

PAYMENT AND COMPENSATION

Research ethics committee conditions: Ethical challenges of researching with poor communities in Malawi

Background context:

As an international academic team we have been engaged with researching African household and young people's livelihood trajectories in a Malawian village since 2007. Intermittently over more than a decade we have conducted surveys, interviews and participatory research with many of the young and adult residents of that small rural community, thereby building up a detailed knowledge of the community and developing extensive personal relations with individuals and families.

The ethical challenge:

The Malawian research ethics committee (REC) granted us ethical clearance to undertake the research on condition that we would not give gifts, compensation or payments to research participants which, as regulated by the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, they viewed as contravening the principle of voluntary participation in research. Thus, we faced the ethical challenge of how could we acknowledge and contribute to the needs of individual research participants living in poverty, while also abiding by these conditions for ethical approval. Not only did the nature of our research make us acutely aware of the severe poverty experienced by some families, we were asked directly to help the village by repairing the borehole. The borehole in question had been broken for some years and meant a longer walk to collect water further away. Unfortunately, getting involved in such a technical and costly undertaking was way beyond what we could do as committed researchers, despite our empathy with respect to the villagers' everyday lives, including their basic unmet needs.

Our dilemmas surrounding payment and compensation were heightened by our experiences as recipients of local hospitality according to village custom – for example, the chief's wife spontaneously prepared a meal for us as we arrived for one of our visits which it would have been culturally unacceptable (i.e. considered

rude) to refuse to eat. Similarly, when one of our international team members was leaving following a period of several months residing in the village, she was presented with gifts from the community including farm produce and a live chicken. Universal notions of social reciprocity meant we naturally felt indebted and were keen to give back, but we were also mindful of the need to abide by the terms on which our research had been granted ethical approval locally – even if we did not agree with them.

Choices made:

After extensive debate, and directly questioning the Malawian REC stance (which, differing from the stance of our UK university REC, was met with intransigence), we decided to try and reciprocate to the whole village and not individual households. Also, we agreed to do this at the end of each period of data collection and not divulge our plans in advance. So we invited the whole village to community dissemination meetings and provided refreshments (some prepared by villagers and paid for), entertainment (thus paying local musicians), donated sports equipment to the local youth teams and items (e.g. sacks of fortified porridge, exercise books, children's clothes) for the village pre-school.

Reflexive questions / considerations:

We asked ourselves three questions about the morality of (i) our position as 'wealthy' outside researchers confronting poverty yet 'forbidden' by the local Malawian REC regulations to give even small gifts in appreciation of research participants' involvement, (ii) the position of the research ethics committee, which required payment of a fee for processing the application and requested ten percent of the research project budget towards running the REC secretariat, and (iii) the position of most national government stakeholders who asked for (or at least expected) a large per diem including reimbursement for fuel for attending our stakeholder dissemination meeting held close to their offices during working hours and at which lunch and refreshments were provided.

Our final village dissemination gatherings had something of a party atmosphere allowing people to enjoy themselves, but there were challenges in distributing refreshments fairly and calmly to everyone. We were also left with lingering doubts about whether the donated items (e.g. clothes, porridge, footballs) would actually go to the intended recipients after we left. Concerns also remain for the in-country members of our research team who continue to be the local face of our research projects and are easily contacted by villagers with further requests for assistance.



On reflection, perhaps we could (or should) have made efforts to connect the village with another organisation specialising in rural water supply and/or helped them apply for funds to repair the borehole pump using our knowledge networks and communication skills.

Our final questions for ourselves and other researcher are: How can such uncomfortable situations be avoided? Made more equitable? How can REC standards be made equivalent? Should REC standards be equivalent ? How can on-the-ground researchers fruitfully engage in dialogue with (remote) RECs to inform and improve their decision-making?

Contributed by: Dr Elsbeth Robson, Reader in Human Geography, University of Hull: e.robson@hull.ac.uk

On behalf of Nicola Ansell, Flora Hajdu, Roeland Hemsteede, Thandie Hlabana, Evance Mwachunga and Lorraine van Blerk - team for the 'Social Cash Transfers, Generational Relations and Youth Poverty Trajectories in Rural Lesotho and Malawi' research project: <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Projects/cash-transfers-youth>

