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The Case for Local Ethics Oversight in International Development Research

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Article abstract

This paper argues that international development research should be submitted to the oversight of research ethics committees from the countries where data will be collected. This includes research conducted by individuals who may fall outside the jurisdictions of most ethics guidelines or policies, such as individuals contracted by non-governmental organizations. The argument is grounded in an understanding of social justice that recognizes that not seeking local ethics approval can be an affront to the decolonization movement, and may lead to significant direct harms to participants. Local ethics oversight can help ensure projects appropriately take into consideration local laws, regulations, priorities and context. For example, a local research ethics committee may be in a better position than a foreign one to assess whether any given proposed project carries context-specific risks. In addition, submitting to a local research ethics committee is to acknowledge the legitimacy of local authorities, thereby taking a stance against the history of colonizing disempowerment. Local oversight is a mechanism to increase the accountability of researchers working abroad: if respect for local authority and tailoring to local context are to be upheld, there must be mechanisms to ensure that research that does not meet these requirements does not proceed. Objections based on the limited oversight capacity in some countries and on concerns related to the politicization of the review process are discussed. Finally, the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the implementation of greater local ethics oversight are laid out.

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ARTICLE (ÉVALUÉ PAR LES PAIRS / PEER-REVIEWED)

The Case for Local Ethics Oversight in International Development Research

Logan Cochrane[1], Renaud F. Boulanger[2], Gussai H. Sheikheldin[3], Gloria Song[4]

Résumé
Cet article fait valoir que la recherche sur le développement international devrait être soumise à la surveillance des comités d'éthique de la recherche dans les pays où les données seront collectées. Cela inclut les personnes ayant un statut qui leur permet de se soustraire des lignes directrices ou des politiques d'éthique, telles que les personnes engagées par des organisations non gouvernementales. L'argument repose sur une compréhension de la justice sociale qui reconnaît que ne pas rechercher l'approbation éthique au niveau local peut être un affront au mouvement de décolonisation et peut entraîner des dommages directs importants pour les participants. La supervision éthique au niveau local favorise une meilleure prise en compte des législations locales, des règlements, des priorités et du contexte. Par exemple, un comité d'éthique de la recherche local est souvent mieux placé qu'un comité étranger pour évaluer si un projet proposé comporte des risques spécifiques au contexte donné. En outre, le fait de soumettre un projet à un comité d'éthique de la recherche local permet de reconnaître la légitimité des autorités locales, prenant ainsi position contre l'histoire de la perte de pouvoir en lien avec la colonisation. La supervision locale permet d'accroître la responsabilité des chercheurs travaillant à l'étranger : si l'autorité locale et l'adaptation au contexte spécifique doivent être respectées, il doit y avoir des mécanismes pour s'assurer que la recherche qui ne satisfait pas à ces exigences ne peut avoir lieu. Les objections fondées sur la capacité limitée de supervision dans certains pays et sur les préoccupations liées à la politisation du processus d'évaluation sont abordées. Enfin, les rôles et les responsabilités des différentes parties prenantes dans la mise en œuvre d'une plus grande supervision éthique au niveau local sont définis.

Mots clés
études sur le développement, recherche en développement international, éthique de la recherche

Abstract
This paper argues that international development research should be submitted to the oversight of research ethics committees from the countries where data will be collected. This includes research conducted by individuals who may fall outside the jurisdictions of most ethics guidelines or policies, such as individuals contracted by non-governmental organizations. The argument is grounded in an understanding of social justice that recognizes that not seeking local ethics approval can be an affront to the decolonization movement, and may lead to significant direct harms to participants. Local ethics oversight can help ensure projects appropriately take into consideration local laws, regulations, priorities and context. For example, a local research ethics committee may be in a better position than a foreign one to assess whether any given proposed project carries context-specific risks. In addition, submitting to a local research ethics committee is to acknowledge the legitimacy of local authorities, thereby taking a stance against the history of colonizing disempowerment. Local oversight is a mechanism to increase the accountability of researchers working abroad: if respect for local authority and tailoring to local context are to be upheld, there must be mechanisms to ensure that research that does not meet these requirements does not proceed. Objections based on the limited oversight capacity in some countries and on concerns related to the politicization of the review process are discussed. Finally, the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the implementation of greater local ethics oversight are laid out.

Keywords
development studies, international development research, research ethics

Introduction

> The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. Just knowing that someone measured our 'faculties' by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations.
>
> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* [1].

Failing to consult local stakeholders when conducting research abroad may enable research that runs counter to local understandings of research-related risks. In the area of agricultural biotechnology, Canada is open to genetically modified food commodities and supports research into such modifications. Ethiopia, on the other hand, has taken a precautionary approach, banning all genetic modifications of food crops, as well as research on such modifications [2-4]. Although both countries are signatories to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, they have interpreted and implemented that protocol differently. Examples like this hint at the damage that research could create in a given community when the research is conducted by individuals less familiar with the setting. This is true not only of agriculture and environmental research, but of human participant research as well.

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The editors follow the recommendations and procedures outlined in the COPE Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors. Specifically, the editors will work to ensure the highest ethical standards of publication, including: the identification and management of conflicts of interest (for editors and for authors), the fair evaluation of manuscripts, and the publication of manuscripts that meet the journal's standards of excellence.

In this paper, we argue that local ethics approval should be obtained for international development research – meaning approval from authorities in the jurisdiction where the research is conducted, not only where it is proposed or analyzed. While the practice of obtaining local ethics approval is common for health research, it is less common in non-clinical research, including the social sciences, and is a topic that has been subject to limited research [5]. This contrasts sharply with the domain of international clinical research, which has been, and continues to be, abundantly discussed in the research ethics literature.

We consider "international development research" broadly: research that seeks to improve human wellbeing by improving health, knowledge and skills, standards of living, governance, environmental sustainability, security, rights, equity and social justice [6-9]. We are not aware of any systematic studies on the subject, and recognize that practices vary by individual, institution, and discipline. Based on our experiences in international development research and interviews conducted with researchers, there seems to exist a marked tendency in non-clinical research to only consult the research ethics committees (REC) of the researchers' home institutions – often in the economic North, and often within the walls of a university [10]. We believe that this should change. Research institutions, such as universities, and funding agencies should not only establish local country ethics approval as a *de facto* expectation, but should also implement the necessary mechanisms for ensuring that local approval has been obtained when and where possible. Similarly, this expectation should be laid out clearly in internationally-recognized ethics guidelines. Despite widespread habitual demand for research ethics approval, our concern is that there is minimal appreciation and enforcement of it in international development research. The result can be affronts to justice, equity and accountability, and the possibility of significant harm.

In what follows, we explain the critical role of ethics oversight in early detection and prevention of potential harm that can be caused by some international development research. Afterwards, we explore a number of reasons supporting our position, stated above. These include the importance of (a) tailoring research to the local context, (b) respecting local authority, and (c) ensuring mechanisms of accountability. After having outlined these justifications, we discuss some of the challenges to local ethics oversight such as low capacity, politicization, and bias. We do not believe that these challenges reduce the importance of local REC approval as a general principle, and instead propose processes to mitigate these so that transparency and accountability can be fostered.

We fear the lack of literature justifying the importance of local ethics oversight in the context of international development research [5] might leave open the door to two phenomena. First, the minimization of the importance of local oversight, hinging on the assumption that there is a *de facto* lack of risk for (certain types of) international development research (for a parallel exploration of this theme in the social sciences more broadly, see [11,12]). Second, the curtailing of efforts to build capacity to enable local ethics oversight of non-health-related research. To begin our exploration of the phenomena, we sought to draw from the personal experience of three cohorts of international development researchers, a project that led to the creation of the special issue accompanying this article. The case studies assembled highlight some of the structural barriers that international development researchers face when trying to obtain local ethics approval.

The role of research ethics oversight

Our starting point is the recognition of the potential for harm that can result from international development research. Drawing from Mayer's suggestion that development *practice* can be harmful, our respective experiences in the field suggest that *research* into development may likewise have direct or indirect consequences that unintentionally cause harm on multiple levels [13]. Research-related harms are often fostered by power inequalities and vulnerabilities that can cause or enable exploitation [14]. Examples of this on the individual level include qualitative social science research that re-traumatizes interviewees, or the identifiability of opinions and experiences that were meant to be non-attributable to a specific individual [15,16]. At the community and national level, harm can occur on a broader scale, such as when research is used to justify relocating communities for the purposes of large-scale development and investment projects [17].

The primary purpose of RECs is to ensure the protection of research participants against such harms. To accomplish this, RECs try to identify where potential harms may emerge in any given research project and to assess the ensuing risk-benefit ratio of that particular study, while ensuring participants are informed and consent voluntarily to their participation in research [6,18]. Over the past four decades, the research ethics infrastructure has been strengthened globally, and RECs are now present in most countries. However, questions remain about what are the most appropriate frameworks of oversight for research projects that are conducted in other jurisdictions, particularly in the economic South.

Global funders and northern RECs often recognize the importance of local ethics oversight. For example, the Australian Council for International Development states that researchers "should ensure that they are aware of, and follow, any national ethics processes, and relevant ethical review processes through local institutions, and comply with local laws" [19]. The Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) outlines a similar requirement: Article 8.3 states that "research conducted under the auspices of a Canadian research institution and conducted outside its jurisdiction, whether elsewhere in Canada, or outside Canada, shall undergo prior research ethics review by both: the REB [research ethics board] at the Canadian institution under the auspices of which the research is being conducted; and the REB or other responsible review body or bodies, if any, at the research site" [18]. Ng et al. [5] similarly support local REC

oversight, arguing that RECs not only be involved in research reviews, but that they also take the leading/coordinating role when more than one REC are involved.

Taking all the above into consideration, and situating it in the context of international development research, we review below some of the primary reasons as to why seeking local research ethics review ought to be seen as the "right" thing to do.

The case for local ethics approval in international development research

There have been decades of debates about what social justice is, and how it ought to be achieved. Rather than delve into these debates, or engage the diversity of opinions of what it entails [see 20-22], we here approach the concept of social justice teleologically: we begin from first principles acknowledged as roots of justice and advocate that they be established and advanced. We deplore that research that is not explicitly about social justice often does not take it into account [23]. Additionally, when it is addressed in a routine fashion, aspects of social justice may be rendered technical, whereby complex issues of social justice are quantified into a limited number of simplistic metrics [2]. Transforming research practices in international development requires changing the minimum standard, and thereby reducing the possibility of injustice, whether in process or in result, intentionally or unintentionally. As such, in the following sub-sections we offer three areas wherein a grounding in social justice warrants justifications for local ethics oversight of international development research. On the social justice spectrum, these three areas are more accommodative (working with the existing system) than transformative (changing the way the system works), and we present them as basic requirements. First, there should be recognition that the perception of what is ethically sound and an appropriate level of risk is not uniform globally, and the positions held by foreign researchers and external RECs ought not to be imposed upon the economic South. Furthermore, sharing the benefits of the research can mean significantly different things for northern RECs granting ethics approval than for local RECs. Opinions about what is and is not acceptable ought to be locally informed [23]. Additionally, bypassing national authority replicates attitudes and practices that disrespect and disempower that authority. Third, external RECs granting approval for research in the economic South provide limited means of accountability. Conversely, local RECs can stipulate monitoring and reporting requirements, while also ensuring researchers act in accordance with national regulations and laws.

Tailoring research to the local context

Local ethics oversight is important because local RECs can assess the risks of harm for proposed projects based upon their own laws, regulations, priorities and context. For example, when researchers obtain ethics approvals from their own institutions (e.g., a Canadian university), they may not operate with the same risk assessment measures as would a local REC. For some components of any given research, local RECs may be in a better position than foreign ones to assess whether the proposed project carries certain risks within that local context. For instance, study protocols drafted by researchers from the economic North may be blind to perceptions of obligation within relationships of power disparities for participants from the economic South, the legacy of colonialism and the unstated assumption of personal gain as a result of participation, all of which can be lost in figurative and literal translation during the research process [14]. In the context of Indigenous research within Canada, which deals with nations within a nation, Stiegman and Castleden have provided a key example of how the researcher's home institution may not be sensitized to the cultural practices and needs of the local Indigenous context [25]. Additionally, local RECs might be better placed to ensure that benefits are appropriately shared with the people and nation being studied. Examples of this are presented in the case studies included in this special issue [26].

While researchers could mitigate risk without consulting national authorities, who assesses and authorizes the proposed research is itself a component of ethical research. Imposing research or assuming that it is sufficiently low risk or that the risk involved is warranted, without consulting national authorities, is a return to colonial approaches and imperialist attitudes, and the subject of the following subsection. Of course, this is not to say that foreign-based RECs (based at the institutions of international researchers) are unimportant: they ensure proposed studies are in line with researchers' own institutional and national codes of ethics. In some cases, these codes may be more stringent than local ones.

Respect for local authority: countering colonial attitudes and ethical imperialism

The 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action emphasize the important role of the nation state in determining its own strategies, priorities and processes. These agreements attempt to address a long-lasting concern within the practice of international development, namely that foreigners direct funding choices and development activity. In addition to shifting the balance of power, these agreements outline mutual accountability as a key principle upon which cooperation and collaboration can occur. These agreements are two examples of efforts towards what we consider to be arrangements reflective of more just relationships. It is possible to translate these steps from the donor and development practice realm into that of research by adopting different operating definitions of terms (e.g., accountability for international development donors tends to be financial, whereas we refer to accountability in research as being much broader).

Respect for local authority is also an antidote for a larger power phenomenon that may not be directly expressed but is present by its overshadowing consequences. Colonialist practices are based on power relations inherited from colonial relations, regardless of whether there is an actual colonial history between the particular countries or groups involved [27]. Colonial relations involve power relations resulting from the global and local politics of postcolonial realities. Indigenous and postcolonialist scholars have argued that research practices have allowed the powerful colonizers to view themselves as

morally superior and "civilized" by studying and categorizing the colonized as the "Other" in a process of objectification and dehumanization [1,25]. From a social justice-oriented postcolonial perspective, researchers or research teams associated with institutions from the economic North doing field work in the economic South must be cognizant of the risk of replicating colonialist practices. Colonialism and imperialism have deep-rooted historical legacies, and the predominant attitudes and practices continue into the present. When one nation imposes its perspective upon another by virtue of its greater economic or military power, concerns of justice arise. In international development research, these concerns should arise when foreign researchers and external RECs determine alone what level of risk is deemed acceptable for local populations. When RECs based in the economic North determine ethical issues on behalf of local stakeholders, they promote the trope that this responsibility and authority is "rightfully" theirs. We find this deeply problematic.

When local ethics oversight capacity has been formally established but is not sought, we must confront the possibility that colonialist attitudes persist and are being replicated. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith has emphasized the connection between research and European colonialism in the Indigenous context, describing "research" as a dirty word in Indigenous vocabulary, one that conjures bad memories and distrust due to past unethical research practices [1]. Researchers may disagree with either position in the example we gave at the start of this article about the differences between the Canadian and Ethiopian positions on the genetic modification of crops. However, conducting research in spite of that knowledge, or, possibly worse, believing it unimportant to bother asking for permission first, replicates paternalistic and colonialist practices.

Ensuring that local RECs approve research is one essential step towards consciously and systemically avoiding the replication of harmful colonial attitudes – regardless of whether those RECs employ different considerations than the RECs of the foreign researchers' home institutions. Denying a less powerful or less economically advantaged country the right to implement its own governing systems are practices that we ought to oppose on principle as being unjust. Submitting to a local REC is to acknowledge and respect the local authority that governs the environment in which one is operating and, as such, is taking a stance against our shared colonial history.

Providing mechanisms to enforce accountability

Accountability refers to the obligation of a person or an entity to "account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner" [28]. We believe that international development researchers have a responsibility and an obligation to be accountable to the countries in which their research is conducted and to the people with or on whom their research is conducted. It is insufficient for a REC to grant the researcher approval for a research project based in another country, because the oversight and ability of that REC to follow up may be very limited in that other jurisdiction. This is an ethical as well as a legal argument, and it is tied to the former two arguments of respect for local authority and tailoring to local context. If respect for local authority and tailoring to local context are to be upheld, there must be mechanisms to enforce accountability at the local level.

Within the field of international development, far too little consideration has been given to the concepts of responsibility and accountability [29]. For example, while in theory informed consent forms provide the relevant contact information, this information may be of little use to participants, as they may face any number of barriers in using that information, such as lacking the resources to make an international call, lacking access to emails, or lacking the required technical literacy level needed to send a complaint electronically. Scholars have observed the difficulties that can arise in accessing mechanisms for accountability and legal redress for negative effects caused by development assistance [30]. Similarly, forms of legal redress for harms caused by international development research may be limited or difficult to pursue. RECs in the home institutions of researchers have the authority to take some punitive measures against a researcher (i.e., terminating a study early) when found to be in breach of research ethics principles. But the mechanisms for accountability are much more limited when research is conducted abroad, particularly given the potential limitations of research participants and host communities to enter in communication with the proper authorities. In contrast, local ethics oversight might provide more easily accessible means of communication for participants, and therefore access to recourse. As such, local RECs have the potential to offer a mechanism to hold researchers responsible if the research causes harm, to help countries and institutions keep track of the research that is being conducted under their jurisdiction, and to ensure that research results are reported back to host communities.

As mentioned above, accountability includes the obligation to disclose results in a transparent manner. Accountability means that researchers must also meet expectations with regard to transparency and sharing of benefits resulting from the research. The Declaration of Helsinki, which guides biomedical research, states that those involved in a study are entitled to be informed of its outcomes and to share any benefits that result from it (Article 33). The Canadian TCPS2 adds that sharing of results should be done in a "culturally appropriate and meaningful format" [18]. Similarly, Indigenous scholars have argued that Indigenous research methodologies require research to be disseminated back to its people in a culturally appropriate manner "as part of an ethical and respectful approach" [1]. Universities and funding agencies may require that participants have access to the research results, but the implementation of plans is "often left to the researchers' goodwill and discretion" [29]. As the Ethiopian case study of this special issue shows, when national research ethics approval is sought, authorities can make approval conditional to the sharing of results and the maintenance of regular communication between researchers and authorities [26]. While this leaves some questions unanswered (e.g., how dissemination costs would be covered), oversight by local RECs provides a means through which national authorities can ensure that the nation wherein research takes place, and the people with/on whom research is conducted, have access to the results and share in the benefits.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine how much or how little of the obtained knowledge and benefits ought to be shared; rather, we wish to highlight that national authorities are better positioned (both pragmatically and from a social justice perspective) to make these assessments and enforce these principles in appropriate and effective ways than are foreign-based RECs. That is not to say that the later must not play a role. But often, there may be a tendency to emphasize procedures that may appear to be more for the protection of the institution or the researcher than the local participants. Thus, part of our argument is that we must shift the power inherent to ethics oversight so that decision-making rests first and foremost with local stakeholders.

Special considerations

In arguing for local ethics oversight, some circumstances make it such that approval for research is impossible to obtain (e.g., lack of local capacity in a given research area, absence of any local REC) or may result in objectively crucial and timely research being denied based on biases or for political reasons [31]. Similarly, ongoing oversight may also prove challenging. Even when research designs are sound and informed consent is reflective of the activities that are planned, the implementation of any given study may differ significantly from the protocol, particularly in the field – an issue of concern that is not limited to that which is conducted in the economic South. Like others, Benator holds that "inadequate attention is paid to monitoring studies, trying to improve the actual conduct of research, and to promoting justice in the distribution of the burdens and benefits of research" [14].

These challenges are valid and they are important [32,33]. However, we see them as illustrations of the possibility to acknowledge special considerations through the case-by-case application of the general principle of local ethics oversight in international development research. We are not aware of any systematic assessment of the degree to which challenges of the nature we explore below are encountered.

1. Local ethics oversight capacity

The infrastructure of local ethics oversight may be significantly less established in some jurisdictions, or may be entirely absent [34]. Communications with and instructions from the local REC may be delayed, infrequent or inconsistent. Requirements for obtaining ethics approval may not always be straightforward, readily accessible, or easy to comprehend – the case studies in this special issue demonstrate how challenging obtaining information about local RECs can be. In some cases, it may even be difficult simply to determine whether a local REC exists, and therefore if there is a requirement to obtain approval for one's research [34]. Furthermore, RECs may lack the enforcement capacity to take action on foreign researchers who do not follow their requirements. This may lead to temptation to forego the REC process altogether. Avoiding a legal requirement because of a country's underdeveloped infrastructure not only perpetuates low capacity and undermines legitimacy, but it also jeopardizes research activities by exposing them to early termination, for instance. It is also important to note that even when local RECs appear dysfunctional, other mechanisms may exist to ensure a minimal oversight of research activities. For instance, some nations require researchers to obtain special visas to conduct research [35].

Generally speaking, having to deal with capacity challenges of local RECs comes with the package of working in international development research. However frustrating these issues may be, researchers who voluntarily choose to work in this field ought not to use these frustrations as justifications for bypassing local ethics approval requirements.

2. Biases and politicization of local ethics oversight

It is important to note that a local REC may not necessarily act in the interest of all people in a nation. Some may feel that many government institutions, possibly some national RECs, represent only the dominant governing elite's interests at the expense of marginalized populations and continue to act with colonialist practices and paternalistic attitudes – or in direct violation of human rights or basic research ethics principles. While this may be the case in some places, such instances need to be explored in detailed, country-specific analyses that highlight the unique contexts in which formal institutions have lost their legitimacy due to failures to protect citizens. Such breakdowns in legitimacy are the exception rather than the norm and, as such, do not undermine our overall promotion of local ethics oversight.

Another related concern is where researchers may face situations where a local REC is reluctant to approve specific research on a politically sensitive or controversial topic that is not favourable to the governing interests in power. This is particularly relevant for human rights research. For example, a research project studying the experiences of homosexual men in a country where homosexuality is criminalized may be confronted with additional obstacles or even dangers – including risk to participants' safety – if approval is sought from the local REC. Clandestine or covert research of this nature can result in imprisonment and must not be taken lightly [26]. The decision should be informed, deliberate and carefully considered – to the point where it would be seen as justified by an impartial REC. The decision ought to be based on values of human rights, human dignity, and equality. In no case should it ever be made out of pure convenience or as a result of adopting a paternalistic attitude. To be clear, we are not advocating that the existence of exceptions allows individual researchers to pick and choose when they wish to follow local ethics oversight procedures. Rather, if a strong case can be made to forego local ethics oversight, it must be approved as being so by an impartial REC known to take the requirement of local ethics oversight seriously.

But researchers should not stop there. An additional step is to partner with a local research institution or to team up with experienced local researchers, whenever possible. True partnerships may offer additional legitimacy to research projects critical of the dominant local discourse, and alleviate impressions of the North meddling in the local country's affairs [36], while

allowing for deeper consideration of the contextual specificity that a local REC would have considered in its assessment of a project. However, it is important to keep in mind that local research partners may be more at risk of persecution from the dominant local elite than might be a foreign researcher. A proper balance must be struck between the safety of the local research team and the principle of local oversight.

Putting it into practice: Roles and responsibilities

The third section of this article presents ways that local ethics oversight can be made a basic requirement of all international development research. This section recognizes that in order for this expectation to become standard, multiple changes are required. We propose the following clarifications of roles and responsibilities for the purpose of discussion, and as potential means by which the local oversight requirement could become a standard practice.

Researchers

Researchers need to be observant of the potential manifestations of injustice, colonialist practices, and paternalistic attitudes in their research practices. Being self-reflective and critical is an essential aspect of being an ethical researcher because RECs (local or foreign) rely upon researchers both to observe rules and guidelines and to identify problematic areas when they emerge so that adjustments to study procedures and behaviours can be made. Second, as we have argued in this article, researchers should seek to measure their plans and practices against the three principles: local risk-benefit analysis, respect for local authority and accountability. It is not the researcher's responsibility alone, but each individual, group, and institution that is a stakeholder in a research project plays a key role in the transition to more just research practice. Researchers also have a responsibility to ensure they are abiding by the correct procedures and according to the laws and regulations of the country wherein the research takes place.

Besides obtaining any required approval from local RECs, researchers should also comply with all other forms of requirements as outlined by the nation within which they intend to conduct research, including obtaining the correct type of visa and other processes. This relates to the nation's right to be informed of, and regulate, research conducted within its borders.

Research institutions, including universities

Home institutions have the power (and obligation) to require that local ethics oversight be taken seriously. Institutions should thus move beyond having local REC approval be a box to be ticked off within a checklist (when it is) and should instead implement a process where documentary proof of the local REC approval is required to be submitted. In other words, research institutions should play a more active role in stringently ensuring that local REC approval has been obtained and will be followed. If local REC approval has not been obtained, institutions should require a documented explanation of why this is the case. In order to support researchers with this process, and avoid frustration and delays, the proof of local REC approval should be clearly communicated at the earliest stage, so that the step does not emerge as an unknown requirement when submitting for ethics review. This is particularly important for graduate students and early career researchers who have less experience with international research procedures and processes, and who may be more constrained by unchangeable timelines.

Beyond an accountability exercise, institutions may be able to assist with this process by compiling a database of the ethics approval requirements of different countries as a resource, perhaps developed with a network of research institutions. Furthermore, institutions may also move towards increased recognition of the validity of the oversight provided by local RECs by putting in place mechanisms to expedite review of protocols already locally approved. Institutions can also facilitate the exchange of information about the conduct of studies in international settings by developing resources such as repositories of submitted protocols, an approach that has been shown to be viable [36].

National government and local research ethics oversight bodies

For the purposes of efficiency for all parties, all countries would facilitate better practice by assigning clear legal mandates to an agency, or agencies, to act as RECs. The clarity of authority, and the process for granting approval, benefits both local authorities and foreign researchers, since it ensures that the latter obtain their approvals if they meet the standard requirements. This legal clarity reinforces the seriousness of local approval. We recognize that there will continue to be challenges of biases and politicization, but working with a developing system is one of the key means for its improvement. The case study from Tanzania [35], about the clarity of the ethics review process hosted by the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology, is a good example of how some countries are actively working to clarify their requirements and establish legal consequences for those who neglect to respect such laws. In addition, for the capacity of local RECs to reach the potential described in this paper, national governments need to sufficiently resource RECs to ensure their capacity is at a level appropriate to manage ethics review, which may include lobbying domestically for additional resources and establishing partnerships internationally.

Conclusions

There is strong cause for critical reflection about entrenched bias, presuppositions, and power relations within research practice [38]. These concerns are well-documented in the global health research ethics literature, and possible solutions have been proposed, such as increased engagement of host communities [27,39]. However, outside the realm of health research, the relevance of these concerns have received far less attention from the research ethics community itself, despite the fact that non-health research can also have serious ethical implications. We recognize that these issues are not limited to international development research, but the objective of this article narrows the focus to this realm.

This paper has argued that local REC approval should become a minimum standard of practice in international development research. We have presented three justifications for why this is the case, each with the objective of moving toward a more comprehensive and consistent system that advances ethical practices in international development research. First, local ethics oversight helps tailor research projects to the local context, taking into consideration the particular local conditions, as well as helping to balance the distribution of benefits. Second, recognizing the legitimacy of local ethics oversight sends a strong signal against colonialist practices and attitudes inherited from the colonial legacy, even when it may feel bureaucratic and/or is difficult to navigate. Finally, it is a mechanism to empower local authorities and further protect local research participants: by providing local authorities with the knowledge about ongoing studies within their jurisdiction, it allows them to enhance accountability, while also making it more accessible for local research participants to seek recourse or inquiry regarding any possible harmful consequences. The duty to comply with all local REC requirements continues to remain the responsibility of the researcher, as well as, we argue, the researcher's home institution. Researchers are not absolved of this duty by the mere fact that the approval process may be unpleasantly complicated, difficult or bureaucratic. While this article was founded upon a position of social justice, the recommendations have focused upon the basic and immediate requirements of change, rather than the aspired ideal (we can consider that there are levels of social justice: the immediately attainable and the long-term aspiration). Our objective in doing so is to move the direction of international development research practice forward, raising the bar of what is acceptable and thereby decreasing the potential for harm and injustice.

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