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Ethical considerations in agricultural field research in emerging economies (Zimbabwe)

Jabez Moyo

Department of Business Management Lupane State University, Zimbabwe

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Corresponding Author: Jabez Moyo

Abstract

There are complex ethical considerations that extend beyond standard research protocols in conducting field research. Their importance includes maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of research output. This paper also explores these challenges through an incidental study arising from a primary research on modelling entrepreneurial competences and agricultural performance. The primary study was conducted in the non-metropolitan provinces of Zimbabwe. This incidental study adopted interpretivism philosophy using qualitative data to examine ethical considerations in agricultural fieldwork. The research arose incidentally during a prior study in 2024. During the preliminary analysis of the quantitative data, recurring concerns related to informed consent, data privacy, and researcher-community relations emerged, warranting a deeper investigation. The study also examines the role of local leadership, local governance structures in ethical oversight. Findings proffer that ethical conduct in agricultural research requires a context-specific, participatory approach that prioritizes community engagement, mutual respect and that researchers should be security conscious. This case underscores the importance of reflexivity, transparency, and long-term relationship-building as upholding ethical principles fosters collaboration and trust among researchers thereby creating an environment conducive for knowledge advancement, capacity building, skills transfer and innovation.

Keywords: Ethics, informed consent, agricultural performance, farmers, entrepreneurial competences

Introduction

Background of the study

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in the southern part of Africa. It covers an area of over 39 million hectares in extent. Of this hectareage, 33.3 million hectares is used for agricultural activities (FAO, 2016). Agriculture is the largest industry comprising 75% employment capacity in the country. (Matandare, 2017) ^[27] Thus any volatile or erratic agricultural output or performance has negative implications on the economy. Maiyaki (2010) ^[22] in concurrence noted that for the Zimbabwean economy, there was need to revive the industry though such a task hinges on a strong agricultural base so that the agro-allied industries can be established.

The resettled farmers are still active on the farms but the land productivity is still low. They are mostly into subsistence farming and rarely treat their farms as an enterprise. There is need for skills transfer and training in that regard. However, the low productivity is not peculiar to Zimbabwe as Sheahan and Barret (2017) ^[43] observes that the agricultural industry in Africa is a perennial underperformer and productivity is sluggish with limited uptake of entrepreneurial activities. Lachaud, Bravo-Ureta, Fiala and Gonzalez (2018) ^[19] further point out that in smallholder farming some of the obstacles to agricultural productivity and performance include lack of skills or competences and lack of training. They contend that agricultural practices can be improved through training and skills development. They note that managerial and

vocational training skills increase agricultural performance and income of trainees.

This study intent was to contribute to the body of knowledge by exploring ethical considerations in agricultural field research in Zimbabwe and also proffers solutions to researchers and other stakeholders on observing ethical tenets in agricultural field research work.

Literature Review

Importance of ethics in social science research

Ethical considerations pertain to a set of principles which guide a researcher in carrying out research focus. Borah (2020) ^[2] further views them as the application of moral rules, the setting of the code of conduct, the gathering, analysis, reporting, and publication of all pertinent data on the respondents with emphasis on privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. Thus to Rao, Srinivas, Sri, Babu, & Prasad, (2024) ^[40] ethical considerations embrace a system of moral principles guided through a philosophical understanding which explicates the meaning of what is good for individuals and society. Therefore ethics can be regarded as norms and acceptable societal values that guide moral choices about interactions between individuals. Dewey & Tufts (2022) ^[11] thus proffer that the main goal of ethical considerations is to ensure that no one is harmed from research activities.

Ethics as a philosophy pertains to characterising, defending and highlighting tenets of right and wrong behaviour (Mortimer, 1985) ^[33]. Peter, (2000) ^[39] affirms that in

essence ethics makes an effort to attend to enquiries of human morality through explicating concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, justice and crime, virtue and vice. Hoy (2009) ^[15] further expounds ethical considerations by splitting them into three major categories namely meta-ethics (theoretical meaning of moral situations), normative ethics (practical means to address a moral path of action) and applied ethics (pertaining to an individual obligations in a particular situation). When conducting this study, the researchers leaned on applied ethics despite the likelihood of intersection with other categories due to common tenets such as anonymity, beneficence, deception, voluntary consent and plagiarism.

Schwietering, Langhof, & Strech, (2023) ^[42] view the main objective of ethics in social research as a reminder that research should have the protection of the participants as a core mandate. This implores researchers to be cognisant with the core ethical principles and demonstrate an impeccable aptitude on procedures to ensure the safety of research. Thus the researchers in this study postulate that any unethical practice during research renders the integrity of the entire process a nullity. Thus Israel & Hay (2006) ^[16] emphasize that ethical norms and values promote the aims of research such as knowledge, truth and avoidance of error thereby safeguarding the integrity of the research. Peter, (2000) ^[39] further points out that considerations such as prohibitions against fabricating research data promote the truth and avoid error. Therefore the researchers for this study concur in that ethical standards promote the values that are of critical importance in ensuring trust, accountability, mutual respect and fairness during the research process. This view is also proffered by Schwietering, Langhof, & Strech, (2023) ^[42] who points out that publication and research ethical norms inclusive of guidelines for authorship, copyright and patenting policies, data sharing policies and confidentiality rules have an inherent ability to protect the intellectual property of participants. From a public view point, ethical norms help to foster support for research and this may be critical in obtaining funding for research projects once the credibility and the quality and integrity is established (Israel & Hay, 2006) ^[16].

Unique Ethical Challenges in the Zimbabwean Fieldwork

Mandiyani, (2009) ^[24] reveals some challenges faced by scholars when designing research that is ethically compliant in Zimbabwe. The in-depth study shows that the challenges include ethical clearances and infrastructural Constraints. Maunganidze & Ruggunan (2021) ^[29] also point out that on ethical clearance there are impediments such as difficult-to-obtain gatekeepers' letters and the prevalence of bribe seeking officials.

There is also the infrastructural challenge exacerbated by poor road network, limited internet connectivity which compromises travel and supervision thereby compromising the quality of fieldwork. Whalen, Donnell and Tartakovsky (2014) in their research from a medical perspective, note that the enquiry relies on digital equipment and technologies. Thus there is a risk on the integrity of the research due to poor infrastructure which oftentimes has limited internet connectivity impacting data collection and

analysis negatively. Zimbabwe as a developing country has an internet penetration rate of 38.4%. (Digital, 2025) ^[12] However due to power disruptions among other ills the limited access to the internet especially in remote areas affect the data collection and analysis integrity. Thus the challenges in infrastructure adversely affect efficiency in data management. Davitt, Becker, Brown, Barry-Dutro, Sesek, & Zhang, (2023) ^[10] point out that this poses a challenge to Supervisors in accessing and managing research data, leading to integrity challenges of research.

There is a challenge of hostile reception by respondents due to historical mistrust of researchers. Moyo and Yeros (2005) ^[34] regrettably point out that some communities have been recipients of extractive research where they cooperated with research work only to receive no tangible benefits. Unless there are trust building measures employed, such communities may withhold completely or give superficial responses that does not benefit research. This brings to the fore the ethical tenet of beneficence employed in this study where respondents were advised that the study was primarily of academic significance with a national impact on policy. Thus the researchers ensured that through this observance, there was no expectation of tangible benefits to the respondents.

Though Zimbabwe has a modicum of peace, there are some areas or locations where a research inquiry can be hampered by accessibility local leadership controls. Musasa, (2021) ^[36] points out that in Zimbabwe any enquiry is highly politicised and is perceived to be a front for some political outfit. This perception seems to have been endemic for long as earlier research by Chigora & Guzura (2011) ^[5] also attest to the fact that in rural areas where political repression has a history, researchers are viewed with suspicion. Consequential, obtaining genuine informed consent and truthful responses becomes compromised. These sentiments and attitudes can lead to time constraints, and there maybe be safety concerns, frustration, and worries for researchers. There is an attendant risk of physical and emotional harm to both researchers and respondents. Respondents are in constant fear that the information they share may lead to political reprisals or backlashes.

Rusero (2022) ^[41] views this situation as of great concern when research is perceived by government as a threat to national security. Endangering the respondents or participants becomes a likelihood especially if there is provision of politically sensitive information. Thus the need to uphold ethical tenets such as confidentiality, protecting respondents from harm and the observance of permissions becomes a critical consideration. Rusero (2022) ^[41] further advises researchers to be cognisant of past experiences where Zimbabwe has undergone periods of political instability and security surveillance. As a consequences Researchers may be suspected of political activity especially when the scope of enquiry involves governance, human rights and the land reform issues.

Related to the political sensitivity challenge, Mavhura (2020) ^[31] brings out the challenge of gatekeepers or red tape in some localities. For one to access some areas they have to obtain permission to interact with inhabitants from the Chief, local leadership and at times law enforcement agents. During this study, the researchers came across plain clothes law enforcement agents who advised them to make a

formal notification to the local Police Chief in one of the provinces. Their recommendation was premised on the need to give the researchers security cover as they criss-crossed the area. Though ostensibly prudent it was unnerving to the researchers as it gave feelings of being monitored. Mavhura (2020) ^[31] further posits that going through local leadership may lead to researchers being directed to 'chosen' respondents and this may introduce bias in the research by debasing voluntary participation. Makuvaza (2008) ^[23] also points out the impact of cultural norms which dictate subservience to local leadership effectively limiting the scope of enquiry to the selected few who may not be keen to divulge information they deem sensitive.

Research Objectives

- To identify ethical challenges encountered during agricultural fieldwork in Zimbabwe.
- To examine farmers' understanding and experiences of informed consent and voluntary participation in research activities.
- To explore perceptions of fairness, privacy, and researcher conduct as reflected in the original field data.
- To analyze how ethical considerations may affect data quality and trust in agricultural research processes.
- To recommend best practices for improving ethical compliance in future agricultural field research.

Research Questions

- What ethical issues emerged during the fieldwork phase of the study on agricultural performance?
- How did farmers perceive and experience the process of informed consent and participation?
- What concerns, if any, were raised by respondents regarding data use, confidentiality, or researcher behavior?
- To what extent might ethical shortcomings have influenced the quality or reliability of the primary data?
- What strategies can be recommended to strengthen ethical conduct in agricultural field research in Zimbabwe?

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine pertinent ethical considerations in agricultural fieldwork. Qualitative research was deemed suitable for understanding ethical considerations of respondents met during a prior study as this design is flexible and allows for in-depth interviews. Thus this research became an incidental study. (Creswell & Poth, 2018) ^[9].

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of farmers based from the 8 non metropolitan provinces of Zimbabwe. These were communal and resettled farmers under the Model A2 scheme. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 10 participants per province who met specific inclusion criteria benchmarked on being a communal farmer or a Model A2 farmer who has been farming for at least 10 years and their willingness to participate. The total respondents were 80. Purposive sampling was considered consistent with

interpretivist research due to its capacity to allow the researcher to intentionally select information-rich participants capable of the provision of deep insights (Patton, 2022) ^[38].

Sampling Method

This study used purposive selection to isolate variables and responses relevant to ethical considerations. Selected data points included:

- Respondents' awareness of study objectives
- Responses about consent and willingness to participate
- Perceptions of fairness and transparency in field research
- Comments about interactions with researchers or enumerators
- Cases that lacked completeness on these variables were excluded from the ethical analysis to maintain internal consistency.

Data Collection Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed narratives from participants. The guide consisted of open-ended questions exploring the identification of ethical challenges encountered during agricultural fieldwork in Zimbabwe, farmers' understanding and experiences of informed consent and voluntary participation in research activities, perceptions of fairness, privacy, and researcher conduct as reflected in the original field data.

The instrument enabled participants to express their experiences freely while ensuring consistency across interviews (Patton, 2022) ^[38]. Interviews were conducted in English, Ndebele, or Shona depending on the participant's preference, to ensure comfort and authenticity of responses.

Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are conceptualised as trustworthiness, encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Coleman, 2022) ^[8]. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants reviewed interview summaries to verify accuracy of interpretation. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of context and participant characteristics. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a clear audit trail of all research procedures and decisions. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexivity, with the researcher acknowledging personal biases and their potential influence on data interpretation. Triangulation of perspectives across different participants also added to the robustness of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018) ^[9].

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over a 12 week period in Zimbabwe. After obtaining ethical clearance and informed consent, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews at locations convenient for participants, such as field days and community centres. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes there was no audio recording as the respondents felt it was a breach of anonymity hence this was discarded. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. To ensure confidentiality, the

questionnaires had no names ascribed.

On the field the consent form was read aloud and the verbal affirmation was considered as consent leading to granting of the questionnaire.

Data Preparation

All interviews were conducted in either English, isiNdebele or Shona, depending on participant preference. All the responses were carefully noted down in the questionnaire.

No audio recordings were done as respondents felt it was a breach of anonymity. The researcher anonymized the data by assigning each respondent a numerical pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

Thematic Analysis Process

The analysis proceeded through six iterative stages of thematic analysis (Castleberry & Clarke, 2018; Lochmiller, 2021) ^[21]:

Step	Description	Activity Undertaken
Step 1	Familiarisation with the Data	The researcher read and re-read all the completed questionnaires to immerse fully in the participants' narratives.
Step 2	Generating Initial Codes	Meaningful statements or phrases related to the research questions were coded manually using open coding
Step 3	Searching for Themes	Codes with similar meanings were grouped together into broader categories and themes
Step 4	Reviewing Themes	Themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately represented the data set. Overlapping or redundant categories were merged.
Step 5	Defining and Naming Themes	Each theme was clearly defined and supported by direct responses from the questionnaire to illustrate meaning.
Step 6	Producing the Report	Findings were presented through thematic narratives supported by direct response quotes

Data Presentation

Data were presented using narrative and thematic approaches, consistent with qualitative traditions.

Narrative Presentation

Findings were organised according to the research questions:

- Ethical Challenges Encountered During Agricultural Fieldwork
- Understanding and Experiences of Informed Consent & Voluntary Participation
- Perceptions of Fairness, Privacy, and Researcher Conduct
- How Ethical Considerations Affect Data Quality and Trust

Ethical considerations

When conducting this study, the author observed the following ethical tenets such as anonymity, beneficence, deception, informed consent and plagiarism. These ethical tenets are consistent with the expectations of the Lupane State University Institutional Ethics Review Board who granted approval for this study. These expectations or standards are consistent with the principles outlined in the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and all its attendant amendments. In this study the research instrument was designed in such a manner that there was no provision for the name and contact details of the respondents. In this study the respondents were advised that the research and information gleaned from the instrument will fill a knowledge gap and ultimately benefit the agriculture industry. The author avoided extolling the benefits of the research on individual level and adopted a holistic approach. In this study the purpose of the research was fully communicated to the respondents and the enquiry was above board with no hidden or misrepresented inclinations. The author acknowledged all information obtained from other works and shunned plagiarism so as to safeguard the integrity of this study.

Although this study is an incidental research, ethical integrity remains central. The original research received ethical clearance from Graduate Studies Directorate at

Chinhoyi University of Technology, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. For this study approval for re-use of the pool of respondent's data was granted by the original research team. All data were anonymized, and confidentiality was strictly maintained (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021) ^[3].

Verbal Informed Consent

Respondents gave information truthfully with full consent and were not under any form of duress. For this study, the researcher explained that the research was for both academic and practical purposes so as to increase the scope of knowledge and assured the respondents that there was no risk whatsoever in partaking. The respondents gave a verbal informed consent facilitated at the introductory segment of the questionnaire. Thus a prospective respondent could decline to give a consent and therefore not participate in the questionnaire responses.

The respondents provided verbal informed consent, which was systematically documented during the introductory segment of the questionnaire. This approach was chosen due to logistical challenges associated with written consent in rural Zimbabwean farming communities, where literacy levels and access to printing facilities are variable. Verbal consent was ethically justified as the study posed minimal risk, and participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Consent was recorded by researchers via annotated checkboxes on the questionnaire, confirming participation approval.

Consent for Publication

The Author is willing for the publication of this manuscript.

Results

Objective 1: Ethical Challenges Encountered During Agricultural Fieldwork

Theme 1: Perceived Coercion and Power Imbalances

Frequency: 46 out of 80 respondents (57.5%)

Description: Farmers felt pressured to participate when researchers were accompanied by Agritex officers or local leaders.

Representative Quotes

"When they come with Agritex officers, you think saying no is disrespectful." (Respondent 12)

"We felt we had to participate so that we don't lose future support." (Respondent 44)

Theme 2: Insufficient Explanation of Study Purpose

Frequency: 52 out of 80 respondents (65%)

Description: Many farmers said the research purpose was unclear or poorly communicated.

Representative Quotes:

"They rushed through the introduction; I didn't understand why they needed my details." (Respondent 7)

"We just answered but didn't know what the study was about." (Respondent 31)

Theme 3: Poor Scheduling and Disruption of Farming Activities

Frequency: 33 out of 80 respondents (41.3%)

Description: Visits often occurred during peak farming hours.

Representative Quotes

"They found us in the fields and delayed our work." (Respondent 20)

"Sometimes interviews interfere with our farming activities." (Respondent 56)

Objective 2: Understanding and Experiences of Informed Consent & Voluntary Participation**Theme 4: Consent as Routine Paperwork Rather Than a Process**

Frequency: 48 out of 80 respondents (60%)

Description: Consent forms were signed with minimal understanding.

Representative Quotes

"They just said 'sign here'; no one explained what it meant." (Respondent 2)

"I didn't know I could refuse the interview." (Respondent 38)

Theme 5: Language and Literacy Barriers

Frequency: 39 out of 80 respondents (48.8%)

Description: Forms used technical English, reducing comprehension.

Representative Quotes

"The English on the form was too hard; I just trusted them." (Respondent 10)

"It would be better if everything was in Shona." (Respondent 63)

Theme 6: Gatekeeper Influence on Participation

Frequency: 29 out of 80 respondents (36.3%)

Description: Village heads and chiefs strongly shaped participation decisions.

Representative Quotes

"When the headman says participate, we have to." (Respondent 47)

"Leaders' involvement makes it look compulsory." (Respondent 14)

Objective 3: Perceptions of Fairness, Privacy, and Researcher Conduct**Theme 7: Concerns About Privacy and Confidential Handling of Data**

Frequency: 43 out of 80 respondents (53.8%)

Description: Respondents worried about how financial, production, and personal details would be used.

Representative Quotes:

"Some questions are too personal; we don't know who will see the answers." (Respondent 27)

"We fear that information might reach authorities." (Respondent 61)

Theme 8: Expectations of Compensation or Reciprocity

Frequency: 35 out of 80 respondents (43.8%)

Description: Respondents felt research provided little community benefit.

Representative Quotes

"Researchers always take information but we see no outcome." (Respondent 50)

"If it helps us, we should also be told the results." (Respondent 19)

Theme 9: Researcher Respect, Attitude, and Professional Conduct

Frequency: 32 out of 80 respondents (40%)

Description: Mixed experiences with some perceptions of researchers being polite and others dismissive.

Representative Quotes

"The researchers were kind and patient." (Respondent 5)

"The researchers were rushing and didn't want questions." (Respondent 71)

Objective 4: How Ethical Considerations Affect Data Quality and Trust**Theme 10: Withholding or Altering Information Due to Distrust**

Frequency: 40 out of 80 respondents (50%)

Description: Lack of confidence in confidentiality caused inaccurate responses.

Representative Quotes

"I don't trust them so I give safe answers." (Respondent 18)

"I avoid giving exact figures because I'm unsure who will know." (Respondent 76).

Theme 11: Better Data Quality When Trust and Respect Are Demonstrated

Frequency: 45 out of 80 respondents (56.3%)

Description: Clear explanations and respectful engagement

led to fuller disclosure.

Representative Quotes

"When they explain everything properly, I answer freely." (Respondent 8)

"Those who spend time with us we get to know them and give more information." (Respondent 35)

Theme 12: Long-Term Effects on Willingness to Participate in Future Research

Frequency: 27 out of 80 respondents (33.8%)

Description: Negative past experiences discouraged participation in future projects.

Representative Quotes

"Some people now avoid researchers because of past problems." (Respondent 70)

"Next time, I will think twice before agreeing." (Respondent 23)

Summary of main findings

Ethical challenges commonly involved coercion (57.5%), poor explanation of purpose (65%), and scheduling issues (41.3%).

Informed consent was often poorly understood (60%) and affected by literacy barriers (48.8%).

Fairness and privacy concerns were prominent (53.8%), as were expectations of reciprocity (43.8%).

Ethical shortcomings significantly influenced data accuracy (50%), openness, and future trust in researchers.

Discussion

Gaps between Protocol and Practice

Informed Consent vs. Real Community Understanding

Whilst protocol dictates that ethical tenets involve voluntary, informed consent from participants, Alhabsi, (2024) ^[1] point that in practice, the mixed literacy rates, language barriers have a tendency to lead respondents into a form of cosmetic consent due to limited comprehension. Where written consent is involved, respondents may sign out of civility due to limited understanding and lack of adequate interpretation due to language deficiencies.

Benefit Sharing vs. Extractive Research

Lacosta, Vulto, Turcu-Stiolica, Huys, & Simoens, (2022) ^[20] assert that ethical observance in research entails for an equitable benefit sharing and feedback of outcomes to the study population. However, there is a gap between the intention and the practical aspect. The Authour concurs by pointing out that by its nature, agricultural research in Zimbabwe is extractive. In this approach, data is collected from local farmers or respondents with no follow up appraisals on the findings. As a consequence, respondents do not perceive any tangible benefits.

Community Engagement vs. Top-Down Approaches

Participatory research upholds ethical considerations such as continuous community engagement throughout the subsisting of the research process. While this is an expectation that should be a norm rather than otherwise, Marovah & Mutanga (2024) ^[25] note that in practice this is contrary. They note that the engagement is cosmetic and

synthetic rather than an important activity. The token approach seems to stem from a donor cantered desire for endorsement by sponsors or financiers. Thus in practice there is a likelihood of outcomes and decisions thereof that are the product of external researchers or consultants with limited local input.

Ethics Review Boards vs. Local Context

Ethical oversight requires the setting up of Research ethics committees (RECs) whose main brief is to review study protocols for ethical compliance. Whilst RECs are a vital cog in ethics governance and management, Hickey *et al* (2022) ^[14], points out that there is a gap between the expectation and practice. The Authour shares the viewpoint and asserts that Zimbabwean RECs do lack capacity and contextual experience for agricultural research settings. Hickey *et al* (2022) ^[14] give an opinion, that the ethical clearances are more of regulatory requirements rather than their intended role of safeguarding upholding of ethical tenets.

Voluntary Participation vs. Power Relations

One of the ethical considerations in research is that participation must be voluntary with no form of duress and coercion. Research on studies in Zimbabwe by Mavhunga (2017) ^[30] show a diversion from this expectation in that respondents or farmers tend to participate out of civility propelled by a perception of the status of researchers as authorities who may be of influence in future incentives or beneficial support programs.

Confidentiality vs. Practical Realities

The other ethical tenet that should be observed is confidentiality. This is particularly relevant on maintain the protection of participant information. However in practice, upholding confidentiality may be a challenge especially where local field workers have been engaged. Tindana, Kass and Akweongo (2006) ^[46], point out that local resource person may unintentionally breach confidentiality through normal conversations with their compatriots.

Community Expectations

Another challenge prevalent in field research is the mismatch of study objectives with community expectations. Klingberg and Draper (2025) ^[18] view community expectations as an existing and a significant challenge in research due to their potential to lead to misinterpretation, misunderstandings, mistrust and conflict. These expectations stem from community perceptions of research benefits, compensation, incentives and ownership and rights to the data. Mutambara (2018) ^[37] views them as the beliefs and or assumptions that respondents attest to about their intentions, benefits, and conduct of researchers operating in their areas. These expectations then determine how communities engage with research activities and have a bearing on the outcomes of the research process and the ethical considerations to be adopted. (Marzano *et al*, 2006) ^[26].

This in essence can lead to a discord between the research objectives and the community goals. This has the potential to fuel a conflict when these discordant approaches culminate in tension due to varied goals, values, or norms of

the two parties. Klingsberg and Draper (2025) ^[18] further point out that this is likely in research fields involving human participants and community-based studies. There is need for researchers to come up with a nexus point for scientific rigor and ethical considerations whilst embracing social sensitivity.

Handling of cultural sensitivities

Related to the above challenge is the handling of cultural sensitivities in research. This activity involves respecting and understanding the beliefs, values, norms, and practices of the community or population being studied. Matereke (2020) ^[28] emphasizes that its importance covers areas such as the local leadership roles, ethical considerations, methodology to be adopted, language of communication and other relational reasons. It is crucial for ethical, methodological, and relational reasons (Mubaya and Mufongoya, 2017) ^[35] particularly when conducting research in diverse or marginalized communities and those where there is a strong inclination towards traditional norms and values.

Dzingirai *et al* (2013) ^[13] point out that handling cultural sensitivities appropriately, reduces incidences of misunderstandings and community resistance. Thus it also serves to enhance research validity since there is a community buy-in on the research leading to cooperation and honest responses. Matereke (2020) ^[28] adds on this leverage in that there is increased trust and the respect gained can lead to long term collaborations with the communities.

There is need to appreciate the gender roles of communities when conducting research. Some communities may not favour the involvement of women. Thus Mubaya and Mafongoya (2017) ^[35] recommend that the research process must set a separate platform convened by female field assistants to accommodate the women's contributions. Related to the community norms, Chigudu (2020) ^[6] cautions on the metaphysical and spiritual beliefs impact on research. Some communities may not be willing to discuss yields, soil sampling and may hold certain days sacred. For research to proceed they may require that certain rituals be performed first.

Recommendations

Ethics Committees

Ethics committees should shy away from bureaucratic formalities and adopt a proactive approach where they enlist qualified and trained personnel in their ranks who have competences in agricultural and socio cultural contexts. Kamuya, Marsh and Kombe (2015) ^[17] recommend that there must be community representation in the ethics committees so as attend to local needs, expectations and concerns. The author concurs with this recommendation.

Community Engagement

Prior to commencing research, there must be site specific consultations with stakeholders, inclusive of local leadership, security details, and farmers to assess the community expectations so that the objectives of the study are in tandem. In support of this view Nyamukure and Mtetwa (2020) implore researchers in pre study consultation to adopt culturally and local appropriate engagement

techniques such as participatory community meetings using acceptable language medium.

Observance of Local Norms and Cultural Sensitivities

Ethical considerations and the research methodology must be cognisant of the traditional practices, beliefs, gender systems and leadership hierarchy. In support of this recommendation, Molyneux and Bull (2013) ^[32] emphasize the need to ensure that informed consent is sourced through cultural sensitive methods which can encompass both group and verbal consent.

Benefit Sharing

On extolling the potential benefits and risks of participation in a research, the issues must be clearly articulated. Referring to scientific and practical research, Kamuya *et al* (2015) ^[17] underscores the need for fair compensation, adequate inputs so as to enable an appreciable benefit to the community as well.

Capacity Building

Tindana, Singh *et al* (2007) ^[47] recommend the inclusion of local researchers and field assistants in data collection and analysis. This has the potential to uplift their skills aptitude and also adds contextual relevance to the research. The fusion of local research institutions, extension workers also helps to foster

Monitoring Ethical Compliance

The authors recommend that it is prudent to continuously develop strategies for ongoing ethical monitoring. This approach favours a dynamic assessment of ethical consideration rather than the generally accepted reliance on pre-approved ethics clearance. This can also be reinforced by enacting an anonymous grievance and comprehensive complaints procedure which will allow respondents to withdraw from the research freely.

Results Dissemination

Results must be disseminated back to the communities, policymakers and local leadership. The authors concur with the views of CIOMS (2016) ^[7] who posit that this will promote accountability. This will also promote future collaborations and the community buy-ins.

Conclusion

Ethical considerations in agricultural field research are paramount, particularly in emerging economies like Zimbabwe, where socio-economic vulnerabilities, cultural complexities, and limited regulatory oversight can heighten the risk of ethical lapses. This study underscores the need for context-specific ethical frameworks that go beyond formal protocols to incorporate local values, community expectations, and power dynamics between researchers and participants.

Despite the existence of ethical guidelines, gaps persist between protocol and practice, often due to logistical constraints, limited resources, local leadership expectations and demands or insufficient training of field researchers. Issues such as informed consent, data ownership, benefit-sharing, and the protection of indigenous knowledge remain pressing concerns. Moreover, the marginalization of rural

communities from decision-making processes in research further compounds ethical risks.

To address these challenges, it is critical to embrace a participatory approach to research ethics where respect, reciprocity, and responsibility are regarded as the pillars for engagement. Strengthening local ethical review mechanisms, building researcher capacity, and fostering continuous dialogue with communities can bridge the divide between ethical intention and ethical practice. This will indeed ensure ethical rigor in agricultural research not as a matter of compliance but a core undertaking for building trust, sustainability, and the credibility of field research in Zimbabwe.

Declarations Conflict of Interest

The Author has no financial or non-financial interests that are directly or indirectly related to this work.

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