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An African view of ethics for research and practice: Ethics letter two (2) from the African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC)

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ABSTRACT

The African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC) was set up in 2021 to provide ethics advice to African researchers and researchers in Africa, initially with a bias towards social work and development. In 2023, the committee was enlarged to include people who work with communities, African cultural experts and professionals. The committee issues advisory letters, and this is the second one. In this letter, the AIEC provides a view of ethics for research and practice. Eight key ethics derived from Ubuntu are presented and discussed.

KEY TERMS: Africa, ethics, social work, development, research, practice

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Ethics in research promote satisfactory research culture at the same time mitigating unethical investigative practices. Much like the international research scenery, Africa has not been protected from the mishandling of human research, including unprincipled conduct in studies. Given the solemn psychosocial issues experienced in Africa, improvement in research has been noted in the continent in the past years. This boost in exploration has not necessarily resulted in improvements in the African view of ethics for research and practices. Contrarily, it increased the peril of manipulative research supported by wealthy nations that carried out experiments in Africa that would be complex to accomplish in territories with more developed and stringent research structures. While acknowledging the impact of internationalisation of research ethics, African researchers believe that they have made less of an impact on the discussion regarding ethics for research and practice. In this letter we offer African knowledge on research ethics and practice. The need for a research ethics in Africa has undoubtedly been influenced by developments in other regions of the world. A mechanism for the ethical opinion of research is in place in most African nations. While the systems are informal in some nations, other countries have them sanctioned by law. The instances of human research manipulations in Africa demonstrate the necessity of further strengthening research safeguards and supervision in Africa to protect vulnerable people. The African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC) is one significant element of the whole system of protections for human research subjects.

This letter presents eight basic Ubuntu ethics that shape research. These are:

1. Value for family (*unhuri*, familyhood).
2. Respect for community (*ujamaa*, communityhood).
3. Decolonising.
4. Developmental and capacity building research funders and researchers.
5. Sustainable research.
6. Justice.
7. Value for life.
8. Protection of most vulnerable populations.

Valuing the family is crucial in African societies because families are an essential part of life. When research focuses on individuals, it is important to understand that they belong to a family. To gain a complete and trusted account of their experiences, involving the family in the research process is often necessary. Recognising the role of family ensures that research reflects the social realities of African life. Respecting the community, or *ujamaa*, means that research should promote collective support and the use of local resources. It is essential to compensate communities fairly for their participation and to follow local customs and protocols. Respecting traditions and community norms build trust between researchers and participants, ensuring the research process is ethical and meaningful. Decolonising research requires giving priority to African perspectives. For years, research has been dominated by Western languages, ethics, and methods, often sidelining African knowledge. Research today must include African voices in setting agendas, value indigenous knowledge, and ensure that African ways of knowing and being are respected alongside Western perspectives. Moreover, research should also promote development and capacity building. This means supporting African researchers and institutions to grow and develop their own expertise. Governments, funders, and researchers must ensure that capacity building and knowledge transfer are at the core of any externally driven research to strengthen local research systems.

Sustainable research is essential for long-term impact. The goal should be to build the capacity of African researchers and institutions to conduct their own studies independently, without relying on external expertise. This allows African research to grow and remain relevant to the needs of communities over time. Justice is fundamental to ethical research. Everyone involved in the research process, such as co-researchers, community members, assistants, and guides, should be properly recognised and fairly compensated for their contributions. Fair treatment and recognition help ensure that research partnerships are respectful and just.

Value for life must guide all research activities. The research process should not cause harm, illness, impairment or loss of life. Researchers have a responsibility to protect the well-being of participants and ensure their safety throughout the study. Protecting vulnerable populations is critical. This includes children, people with disabilities, the elderly, individuals in rural areas, young women, those with strong spiritual beliefs, and people with limited financial means or literacy. Research should safeguard their dignity, rights, and well-being, ensuring

that these groups are not put at risk.

In this second letter from our committee, we have set out eight important ethics based on the philosophy of Ubuntu. These ethics reflect key values such as community, justice, respect, and the connection between people, which are deeply rooted in African culture. They offer a guide for research that is non-colonising, ethical, relevant to local cultures, and socially responsible. These principles are not only shaping research in Africa but are also being recognised and used in other parts of the world. They challenge the usual Western approach to research by bringing in different views that focus on community well-being, fairness, and sustainable growth. The Ubuntu ethics aim to support research that respects the dignity of all participants, values local knowledge, and involves communities in meaningful ways. We hope that these ethics will continue to be used, debated and improved.

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