



## **National Commission for Science and Technology**

# **THE FRAMEWORK OF GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES IN MALAWI**

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**National Commission for Science and Technology**

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Anthony Muyepa  
**DIRECTOR GENERAL**

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Researchers in the fields of social sciences and humanities work within a variety of economic, cultural, legal and political settings that influence the emphasis of their disciplines involving their own techniques, procedures and ethical approaches. Even within the same setting and discipline, individuals may have different moral precepts that guide their work. No declaration could successfully impose a rigid set of rules to which social and humanities researchers everywhere should be expected to adhere. For this reason this document is referred to as *The Framework of Guidelines for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Malawi*, herein referred to as the *framework*.

The framework contains a preamble; value of research in the social sciences and humanities; ethical principles and obligations; and sections on autonomous implementation of the framework; research communication; appropriate research environment; monitoring system; application; affiliation and clearance, and acknowledgements.

The purpose of the framework is to provide individuals and institutions with guidelines for making ethical choices in the conduct of social sciences and humanities research in Malawi. Its aim is to enable the social and humanities researchers make individual ethical judgments and decisions informed by shared ethics, principles, values and experiences that are not imposed by their professions. This is a mere framework given that the specific disciplines in the social sciences and humanities can present researchers with many and different complex situations. It shall be adapted by researchers according to the situations they encounter.

The framework is designed to be informative and descriptive rather than being authoritarian or rigidly prescriptive, and is applicable as far as possible to different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Its informative and descriptive nature, however, reflects the minimum standards and requirements that should be followed by stakeholders. Its provisions are fairly broadly drawn. However, it will require periodic updating and amendment as deemed necessary by the National Commission for Science and Technology (NCST).

## **2.0 PREAMBLE**

Noting the steady growth of social sciences and humanities research in Malawi, the NCST developed this framework to guide the conduct of research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in conformity with national policies, laws and international standards.

Most research in the social sciences and humanities has direct impact on individuals' privacy and security. Without ethical commitment and guidelines, the credibility and quality of the research work being done, the autonomy and rights of the research participants, the integrity of researchers, and public confidence in research are adversely affected. This framework shall therefore guide the co-ordination, procedure, and ethical conduct of research in the social sciences and humanities in Malawi.

The National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities and any NCST approved and registered institutional research and ethics committee shall be key structures to facilitate observance and to promote adherence to what has been provided in this framework. The National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Malawi is a technical committee established within the institutional set up of the NCST as provided for in Part III, Section 11, Sub-section 1-3 of the Science and Technology Act No. 16 of 2003.

## **3.0 VALUE OF RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES**

The ultimate goal of research in the social sciences and humanities is to improve human life in the physical, material, moral, emotional and intellectual forms. The collection and use of research data in the various disciplines that fall in the categories of the social sciences and humanities, therefore, have direct bearings on people. Data are collected from human research participants, for use by individuals or groups of individuals, to meet individual or collective needs.

Researchers in the social sciences and humanities, therefore, have obligations to: their sources of research data, those whose lives will be

affected by the research findings, other interested parties and end-users of the research data, as well as themselves and their colleagues. Such obligations raise issues related to values, ethics, professional conduct, and moral commitment.

The framework provided herein is premised on the values of:

- i. service and benefit to humanity,
- ii. respect for the rights, worth and dignity of research participants.
- iii. promotion of innovation and creativity in research,
- iv. excellence and professionalism,
- v. collegiality,
- vi. continuous transfer of skills and knowledge,
- vii. encouragement of collective participation in matters of human development, and
- viii. transparency and accountability at all levels of the research continuum.

#### **4.0 ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND OBLIGATIONS**

This framework forms the basis for the ethical design and conduct of research in the social sciences and humanities.

##### **4.1. Informed Consent**

All persons have the right to individual autonomy and self determination. Some of them are vulnerable in the sense that they have a compromised autonomy related to decisions about research participation to a degree that would violate the principle of respect for persons. Therefore, any individual who is invited to participate in a research study shall be given an adequate description of the study that is clear and complete enough for the individual to judge whether she or he wants to participate. The informed consent process is designed to provide potential participants with readily understandable information in an amount and timing appropriate to achieve the participant's understanding. Consent shall be obtained from each research participant who is legally, mentally and physically able. For those that are not, including minors, permission shall be sought from parents or legal guardians or any of their legally authorized representatives as the situation may apply. The following are examples of the exceptional



circumstances under which research can be approved by a research ethics committee without parental permission;

- i. If the research ethics committee determines that a research protocol is designed for conditions or for a subject population for which permission is not a reasonable requirement to protect the research participants (for example, neglected or abused children), provided an appropriate mechanism for protecting the children who will participate in the research is adequately substituted, and provided further that the waiver **is not inconsistent** with any of the relevant local laws.
- ii. Research on adolescents involving their access to contraceptives; or research on adolescents that aims at describing sexually transmitted diseases treatment seeking behaviours, provided the waiver **is not inconsistent** with any of the relevant local laws.

#### 4.1.1. *Written Consent*

Consent shall be in writing unless an NCST -recognized research ethics review committee finds that written documentation of informed consent may be waived. Consent forms and other informational documents like information sheets shall be written in simple language so as to be easily understood by potential participants and any persons without technical background in the field. The standard consent form and/or information sheet must include the following elements which are considered the most important information to be given out to the research participants;

- ***Research purpose and procedures:*** a statement that the study involves research, an explanation of the purposes of the research and the expected duration of participation, a description of procedures to be followed, and identification of any procedures which are experimental;
- ***Risks and discomforts of the research study:*** a description of any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the research participants;

- ***Potential benefit of the research study:*** a description of any benefits to the research subjects or to others or to the country as a whole that may reasonably be expected from the research;
- ***Alternative procedures:*** a disclosure of appropriate alternative procedures, if any, that might be advantageous to the research participants;
- ***Provisions for confidentiality:*** a statement describing the extent to which confidentiality of records identifying the research participant will be maintained;
- ***Research related injury:*** for research involving more than minimal risk, an explanation as to whether any compensation is available and if so, what it consists of and how it will be provided;
- ***Voluntariness in participation and the right to discontinue participation without penalty:*** a statement that participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled, and the participant may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled.
- ***Contacts for additional information:*** an explanation of whom to contact for answers to pertinent questions about the research and research participants rights, and whom to contact in the event of the research related injury (i.e. contacts of the principal investigator and the chair of the research and ethics committee reviewing and approving a particular study for additional information on the research and rights of participants, respectively);

#### 4.1.2. *Oral or Verbal Consent*

Any NCST-recognized research ethics review committee may allow an oral or verbal consent in the case of all those that do not read or write or do not understand the language of the written consent form. However, the script or information sheet to be read to the potential participants must be approved by the NCST-recognized research ethics review committee and be signed for by their parents or legal guardians or any

of the legally authorized representatives. The consent form or information sheet to be read out shall, however, contain the elements described in **4.1.1**.

#### 4.1.3 *Consent for protected sites*

For research related to intangible cultural heritage (as per definition contained in the convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage), heritage sites and graveyards/cemetery, consent/permission (be of entry) shall be obtained from the relevant custodians and/or offices or legal representatives.

#### 4.1.4 *Use of Language*

No consent form or information sheet, whether written or oral, shall include intimidatory, threatening, or deceptive language through which the subject or the subject's authorized representative is made to lose or waive any of the subject's legal rights, or releases or appears to release the investigator or sponsor from liability for negligence or any harmful consequences originating from participating in the research.

#### 4.1.5 *Requirement*

The standard requirement is that all participants shall sign in person a consent document or form or information sheet containing adequate elements of a consent document. Those who cannot sign, due to illiteracy, will provide a thumb print under a witness who shall also sign for witnessing. For those who cannot legally, mentally and physically give consent, their parents or legal guardians or authorized legal representatives will be required to sign or thumbprint.

#### 4.1.6 *Assent*

Researchers shall obtain assent from minors who are capable of assenting. In determining whether children are capable of assenting, an ethics review committee and the researchers shall take into account the ages, maturity and psychological state of the children involved. However, minors must assent in tandem with parental permission. An

assent needs to be tailored to the level of comprehension of the prospective participants. A research ethics review committee is granted wide discretion in determining whether a child is capable of assenting and can waive the requirement for child assent under the following circumstances;

- If a child is not capable of assent
- If the research offers a prospect of direct benefit not available outside of the research (thus falling under the scope of parental authority in overriding a child's desires)
- Or given the same conditions under which parental permission can be waived (as stated above in 4.1)

#### 4.1.7 *Consent from Emancipated Minors*

Emancipated minors may include those that society may regard as mature minors by law, those legally married, or students under a defined Malawian adult age. Assent from such minors may be regarded as an informed consent.

#### 4.1.8 *Protection for Vulnerable Populations*

Vulnerable persons are those who have a compromised autonomy related to decisions about research participation to a degree that would violate the principle of respect for persons. Researchers to involve such persons shall be required to obtain extra protections or safeguards for their safety and welfare. Examples of vulnerable populations include pregnant women, prisoners, orphans, people living with HIV and AIDS, refugees, persons with mental disabilities, the illiterate, and women and men who, in some settings, may have to ask their spouses before consenting to participate in a research. .

## 4.2 **Privacy and Confidentiality**

- i. Researchers shall be required to take precautionary measures to ensure that sensitive research information is not attributed to specific individuals that provided it and is collected in a manner that does not invade the privacy of the participants.
- ii. Researchers shall respect individuals' right to privacy.
- iii. Researchers shall ensure that sensitive, identifiable information is collected for research purposes and access to such

information is limited to a well defined group such as the research team, the research ethics committee or the research regulatory authority.

#### **4.3 Rights of Participants**

- i. Research participants have the right to know the benefits and risks of their participation in a research study
- ii. Research participants have the right to withdraw from participating in a research study without any penalty for their voluntary withdraw.
- iii. Research participants or communities from which research participants come have the right to feedback from researchers.

#### **4.4 Accountability and Transparency**

Researchers shall be committed to research that is fair, honest and transparent. They shall be accountable to their profession, research participants, and the wider society, and shall make arrangements to have their research data preserved for a reasonable period of time for posterity.

#### **4.5 Obligations to others**

Researchers shall promote social relations based on the principle of non-exploitation, collaboration, and mentorship. They shall strive to establish working relationships that benefit other researchers and participants, and have primary ethical obligations to the people they study. They shall respect the dignity and well-being of all people involved in their research. Their research shall not unnecessarily consume the time of participants or make them incur undue loss of property and income. Research shall not expose research participants to risks due to their participation in the research.

#### **4.6 Responsibility to the public**

Social and humanities research shall be done to benefit society and groups and individuals within it by making the research appropriately available to sponsors, students, decision makers, other researchers and research participants. Above all, researchers shall conduct their work responsibly and in light of the moral and legal order of the society in which they practice. They shall be truthful and be responsible for the

factual content of their statements and must consider the wider implications of the information that they disseminate. They shall make sure that the information presented is well understood, properly contextualized and responsibly utilized.

#### **4.7 Responsibility to colleagues and fellow researchers**

Social and humanities researchers shall maintain standards and appropriate professional behaviour that are shared amongst the professional research community. Without compromising obligations to funders, employers, subjects or society at large, this requires methods, procedures and findings to be open to collegial review and dissemination of findings to the scientific and scholarly community.

Where junior researchers work with their senior colleagues the aims shall be to: transfer professional skills, mentor, and build capacity in them.

#### **4.8 Responsibility to students and trainees**

Where researchers use students, the following guidelines shall apply:

- i. Research and teaching shall be conducted in such a way that does not discriminate on the basis of gender, marital status, race, social class, political convictions, religion, ethnicity, nationality, age or any other criterion irrelevant to academic performance;
- ii. Ensure improvement in teaching and training techniques, and being available to the needs and interests of the students;
- iii. Impress on students the ethical challenges involved in stages of social and humanities research;
- iv. Teachers shall publicly acknowledge student assistance in research and preparation of their work; and
- v. Wherever students are used in the research the aim shall be to transfer professional skills and to build capacity in them.

#### **4.9 Non-discrimination**

Researchers shall avoid discrimination against others on the basis of sex, race, religion, ethnicity, culture, or other social and human categories that are not related to their scientific competence and integrity.

#### **4.10 Avoidance of conflict of interest**

Researchers and members serving on research ethics review committees shall avoid conflict of interests. In this case, conflict of interests shall include but not limited to:

- i. researchers and members of any research ethics review committee who serve as an investigator on research under consideration by the same committee;
- ii. researchers and members who hold a significant financial interest in a body that funds or sponsors research or promotes products or services on which the research is being done;
- iii. a member whose spouse or close relative has a research under review by the committee;
- iv. researchers and members who have any special form of relationship with the sponsor of the research under consideration if such relationship is likely to influence decision of the committee;
- v. any person who receives a bribe or inducement to do research that compromises objectivity.

Insider dealing shall not be allowed in the research review process, and award of research grants. In a case where conflict of interest is likely to occur, a member of the committee or researcher shall be required to declare the nature of the conflict of interest and provide relevant information. Such a member shall not participate in the review of a particular protocol in which such a member has a conflict of interest. Such a member shall recuse oneself and move out of the meeting room to allow the committee freely deliberates on the protocol in which a member has declared conflict of interest. Such a member shall only be recalled into the meeting room after decision on that protocol had been made. The declaration and recusal shall have to be properly reflected in the minutes of that meeting.

#### **4.11 Objectivity**

Researchers shall strive to avoid bias or deception in the design of methods, data analysis, and data interpretation of their research. They shall serve rather than threaten the interests of society in which they

operate. For this reason they shall be aware of the fact that their assumptions may have an impact upon society. Hence, their duty is, on the one hand, to keep an unbiased attitude as far as possible, while, on the other hand, to acknowledge the tentative and relative character of the results of their research and not to conceal their own ideological position(s). No social sciences and humanities assumptions shall be presented as indisputable truths. Researchers shall need to clear misconceptions and misinterpretations about their research.

#### **4.12 Integrity**

Social science and humanities researchers bear responsibility for the integrity and reputation of their disciplines of scholarship and of science in general. Researchers shall not deceive or knowingly misrepresent (i.e. fabricate evidence or results, falsify, plagiarize), or attempt to prevent reporting of misconduct in any way, or obstruct the scientific or scholarly research of others. Researchers shall also allow others to have access to their research data and other research materials for purposes of their own work.

#### **4.13 Coercion and Undue Influence**

Coercion and undue influence shall not be allowed. Coercion refers to a situation in which a person to some degree is forced, or at least strongly pushed, to do something that is not good for him or her to do. Its interchangeable term is undue influence. If individuals are put in a position where there is undue influence to participate in research, then their ability to control their own destiny has been compromised. It shall be noted that undue influence and inducement amount to coercion.

### **5.0 AUTONOMOUS IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FRAMEWORK**

This framework is of a general application, but academic and other institutions are encouraged to develop their own frameworks in line with it. Such institutional frameworks/guidelines shall, however, be required to be endorsed by the NCST.

### **6.0 RESEARCH COMMUNICATION**

Research communication entails popularization of research results. Researchers in the social sciences and humanities shall ensure that



scientific knowledge is communicated to a wider audience beyond the research community. Reporting of research and its results shall be the responsibility of every researcher and the research institution. The responsibility may be delegated to either the sponsor or any individual upon mutual agreement and expressed commitment to publish or disseminate the results within a specified period.

### **6.1. Authorship**

As a rule, research results shall be published whether they support or contradict the expected outcome. When publishing, the following authorship guidelines shall apply:

- i. Authorship shall be based on the level of contribution made in terms of ideas, conceptualization, and actual performance of the research, analysis and writing of the report or any other publications based on the research.
- ii. Co-authorship and its sequence should not be based on the status of an individual in the institution or elsewhere.
- iii. All other persons not meeting the criteria for authorship but contributed to the conduct and completion of research or publication shall be properly acknowledged.
- iv. Students shall be listed as principal authors on any multiple authored publications that considerably originate from their dissertations.
- v. Appropriate acknowledgment shall be given where data or information from other studies or publication is quoted or otherwise included.

## **6.2. Research Dissemination**

Researchers bear a special responsibility to convey research results in a comprehensive and responsible manner. Researchers may disseminate preliminary results of their research before being peer-reviewed or published in recognized journals. When such results are being disseminated through the popular media, great care shall be taken to ensure that the media people, not specifically trained in social science and humanities issues and research, are able to understand the limitations and implications of research results to avoid distortions.

It is incumbent upon research institutions to promote multifaceted and comprehensive research communication, characterized by high quality and relevance. Institutions conducting social science and humanities research shall establish committees responsible for dissemination of research results to ensure that the results reach end-users. The committees shall also be charged with the responsibility of publishing circulars and organizing events for specific dissemination of results.

All funded research shall have a component on dissemination of results. Institutions shall be required to establish budget lines for dissemination of research results and organize theme specific conferences or symposia.

Institutions shall establish research data banks and repositories from which they shall develop research indicators in the social sciences and humanities and compile annual inventories of research and to facilitate availability and access by other users.

## **7.0 APPROPRIATE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS**

Researchers shall establish and maintain sound and appropriate research environments in which research can be conducted. Researchers shall actively participate in the initiatives and efforts to improve the quality of research environments in their communities and institutions, and to promote public involvement in these.

## **8.0 AFFILIATION AND RESEARCH CLEARANCE**

As a matter of policy, it remains a fundamental requirement that all foreign based researchers intending to conduct research in Malawi should be affiliated to local research related institutions and government departments. The affiliating institutions' role shall be to aide such researchers to conduct research in Malawi according to the applicable regulatory requirements.

In considering affiliation, fees and MoUs may be required depending on procedures and policies of the affiliating local institutions.

Researchers in Civil Society Organisations/NGOs and other related institutions shall be required of their research to be reviewed and approved by an NCST authorized research and ethics review committee.

## **9.0 FORMAT FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS**

Research proposals/protocols shall be prepared according to the following general or specific format;

### **9.1 General Format**

This format shall apply where a research and ethics review committee has not specified a format.

- i. Proposal title
- ii. Names of investigator(s) and qualifications (their CVs should be appended)
- iii. Institution of affiliation (local and/or international)
- iv. Summary
- v. Introduction/literature review
- vi. Problem Statement/Justification
- vii. Main and specific objectives
- viii. Methodology/Materials and methods
  - This should include a description of details of the study design and methods to be used. The description should include study site(s)/location(s); study participants; sampling

methods; sample size; data collection instruments; and data management and analysis methods.

- Data collection instruments, where appropriate, must be translated into the appropriate local language and should be attached in the annex and be appropriately referred to.

ix. Ethics

- This should include a description of strategies and/or processes that will be followed to guarantee the protection of the rights and welfare of the research subjects/communities as required and described under **section 4.0**, while taking into cognizance of the nature and design of a particular study.
- Consent/assent forms or information sheets in English and in an appropriately translated local language should be attached in the annex and be appropriately referred to.

x. Work plan (where appropriate, roles and responsibilities of collaborators, should be stated clearly)

xi. Expected outcomes of the study

xii. Strategies of dissemination of research results

xiii. Budget

xiv. Declaration of source of funding (if already available or proposed)

xv. Reference

## 9.2 Specific Format

- i. Some funding agencies may have different requirements which researchers shall be required to follow in soliciting funding.
- ii. In submitting for research and ethical review to the **National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities** as mentioned **under section 10**, researchers shall be **generally** required to;
  - follow the format that is defined in **section 9.1**;
  - submit both **an electronic copy and two hard copies** of the research proposal/protocol; and to

- enquire from the secretariat on the other specific requirements and procedures for submission of a protocol for review by this committee which are not described herein.
- iii. Institutional research and ethics committees shall specify their own formats that shall, however, be modeled on the general format.

## 10.0 MONITORING SYSTEM

Once misconduct during research has been reported, a proper process of investigation shall be set up. All relevant facts for investigation shall be gathered without taking sides and the findings shall be made public for purposes of preserving the integrity of the research community. The regulatory research authority shall impose strict measures in the case of fabrication, falsification, fraud, or plagiarism or any form of serious violation of this framework. All those that report any forms of misconduct shall be protected.

All records of research approved by institutional research ethics review committees shall be submitted to the NCST for record keeping and for creating research data base of all research taking place in the country. **In the event that there are no institutional research and ethics review committees, researchers shall be required to seek approval from the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities whose secretariat is at the NCST.**

## 11.0 APPLICATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

*The Framework of Guidelines for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Malawi* shall apply to all researchers and research institutions in the social sciences and humanities doing research in Malawi. The guidelines give due consideration to prevent research activity from becoming unduly constricted, and limiting of academic or scientific freedom but placing emphasis that such freedom should occur within the framework of ethical principles set forth in this document as minimum standards. Nonetheless, all institutional and subject or discipline specific guidelines are subject to this framework

and other relevant laws and national policies for conducting research in Malawi.

## 12.0

## SOURCE MATERIALS

*The International Sociological Association Code of Ethics* (2001), United Kingdom

*Republic of Malawi Constitution* (1995)

*The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (SSH REB)* (2005), United Kingdom

*The Science Council of Japan Code of Conduct for Scientists* (2006), Japan  
*National Committee for Research Ethics, Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Law and the Humanities* (2006), Norway

*Human Sciences Research Council Code of Research Ethics*, South Africa  
*National Research Council of Malawi, Procedures and Guidelines for the Conduct of Research in Malawi* (2002), Malawi

*Ethical Guidelines for Social Sciences Research in Health*, India

The National Health Sciences Research Committee, *National Guidelines for the Conduct of Health Research in Malawi* (2007), Malawi

*The American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics*, USA

*Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines*, (2003), (UK)

*HIV/AIDS Research Strategy for Malawi* (2005-2007), Malawi

*Institutional Review Board Member Handbook* (2003) by Robert Amdur

Government of Malawi, (2003), Science and Technology Act No. 16 of 2003

*National Advisory Board on Research Ethics* (2009) Helsinki

*Economic and Social Research Council Research Ethics Framework*