

Ethiopia: Obtaining Ethics Approval and the Role of Social Capital

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Volume 1, Number 1, 2018

Ethics and International Development Research
Éthique et recherche en développement international

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058312ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058312ar>

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Publisher(s)

Programmes de bioéthique, École de santé publique de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

2561-4665 (digital)

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Cite this document

Cochrane, L. (2018). Ethiopia: Obtaining Ethics Approval and the Role of Social Capital. *Canadian Journal of Bioethics / Revue canadienne de bioéthique*, 1(1), 31–33. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058312ar>

Article abstract

Ethiopia has a research ethics review system, yet few international researchers obtain approval outside of health studies that involve biological samples or medical testing. This case study outlines three types of ethics approvals in Ethiopia, and which research projects are suitable to them. In outlining these processes, I also reflect upon my own experience of obtaining ethics approval. The questions raised in this case study include concerns about accountability for international researchers as well as areas where universities and ethics bodies could improve their facilitation and support to ensure that the research conducted is approved by national authorities. I critically reflect on the role of social capital and relationships, which in my own case enabled access to information about where ethics approval could be obtained and provided significant support throughout the process. For this case study, I draw upon my experience of applying for ethics approval in 2014, having that approval granted in 2015 and conducting research until 2016.



ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

Ethiopia: Obtaining Ethics Approval and the Role of Social CapitalLogan Cochrane¹**Résumé**

L'Éthiopie dispose d'un système d'évaluation de l'éthique de la recherche, mais peu de chercheurs internationaux obtiennent l'approbation en dehors des études sur la santé impliquant des échantillons biologiques ou des tests médicaux. Cette étude de cas décrit trois types d'approbations éthiques en Éthiopie et les projets de recherche qui y sont menés. En décrivant ces processus, je relate ma propre expérience dans ce domaine. Les questions soulevées dans cette étude de cas comprennent les préoccupations concernant la responsabilité des chercheurs internationaux ainsi que les secteurs où les universités et les organismes d'éthique pourraient accroître leur soutien afin de faciliter l'approbation des projets par les autorités nationales. J'expose le fruit d'une réflexion critique sur le rôle du capital social et des contacts personnels qui m'ont permis d'obtenir l'information pertinente pour l'approbation éthique de mon projet et qui m'ont soutenu tout au long de ce processus. Pour cette étude de cas, je retrace les étapes de mon expérience de recherche, de la demande d'approbation en 2014, reçue en 2015, jusqu'aux travaux menés en 2016.

Mots clés

approbation éthique, Éthiopie, capital social, justice sociale

Abstract

Ethiopia has a research ethics review system, yet few international researchers obtain approval outside of health studies that involve biological samples or medical testing. This case study outlines three types of ethics approvals in Ethiopia, and which research projects are suitable to them. In outlining these processes, I also reflect upon my own experience of obtaining ethics approval. The questions raised in this case study include concerns about accountability for international researchers as well as areas where universities and ethics bodies could improve their facilitation and support to ensure that the research conducted is approved by national authorities. I critically reflect on the role of social capital and relationships, which in my own case enabled access to information about where ethics approval could be obtained and provided significant support throughout the process. For this case study, I draw upon my experience of applying for ethics approval in 2014, having that approval granted in 2015 and conducting research until 2016.

Keywords

ethics approval, Ethiopia, social capital, social justice

Introduction

According to members of the national ethics committee of the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI), very few international researchers who conduct social science research in Ethiopia have been approved by national authorities. International research projects that are typically submitted to the ethics committee for approval involve pharmaceutical testing or biological sampling from the health sciences. My experience working with international researchers in Ethiopia over the last twelve years aligns with that of the ethics committee: few social science research projects are reviewed and approved by national authorities.

From the perspective of international researchers, two issues are raised regarding why approval is not obtained. First, it is argued that their research has been approved by their own institution (see [1] for discussion). Second, it is argued that the Ethiopian ethics approval system is inefficient and causes years of unnecessary delays. In this case study I problematize both of these issues. Regarding approval by their own institution, I argue that it is inappropriate, and a replication of colonial attitudes, to argue that approval by authorities in another country is sufficient to justify bypassing national authorities. This argument complements the main article in this special issue [2]. Secondly, in my experience, the concerns of inefficiency and delays are not always accurate.

It is difficult to obtain information about how ethics approval is granted by national authorities in Ethiopia. Yet, this does not give researchers license to neglect such processes. This case study, and the series within which it resides, provides a wealth of examples about how researchers have successfully navigated complicated systems. National ethics approval does take time (several months), but that amount of time is not unreasonable in comparison to similar ethics review processes within university settings in North America and Europe. There are many reasons why researchers ought to obtain ethics approval, including legal ones [3]. There are also important reasons why researchers should engage with national ethics systems. In my own case, the process strengthened the research as the ethics committee members were more aware of local laws and issues, whereas my home university made an assessment based on ethical practices applicable broadly.

At the same time, however, this case study demonstrates that relationships and social capital can play a key role in ensuring that the processes are relatively clear, timely and efficient. I argue that universities must take a more proactive role in supporting researchers to obtain national ethics approval so that information and approval is not reliant upon social capital (as not all researchers have pre-existing relationships within the country where research will take place).

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ISSN 2561-4665

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Presentation of the case

In the summer of 2014 I inquired with an Ethiopian colleague who worked in the Federal Ministry of Health about how to obtain ethics approval for social science research on food security. I was informed that there were three options: 1) from a national authority, such as the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI); 2) from a regional authority, such as from the respective regional health bureau; and 3) via a national university. I opted to seek national approval from EPHI. I would later learn that regional authorities only grant approval when the research is limited to a single regional state and do not have the authority to approve international graduate research projects. I also later learned that approval via a national university requires significant partnership with my home university, well beyond what I would have been able to facilitate. These details were not widely known, even within the agencies that have the authority to grant the respective approval.

I returned to Ethiopia in February, 2015. During the intervening months, I completed the required forms and had a second colleague from the Federal Ministry of Health meet with the national authority on my behalf. I also sought advice from a third Ethiopian colleague who had previously obtained national ethics approval from this same authority (EPHI). The process required developing a detailed research plan, for which I had to include components that were not required by my home institution – including involving Ethiopian graduate students, specifying how adherence to the plan would be monitored, and how I would disseminate the findings in Ethiopia. Following a public presentation with questions and answers, I received feedback on the proposal from the ethics committee and was required to revise accordingly. The additional content that was required reflected the different type of interests involved. Whereas my home university was concerned about process, the Ethiopian authorities focused on how the research would benefit the nation and its people. Notably, Ethiopian authorities gave less emphasis to participant risk in comparison to my home university, and thus may have weighed risks and benefits differently (raising questions about the degree of individual risk considered acceptable for national benefit).

From the initial inquiry to the approval, I used my contacts to support the process on eighteen different occasions. Undoubtedly, the process would have taken longer had I not been able to draw upon these personal connections for information, to liaise on my behalf and to inquire with authorities about the processes. In 2015, I wrote [4] about obtaining national ethics approval in Ethiopia and have since supported researchers from Canada and the United States as they navigate the ethics approval system. This too has highlighted the role of networks and the importance of networks and social capital in multiple spheres (domestic and international) in how researchers navigate unfamiliar systems, obtain information, and learn about processes.

The countries from which international researchers come to Ethiopia commonly outline that national ethics approval should be obtained, which is the position of Canada's Tri-Council [5]. Within Ethiopia, the challenge is not a lack of policies or processes to obtain such approval. Rather, there are challenges about accessing information and having the required support. It is common that graduate and early career researchers do not have the existing social capital that may be required to navigate national ethics approval systems. As such, universities must take a more proactive role. I propose two practical ways that universities can better facilitate this process and ensure national ethics approval is obtained. First, in typical North American doctoral programs, where research normally begins after the second year of enrolment, graduate programs need to ensure that students are looking into international ethics review processes well in advance so that sufficient time can be allocated, rather than waiting until students apply for ethics approval from their home university before this issue is raised. Second, university research ethics boards should maintain a database of countries from which national ethics approval has been obtained, and the respective authorities involved. This would provide guidance based on institutional experience. Pending the development of a more comprehensive reference system, such a database would allow for verification when researchers claim that no ethics approval system exists within the country where they intend to conduct research.

In advocating for national ethics approval in international development research, I am aware that some research is not welcome by the issuing government. Some of my own research has challenged the Government of Ethiopia, and I am cognizant of potential challenges raised in requiring national ethics approval [6,7]. However, research proposals do not need to speculate what the findings will be, rather they outline the ways in which research will be conducted. In many instances this does not bar researchers from engaging in contested topics and publishing critical research. In some cases the government may not approve research based upon the topic or geographic area proposed. Instances of this nature appear to be the exception, rather than the rule. In situations where the government may disapprove of the research for unjust reasons, it is important to consider the consequences; in Ethiopia, international journalists¹, volunteers and researchers have been detained and convicted by the authorities for acting without approval [8,9]. From the perspective of the government, clandestine research activity is illegal and researchers weighing the consequences of such endeavors must take into account the legal ramifications. The complex nature of ethical questions relating to unjust laws and politicization are grappled with in the main article of this special issue [2]. This case study has outlined the processes for obtaining approval in Ethiopia, and problematizes the justifications given for why this approval is not obtained.

Questions to consider

1. To what extent must researchers go to determine how national ethics approval can be obtained?

¹ Two Swedish journalists were given eleven year prison sentences in 2011, they were released in 2012 after a lengthy diplomatic negotiation [9].

2. What would justify deeming that national ethics approval systems are too inefficient, too slow or non-existent to proceed?
3. Would this case have been approved had the researcher not had existing social capital? Or did the relationships enable a more streamlined approach within a system that lacks clarity?
4. Who ought to be responsible for monitoring the obtaining of national ethics approval in international development research?
5. When can national authorities be intentionally bypassed in order to conduct research on topics deemed politically inappropriate or unacceptable? Considering the consequences, are these areas wherein international researchers ought to take a lead role?

Remerciements

L'auteur tient à remercier le Centre de recherches pour le développement international du Canada (CRDI), et le soutien offert en 2016-2017 pendant qu'il était boursier de perfectionnement professionnel. Les opinions exprimées dans ce travail sont celles de l'auteur et ne représentent pas nécessairement celles du CRDI ou de son Conseil des gouverneurs.

Conflit d'intérêts

Aucun déclaré

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and its support provided while the author was a Professional Development Awardee in 2016-2017. The views expressed in this work are the creator's and do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

Éditrice/Editor: Cécile Bensimon

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Reçu/Received: 29 Nov 2016

Publié/Published: 15 Feb 2018

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