

# Ethical Challenges Faced by Development Researchers in Low and Middle-Income Countries

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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/1058306ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058306ar>

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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

Nayfeh, A. & Charron, D. (2018). Ethical Challenges Faced by Development Researchers in Low and Middle-Income Countries. *Canadian Journal of Bioethics / Revue canadienne de bioéthique*, 1(1), 4–7.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1058306ar>

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## ÉDITORIAL INVITÉ / GUEST EDITORIAL

# Ethical Challenges Faced by Development Researchers in Low and Middle-Income Countries

Ayah Nayfeh<sup>1,2</sup>, Dominique Charron<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Researchers play an important role in setting the ethical standards of development research in low and middle-income countries (LMIC). In most high-income countries, researchers and research institutions and their staff and students operate within common research ethics policy frameworks, like Canada's *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2) [1]. However, this is not the case in multi-jurisdictional research, particularly in settings involving funding from high-income countries for research in LMIC, with or without the participation of high-income country researchers. In such settings, not only may there be differences of ethical standards in conducting research or oversight capacity, but the nature of the ethical dilemmas themselves are changed [2]. For instance, the local context in different jurisdictions may change how research design affects the dignity, autonomy or welfare of local participants.

As stipulated in the TCPS2 multijurisdictional research involving humans must ensure a proportionate balance between the core principles of respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice, as well as due consideration of locally relevant policies and applicable laws and regulations of all jurisdictions [1]. Unfortunately, the scarcity of scholarly resources on research ethics in development contexts makes it difficult for researchers from high-income countries to understand the political, legal and sociocultural differences to appropriately assess ethical considerations in LMIC [3,4].

Compared to other stakeholders involved in the research process, such as funding donors, research ethics committees (RECs) and research institutions, local RECs might be in the strongest position to assess whether the research complies with local laws and regulations or whether it imposes any risk that may be unknown to foreign researchers [1,5]. Furthermore, local RECs with the legal capacity for ethics oversight can help countries and institutions keep track of research that is being conducted within their jurisdiction, and can offer a mechanism to hold researchers accountable if their research causes harm.

Unfortunately, local RECs in some LMICs are not well-established or are entirely absent [6]. Further, the limited academic literature that is available on conducting research with human participants in LMIC fails to address research other than clinical research, and neglects to guide methodologies widely used in international development (particularly collaborative or transdisciplinary natural and social science research) [3,6]. While defaulting to western bioethical frameworks assures that the proposed research is in line with high-income country codes of research ethics, compliance with such frameworks alone may not be adequate for ensuring the safety, dignity and autonomy of participants in LMICs.

The authors of the different manuscripts are former Professional Development Award Recipients and Research Award Recipients from multi-disciplinary backgrounds that conducted field research between 2016-2017 as part of their 12-month award with the support of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC).<sup>1</sup>

IDRC mandates that the research it supports, in part or in full, always be conducted in accordance with the highest recognized ethical standards that are applicable. This includes research involving human participants, research involving non-human animals, and research subject to additional regulatory requirements (for example, research involving genetically modified organisms). Research Award Recipients' proposals undergo an internal research ethics assessment prior to the commencement of their research in the field. This process, coordinated by IDRC's Advisory Committee on Research Ethics, prompts early-career researchers to seek local ethics review mechanisms; to appropriately consider cultural norms and practices; and to make recommendations of strategies to minimize risks and maximize benefits for the individuals participating in, or affected by, the research. This internal process becomes particularly important for field research where local RECs do not exist; where ethical review processes and infrastructures are weak or difficult to navigate; or where non-clinical research is not clearly regulated. These efforts are complemented by policies on mandatory research ethics training and institutional initiatives that aim to promote awareness and application of research ethics. Award recipients are asked to provide feedback to IDRC on their experience, including research ethics training and oversight. Some of the papers in this special issue reflect

<sup>1</sup> The Research Awards program at IDRC offers aspiring new investigators an opportunity to hone their research skills in an international context, and is emblematic of IDRC's capacity-building and educational mission to build the next generation of international development leaders. The program provides hands-on experience in research management and in the creation, dissemination, and use of knowledge from an international perspective. It also includes a bursary for a 6-month program of research on a topic of international development.

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ISSN 2561-4665



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perceived gaps and inefficiencies in IDRC process. As a learning organization, IDRC uses this information to continually improve the effectiveness of our support and oversight of research ethics.

This special issue sheds light on the reality of “ethical challenges encountered by researchers from high-income countries working in low- or middle-income countries” on international development research (and particularly non-health-related research), a domain often neglected by the research ethics community [7,8]. Our aim with this article is to introduce ten case studies that illustrate some of the distinctive ethical challenges and experiences faced by development researchers in navigating local ethical requirements in Nepal, Ethiopia, Guyana, Colombia, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Peru, and India. The case studies are accompanied by a peer-reviewed article authored by the editors of the special issue that underscores the importance of local ethics review from the perspective of social justice.

Gaining knowledge of the local context and navigating local research ethics oversight systems are often a challenge for early-career international development researchers, as information on the existence of local RECs and requirements for ethics approval are not always readily accessible [6]. This challenge is explicit in the first case study by Gloria Song entitled “*Guyana – How do you know where to get the information you need? Determining ethics approval requirements in a developing country*” [9]. When a web search did not provide any information on local ethical requirements for legal and social sciences research in Guyana, Song describes the various methods and sources that she consulted before concluding that there was no national research ethics approval body in Guyana. Correspondence with a regional bioethics organization, local researchers, Guyanese government offices, and the Guyanese High Commission ultimately served as a valuable resource for understanding the local ethics requirements and standards for conducting research on Guyana’s Domestic Violence Act with justice service providers. In doing so, this case study reflects on the importance of researchers doing their due diligence to gain knowledge of local ethical requirements.

Gussai Sheikheldin’s case study “*Responsible access to data in international field research: a case study from Tanzania*” documents the challenges in obtaining information on the processes required to respect local laws and regulations in Tanzania [10]. In addition to obtaining ethical clearance from the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology, Sheikheldin describes the process of obtaining a residence visa to conduct his research in a way that does not violate local laws of legal residency. The article goes on to discuss how failure to obtain a research permit before conducting field research in Tanzania can result in a number of harmful consequences on the Tanzanian local ethics capacity.

Navigating local ethics review does not need to be difficult and can be straightforward if the researcher limits their assumptions regarding the process and engages with the local REC early on. In Sunisha Neupane’s case study “*Nepal Health Research Council paves path to ethical research processes*”, she highlights the hassle-free and easy process that she experienced in acquiring ethics approval for a health-related research project in Nepal [11]. Although the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) requires research involving human participants to undergo local ethics approval, there is a low adherence rate for ethics approval in the country. Neupane and Sinha describe how even in the wake of extenuating local circumstances, undertaking local ethics review through the NHRC was not considered a “barrier” to the research process. The authors conclude that foreign researchers ought to do their due diligence in following host-country guidelines as a matter of principle, and must put aside the assumption that obtaining local ethics review delays the research process.

Juan Rivillas illustrates in his case study “*Seeking ethics approval in Colombia: a health systems research case study*” how Resolution 8430 – a legal framework provided by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection for carrying out health research in Colombia – was implemented for his project as a researcher affiliated with a foreign institution [12]. The resolution states that ethics approval must be provided either by the researcher’s institution, the institution in which the research will be conducted, or the health authority responsible for the communities participating in the research. After struggling to gain information about research ethics oversight from collaborating local health care facilities, the authors reflect on the need for more guidance for researchers who are not affiliated with Colombian institutions regarding ethics review and approvals. Collaborative partnerships with local researchers throughout the course of the research provided valuable insights and a better understanding of the ethics approval process within Colombia. Reflecting on his experience, the author suggests that an earlier engagement with local researchers and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection would have facilitated the connection with and involvement of local health facilities or health authorities to conduct fieldwork in Colombia.

Logan Cochrane also elaborates on the importance of social capital in his case study “*Ethiopia: obtaining ethics approval and the role of social capital*”, and the role that relationships can play in ensuring that local ethical processes are clearly understood and complete [13]. Based on his research experience in Ethiopia, Cochrane describes how the challenges in the local ethics review process are not due to a lack of policies or REC infrastructure, but rather to the difficulties in accessing the necessary information. Local collaborative partnerships enable access to information on the ethical review process and help guide researchers through local laws, regulations, and expectations. Like Rivillas, he too highlights the role that local networks played in helping him, a foreign researcher, navigate an unfamiliar system and provide the necessary information and knowledge of local processes. This case study proposes several mechanisms that universities and research institutions in high-income countries can use to play a more pro-active role in facilitating the local ethics review process and ensure that national ethics approval is obtained.

In Mathieu Feagan’s case study “*Ethical evaluation and action research: toward new north-south research collaborations?*”, he discusses how collaborative partnerships between high-income researchers and local researchers and organizations

typically impose Northern research priorities and frameworks on Southern communities, undervaluing the knowledge those communities have already developed [14]. In this case study, Feagan reflects on his experience and challenges with obtaining ethics approval for an action research project dealing with dynamic group processes, whereby the notions of recruitment, consent and data collection emerge in accordance with the needs of the peer group. He describes how the action research framework intersects with dominant North-South power dynamics, and suggests that a shift is needed from Northern ethical review processes to ensure that knowledge is created with, not only about, people in action-oriented research projects.

North-South power dynamics between researchers and study participants call for unique strategies that minimize any potential risk that may be imposed on participants in the different local contexts. In the case study *“Being ethical in a context with limited ethics oversight: a study on flooding risk management by local governments in India”*, Nidhi Subramanyam illustrates how foreign researchers and Northern RECs must carefully consider the conditions and sociocultural differences under which individual participants provide consent [15]. This case study reflects on how, a permit to conduct research, obtained from local or regional authorities in India, may inadvertently exert coercion on potential participants of the study, in particular staff of those authorities. Unintended risks such as reputational damage or institutional stigmatization can occur inadvertently from consenting participants who provide responses critical of authorities. Subramanyam describes in detail the process she followed to ensure voluntary and autonomous consent was provided within a hierarchical institutional context, and the important considerations that were made to avoid participant exposure to any unintended risks.

The process of obtaining consent and sociocultural considerations that must be made with different groups also emerged in Erika Malich’s case study *“Consent documentation and the accessibility of research results in international development research”* [16]. Malich describes her experience in selecting a culturally and contextually appropriate method to document informed consent with different groups in Latin America. For example, it became apparent throughout the course of conducting interviews that written consent was not common research practice for participants. Particularly in settings where local RECs do not exist, this case study suggests that it is the shared responsibility of the researcher and their home country REC to understand the specifics of both the cultural context and the power asymmetries that may prevail among research participants before deciding on the best method for documenting consent.

While the mandate of a REC is primarily to protect research participants, Nirojan Kulendrarajah highlights in his case study *“Positionality and reverse asymmetry in research ethics in international development: learning from experiences in researching South Asian philanthropy”* that not all research participants belong to vulnerable groups as is frequently the case in international development research [17]. Different sociocultural contexts can create a condition of reverse asymmetry, whereby the researcher holds a lower position of power and privilege and that can pose risks to the researcher and the research process. Kulendrarajah walks us through his experience with reverse power asymmetry in conducting research with individuals from high socioeconomic positions in India. While this contributed to a more relaxed, collegial environment in the interview process, the reverse asymmetry actually made it difficult to secure interviews with senior officials who could have provided valuable information on the subject matter. This case study reflects on the important role of local RECs providing local and context-specific ethical issues that may emerge for Northern researchers such as reverse asymmetry.

Finally, in summary of the experiences and challenges faced by foreign researchers conducting fieldwork in LMIC, the main article of this special issue underscores the importance of adhering to local ethical requirements in the conduct of development research, and the appropriate consideration that must be given to the political, legal, and cultural specificities of the local context [6]. Using the perspective of social justice, the article proposes several mechanisms in which Northern researchers and institutions, such as universities and funding donors, should enforce to be socially accountable and sensitive to all local ethics requirements, particularly those of local RECs, across jurisdictions. These measures not only maximize respect for local knowledge and local ethics oversight capacity; they uphold social justice by demanding that researchers be more aware of the risks and burdens of their research on local study participants.

## Conclusion

Consideration of cultural norms, practices, and legal specificities of local contexts is a matter of social justice, yet researchers continue to face challenges in navigating local ethics review mechanisms that help ensure the responsible conduct of development research. The case studies of this special issue reflect on the meaning of social accountability and the responsibilities researchers have towards research participants and the foreign jurisdictions in which they work. This journal supplement contributes to the on-going dialogue on global research ethics, and aims to increase support and space for international development researchers in the North and South to share their reflections, analysis, experiences and insights on how they can address and improve research ethics practice within their own countries. As part of their reflections and learning, some authors have highlighted potential gaps among processes and institutional arrangements for the oversight of foreign-led, social sciences or participatory research ethics in the countries where they conducted research. The views of the authors are their own, and not a reflection of IDRC opinion or policy.

### Remerciements

Les opinions exprimées dans cet ouvrage sont celles des auteurs et ne représentent pas nécessairement celles du CRDI ou de son conseil d'administration.

### Conflit d'intérêts

Aucun déclaré

### Acknowledgements

The views expressed in this work are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

### Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

**Éditeurs/Editors:** Hazar Haidar & Stanislav Birko

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**Reçu/Received:** 11 Sept 2017      **Publié/Published:** 15 Feb 2018

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