Letter from the African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC): Advice for institutional ethics committees on process, roles, composition and decolonisation

MUGUMBATE, Rugare J.; OMOROGIUWA, Tracey. B. E.; CHIKOKO, Witness; and DIRADITSILE, Kabo

ABSTRACT

The AIEC was set up to provide ethics advice to African researchers, initially with a bias on social work and development. Ultimately, the committee will be enlarged to include people who work with communities, African cultural experts, social scientists from other disciplines, professionals from other disciplines and lawyers. When fully fledged, the committee will be able to provide full ethics services. It was started by the African Social Work Network (ASWNet) to address a gap that exists currently in African research, that of inadequate ethics oversight. This letter will be published three times a year, once in each third of the year. The authors are the current members of the AIEC. In this first ethics letter, we provide a brief review of literature on African ethics, provide key definitions and advice to ethics on the process of developing committees, roles of stakeholders, composition and decolonising.

KEY TERMS: *Africa, ethics, ethics committee, definitions, development, practice, social work, research*

Author/s details
Dr Jacob Rugare Mugumbate, African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC); School of Health and Society, University of Wollongong, Australia
Dr. Tracy B. E. Omorogiuwa, African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC);Department of Social Work, University of Benin, Nigeria
Dr Witness Chikoko, African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC);Department of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, Department of Social Work, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
Dr Kabo Diraditsile, PhD (Botswana), African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC);
Corresponding email: asw@africasocialwork.net

Current and previous volumes are available at:
https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/ or
https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajsw

ASWNet
Africa Social Work Network

How to reference using ASWNet style:

Mugumbate, J. R; Omorogiuwa, T. B. E.; Chikoko, W; Diraditsile, K. (2022). Letter from the African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC): Advice for institutional ethics committees on process, roles, composition and decolonisation. *African Journal of Social Work, 12(2),* 59-65.

INTRODUCTION

Based on data collected in the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) between 2013 and 2019, most researchers in Africa do not have access to an ethics committee. This leaves a gap in African research, that of inadequate ethics oversight. As such, the African Social Work Network (ASWNet) designed a platform to provide independent ethics advice to researchers – The African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC). The AIEC was set up initially with a bias towards social work and development disciplines but ultimately, the committee will be enlarged. When fully composed, the membership will include people who work with communities, African cultural experts, social scientists from other disciplines, professionals from other disciplines and lawyers. When fully fledged, the committee will be able to provide full ethics services – advice, approval and follow up. For researchers wanting to or already doing research in Africa, it is important to get ethics advice or ethics approval. This is important so that you protect our communities, and that you also get protected. At times external researchers dump research ethics in Africa, an unethical practice. Others only get ethics approval from an external country and ignore local ethics yet they are very important. The AIEC provides ethics advice internal to African research institutions, organisations and individual researchers including honours, masters and doctoral students, and externally to research institutions, researchers including students outside Africa. This letter will be published three times a year, once in each third of the year. All authors of this letter are the current members of the AIEC. In this first ethics letter, we provide a brief review of literature on African ethics, provide key definitions and advice to ethics on the process of developing committees, roles of stakeholders, composition and decolonising.

LITERATURE ON AFRICAN ETHICS

At all times, the research should be governed by the acceptable ethics (Omorogiuwa, 2016). Human study necessitates extra caution due to its sensitivity, which raises appropriate ethical issues. It is important for ethics to be embodied or internalised in the researcher instead of them being seen as a requirement of research. Similarly, the majority of social work research relies on people voluntarily providing the data needed to generate knowledge (Omorogiuwa, 2016). The goal of research ethics is to preserve the participants' care and well-being. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2003) gave guidance on relevant ethical principles, such as informed consent, right to say no, age-friendly language, developing trust, right to privacy and confidentiality, and voluntary involvement, in order to generate credible information on such challenges faced by participants. A research's intended participants should be approached in their various contexts to confirm their interest in participating in the study. After that, let them know that their participation is entirely choice and that there will be no consequences if they choose not to engage.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007) 'Research ethics committees review proposed studies with human participants to ensure that they conform to internationally and locally accepted ethical guidelines, monitor studies once they have begun and, where relevant, take part in follow-up action and surveillance after the end of the research. Committees have the authority to approve, reject or stop studies or require modifications to research protocols. They may also perform other functions, such as setting policies or offering opinions on ongoing ethical issues in research'. Other countries have ethics committees for practice, known asclinical ethics committees in health (Moodley, Kabanda and Soldaat (2020).

The community plays an important role in ethics (Simwinga and Kabero, 2014). In Tanzania for example, Community Advisory Boards (CAB) have been created for research on HIV/AIDS. Their roles include 'contextualization of the informed consent process and protocol, managing rumours in the community, weighing trial risks and benefits, sensitizing the community, assisting participant recruitment, tracing and retention (Pancras et al, 2022, p.1). Community involvement ensures that the research process is transparent, contextually relevant and respectful. In the San Code of Ethics, community has a key role. the code emphasises respect, honest, care, justice and co-production of knowledge. Below are selected snippets from the code:

> We require an open and clear exchange between the researchers and our leaders. The language must be clear, not academic. Complex issues must be carefully and correctly described, not simply assuming the San cannot understand. There must be a totally honest sharing of information.
>
> We have encountered lack of honesty in many instances in the past. Researchers have deviated from the stated purpose of research, failed to honour a promise to show the San the research prior to publication, and published a biased paper based upon leading questions given to young San trainees. This lack of

honesty caused much damage among the public, and harmed the trust between the collaborating organisation and the San.

Research should be aligned to local needs and improve the lives of San. This means that the research process must be carried out with care for all involved, especially the San community.

We have encountered lack of care in many instances in the past. For instance, we were spoken down to, or confused with complicated scientific language, or treated as ignorant. Failing to ensure that something is left behind that improves the lives of the San also represents lack of care.

We have encountered lack of justice and fairness in many instances in the past. These include theft of San traditional knowledge by researchers. At the same time, many companies in South Africa and globally are benefiting from our traditional knowledge in sales of indigenous plant varieties without benefit sharing agreements, proving the need for further compliance measures to ensure fairness.

Only 36% of African research institutions have ethics committees (Kirigia, Wambebe and Baba-Mousa, 2005). Other literature show that there is a limited number of ethics committees in Africa (Silaigwana and Wassenaar, 2015) although this situation is changing (Mokgatla, IJsselmuiden, Wassenaar, Kasule, 2018; Marzouk et al, 2014, Owusu, 2022). In a 2019 research, Owusu (2022) found that Ghana had 18 research ethics committee, although government there was no public law or body to support and regulate them. In their review of other studies, Silaigwana and Wassenaar (2015, p. 1) found that ethics committees in Africa faced challenges including 'lack of membership diversity, scarcity of resources, insufficient training of members, inadequate capacity to review and monitor studies, and lack of national ethics guidelines and accreditation'. In another research, it was found that it was researchers who faced challenges of acquiring the money required to apply for ethics (Baluku, 2021). It has also been shown that ethics committees in Africa often use non-African ethics and have copied their ethics guidelines. This is largely because of colonization but also failure to change this situation. African ethics come from African philosophy (Murove, 2020). Murove (2020, p. 1) said:

First, African ethics is regarded as ancestral ethics in the sense that the existence of the present community and all that is regarded as ethical has its genealogy in the ancestors. The belief in ancestors is based on the presumption that life is endless, and the sacred and profane are intertwined with each other. The present community exists in anamnestic solidarity with the past, and hence when the present community becomes the past, it will influence the wellbeing of those who will exist in the future. As ancestral ethics, African ethics is not about an uncritical acceptance of traditions; rather it demonstrates the narrative of nature of ethics where critical thinking is integral to improvisation and creativity. Second, African ethics places premier value on relationality in its ontology of a human being. My humanity is conjoined with the humanity of others as espoused in the adage—Umuntu ngomuntu gabantu (a person is a person because of other persons). Human beings are communal beings whose ultimate wellbeing is indispensable from the reality of human common belonging. Third, the motif of relationality is paramount to the discourse of African ethics.

This long quote shows that for Africa ethics to be relevant, they should be grounded in African values. The size and composition of ethics committees vary. According to Professor Renzaho, a renowned African researcher, 'internationally accepted membership composition includes a chairperson, a layman, a laywoman, someone with experience with professional care or counselling, a person who performs a pastoral care role in a community (e.g. religious leader), a lawyer, and two persons with research experience' (Renzaho, 2022). In terms of size, committees in Africa have been found to range from 9-31 (Kass et al, 2007).

KEY DEFINITIONS

The definitions are arranged in alphabetical order.

- *Conflict of interest*: a situation where a researcher or ethics committee member will benefit from a decision about ethics
- *Ethic*: the rightness of an action

- *Ethical analysis*: using relevant ethics to assess an action's potential consequences
- *Ethical considerations*: a discussion of how a research or practitioner will apply ethics in a project or activity they are taking
- *Ethical dilemma*: a situation where right or wrong cannot be determined easily
- *Ethical guidelines*: rules used by governments and ethics committees to determine if an action is right or wrong
- *Ethical independence:* the decision of a committee or member of the committee should not be influenced by the institution, the applicant or otherwise
- *Ethical issue*: an action that is likely to result in an ethic being compromised or questioned
- *Ethical problem*: an action that will result in an ethic being broken
- *Ethics advice*: recommendations made by an ethics committee
- *Ethics application fee*: a fee that is paid to get ethics advice or clearance
- *Ethics approval*: clearance given by an ethics committee to go ahead with an action determined as right.
- *Ethics clearance*: approval given by an ethics committee to go ahead with an action determined as right.
- *Ethics colonization*: a situation where local ethics are replaced by non-African ethics
- *Ethics committee*: a task group of people set up to review ethics in research or practice
- *Ethics deliberation*: a discussion to reach consensus on an ethical issue, problem or dilemma. Most African communities deliberate on ethics most of the time
- *Ethics protocol*: a document or statement that details a project, ethics considerations and how ethical issues will be addressed
- *Ethics rejection*: a denial or blockage given by an ethics committee not to go ahead with an action determined as wrong
- *Ethics review board*: a task group of people set up to review ethics to be applied when doing research or practice
- *Oral ethics*: unwritten ethics that exist in proverbs, songs, poetry and are embodied
- *Practice ethics committee*: known as Clinical Ethics Committees in health, their role is to oversee ethics for practitioners
- *Research ethics committee*: a task group of people set up to review ethics in research
- *Risk-benefit assessment*: measuring risk of an action against potential benefits
- *Risk*: potential to cause harm, distress, disability or death
- *Unethical*: the uprightness of an action

OUR ADVICE

1. *Advice on process of development of ethics committees in Africa*

There are no ethics committees in many African research and professional institutions because of lack of training, limited resources, and lack of awareness. We advise that each African research institutions (e.g. a university or research institute) and professional association (e.g. council or association of social work) to have an ethics committee. Their role would be to identify risk in research and practice and counter it. The process to development of an ethics committee is:

- Constitute a committee to develop draft guidelines
- Benchmark locally or regionally and adopt the guidelines
- Constitute the ethics committee
- Train ethics committee
- Advertise the service to your researchers and practitioners
- Train researchers

Given the cost of running ethics committees, we recommend, where appropriate that practice and research committees be combined with sub-committees for each. Where researchers are constrained financially, it might be useful to start with a free service or have subsidized fees.

2. *Advice on roles and responsibilities of stakeholders*

Communities have the primary role to oversee ethics. Ethical issues are encountered every day in communities, and they are discussed in families, family courts, community courts, cultural institutions, modern courts and other fora. While ethics committees can be formed, we recommend that they act as extensions of the community, rather than to compete with communities. Communities are permanent, and they existed before institutions, to that end, institutions may cease to function while communities keep going. In ethics committees, there should be more members from the community. *Individuals researchers or practitioners* have the primary role to embody and apply ethics. This means that ethics must be part of them, not only applied to research and practice but in everyday life. *The government* has a primary role to develop ethical guidelines as a representative or intermediary of the community and institutions. The role of government is to register to register ethics committees, set guidelines and to oversee their work. This role can be played by a public or government board. *The institutions of research and practice* have a primary role to implement ethics in research and practice. Their role is to set up ethics committees, monitor researchers and develop training programs for ethics. Finally, *ethics committees* have a primary role to approve or deny ethics applications and to follow up on researchers.

3. *Advice on composition ethics committees*

Ethics committees in Africa are usually modelled along western committees but this should change to reflect local contexts. An ethics committee for social science and related research and practice, could have the following members:

1. A community representative who lives in the community
2. A person who works in the community
3. Two African cultural experts
4. One African indigenous leader
5. One spiritual leader (African spirituality, Christian spirituality or Islamic spirituality)
6. A person representing each discipline of researchers in the jurisdiction
7. A legal person
8. A retired scientist or professional from the community
9. An educator from the community
10. A representative of special interest groups
11. Representative of the institution
12. Representative of the faculty
13. Representative of a relevant government department
14. A secretary or administrator of the committee

We recommend that committees are gender balanced. We strongly recommend starting with smaller ethics committees rather than not having one at all.

4. *Advice on decolonising African ethics*

More often than not, African ethics committees are modeled along western committees. Instead, indigenous models are desirable. There are several strategies that could be taken, including:

a) Stating the undergirding philosophy of ethics processes for the institution, committee and researchers. For Africa, the undergirding philosophy is Ubuntu. It must be clear that ethics are derived from Ubuntu. Ethics are not handed down from another group of people, they are developed and nurtured with in.
b) Usually, cultural and African spiritual representatives are not included in ethics committees in favour of Christian and Islamic representatives. This is a colonial idea that devalues African institutions and favoured those that came from outside the continent. African ethics committees must be indigenous.
c) Ethics clearance should not be a form of control, that is controlling who does research, it should indeed be collaborative and community centred.
d) Researchers and practitioners should not be denied an opportunity to state their view of ethics, and their positionality in the work that they do. In western research, often personal experience is denied in research. It is crucial for researchers to make their positions known when researching. Are you coming from a position of power or disempowerment? Are you coming from an experiential position? How is potential bias from positions corrected? All these questions must be answered in research to make it more ethical.

e) There is often a tendency to prioritise global values and ethics when dealing with African contents. Resultantly, the ethics process, guidelines and outcomes disfavor local contexts and become inappropriate. Global ethics must not displace but rather enhance local ethics in both research and practice.

f) Codes of ethics must be revised to be relevant to Africa, and to have grounding in African philosophy and values.

g) At times English language is not able to provide adequate meaning of African ethics, we recommend use of African languages.

CONCLUSION

In this letter, which is the first one by the AIEC, we advised and made recommendations about development; roles and responsibilities of stakeholders; composition of ethics committees; and decolonising African ethics. We hope researchers will find this advice useful, and cite it in their research and practice. While communities, institutions, supervisors and ethics committees can play a crucial role in ensuring ethics are maintained, researchers have a critical to embody ethics. This means ethics should be part of a researcher's way of doing work, whether they are being monitored or not. Our second ethics later will be published later this year, look out for it.

REFERENCES

Baluku, J. B., Olum, R., Katagira, W., Namaganda, R., Osaigbovo, I. I., Dhiblawe, A., Sambani, C., Magumba, C., Muchiri, J., & Bongomin, F. (2021). Ethics approval fees constrain early career researchers in Africa: a call for alternative financing for ethics committees. *Therapeutic advances in infectious disease, 8, 20499361211035205*.

International Labour Organization (ILO) (2003). Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour. Geneva: ILO.

Kass, N. E., Hyder, A. A., Ajuwon, A., Appiah-Poku, J., Barsdorf, N., et al. (2007) The Structure and Function of Research Ethics Committees in Africa: A Case Study. *PLOS Medicine 4(1):* e3.

Kirigia, J. M., Wambebe C, Baba-Mousa A (2005) Status of national research bioethics committees in the WHO African region. *BMC Medical Ethics 6*.

Marzouk, D., Abd El Aal, W., Saleh, A., Sleem, H., Khyatti, M., Mazini, L., Hemminki, K., & Anwar, W. A. (2014). Overview on health research ethics in Egypt and North Africa. *European journal of public health, 24 Suppl 1*, 87–91.

Mokgatla, B., IJsselmuiden, C., Wassenaar, D., and Kasule, M. (2018) Mapping research ethics committees in Africa: Evidence of the growth of ethics review of health research in Africa. *Dev World Bioeth. Dec;18(4):*341-348. doi: 10.1111/dewb.12146. Epub 2017 May 3. PMID: 28470868.

Moodley, K., Kabanda, S. M., Soldaat, L. et al. (2020). Clinical Ethics Committees in Africa: lost in the shadow of RECs/IRBs?. *BMC Med Ethics 21, 115*.

Murove, M. F. (2020). African Ethics in a Nutshell. In: African Politics and Ethics. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Omorogiuwa, T. B. E. (2016). The development of intervention guidelines in response to child labour in Nigeria. University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Owusu, S. A., Addison, G., Redman, B., Kearns, L., Amuna, P., & Laar, A. (2022). Assessment of the Operational Characteristics of Research Ethics Committees in Ghana. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics, 17(1–2),* 114–128.

Pancras, G., Sunguya, B. F., Sirili, N., Balandya, E., Lyamuya, E., & Mmbaga, B. T. (2022). The role of community advisory boards in community-based HIV clinical trials: a qualitative study from Tanzania. *BMC Medical Ethics, 23(1), 1*.

Renzaho, A. (2022). Personal communication. 08 March 2022.

Silaigwana, B., & Wassenaar, D. (2015). Biomedical Research Ethics Committees in sub-Saharan Africa: a collective review of their structure, functioning, and outcomes. Journal of empirical research on human research ethics : *JERHRE, 10(2),* 169–184.

Simwinga, M. and Kabero, C. (2014) Community Engagement in Research Ethics in *Africa: A Resource for Research Ethics Committees*, Mariana Kruger, Paul Ndebele and Lyn Horn (Editors). South Africa: Sun Press.

South African San Institute (SAAI) (2017). The San Code of Research Ethics. Kimberly: South African San Institute

World Health Organization (WHO) (2007) *Research ethics committees: Basic concepts for capacity-building*. Geneva: WHO.