

# Community engagement in research: An approach to improve research relevance and use.

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Consideration of community engagement to scientific inquiry is a relatively recent development. In scientific inquiry, there have been major shifts to make the development of science and knowledge building the collective responsibility of researchers, research participants and other stakeholders (1). In the past century, we witnessed the evolution of different epistemologies – positivist, neo-positivist, postmodernist and constructivist, in particular (2). More recently there are widespread calls to move from disciplinary to transdisciplinary research and guidance by One Health approach to benefit science, knowledge building and problem solving from multiple perspectives.

In any field and more particularly in the field of health sciences, scientific enquiry, knowledge building and problem solving cannot be unilateral, otherwise it would limit itself to seeing one side of the truth. The search for truth and thereby building knowledge require multiple perspectives, multiple approaches and multiple tools to operate together (3). Progress made in triangulating methods to better address research questions, and the One Health methodology – which encompasses a collaborative, multisectoral and transdisciplinary approach to research – are encouraging developments in line with the principles of community engagement in research (4). Yet, community engagement in research has been advocated with defined approaches, guides and tools. Anecdotes from institutional review boards (IRBs) show the steps taken to involve non-scientist target research participants or the host community in review committees. The essence of IRBs is to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, maintain scientific standards, and minimize the potential risks of the research to participants and the community. The participants are thus provided with relevant and clear information about the research, including its potential risks weighed against its potential benefits. To this effect, research participants are provided with information and requested to consent to participate, which nowadays includes signing consent forms (5). Even though IRBs involve non-scientists in the review and subsequent decision-making about the research, the foundation of IRBs inherently lies in balancing scientific rules and procedures against premises based on moral, legal and rights (6).

Community engagement in research, on the other hand, is inherently about partnership, ownership and shared accountability. With community engagement, the

community, researcher, research institution and donors are accountable. In no sense is the target participant a passive information provider and the host community a bystander. Rather, they take responsibility to make available authentic evidence, actively participate in the research process, and take responsibility for the success and potential adverse effects of the research process, as well as the outcomes. Although this may seem idealistic, research-literate communities take a more proactive role in research activities (7).

Despite its wide recognition as valuable element in most research, the understanding of community engagement in the sphere of health research is not well developed nor has it yet been clearly defined. As a result, consideration of community engagement and its understanding vary among researchers, communities, research institutions and donors. For example, in genomic studies, researchers and research institutions appreciate community engagement to improve the recruitment of research participants, while in other research settings, informing the community about the research or to disseminate research outcomes rely on community engagement.

Consequently, the role of community members in knowledge building and science remains limited. While some consider community mobilization to inform, others go further to obtain community buy-in regarding the aspirations and values brought to them. These factors all limit the success, outcome and utility of the results from the research (8).

Reflecting on the essence of research, it always is about searching for truth. The search for truth could be triggered by a problem at hand or curiosity. In either case, there is an intention which needs to be translated into a problem. The key questions here include: Is the problem indeed a shared problem? Whose problem is this? Is it recognized as a problem by all those involved? With such questions resonating in our mind while conceptualizing ‘community engagement in research’, one more critical question is: Who has what role in the research process? (9).

Charting the interface between researchers, research institutions and the community and the roles of different partners in the process are important to define. It is also important to note that the depth and breadth of engagement in the research process may vary by the type of research. For trial research, target participants are

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expected to be continuously engaged, thereby they should be well versed with the process. In addition, the host community should consider itself as part of the research process, thereby providing the needed support for the proper implementation of relevant research projects, uptake of research findings, and offering participants protection and considering them as their representatives in case adverse effects occur (10).

From the experiences we have had, scientific inquiries in Ethiopia and subsequent research journeys are always charted by a researcher or team of researchers. Such effort neglects the basic essence of partnership in knowledge building, on the one hand, and researchers' research outcomes from the wisdom and contributions of target participants in the community representing the community at large, on the other. Conscious recognition of an active and functional partnership between the researcher, community, research institution, donor and other stakeholders would make research much more valuable. The outstanding debate over the disconnect between research and policy could benefit from active and functional community engagement in every research project. This requires the buy-in, and structural support for such endeavours, of key stakeholders, including ministries, research institutions and universities.

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