



BUILDING TRUST FOR RESILIENT SOCIETIES: THE GLOBAL LISTENING PROJECT AMPLIFIES LOCAL VOICES

IN 2021, ANTHROPOLOGY PROFESSOR HEIDI LARSON JOINED FORCES WITH PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSOR PIERRE VAN DAMME TO CREATE A NEW KIND OF ACTION RESEARCH ORGANIZATION. THE GLOBAL LISTENING PROJECT USES IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS, SURVEYS, AND OTHER RESEARCH TOOLS TO GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES, HOPES, AND FEARS, GENERATING INSIGHTS THAT ARE ESSENTIAL TO BUILDING THE TRUST THAT ENABLES SOCIETIES TO PREPARE FOR CRISES AND INCREASE THEIR RESILIENCE.

By the time Heidi Larson launched the Global Listening Project (GLP), she had spent years talking to people across the world about their attitudes to immunization. Through the Vaccine Confidence Project, which she established in 2010, Larson found that behind vaccine hesitancy lies a complex set of concerns that go beyond misinformation to include everything from unfortunate healthcare experiences and distrust of government to religious beliefs.

She also recognizes that those same concerns weaken public trust in other ways, undermining the ability to tackle a range of global crises such as youth loneliness, migration, food insecurity, conflict-related events, and the effects of climate change. By building a deep well of knowledge about people's levels of trust and what increases or decreases that trust, Larson believes the GLP can enable policymakers to make more informed decisions and

help communities strengthen social cohesion and build resilience. “You need to hear what the issues are from the people who know what’s going on,” she says.

AN EXPANDING AGENDA

It was a call from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation that kicked off the development of the Global Listening Project in 2021. The foundation had heard about the Vaccine Confidence Project and was impressed with its work to map public feelings about vaccines. So, while it doesn’t typically fund health, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the MacArthur Foundation decided to set up a special fund for Equitable Recovery that was a perfect fit for the creation of the GLP.

At the time, with the Covid-19 pandemic unfolding, Larson was thinking about how she could apply the techniques developed for the Vaccine Confidence Project—including interviews, focus groups, population-based surveys, and media monitoring—to a broader set of problems. “We’d learned so much about what affects people’s trust,” she says. “And so much of what we learned was relevant to a lot more than vaccines.”



While vaccine hesitancy was much debated during the pandemic, Larson was also interested in what influences the willingness of communities to comply with the restrictions governments may need to impose during a crisis such as a global pandemic. “So, when we got the call from MacArthur,” she recalls, “I thought it was a really important opportunity to go beyond vaccines and to look at the drivers that motivate people to cooperate.”

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FUNDING FOR SOLUTIONS

When the MacArthur Foundation fund was announced, it soon caught the attention of other funders. These were both corporate (pharmaceutical companies GlaxoSmithKline and Moderna) and philanthropic (the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation).

Part of what interested these organizations was that the GLP was filling a gap. While there had been plenty of commissions, committees, advisory groups, and reports on what it would take to improve pandemic preparedness, the focus tended to be on factors such as disease surveillance, health systems, governance, and resources. “These are all super important, but I didn’t see much attention to preparing people,” says Larson.



As a Brussels-based organization, GLP opened an American Friends Fund with Myriad USA to receive grants from U.S. corporations and foundations. In addition, Larson says the relationship with Myriad USA provided an opportunity to have discussions about the GLP's future. "It's facilitated different kinds of funding sources," she says. "But I've also had some great conversations. It's the chance to think things through on a more strategic level."

THE VALUE OF TRUST

At the heart of the GLP's work is a belief in trust as a cohesive force in society. In any crisis, argues Larson, people are forced to rely on their own resources and on their communities, but also to follow the advice and mandates of governments, scientists, and others—whether that is to evacuate before a hurricane hits or to adhere to social distancing rules during a pandemic.

The willingness of citizens to cooperate with each other and with governments and experts depends on how much trust they have within their communities and with those governments and experts. It is something Larson learned through the Vaccine Confidence Project. "Our real work was to understand this from people on the ground around the world," she says. "It was about what

worked and what didn't, who they trusted or didn't, and what would help in another crisis that requires people to cooperate."

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This belief in the value of trust shapes the work of the GLP. Rebuilding and strengthening trust, Larson argues, is what is needed to forge social cohesion, which in turn makes communities and countries more resilient to and better prepared for all kinds of crises, from environmental disasters to health emergencies.

TURNING DATA INTO IMPACT

Before designing policies and programs that increase levels of trust in society, the GLP believes decision-makers need information based on research that is

personal, granular and in-depth but that can also be conducted at scale.

Already, some of the insights it has gained could change the way decision-makers think about designing policies and programs that address public crises. Larson cites the example of one GLP finding about how people assessed the performance of their governments during the pandemic. “People didn’t judge their country’s response based on Covid-19 death count and case count,” she says, “but on whether the government considered the overall wellbeing of its people.”

Larson has also seen how presenting GLP’s findings can spark new kinds of discussion. “By sharing these data, you start to hear the stories behind the stories,” she says. “And in many of these roundtables, people have come up to me later and said, ‘I’ve never had a conversation like that before.’”

GLP is now becoming even more ambitious, both in the scale of its research and in using that research to make a positive impact. Most recently, in September 2024, it launched a major report, “Loneliness, Trust and Hope” focused on the post-pandemic experiences of young people. The research was based on 60 in-depth interviews and 36 focus groups conducted in six major cities—Sao Paulo, New York City, Paris, Abuja, Delhi and Bangkok—as well as on a survey of more than 70,000 people in 70 countries.

However, to turn GLP insights into impact, Larson knows that the organization needs to get that research into the hands of key decision-makers—something she is now keenly focused on. “We can’t wait until the next crisis,” she says.

Larson would like the GLP to play a role in a new approach to preparedness and resilience. “I hope that policymakers and programs put people at the center of these responses,” she says. “Obviously we need scientific, technical, and structural preparedness. But we also need to involve people more, to listen to them, and to engage with them before the next big crisis.”

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