Global Forum on Bioethics in Research

Reflecting from within: confronting institutional practices that undermine ethical research partnerships

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Brief description of context

Global research collaborations have long been celebrated as engines of discovery, capacity building and innovation. For institutions in the Global South, these partnerships have expanded access to funding, visibility and networks of expertise. But beneath these gains lies a growing recognition that ethical imbalances persist, not only between North and South, but also within Southern institutions themselves (1-3). This paper explores how internal institutional practices within low and middle-income country (LMIC) research institutions such as Makerere University, can either reinforce or reform inequitable research partnerships. Drawing from institutional experience and reflection, we argue that the ethics of partnership depend as much on internal governance and researcher behavior as on the actions of external donors and collaborators.

Discussion of ethical issues

Dual accountability in ethical partnerships

The call for equity in research partnerships often focuses on reforming extractive Northern practices. However, lasting change requires dual accountability: both Northern and LMIC institutions must share responsibility for ethical collaboration (4,5). While donors must commit to fairness, transparency and capacity building, LMIC institutions must build systems that enable their researchers to negotiate, question and lead. Without this internal strength, global research risks reproducing inequities under the guise of collaboration (6). At Makerere, this reflection has been critical. With over 500 partnerships, MAK occupies a unique position; simultaneously a beneficiary of donor funding and a broker of regional collaborations. This dual role exposes both the strengths and weaknesses of internal systems that shape the institution's ethical standing.

Internal challenges: the roots of imbalance

1. Silent compliance and hierarchies; It often starts in small ways. Someone raises a concern about a tight deadline or a budget that doesn't quite add up. The concern is noted but not acted on. Maybe it's even brushed aside as resistance. After a few experiences like this, people stop speaking up. They learn that silence is safer. We see this play out across research environments. When feedback is ignored or penalized, researchers withdraw, holding back their insights, not because they don't care, but because they've learned that voicing concerns carries risk. Gradually, what begins as caution becomes a culture of quiet compliance. Over time, this erodes trust, weakens accountability and normalizes unethical practices.

Much of this stems from how power operates within institutions. Senior researchers often make decisions on authorship, timelines and resources, while early-career staff and field teams are expected to follow along. These internal hierarchies, though rarely intentional, end up reproducing the very inequities that low and middle-income institutions so often point out in global research partnerships.

2. Dependency and donor agendas; A large proportion of research funding in LMIC institutions like Makerere still comes from external donors. The support is vital to keep institutions running, creates jobs and enables large-scale studies that might otherwise never happen. But it also shapes what gets studied and what is quietly left behind. In practice, this means that certain national priorities are often filtered through donor interests. For instance, for a long time, we saw extensive funding for infectious diseases like HIV, malaria, tuberculosis, which are important, yet far less attention to pressing community issues such as mental health, non-communicable diseases, or the growing burden of drug and alcohol abuse among young people. These topics matter deeply at the local level but remain under-researched simply because they fall outside donor priorities. When institutional survival depends on external agendas, autonomy narrows. Researchers spend more time chasing what funders want to hear than what communities need to say. In the long run, this imbalance risks stifling innovation and pulling research away from real community needs.

3. Weak systems and governance; Ethical consistency is difficult without clear institutional frameworks. Gaps in infrastructure, fragmented policies and reliance on goodwill create vulnerability. For instance, early-career researchers and field teams, the backbone of implementation, are often left unprotected or undervalued. During community-based studies, research assistants frequently face ethical and logistical dilemmas in the field; from inadequate transport and delayed allowances to unclear guidance when participants raise sensitive concerns. Without strong institutional systems for support, these challenges are handled informally, often relying on the discretion of individual supervisors. The result is uneven practice, avoidable risk and a widening gap between institutional ethics on paper and ethical conduct in action.

Reforming the institutional ethics

Recognizing these challenges, the University has been intentional about reforming its research ecosystem to strengthen fairness, accountability and institutional resilience. Efforts have focused on developing clearer partnership policies through the Directorate of Research and Innovations (DRIP), expanding funding sources via the Research and Innovations Fund (RIF), and improving infrastructure and data governance through college level Grants management support units. These reforms are shifting the institutional ethic from reactive compliance to proactive stewardship of ethical standards.

Institutionalizing ethical oversight; MakSPH for example has strengthened ethical oversight through its Grants and Research Capacity Building Committee (GRCBC), which reviews proposals for feasibility and alignment with institutional values before submission. The in-house Institutional Review Board (IRB) extends this function by critically looking at Data sharing and management agreements, a critical issue for LMIC institutions that often collect data but rarely host it, or even control its use. This approach is a commitment to safeguarding data ownership and ensuring that local researchers and communities benefit from the knowledge their data helps generate.

In addition, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) guide fair negotiation, and safe reporting platforms now allow staff to raise partnership-related concerns without fear of reprisal. Together, these mechanisms make ethics operational and not just aspirational.

Strengthening the southern voice; The strength of Southern institutions lies in their contextual expertise and their deep connection to the communities they serve. By leading South to South consortia and regional research networks, institutions like Makerere are moving from participants in global research to shapers of the agenda. This shift is not just about leadership, it is an ethical act. It rebalances power, ensures that research questions reflect local realities and that communities benefit from the knowledge they help generate. When Southern institutions come together, they gain more than visibility; they gain voice. As a collective, we negotiate from a place of strength, shaping terms of collaboration that reflect fairness, transparency and mutual accountability. This is, in itself, an ethical outcome: one that challenges extractive practices and promotes genuine partnership.

The ALAMINE Project for example, which brings together more than eight African countries under Makerere's leadership, demonstrates what ethical collaboration can look like when driven from the South. It shows that

south to south partnerships can deliver high-quality research, build capacity and model integrity, reminding us that ethics in global research is also about balance, fairness and shared ownership of both the process and the outcomes.

Reflections and lessons for the GFBR dialogue

Ethical partnerships begin within institutions. Addressing internal inequities; in systems, culture and leadership is foundational for ethical global engagements. Key lessons include:
- ✓ Dual accountability requires reform on both sides.
- ✓ Feedback must be encouraged, not penalized.
- ✓ Oversight structures like GRCBC and IRB are ethical tools, not bureaucratic barriers.
- ✓ Researcher welfare and mentorship are central to institutional ethics.
- ✓ Equity begins at home; institutions must model the fairness they expect from others.
  "If there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do us no harm."

Strengthening ethics within LMIC institutions is both a moral and strategic priority; one that transforms dependency into dignity, and partnerships into true collaboration.

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