The Cape Town Statement on Fostering Research Integrity through Fairness and Equity advocates for fair practice from conception to implementation of research and provides 20 recommendations aimed at all involved stakeholders.

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Preamble

The 7th World Conference on Research Integrity (7thWCRI) was held in Cape Town in May 2022 with the conference theme “Fostering Research Integrity in an unequal world”. Participants at this conference recognised that unfair and inequitable research practices remain prevalent at all stages of research from proposal development to funding application, data collection, analysis, sharing and access, reporting and translation. These practices can impact the integrity of research in many ways, including skewing research priorities and agendas with research questions that are irrelevant for local needs, power imbalances that undermine fair recognition of knowledge contributions within collaborations, including unfair acknowledgement of contributions to published work, lack of diversity and inclusivity in collaborations, and unfair data management practices that disadvantage researchers in low resource environments. Furthermore, a drive towards open science as a pillar of research integrity fails to recognise the financial burden placed on under-resourced researchers and institutions, and the reality that highly trained and well-resourced researchers in HIC may disproportionately benefit from reanalysing openly shared data by LMIC researchers. In response to these challenges the following statement of goals, values and recommendations aims to contribute to the growing global recognition that fairness and equity are essential requirements of integrity in all research contexts.

This statement advocates for fair practice from conception to implementation of research and provides 20 recommendations aimed at all involved stakeholders. These recommendations are grouped under values that were identified as important underpinning considerations in discussion groups at the 7th WCRI. These values include diversity, inclusivity, mutual respect, shared accountability, indigenous knowledge recognition and epistemic justice (ensuring that the value of knowledge is not based on biases related to gender, race, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status etcetera).

Goals for Research Integrity

Research should deliver accurate, replicable, and unbiased results reported responsibly, with the appropriate acknowledgement of all stakeholders. To be valuable, trustworthy, and usable in local settings the research should be translatable into locally relevant and locally owned and accessible interventions or policies, where applicable. Research integrity educational programmes and other related initiatives should support researchers to reflect these goals in the planning, conduct, and dissemination of their research.

Recommendations to uphold values and achieve research integrity goals

Diversity and Inclusivity as a pathway to fair practice and attribution

1. Researchers should recognise the value of collaborating with colleagues from different disciplinary, geographical, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds and strive to achieve this diversity, especially when doing research in contexts and environments that are different from their own.
2. Research Performing Institutions (RPIs) should develop and implement policies, structures and processes that support and promote diversity and inclusivity in their research.
3. Funders from high-income countries (HICs) should aim to avoid so-called 'helicopter research' by including diversity stipulations in funding calls and funding local researchers directly.
4. Journals and publishers should question the practice of excluding local researchers from low-income and middle- income countries (LMICs) from authorship when data are from LMICs and have a low threshold for rejecting such papers.

Fair Practice from conception to implementation

5. All research stakeholders should be aware of potential power imbalances in their research collaborations and ensure their actions do not exacerbate them, but rather contribute to redressing imbalances.
6. Funders should specifically identify and adopt practices that support fairness and equity in research collaborations and avoid practices that undermine fairness such as unfair indirect cost allocations to LMICs.
7. Barriers to 'open science' participation by researchers working in low-resource settings need to be identified and addressed by publishers, and other appropriate national and global stakeholders, such as science councils, funders, and similar institutions. Journals and publishers should adjust page costs for authors from low-resourced environments.

Mutual Respect as a pathway to trust

8. Research priority and agenda setting should include all research partners; HIC research agendas should not be imposed on LMIC collaborators.
9. Research teams should identify mechanisms to enable planning and budgeting that minimise power and opportunity imbalances in teams and make roles explicit early.
10. Full cost transparent budgeting is an essential mechanism to enable fair practice and ensure equitable resource allocation.
11. Data access, use, sharing and openness requirements should not unfairly disadvantage LMIC collaborators.

Shared Accountability

12. Research fairness requires a commitment from all stakeholders to address deficiencies in research capacity and systems in LMIC contexts.
13. LMIC governments need to recognise the value of funding research to support locally relevant research priorities and be accountable for reducing reliance on HIC funders.

14. RPIs should prioritise the development of adequate research support systems to support researchers, including support for research management capacity development and open access page costs where possible.
15. HIC funders should incorporate some funding for local capacity development, mentorship, and research support systems.
16. Funders should take steps to minimise the negative impact of currency fluctuations on LMIC collaborators when they agree to fund research that involves HIC and LMIC collaborations.
17. RPIs from HICs collaborating with researchers from low-resource settings should ensure their researchers engage in fair practice and where possible and appropriate, contribute to local capacity development and strengthening of research management systems and processes.

Indigenous Knowledge Recognition and Epistemic justice

18. The unique value of indigenous knowledge must be recognised. Researchers and community researchers from Indigenous communities are often best placed to articulate and translate this value into beneficial outcomes that can have impact.
19. All stakeholders must ensure adequate recognition and respect of Indigenous knowledge; avoidance of exploitation and stigmatisation of such knowledge by external researchers is essential.
20. Researchers involved in co-creation of Indigenous-led knowledge must ensure collaborations are grounded on mutual trust and respect and result in appropriate benefit-sharing and recognition.

Concluding Remarks

This is not the first set of principles or similar, focusing on research fairness and equity particularly in collaborations, and these documents have informed our discussions. They include the Swiss KPFE (The Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries), the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings and the BRIDGE Guidelines which also linked research fairness to research integrity in the context of epidemiological research . Furthermore, we would also like to acknowledge that while this statement can encourage stakeholders to act, a tool already exits, namely the Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) , that can assist both RPIs and funders with evaluating their current practices. After completion of this evaluation the tool assists stakeholders to identify implementation steps that can lead to improvement of fair and equitable research and innovation partnerships and practices. The RFI was discussed in some detail in the 7thWCRI pre-conference paper and informed discussions at the 7th WCRI .

The Cape Town Statement specifically links the issue of research fairness and equity with research integrity broadly. We hope that by doing so this statement will strengthen the call to recognise fairness and equity as an essential component of research.

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