

Policy Dialogue

Strategies to enhance community engagement in research: The way forward for Ethiopia

Dialogue Report

Ethiopian Public Health Institute
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Wednesday, 13 July 2022

This report was prepared by Knowledge Translation Directorate of EPHI and Department of Health, Behavior, and Society, Jimma Institute of Health, Jimma University

This policy dialogue was informed by the following evidence brief: Strategies to enhance community engagement in research:
The way forward for Ethiopia



What is a policy dialogue?

A structured discussion focused on an evidence-based brief. The agenda from the policy dialogue is attached as Appendix 1.

Who participated in the dialogue?

People with relevant expertise and perspectives, including researchers, academicians, policymakers, civil society organizations, research funding institutions, and other stakeholders with an interest in the problem addressed by this evidence brief. The complete list of participants is attached as Appendix 2

What was the aim of the policy dialogue?

+ That discussion and careful consideration of well-informed health policy decisions

X The dialogue did not aim to reach a consensus or make decisions

What is included in this report?

Views, opinions and insights of individual participants reported without attribution

The opinions included in this report reflect the understanding (or misunderstanding) of individual participants in the dialogue

It should not be assumed that the opinions and insights in this report represent a consensus of the participants unless this is explicitly stated

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Key Messages

The following statements represent views, opinions and insights of individual participants in the policy dialogue.

The Problem

Dialogue participants in the discussion raised the issue why the recent systematic review by Zewdie et al concluded that no studies reported community engagement activities in the research works in the Ethiopian context. However, participants has also expressed that although it may be difficult to accept, there is no genuine community engagement in research work in the Ethiopia and the current systematic review's revealed the true nature of our research, which lacks community engagement.

The barriers

The dialogue participants aired the possible and practical barriers to not engaging communities in research in the Ethiopian context including:

- Not incorporating community engagement activities during conceptualization and planning stage of the research
- Lack of regulatory mechanisms for community engagement in the research process
- Language barrier
- Lack of awareness about research by the community
- Lack of awareness and skills among researchers
- Attitude of the researchers
- Interest of funders
- Socio-cultural factors
- Researcher and community benefit dilemma

The way forward

Dialogue participants stressed on the need to develop a practical guideline, framework, and institutional platform or structure to strengthen community engagement in research in Ethiopia.

Introduction

The provided evidence brief on community engagement in research and its implications for Ethiopia was discussed by dialogue participants, who also offered their comments and suggestions. An extended discussion was held both in plenary and in small group discussions on this topic. For the small group roundtable discussion, participants were primarily grouped according to their affiliations. Accordingly, there were three groups: 1) participants from academic institutions (universities), 2) participants from research institutes, and 3) participants from non-academic/non-research institutions including policymakers, civil society organizations, and community representatives. The stakeholders' dialogue report is described in more depth below following the evidence brief's contents, i.e., the problem and its main barriers, community engagement strategies, and implications or way forward for Ethiopia.

The Problem

Dialogue participants in the discussion raised the question of whether the recent systematic review by Zewdie et al (2022) had attempted to look at reports from institutional repositories and gray literature because they were surprised by the systematic review's conclusion that "no studies,....reported community engagement practices and lessons in research in the Ethiopian context." However, the systematic review's conclusion was noted as expected by the dialogue participants, who added that the work (systematic review) revealed the true nature of our research, which lacks community engagement. Some participants expressed that although it may be difficult to accept, there is no genuine community engagement in research work in the Ethiopian context. According to them, there are a number of issues attached to this in our situation including:

- The lack of strategy or planning on how to effectively engage the community in research activities from the beginning,
- Research problems are mostly not identified and coined from the real challenges the community is facing and there is a clear top-down approach to research dominated by expertise views,

- Researchers don't prioritize the needs of the community; they just consider their own interests and views,
- Although researchers claim that their study would benefit the community, the community members are excluded from the research process, and
- Researchers give false promises to the community in order to collect data and leave without actually engaging with them.

One of the dialogue participants for example said: *“It is not surprising to get such a finding. I would say that most of our researchers are breaching the ethical values in research, let alone the engagement issues. They [researchers] often give false promises to the community by saying you will benefit this and that from this work if I am able to collect data on this issue...”*

A heated debate on the extent of community engagement in research in Ethiopia also took place. Participants acknowledged that there may be studies that involve the community in other research fields, such as maternal and child health studies, which fall outside the scope of the current systematic review, which focused on diseases of poverty. However, the majority of participants agreed that generally research projects in Ethiopia lack elements of community engagement. For instance, though several local universities in Ethiopia claim that their educational approach and research practices are community oriented, they still a long way from effectively engaging communities in research activities. Many participants ascertained that even if some researchers and institutions are trying to occasionally engage communities in research projects, it does not go beyond informing stage with no substantive element of contribution. Furthermore, there are gaps in the documentation and reporting of community engagement activity as explicitly discussed by the participants. Additionally, if such community engagement activity does exist, it is often remain unpublished, and even if these reports are posted on institutional websites and repositories, they cannot be found or accessed by the global research community. A thorough systematic search to such evidence cannot yield any of these works. Thus, dialogue participants stressed to strengthen the public visibility of these practices and experiences, if any.

Besides, the dialogue participants aired the possible and practical barriers to not engaging communities in research in the Ethiopian context. Accordingly, several views and commentaries were raised including:

- ***Not incorporating community engagement activities during conceptualization and planning stage of the research:*** Research plan rarely integrate community engagement that affects the consideration of resources needed (logistics and time).
- ***Lack of regulatory mechanisms for community engagement in the research process:*** There are no institutional structures and tools or guides that direct and support community engagement activities in research in the Ethiopian context. In addition, though there are institutional review offices (IRBs) that regulate ethical standards of research, the IRB guidelines lack community engagement components.
- ***Language barrier.*** English is the medium that the scientific community tends to use in Ethiopia. Research language used by researchers greatly varies from those used by the community. The design of data collection tools including questionnaires is greatly hampered by this aspect. Translation into the local language does not consider local contexts and norms. Hence, direct translation from the English language could be very offensive to the local communities.
- ***Lack of awareness about research by the community:*** Generally, community lacks proper understanding and knowledge on the general concept of research and on research being conducted in their locality. Thus, the gap in awareness about research and the language barrier mentioned above are affecting the realization of community engagement in research in our context.
- ***Lack of awareness and skills among researchers:*** There is a lack of awareness, skills, and competency among researchers on community engagement and participatory research techniques and tools. This could be due to a lack of training opportunities on related topic.
- ***Attitude of the researchers:*** Researchers conduct research for the purpose of promotions such as academic promotions without the intention of translating the

results into tangible actions. So, the researchers' main intention is to publish driven by the old principle "*publish or perish*", which has little to do for the community.

- **Interest of funders:** Research funders' interest matters the most in some circumstances. In many cases, research funders are interested in other aspects of the research rather than engaging communities in the research process.
- **Socio-cultural factors:** Researchers fail to engage the community due to a lack of socio-cultural and normative understanding of the community.
- **Researcher and community benefit dilemma:** There is a dilemma between researchers/clinicians need and community benefit from research outcomes. The dilemma arises from the lack of definitions of common terminologies such as '*community*' and '*community engagement*' and the roles of researchers and communities in the research process.

One of the dialogue participants reiterated the lack of community engagement in research especially due to researchers' attitude stating "*...when it comes to community engagement in research, particularly researches in a clinical trial, researchers just don't seriously consider community engagement*". Researchers consider patients as their own research tools. They say "*I know their perceptions thus I own my patients*".

Implications for Ethiopia and the way forward

In addition to the strategies addressed in the evidence brief, the dialogue participants proposed the following way forward for Ethiopia to strengthen community in research process.

- A practical guideline or working document that supports the community engagement process in the country should be developed
- There should be a responsible body or structure that ensures community engagement in the research process. There must also be an institutional arrangement that checks and monitor the balance for the desired level of community engagement in the research process

- IRBs should give emphasis in their guidelines to include community engagement in the review of protocols and follow-up. There should also be adaptations of international ethical standards and contextualization for Ethiopia
- Standard definition should be there on the common terminologies such as 'community', 'community engagement', and 'community engagement in research'
- The roles and responsibilities of the communities and the researchers should be clearly identified during the planning phase. One of the participants said: *“We need to decolonize research process and research should be redefined in relation to community engagement”*
- A prolonged engagement through the research process must be considered to define context, to understand the community culture and norms, and to contextualize the tools
- Modalities of evidence dissemination must be reconsidered including local communications of key findings translated into locally understandable language
- Engaging both formal and non-formal representatives of the community to assure there is genuine engagement in the research process
- Giving due emphasis to those research problems in which we can utilize findings through collaboration and participation is important

Generally, the dialogue participants stressed on the need to develop a practical guideline, framework, and institutional platform or structure to strengthen community engagement in research in Ethiopia.

Finally, the higher officials from Jimma University and the Ethiopian Public Health Institute forwarded their suggestions for enhancing community engagement in research and expressed their commitment and dedications to execute the strategies forwarded by the dialogue participants in their respective institutions.

Appendix 1: Agenda

Agenda of deliberative discussion (Dialogue) on Community engagement in research			
<p><i>A collaborative research project by Jimma University & Knowledge Translation Directorate of Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI)</i></p> <p>13 July 2022,</p> <p>Venue: Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI) Training Center, Conference Hall (Second Floor), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia Note takers: Gelila Abraham (JU) and Zelalem Kebede (EPHI)</p>			
Time	Activities	Responsible person	Moderator
9:00-9:30am	Registration	Dagmawit and Zelalem	
9:30-9:40am	Opening remarks	Dr. Getachew Tollera (Deputy Director General, EPHI)	Firmaye Bogale (Director, KTD@EPHI)
9:40 – 9:50am	Key note speech	Dr. Netsanet Workneh (Vice President for research and community service, Jimma University)	
12:30-1:45pm	Lunch	Organizers	
1:45-1:50pm	Procedure and rules of the deliberative discussion (dialogue)	Dr. Mirgissa	Dr. Mirgissa Kaba
1:50-2:20pm	Going through the evidence brief document: Strategies to enhance community engagement in research: The way forward for Ethiopia	Participants	
2:20-3:10	Deliberative discussion (dialogue)	Participants	
3:10-3:25pm	Tea Break	Organizers	
3:25-4:25pm	Continued discussion (Way forward for Ethiopia)	Participants	Dr. Mirgissa Kaba
4:25-4:30pm	Closing remark	EPHI/JU Officials	

Appendix 2: List of Dialogue Participants

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