



**Global Science, Local Change
Research4Life at 20**

**Interviews with
Andrea Powell, Outreach & Publisher coordinator, Research4Life, STM Association**

&

Gracian Chimwaza, Research4Life executive council

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KENNEALLY: 20 years ago, publishers and the WHO collaborated to provide subsidized access to health research around the globe. In 2021, Research4Life manages one of the world's largest collections of research in science, agriculture and the environment.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Every five years, Research4Life commissions in-depth reviews of its work to understand better the quality of the user experience and the impact access to research has in developing communities. Together, the reviews serve as a solid evidence base for future evolution as Research4Life [plans its strategy](#) for the next five years.

The most recent set of evaluations were conducted in 2020-2021. When the pandemic hit, the Research4Life community felt the impact differently depending on personal experience and local environment.

In a pair of interviews, a Research4Life executive explains how the organization plans to broaden its scope from access to articles to access to publishing – and a South African-based researcher describes how access to global research networks is leading to local solutions and local change.

Andrea Powell is STM's director of outreach and publisher coordinator for the Research4Life initiative. She joins me from her office in the UK. Welcome to the program, Andrea.

POWELL: Hi, Chris. It's great to be with you again.



KENNEALLY: It's a special moment. Research4Life is marking its 20th anniversary this year. And as you have done throughout your existence, you've conducted an in-depth review of the work you do to assess its impact and to help you set a strategic plan through 2026. Of course, this year, last year, these surveys were conducted in the middle of a pandemic. So tell us about the ways that you have found that the pandemic impacted research adversely and even positively.

POWELL: In common with many researchers around the world, many of our users also found that their institutions were closed for long periods during the pandemic. So they were forced to work from home, where their access to information, their infrastructure, their internet connections were sometimes not particularly good. They really felt that. We had a lot of feedback that said that researchers really missed the institutional support and the access to knowledge that Research4Life was providing them with.

Conversely, of course, as I think in many parts of the world, a forced period of isolation, if you like, or forced time away from the office allowed researchers to focus on writing up some of their work and writing up papers for publication and also to take part in some of the online education that we were able to offer, some of the online training programs, where they may not be able to get into their institutions, but they could participate in some training activities. So there were positive and negative impacts.

KENNEALLY: If there's a silver lining in this pandemic, it's the opportunity we've all had to do some of the reading and self-education that we might have wished we could do before. So did researchers take advantage of that? And what were they working on?

POWELL: Yes, absolutely. Even before the pandemic, Research4Life had started to focus on the delivery of a MOOC – a massive open online course. We'd already started this process of moving more and more of our training from the very high-impact, but very un-scalable face-to-face model into the online environment, where we could reach many, many more users and achieve much greater impact at scale. The pandemic really accelerated that move into online. We've now run our MOOC, I think, five times. We've run translated versions. That has allowed us to reach well over 5,000 users, well over half of whom have completed the full five-week program, and it's helped us to really hone what we offer, to improve the range of modules – to include webinars, some of them given by our publisher partners – and to really focus on scaling up our online activities. That was a huge positive, and I think it meant that we got there sooner than we might otherwise have done.

KENNEALLY: So that'll be part of the new normal, I would imagine, right? Because moving forward, once we get past this pandemic, people are still going to have a great appetite for that kind of work.



POWELL: Yes, that's right. In fact, just recently, we were planning our work plan for next year for our capacity development activities, and although we do think that there is still a place for some face-to-face training – particularly we train the trainers, so we run some master training courses, and those are much more effective done face to face within the region. We use regional trainers to provide training to those specialist educators. But certainly for the users, for the vast majority of the librarian contacts that we work with, online is absolutely the new normal, and we intend to run many more editions of our MOOC.

We set up a task force last year to look at ways in which Research4Life can provide support not just in the context of access to knowledge, but also access to publishing opportunity – to provide skills to researchers, but crucially, support for their institutional librarians to help them understand the vagaries of the open access system, understand how to navigate that whole process.

KENNEALLY: It's all really very valuable work, and I'm sure it takes a lot of time and a lot of resources to be able to reach a global audience like the one that Research4Life has. So tell us about the newly launched nonprofit Friends of Research4Life and what that's aiming to do.

POWELL: This is a really exciting milestone in the history of Research4Life. Astonishingly, we have survived 20 years, as you say. We just celebrated last week the 20th anniversary of the first Research4Life program. And we've come a long way as a volunteer coalition of the willing, if you like – people who believe in the objectives of Research4Life. But we have no legal entity. We have no fundraising mechanism. And we're highly dependent on the very modest fees that some of our user institutions pay. That simply isn't enough to allow us to reach the users that we need to reach, to raise awareness, to provide the sort of online training that I've been talking about. We've been lucky to get some additional sponsorship for that, but that's not a very sustainable model for the future. And if we really want to achieve the kind of impact that we all strive for, we're going to have to scale that up.

So yes, we've launched a fundraising vehicle, Friends of Research4Life, which is now a 501(c)(3) registered nonprofit out of the State of Delaware. It has its own independent board of directors and is in the process now of developing a fundraising strategy to identify potential donors and ways in which we can give Friends of Research4Life a much more sustainable revenue stream. It will allow us to set longer-term and more ambitious targets to support the very important work that we're doing.

We've received donations already from six inaugural publisher donors, and we're obviously very keen to talk to other publishers who might wish to make a donation as well.



It doesn't have to be large, because we're very economical with how we spend our funds. And the more donors we can get, the more that we can achieve. We're setting quite ambitious targets. We're thinking big. But we know how we can scale up to achieve the sort of impact that we're seeking.

KENNEALLY: As you continue that forward-thinking planning, Research4Life will participate in a strategic retreat this fall, and that's to develop the next five-year strategic plan. Can you offer any hints of what new directions or initiatives we could expect?

POWELL: It's very difficult to raise awareness and to provide training for users in countries that are on the other side of the world and where there isn't a local support network. So we have developed sort of a proof-of-concept project that we're calling our Country Connectors project, and we're looking to see how we can scale that up, that will actually allow us to employ some local coordinators to really strengthen the communities within each of our user countries and hopefully develop a much more sustainable model for support in those countries.

KENNEALLY: And I understand that Research4Life has just launched a new content portal. What changes will researchers see online?

POWELL: Any publisher who has ever gone through the pain of developing a new platform for the delivery of their content will understand how complex this project has been, particularly because it's been implemented and managed by volunteers within the Research4Life community.

But we're delighted that Ingenta has built a very user-friendly platform for our users now that is fully optimized for mobile use, which is very important for users in developing countries, where mobile access to knowledge is very common. It's a much more responsive and intuitive platform. It allows us to update the content more frequently and generally provide a much more modern user experience, the sort of user experience that a researcher in a well-funded institution might expect. We feel that it's our obligation to provide the same quality of user experience to researchers in the global south. That's very much what we have now with our new content portal.

KENNEALLY: Well, congratulations on that and on the 20th anniversary of Research4Life. We've been speaking with Andrea Powell, director of outreach and publisher coordinator for the Research4Life initiative. Thank you for joining me today.

POWELL: It's been my pleasure.



KENNEALLY: Gracian Chimwaza is the founding and executive director of the Information Training and Outreach Center for Africa, providing research and academic communities with access to published scientific scholarly literature. Gracian Chimwaza serves on the Research4Life executive council and holds a PhD in information science from the University of Pretoria, South Africa, from where he joins me now. Welcome to the program, Dr. Gracian Chimwaza.

CHIMWAZA: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: We're very happy you can join us. Given your own leadership role in Research4Life, tell us about the various programs that you've worked on that help promote and develop African research capacity.

CHIMWAZA: We have worked a lot with Research4Life over the last 20 years. The focus of our work at ITOCA has been really on capacity-building to make sure that the researchers, the academics, and the students take advantage of these resources, and they are able to know about them, but also more importantly, to know how to use these resources. And now, the researchers are able to do their work and really focus on innovation and contribute their knowledge to the body of knowledge that has been contributed internationally.

KENNEALLY: And that focus on innovation – that's critically important right now across Africa, because it's at a very special moment in its development. It's really poised to launch, if I could put it that way, in the 21st century.

CHIMWAZA: Absolutely. Really, now, we look at the challenges that we have, be it in agriculture, be it in innovation in the environment, be it in technology itself, the solutions are there that are really coming from the Africans themselves and those from the developing world. They work locally to address the problems locally, but with, of course, the international knowledge that we are sharing with others – not only from this region, from the south, but also from the north – so they can be able to tailor their solutions to the problems that they have locally.

KENNEALLY: You are an instructor for the Research4Life massive open online course, a MOOC. Tell me – what's on the syllabus?

CHIMWAZA: The MOOC really focuses on making sure that, one, the researchers are aware of what is available in terms of the content and the research that is there, but also, more importantly, to make sure that they are fully aware of the functionality of the Research4Life portals – how to really use them and how to take advantage of the discovery tools that are there. The databases that are there are quite massive, and you want to make



sure that as a researcher, you know how to find the information more efficiently and really in the subject area of your specialization.

The Research4Life program really covers five programs. The first program was actually focusing more on health and biosciences, and it's led by the WHO. The second program is led by a food and agriculture organization, and it is called AGORA. It focuses more on agriculture broadly, including the sustainable systems, including forestry. It also includes the disciplines in fisheries. We also have got a program that is focusing on the environment and is led by UNEP. We then have the GOALI program that is really looking at justice and information around the laws. We also have got an innovation program that is led by WIPO, and that is called ARDI. All these programs really came about in the last 15, 16 years now. And of late, we now have a program that is focusing really more on the innovations that cover justice and that cover the law.

KENNEALLY: Your work at the organization you founded, the Information Training and Outreach Center for Africa, has been ongoing for many years, and your involvement with Research4Life is likewise an ongoing one for many years. Tell us about the changes that you have seen throughout your time.

CHIMWAZA: Over the years, we have seen a lot of change. When we work with researchers, when we work with faculty, and when we work with students, we realized that over the years, the initial focus has been really on creating awareness of what is available for them, especially via the internet and what is available for them online. Now, we realize that not only do they know what is available, they really can take advantage of the information that is coming from other regions and other developing countries. But also, more importantly, they now can see especially what is available and what are the gaps in the kind of research that they are doing in their areas.

As you know, for example, agriculture is very geographic, but you can learn on innovations from other regions and apply what you are doing in your geographical region and also in your country, or even in your district, so to speak, on the technologies that are coming from other regions. But you really can apply it according to the soils, according to the rains that you have – really, the environment that you're actually working on and the type of crop that you're working on.

KENNEALLY: As you say, it's all very encouraging, but of course, Africa and the rest of the world have been challenged by the global COVID-19 pandemic. What has been the impact on research activity from the COVID-19 crisis?

CHIMWAZA: COVID has really had a major impact of what is happening in the research world – not only in other regions, but also here in Africa, where we see that a lot of interaction that has been going on in person, like the big conferences, like the proceedings that have



been going on – technical proceedings and conferences and in other meetings – has now all moved on to be virtual. That interaction between the researchers and all the other players really has had to take a different kind of turn, where everything is going on now online. Again, as you can see, all the investments that have been done and work that has been going on in person has really been impacted now, and most of it has been slowed down because of the pandemic.

KENNEALLY: I wonder if you can describe for us the work that you are doing to help educate African researchers about open access publishing. It's a very complicated field.

CHIMWAZA: With open access, there has been many opportunities that have come by. A lot of research that has been behind the paywalls is now really open and available online. Many of the researchers who have got institutions that have got libraries that cannot afford to pay for these high-impact journals, for example, that are behind the paywalls are really now taking advantage of open access.

Look at the researchers that are at universities that now have got the same kind of information that the other researchers in the north have got access to, and they can easily now add their own innovations based on their experience and based on their research outputs that they are working on.

KENNEALLY: You put your finger on something, which is the concern around equity. With the pandemic and with various other issues – particularly here in the United States, but around the world – our attention has been drawn to issues of equity. Tell us about that. Tell us about the role you think that Research4Life can play in addressing those challenges.

CHIMWAZA: Yes, indeed, because as you can see, a researcher who is working out in the DRC, for example, who is working out in Rwanda, at any of those universities or research organizations can easily collaborate with somebody who is working at Oxford University, Harvard University, anywhere else in the world – and of course, in the other regions, in China, in South America – and they can all work together quite easily now online.

That kind of exchange is something that the world is really learning to live with now. And the fact that anyone from any region can contribute in terms of their experience and in terms of innovation. We really would like to see more of that going forward, because only through collaborations can we address many of these challenges.

As you can see, COVID-19 itself is really a global pandemic. It has not only attacked one region. It is a challenge that we are all experiencing. And of course, it is really a time for all of us to put all hands on the deck and try and address this. And it is really incredible



that we can contribute the innovations from all the regions. Africa is playing a key role in that, in also contributing its experiences and its innovation to try and address this challenge.

KENNEALLY: This fall, Research4Life will engage in a kind of strategic retreat to look at the years ahead, the next five years, develop a strategic plan. What new directions or initiatives would you like to see Research4Life address?

CHIMWAZA: I really would like to see more collaboration. I would like to see how we can all work especially with the Sustainable Development Goals that have been set out to see, how can we address many of those challenges? If Research4Life, as it is working right now, really focuses on addressing those kind of issues, how can we collaborate with other partners that are there as well?

With Research4Life, we already have on the platform technologies that are coming from the participating universities, from the UN agencies, from also other organizations, like ITOCA, that is collaborating with them. So how can we all then put all hands on the decks, all of us together, and work together to address especially the SDGs that we have got in front of us and try and address and play our role as really partners who are making sure that information is now accessible by all parties in the north or in the south.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Gracian Chimwaza, executive director of the Information Training and Outreach Center for Africa in Pretoria, South Africa, thank you for joining me on the program.

CHIMWAZA: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to this program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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