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Résumé de l'article

Cette étude de cas relate l'expérience de l'auteur pour obtenir l'approbation en éthique de la recherche des autorités locales en Tanzanie. Elle met en évidence les exigences supplémentaires relatives à l'obtention d'un visa rencontrées par un chercheur étranger en Tanzanie. Bien que cette démarche soit distincte du processus d'approbation éthique en soi, elle fait partie des prérequis à la conduite responsable de la recherche (CRR) afin de respecter les lois et procédures en vigueur dans le pays hôte. Le récit démontre que deux étapes doivent être complétées pour accéder de façon responsable aux données sur le terrain : l'examen local de l'éthique de la recherche et l'obtention d'un visa adéquat. À titre de comparaison, un exemple "d'accès irresponsable" aux données est présenté et les conséquences de cette pratique sont exposées.

ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

Responsible Access to Data in International Field Research: A Case Study from Tanzania

Gussai H. Sheikheldin[1]

Résumé

Cette étude de cas relate l'expérience de l'auteur pour obtenir l'approbation en éthique de la recherche des autorités locales en Tanzanie. Elle met en évidence les exigences supplémentaires relatives à l'obtention d'un visa rencontrées par un chercheur étranger en Tanzanie. Bien que cette démarche soit distincte du processus d'approbation éthique en soi, elle fait partie des prérequis à la conduite responsable de la recherche (CRR) afin de respecter les lois et procédures en vigueur dans le pays hôte. Le récit démontre que deux étapes, séparées mais complémentaires, doivent être complétées pour accéder de façon responsable aux données sur le terrain : l'examen local de l'éthique de la recherche et l'obtention d'un visa adéquat. À titre de comparaison, un exemple "d'accès irresponsable" aux données est présenté et les conséquences de cette pratique sont exposées.

Abstract

This case study illustrates the author's narrative of his experience obtaining local research ethics approval in Tanzania. It highlights the additional requirements a foreign researcher in Tanzania can encounter with visa approval which is a separate process from research ethics approval. While fulfilling the visa requirements may not be directly related to the ethical administration of research per se, it is part of the responsible conduct of research (RCR) which, among others, includes respect for the local laws and procedures of the host country. The narrative shows that a responsible access to field data in such cases requires fulfilling two separate but complimentary processes: local research ethics review and proper visa attainment. Further, an example of an 'irresponsible' access to data is also presented for comparison and examination of the consequences.

Mots clés

données, accès, éthique de la recherche, visa, conduite responsable de la recherche, Tanzanie

Keywords

data, access, research ethics, visa, responsible conduct of research, Tanzania

Introduction

This case study article is a personal narrative of the process of attaining local research ethics approval in Tanzania. It illustrates an example of separate but complementary steps of obtaining all the necessary paperwork in international development field research work conducted by foreign researchers, and how such steps are connected from a research ethics perspective.

Between December 2014 and June 2016, I spent 12 months in Tanzania conducting field research. The study was on agents of technological change (or technological development) in Tanzania, which are organizations that are active in processes of diffusing, supporting and adapting new technological solutions for developing communities. Due to the wide scope of this study, it was divided into two phases that were carried out by the same researcher. One at the rural level explored social enterprises that diffuse technology products and services. Social enterprises are forms of organizations that combine social mission with business rigour (i.e., not charitable or philanthropic but also not mainly for-profit), such as delivering renewable energy to off-grid or developing rural communities through affordable payment deals. The other phase, at the national level, investigated policy reform agenda for a number of public technology intermediaries (PTIs), organizations that belong to the state apparatus but operate autonomously (also known as R&D parastatals). PTIs conduct research and development activities on innovative technological solutions to development challenges that can improve local technological capabilities of Tanzanian industries [1]. Both phases of the study collected data from various parts of the country, from off-grid rural communities to ministries and academic institutions in urban areas. Primary data was collected through key informant interviews and direct field observations by the researcher, through a comparative case study strategy [2]. Secondary data involved national and organizational reports about the state of productivity and technological demands in the agricultural, energy and industrial Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) sectors of Tanzania. The research tried to determine whether social enterprises can be effective agents of technological change in rural regions, and whether some institutional reform agenda can revamp Tanzania's PTIs to be more innovative.

Ethics review process and visa approval

As a university-associated study from Canada, (then based at the University of Guelph), I was required to submit an application for research ethics review to my university Research Ethics Board (REB), which approved my research proposal. As a standard procedure, the REB required us to clarify whether there were ethics review requirements in Tanzania, and if these existed, we had to comply with local requirements before beginning field activities. We found that in Tanzania, all research conducted in Mainland Tanzania (excluding Zanzibar) by foreign principal investigators, whether as individuals or associated with institutes, required a clearance from the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH). To receive clearance, ethics review applications must be submitted to COSTECH. It has a year-round application window. After reviewing applications, along with supporting documents such as the researcher(s)' credentials and their affiliations, and the purpose of the study, the

verdict is communicated back to the researcher who can then obtain the official 'research permit' from COSTECH. Whether the research includes human subjects or the study of local flora and fauna, COSTECH receives ethics review applications and channels them through appropriate reviewers who can assess them according to their specialty and content [3]. I obtained my local research permit that was valid for one year and extended after another year using the above-mentioned process. Upon the conclusion of the study, COSTECH requests that researchers share the general findings with them, in any suitable format (e.g., a publication, a technical report, etc.), for their records of Tanzania-related studies.

Soon after obtaining the research permit from COSTECH, the researcher should apply to the Immigration Department of Tanzania Ministry of Home Affairs to receive a temporary residence visa for researchers. While COSTECH approves the ethical criteria of research itself, it is the ministry of Home Affairs that approves the residency of the researcher (in that capacity) in Tanzania.

Responsible access to data as a part of the responsible conduct of research (RCR)

For a foreign researcher to access local data in an ethical manner, it is not enough to go through local research ethics review (COSTECH) in the host country. An additional step is required to comply with national laws, which is to attain a specific visa type for foreign researchers in order to respect the local laws of legal residency. Therefore, a responsible access to data by fulfilling both processes, constitutes a key element for a responsible conduct of research (RCR).

Defined as "the practice of scientific investigation with integrity" [4], RCR is generally a set of principles that guide researchers so that their practice is comprehensively ethical [5,6]. Comprehensiveness here means that researchers can be sure to have behaved in an ethically responsible manner regarding not only the technical aspects of the research but also the contingencies surrounding their work. Principles of RCR include the basic research ethics principles of honesty, objectivity and confidentiality, as well as related principles such as respect for the law and respect for research participants [5,6]. In the current context, skipping one or both processes, whether local research ethics approval or proper residency status, would constitute a research misconduct that is a violation of RCR, as will be illustrated in the example below.

An example of an irresponsible access to data

During my field research in Tanzania I interviewed senior staff from COSTECH as well as from the Ministry of Education (to which COSTECH reports), and some of the respondents revealed to me that, in some cases, foreign researchers choose to skip the COSTECH research ethics review altogether and conduct their field research anyway. Some examples included wildlife scientists who entered Tanzania with visitor visas that gave them a 90 day stay in the country. During this time, they apparently took multiple safari and game tours to some of Tanzania's renowned national parks, and while on those tours they conducted their field research activities, including the research on small samples of flora and fauna. The respondents informed me that COSTECH was able to identify a number of such occurrences when the researchers later published the results of their studies in journals or volumes that reached COSTECH's attention. COSTECH research staff were interested to see that such studies took place in Tanzania without them having any records of those studies, at which point they could conclude that research permits were never issued. Whether they received ethics approval from their home institutions remains unknown. Besides being on the highly questionable ethically and legally, these occurrences harm Tanzania's own research networks and interests in several ways, including:

- Devaluing local knowledge reservoirs by undermining the local record keeping of relevant research conducted within the country. For example, the knowledge attained from such field studies could have perhaps benefited Tanzania's own efforts at wildlife conservation, if they knew about it in proper time and format.

- Denying COSTECH resources that could have been used to support local development agenda, since the fees paid for local ethics reviews are a source of revenue for COSTECH which in turn invests them in fostering the science, technology and innovation capacity of Tanzania.

- Disserving Tanzanian local researchers who may have been conducting similar research and would lose their opportunity to publish their results on international platforms due to the 'sneaky' performance of those foreign researchers. That is at least unfair.

Access to data was, in these cases, irresponsible. It was not sanctioned by local laws and research ethics oversight. Even if these researchers obtained some form of ethical review from their home institutions, their failure to obtain local approval (ethics and visa) was a violation of RCR. Thus, in order to face this kind of problem, COSTECH has been seeking from the government the mandate to legally pursue, inside and outside Tanzania, foreign researchers who fail to obtain research permits before conducting field research activities in Tanzania.

Questions to Consider

1. Whom should be held accountable when local ethics norms are violated by a foreign researcher? The researchers themselves, their institution(s), or the journal that published the researcher's study results and did not check whether their study met local ethics standards?

2. Can there be alternative ways of thinking about fulfilling both ethics and visa requirements for foreign researchers through a unified procedure? Would an 'enhanced' application procedure that combines both, to be handled by a single reporting station, be a beneficial arrangement for local authorities and foreign researchers, or would it present another set of problems?

3. How could we ultimately implement proper procedures to prevent foreign research projects from harming local research interests?

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