of perceived hierarchies, it's important to communicate as friends, and not only talk about the project when making phone calls. It can also help to be digitally present on social media, and to share and make data very accessible to as many community members as possible, for instance by posting content on YouTube.

Agency

**Relationships**

- Often pre-established
- There is no 'boundary' between 'in the field' and 'at home'

e.g. Gutova 2021; Holton et al. (2021)

In many remote field work projects, relationships between collaborators and the outside researcher are pre-established and maintained over a few years or months. But there are also examples of projects that started almost completely digitally, and where it was possible to set up a description project with very minimal travel and face-to-face interaction.

In any case, it's important to maintain these relationships because they take a very central place in remote field work, even more so than in traditional field work.

In traditional fieldwork, it sometimes happens that a fieldworker doesn't communicate often with their collaborators when they're 'back at home'. There's a clear distinction between the researcher's 'life in the field' and 'life at home'. With remote field work, this kind of distinction fades and the researcher has to put care into clear and frequent communication with the community.

Agency

Relationships

**Support network**

- Direct collaborators
- Speaker community
- Teachers
- Organizations
- Suppliers
- Friends

Holton et al. (2021)
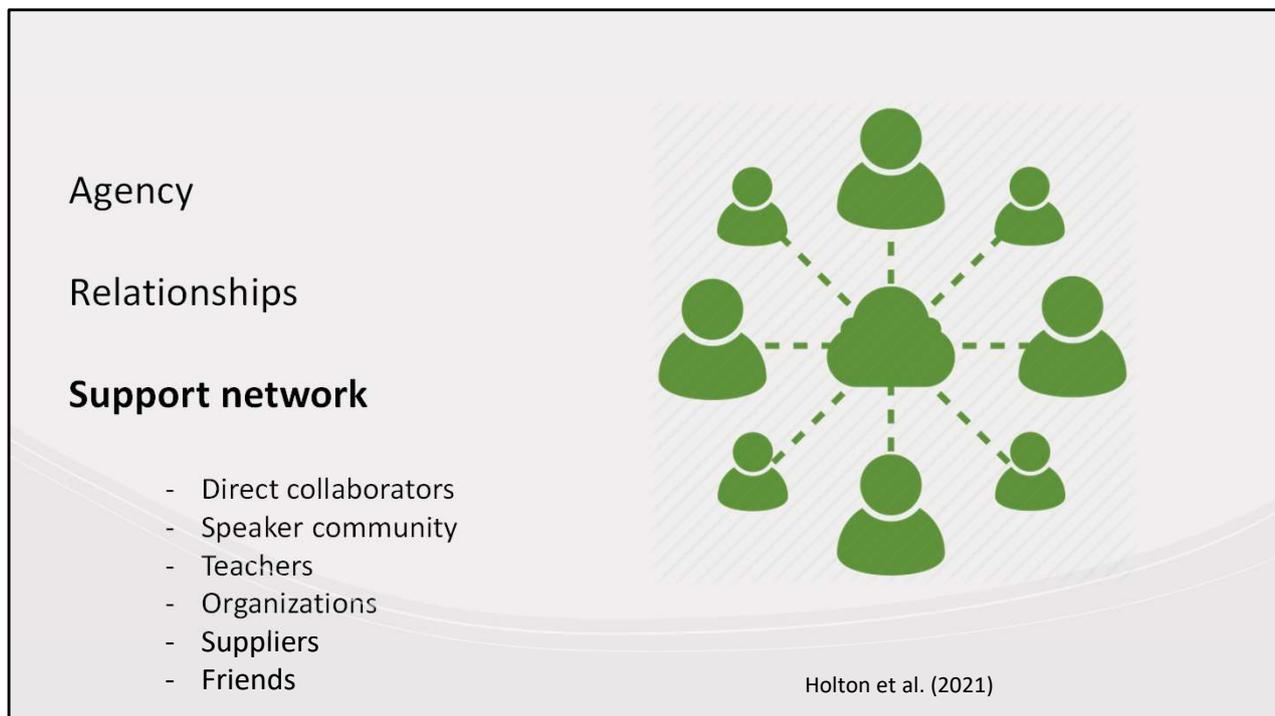
Beyond the direct collaborators, it's important that there's a wide local support network for the project. Having contact with the wider speaker community reduces dependency on just a few collaborators.

I said before that training is an essential part of any remote field work project. Sometimes, digital training or self-teaching is possible, but in most cases it's necessary to make contact with local people who are familiar with audio and video equipment, computers and perhaps even language documentation more generally who can provide face-to-face training and support.

Things *will* go wrong. Possibly everything will go wrong. And in my project, it's been incredibly helpful to have a network with local institutions like bible translation organizations and universities, suppliers of electronics, drivers and just friends more generally. You can't just count on the essential social contacts. In many places, social networking is key to setting up a successful documentation project.

# **Consequences** of a remote approach

The field linguist becomes a **project manager**.

Tsutsui Billins & Griscom (2020)

Physical remoteness shifts the **focus** away from the location of the PI and **towards the location of the community**.

cf. Scerri et al. (2020)

From everything that I've just discussed, I want to highlight two important consequences of a remote approach that summarize the key points that keep coming up.

The first is something Richard Griscom already emphasized in an early interview about remote fieldwork: the field linguist is no longer a 'lone wolf' linguist but has become more of a project manager. Technical, administrative, ethical and strategic concerns become more prominent.

The second consequence is that physical remoteness shifts the focus away from the location of the PI and toward the location of the data. Paradoxically, spending less time in the field means having to pay more attention to what's happening in the field. Remote field work requires us to invest more time, more energy and more money in the communities where the data collection is done.

Community-based Kam documentation

Having summarized some general points of remote field work, I want to finish the presentation by talking about the Kam documentation project and how we try to address these considerations.

I work together with a core team of four main collaborators and three teachers. We set up an office space in Sarkin Dawa, a central village from which speakers can most easily travel to other villages and to Jalingo, the state capital. There is no power connection and network connection is intermittent. A nearby town, Garba Chede, has good network connection.

## Ideal workflow

**Recording**

1. Record data
2. Back-up data
3. Transfer raw data with mega.nz (2-weekly)
4. Feedback
5. Planning

**Annotating**

1. Preparation: segment and format
2. Orthographic transcription in ELAN
3. (Respeaking in SayMore)
4. Translation in ELAN
5. Transfer annotations
6. More detailed annotation
7. Feedback
8. Planning

On a micro-level, I developed two workflows for data collection and data treatment. In this overview, the steps in green show the local collaborators' tasks and the steps in black show my tasks.

To collect the primary data, the collaborators first record data. Then as soon as possible they save and back-up the raw data to a computer and to a hard drive. Every two weeks, they transfer the raw data, either during a trip to Garba Chede or to Jalingo. The network in Sarkin Dawa is currently not strong enough.

When I receive the data, I watch the videos and organize feedback sessions to hear what the collaborators think about the recording and to give instructions. Finally, based on a spreadsheet I made and what's happening in the next week in the community, we plan the next recording events.

To annotate, I prepare the data: I segment the ELAN files and I convert the video files. The speakers provide an orthographic transcription in ELAN. Depending on the difficulty of the recording for me, they provide oral transcription in SayMore. Someone translates the recording, and then the annotations can be transferred back to me. I add detail to the annotation, provide phonological transcription and glossing.

Finally, we organize mutual feedback sessions, including elicitation sessions, and we plan the next recordings to annotate.

## Practical workflow

- Keep presence by making **videos** for the community
- **Buy equipment**
  - In Europe → send to Nigeria (DHL)
  - In Nigeria
- Arrange **training**
  - Documentation training (Elisha Yunana)
  - Annotation training (Bitrus Andrew)
  - Computer training (Ibiem Abraham Msugh)
- **Planning** required documentation

On a macro-level, spanning the project as a whole,

I make video messages for the community to keep everyone updated about the project, to keep a digital presence and to keep the project accessible to as many people as possible.

I bought equipment – some in Europe, which I then send to Nigeria. Some in Nigeria, from trusted suppliers that I know from my previous project. It's often good to have local products because if something happens there's a bigger chance that experts and spare parts are available.

I arranged training:

Elisha Yunana provides documentation training. Elisha has worked on a remote documentation project of Baa with Mirjam Möller-Nwadigo, a colleague in France. The equipment I ordered is exactly the equipment he also used.

Bitrus Andrew provides annotation and data management training. Bitrus has worked on a description and documentation project of his language, Bena, together with

Mark Van de Velde and Dmitry Idiatov as their main collaborator and has experience with transcription, annotation and data transfer.

Ibiem Abraham Msugh is a computer teacher who has his own computer shop in Jalingo. He also provides IT support for the project. He has some experience working together with NGOs.

I prepared an overview file where I keep track of everyone's contributions, planned recordings, genres and prompts. I also keep close track of the financial aspects of the project and the required administration.
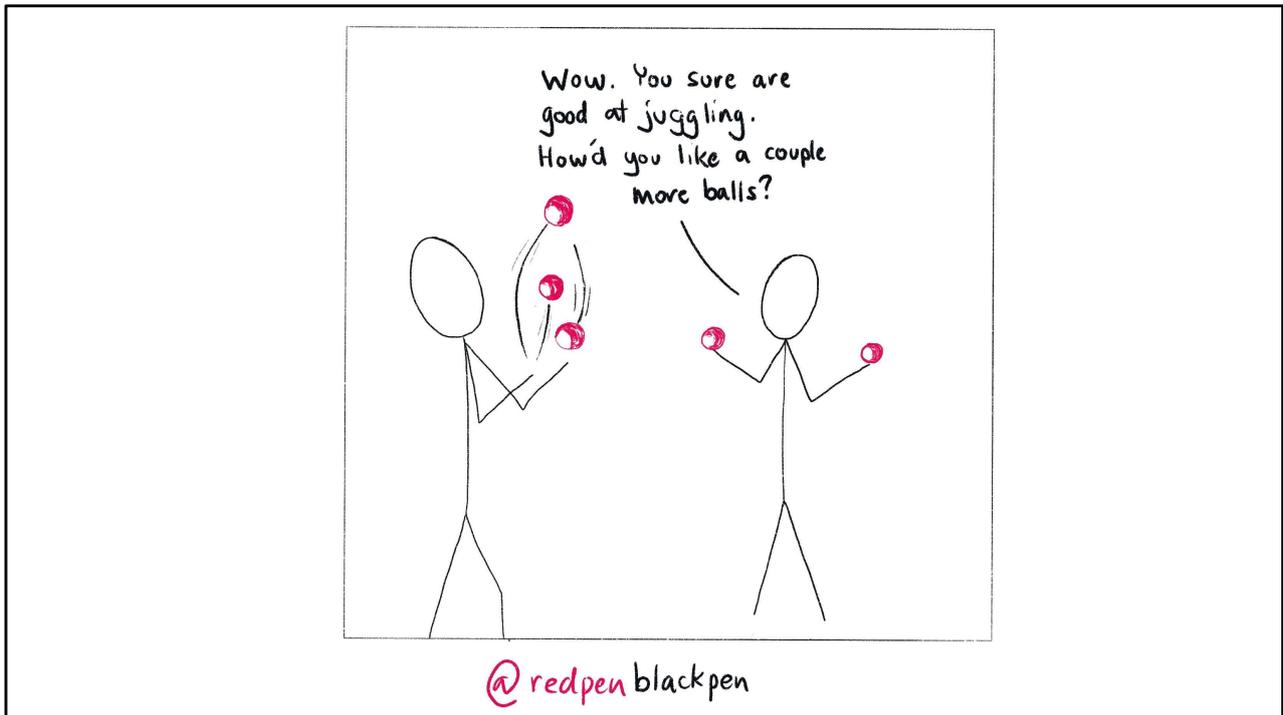
While I was writing the project and when it started, I felt like I had quite a solid plan and I quite enjoyed balancing all the different administrative, technical and social tasks.

But as is usually the case: when you think you've got it all figured out and you manage to juggle your priorities, a bunch of unexpected problems come up and you're forced to add a few more props to your act.

## New challenges

- Sending **money**: logistic problems

- Sending money: interpersonal challenges

- Sending **equipment** to Nigeria: extreme customs duty on cameras

- Buying equipment in Nigeria: quotations and university admin

- **Training**: making do without equipment
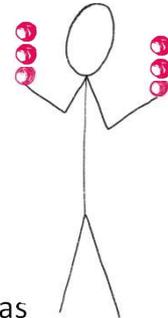
Well, not entirely unexpected of course. As I said before, everything *will* go wrong in these kinds of projects.

In any case, here are just six examples of unexpected obstacles I've encountered.

Last year at the onset of the global crisis, the Nigerian government blocked all ways to send money to local bank accounts. This made money transfers impossible for this project. So I had to find alternatives. Luckily, I had a support network and my previous supervisor directed me to a local currency trading website. One of my close colleagues in Nigeria indirectly put her bank account at my disposal and made it possible to make weekly transactions to my collaborators.

I also quickly discovered that sending money online is quite a different thing from giving people money in person. People were initially quite confused that I was sending them money and even felt a bit uncomfortable. Giving money physically has a different social context around it. Sending money online was perceived as 'payment', giving money physically was seen as 'social interaction'. Since it's sometimes inappropriate to pay people for working with their language, it's important to call people before and right after making a transaction to add a friendly

social component.

Sending the equipment to Nigeria isn't as easy as it seemed. The customs duty on cameras is 100%, which I could not afford with the project budget. So, we had to find alternative solutions.

It remains difficult to explain the university's administrative procedures* for buying equipment and spending project money to local vendors and collaborators. They sometimes reacted a bit suspiciously to my explanations, thinking that I had things to hide or that I wouldn't trust them. I work closely with the vendors to get the administration right.

Since the equipment has not arrived yet, I started asking people to record videos with their phone. I ask them about their experiences and their opinion of the data. It's an initial way to gain experience and to detect early difficulties by trial and error. Some of the video recordings have quite good quality.

The group dynamics are sometimes difficult to manage. Currently, we're in the middle of the Nigerian rainy season and some people have a lot of work to do on their farm. This understandably causes delays with the recordings and has lead some people to take charge of the project and put pressure on collaborators who are less keen to multi-task. In this context, it's been difficult to avoid a hierarchical structure in the team.

## What was **not a problem…** so far?

- Electricity
- Network
- Keeping in touch with local collaborators
- Communication with local support



Some things have not been problematic so far, and have been welcome surprises! There have been no problems with electricity supply or with the network, which has been exceptionally good in Sarkin Dawa.

It has been very easy to keep in touch with the local collaborators and with the local support network, who have been very responsive and trustworthy.

# Next steps

- **Video recordings** for training purposes
- Get the **equipment** to Kam
- Start **local training** sessions
- Dry season **filming**

The next steps in the project will include

Making video recordings for training purposes and self-teaching, including using ELAN and SayMore for collaborators with less experience.

Getting all the equipment to the community

Starting local training sessions with the teachers, as soon as the equipment arrives

And more filming once the dry season arrives and people have more time to invest in this project.

Babangida Audu · Solomon Ahmadu · Rahab Garba Precious · Danjuma Bello · Ibiem Abraham Msugh · Bitrus Andrew · Elisha Yunana

Thank you!

I wish to thank all the local collaborators and teachers that have played essential roles in this project.

Thank you for listening

And I wish to thank you all for listening to my talk.

Questions and Discussion

I am looking forward to discussing any questions and hearing your comments!

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