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Sanitation and Hygiene Applied Research for Equity

Engaging Participants in Community-Based Research

Community members, leaders and researchers at the Nchalo Cafe.

Community engagement in context

Community engagement is a key component to public health research that is often overlooked. While public health research is subject to rigorous ethical approval procedures, many researchers do not engage research participants to a necessary degree. One definition of community engagement is:

> *In its simplest terms community engagement seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, processes, relationships, discourse, decision-making, or implementation.*
>
> *- Penn State*

In Malawi, there has been a long history of community engagement through key health institutions. Researchers and community engagement professionals have developed a variety of approaches to engage communities they work with - from radio programmes to face-to-face workshops.

The Centre for Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Appropriate Technology Development (WASHTED) at the University of Malawi has been undertaking community-based research in Malawi for many years and has been adhering to good practice. However, it

POLICY BRIEF

Key messages

- Many public health researchers do not engage research participants to a necessary degree.

- WASH and health research partners collaborated to explore issues of trust around community-based research through a community dialogue event in Chikwawa, Southern Malawi.

- Participants provided a series of recommendations for researchers to consider at the beginning, middle and at the end of a project.

- Researchers and participants agreed that policymakers should provide improved national guidelines for community engagement.

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became evident from recent community encounters, and a recent national hysteria of 'bloodsuckers', that an open dialogue was needed on the relationship between researchers and participating communities for long term planning and engagement.

Through a small grant for public engagement funded by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the SHARE Consortium, WASHTED, University of Strathclyde and the WATERSPOUTT Consortium convened a community dialogue event to explore issues of trust around community based research. This brief will highlight the objectives and structure of the event, common challenges expressed by community members and offer recommendations for researchers and implementing agencies working directly with communities to strengthen good practice.

Nchalo cafe participants

The Nchalo Community Cafe

In October 2017, a community-based workshop called the Nchalo Community Café was conducted in rural Chikwawa, Southern Malawi, which aimed to improve good practice in community-based health related research. It involved stimulating participatory dialogue with target audiences to gain a deeper understanding of barriers to trust, and through this further develop our understanding of 'good' practice.

The objectives were:

• To explore issues around building trust and identifying barriers and concerns among communities and stakeholders in Chikwawa district and WASH researchers.

• To stimulate ideas around strengthening relations and developing mutual understanding between community members and stakeholders when engaging with research programmes

• To identify and document good practice and recommendations for better collaboration between communities and researchers.

The workshop used a world café format, and included a range of community members (n=29), community leaders (n=8), government extension workers (n=14) and researchers (n=18). Participants were divided into groups of up to five people, facilitated by a table host, and group members rotated every 20 minutes. This format allowed for effective dialogue, rapid collation of information and cross-pollination between participants. It also allowed members to express their thoughts through oral dialogue, written notes, illustrations or video blogs, allowing participants of all levels of literacy to feel comfortable in expressing their experiences and ideas.

Ncahlo cafe participants

Key successes

In general, there was a recognition by the community for the benefits of research. Participants expressed

positive experiences they had through participating in research projects. Many said they they had learnt things that they didn't know before, including increased awareness of the importance of having a toilet and handwashing stations. They also felt that researchers had become more aware of the problems being faced in their villages, and research led to economic opportunities for some people.

Still from video Chikwawa Village Voices

Key challenges

Participants discussed a number of challenges around participating in research projects. The challenges focussed on three phases of the research process: start of data collection, during data collection and after data collection.

Participants expressed concerns about the way that some researchers have come into communities without using appropriate structures and communication channels, and without respecting local cultural customs. During data collection, participants spoke about a lack of understanding of study eligibility criteria, misconceptions around taking human samples, and lack of communication about other research methods. Participants felt it was particularly important at the end of data collection that they receive feedback on what researchers found.

Recommendations for researchers

The following table provides an overview of the recommendations offered by participants for researchers to improve relations between researchers and community members during the three phases outlined above.

Research phase	Recommendation
1 **Start of data collection: Community entry**	• Researchers must obtain approval from the district committees, community leaders and other key groups before starting their research. • When entering a community, researchers must carry a form of identification and show to community members when asked. • Researchers and enumerators should dress decently and appropriately • Researchers must notify district extension workers, village leaders and community members in time before arrival at the project site. • Research projects and organisations should be explained on arrival to avoid confusion between studies. • Researchers should involve community members as volunteers in the project for activities that require their expertise.

Research phase	Recommendation
2 **During data collection: methods and tools**	● Researchers should clearly explain the inclusion and exclusion criteria of a study to ensure community members understand why only certain people are involved in the intervention ● Researchers should clearly explain why they need to take samples and what these samples will be used for to avoid misconceptions ● Interviewer should explain how they are collecting data - for example if using tablets or phones they should demonstrate how this is done to avoid appearing rude ● During interviews, enumerators should be friendly and patient when asking questions ● During observations, enumerators should inform participants that all information is confidential and will not be shared with other community members. ● Research teams should train community members properly to use resources given to them during interventions
3 **End of data collection: feedback**	● At the end of a project, researchers should provide feedback to the community in a timely manner (e.g. within 2 months of completion) ● Feedback should be at all levels including household if information is confidential

Recommendation to policymakers

• **Policymakers should provide national guidelines for community engagement**

In addition to researchers ensuring they engage community members effectively during individual studies, policymakers and research regulatory bodies have a responsibility to provide national guidelines to ensure this level of community engagement becomes the norm. These guidelines should be widely circulated and referenced during the ethical approval process.

Conclusion

While the research recommendations provided are based on findings from a community engagement event in rural Malawi, they are applicable to researchers working on community-based research in many low-income and rural contexts.

Contributors