

Research Ethics Committees and Science Granting Councils: Strengthening institutional capacity to manage, reduce or eliminate Conflict of Interest (COI) in health research in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)

This project is a collaborative project involving co-investigators from the University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, The Great Lakes University of Kisumu, the Cameroon Bioethics Initiative and the American University of Beirut. The project has built on the work of a collaborative network of public health researchers and scholars grappling with the challenges posed by COI for promoting health in the face of corporate risks for non-communicable disease, and particularly on research by the Governance, Ethics and Conflict of Interest in Public Health (GECI-PH) network.

The aim of the project is to strengthen the capacities of health research institutions (specifically Science Councils and Health Research Ethics Committees and their equivalents) to protect the integrity of health research from conflict of interest. To this end, the project has developed a Toolkit and an online course.

This Table summarises guidelines, from selected Research Ethics Committees and Science Granting Councils in SSA, to address conflicts of interest in health research.

Table: Institutional guidelines from selected Research Ethics Committees and Science Granting Councils in Sub-Saharan African countries: Identifying and managing common conflicts of interest in health research

Country	Institution	Type of institution	Cases/Situations regarded as potential COI (per institution's SOP/Policy document)	Type of COI	Institutional strategy for identifying potential COI (From SOP/Policy document)	Institutional strategy for managing COI situation (From SOP/Policy document)
Nigeria	Nigeria's National Health Research Ethics Committee ¹	REC	One of the REC members is either the principal investigator or a member of the research team of the study under review	Not explicitly specified.	Mandatory written or oral disclosure by members of REC. (before the review of study protocol).	Recuse REC member with potential COI from the review process In certain cases where it is agreed by the committee that their judgment could potentially be biased (e.g., Where the principal investigator is the chair of the committee), transfer of ethics review application and protocol to another research ethics committee.
			The principal investigator of a study holds stock in a company that is sponsoring the study.	Financial	Written disclosure of potential COI by principal investigator	The institution's strategy for managing the COI situation is not described in the SOP.
Uganda	Research Ethics Committee- Makerere University, Uganda ²	REC	The Chairperson or a member of REC also serves as the principal investigator for a study under review.	Financial and professional	Mandatory disclosure in writing of potential conflict of interest	Recuse REC members with potential COI from taking part in the consensus process to approve or reject the protocol. In cases where the REC member is the chairperson, he/she is excused from the review process and another person is delegated to chair the review process for that study.
			A member of REC is involved in a potentially	Professional	Written submission	"The committee may elect to investigate the PI's claim of a

			competing research project to that under review.		from the principal investigator of the study under review, detailing how a project of a member of the committee could be a competing research project to his/her study. Mandatory disclosure in writing of potential conflict of interest by REC member	potential conflict of interest of a member” The REC member with potential Col is recused from taking part in the consensus process to approve or reject the protocol. (In some instances, the member is allowed to be present during deliberation but only to answer some questions the committee might have regarding the potential Col).
			A REC member has access to funding or intellectual information that may provide an unfair competitive advantage to his or her project at the expense of the study under review	Professional and Financial	Mandatory disclosure in writing of potential conflict of interest by member of REC	Recuse REC members with potential Col from taking part in the consensus process to approve or reject the protocol.
South Africa	University of Cape Town Human Research Ethics Committee ³	REC	A principal investigator of a study also serves as a director, officer, or another decision-maker for a commercial sponsor of the study.	Financial	Written disclosure by the principal investigator.	The institution’s strategy for managing the Col situation is not clearly described in the SOP. There is however a mention in the SOP that failure to declare any potential Col constitutes a non-compliance with the institution’s research ethics policies and warrants an investigation against the PI
			A principal investigator of a study holds any stock or stock options in a commercial sponsor of the study unless held in a diversified, independently managed mutual fund or the spouse and/or dependent of a principal investigator of a study has any financial interest in the study.	Financial	Written disclosure by the principal investigator.	The institution’s strategy for managing the Col situation is not clearly described in the SOP. There is however a mention in the SOP that failure to declare any potential Col constitutes a non-compliance with the institution’s research ethics policies and warrants an investigation against the PI
			A principal investigator of a study receives consulting fees or honoraria from a commercial sponsor of the study.	Financial	Written disclosure by the principal investigator.	The institution’s strategy for managing the Col situation is not clearly described in the SOP. There is however a mention in the SOP that failure to declare any potential Col constitutes a non-compliance with the institution’s research ethics policies and warrants an investigation against the PI

			A principal investigator accepts payment from a study sponsor for non-research travel or gifts or receives payment based on the research outcomes.	Financial	Written disclosure by the principal investigator.	The institution's strategy for managing the CoI situation is not clearly described in the SOP. There is however a mention in the SOP that failure to declare any potential CoI constitutes a non-compliance with the institution's research ethics policies and warrants an investigation against the PI
			A principal investigator of a study is personally named as an inventor on patents or invention reports for the product(s) being evaluated in the study or having a financial interest in companies with similar products is known to the investigator to be competing with the product under study.	Financial/ Professional	Written disclosure by the principal investigator.	The institution's strategy for managing the CoI situation is not clearly described in the SOP. There is however a mention in the SOP that failure to declare any potential CoI constitutes a non-compliance with the institution's research ethics policies and warrants an investigation against the PI
Rwanda	Rwanda National Ethics Committee ⁴	REC	A REC member is involved in a potentially competing research grant application (i.e., applying for a research grant that has also received an application from the principal investigator of the study under review)	Financial	Written submission from the principal investigator of the study under review detailing how the interest of a member of the committee could conflict with the study protocol under review Written or oral disclosure by REC member (Mandatory)	Setting up a subcommittee to investigate the PI's claim of a potential conflict of interest of a member. To ensure that REC members are in the position to investigate and come to the right conclusion in such cases, the committee SOP directs the committee to offer members initial and continuous training in research-related ethics issues including how to deal with potential conflicts of interest. The REC member whose interest might conflict with the protocol under review is made to abstain from voting.
Sudan	Sudan National Committee for Health Research Ethics ⁵	REC	A researcher and/or the institution conducting a study have any financial interest in the outcome of the research.	Financial	Written disclosure of potential CoI by the principal investigator of the study	The institution's strategy for managing the CoI situation is not described in the SOP
			A REC member holds shares in a company or organization that funds a study under review.	Financial	Mandatory written disclosure by all members of REC before the review of ethics approval applications.	REC member is recused from the meeting to discuss the ethics application for that study. SOP indicates that before the meeting to discuss the ethics application, the chairperson of the REC must be informed of the potential conflict of interest involving one of the members of the committee. The reason for this is not clearly stated in the SOP
Ghana	Centre for Scientific and Industrial	SGC	A member of the institutional review board of the CSIR is	Not explicitly	Mandatory written or oral disclosure by	The CSIR-IRB member with potential CoI is recused from the meeting to discuss the ethics

	Research (CSIR) ⁶		involved in a study that has been submitted to the council for ethics approval.	stated in the SOP	members of the institutional review board of the CSIR	application. In certain instances, the member is allowed to remain in the meeting to address certain questions that the review board might have but under no circumstance is he/she allowed to vote during the meeting
Kenya	National Council for Science and Technology (NCST) ⁷	SGC	A member of the ethics committee under the National Council for Science and Technology holds financial stock in an organization that sponsors the study seeking ethics approval.	Financial	Mandatory disclosure of any conflict of interest by members of the NCST ethics committee.	Members with potential conflicts of interest recused and exempted from voting in the meeting to discuss the ethics application.

Table created by Abraham Opare (2022) as part of a review of the literature relating to conflicts of interest in health research, with specific reference to RECs and SGCs in sub-Saharan Africa.

References

1. National Health Research Ethics Committee. *Standard Operating Procedure of Nigeria's National Health Research Ethics Committee.*; 2012.
2. School of Biomedical Sciences Higher Degrees and Research Ethics Committee. *Standard Operating Procedure .*; 2018.
3. Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. *Standard Operating Procedure.*; 2019.
4. Rwanda National Ethics Committee. *Standard Operating Procedures.*; 2009.
5. Committee for Health Research Ethics. *Standard Operating Procedure .*; 2008.
6. Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research. *Standard Operating Procedure.*; 2015.
7. National Council for Science and Technology. *Standard Operating Procedure.*; 2011.