

# Ethical Problems of Conducting Research and Building Peace in Conflict Environment: Example of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The study examines the incessant cases of ethical challenges in research and peacebuilding in the Nigeria's conflict environment. Due to rampant corruption and lack of specific national ethical framework, and regulatory committee and resources that have affected societal values and culture of ethics and integrity, peace and conflict researchers and practitioners are prone to unethical conducts. Some are committed knowingly and unknowingly. This aspect of professional life has not been closely scrutinized, let alone proffers suggestions to. Perhaps, ethics frameworks and administrations are just beginning to be mainstreamed into development work in most part of the world. Therefore, drawing qualitative data from a wide range of personal, career and desk top sources from the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, which is the government's apex agency saddled with the responsibility of investigating causes and dynamics of conflict, and advising decision makers on best policy alternatives, build peace and engage in advocacy, the study identifies numerous ethical problems that include copy and paste, manipulations of data, unhealthy competition/rivalry among researchers and peacebuilding practitioners working in the conflict field. The research uncovers approaches the institute adopted to ameliorate the problems and promote ethical standards among its research and peacebuilding teams that included trainings and constant reminders of the need to protect the integrity of individuals in the team and the Institute as well as the need to project a good image for the country. The inability to re-think ethical regime and legal norms in the country could fuel violent conflict and terrorism, and militate against the goals of conflict management in the country that is seriously desirous of peace and security.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Responsible conduct of research and peacebuilding is becoming more difficult in the Nigeria's conflict landscape. In an environment battered by the Niger Delta militancy, Boko Haram terrorism, and currently being laden with widespread, more ferocious armed banditry, cultism and kidnapping, collecting reliable data and implementing effective interventions depends not only on the feasibility and necessity of such endeavours but also the harm-benefit ratio of the target audience (Ford *et al.*, 2009).

It could be observed that the research and peacebuilding environment has changed since Boko Haram terrorism in 2009. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) is not exempted in this quandary as researchers and practitioners are confronted with difficulties to make ethical decisions. In the process of deciding what to do, some have encroached on ethical practices knowingly or unknowingly. Reflexivity, plagiarism, research manipulation and undisclosed competing interests are a few of the problems. The reasons most times being the dilemmas and vulnerability of researchers as well as the institutional environment they operate.

According to John d. Brewer (2016), peace and conflict research will always present higher risks and greater ethical challenges than research done in non-dangerous fields. Such risks and challenges are made worse by the political conditions surrounding the conflict they investigated or intervened in, the societal corrupt culture that cast shadows on the integrity of research processes, disrespect to fact and information, lack of trust and confidence on research and development institutions, and working under extraordinary circumstances are some of the factors undermining ethics in research and peacebuilding.

The research hypothesizes that every unethical practice in Nigeria has an explainable cause. Researching and building peace in an environment of intractable conflict and deep-seated corruption is arduous and more complex than it appears to outsiders. Nevertheless, to deliver an output and outcome that is committed to ethics, legal norms and integrity is difficult but not impossible. To promote anonymity or rely on data and information among suspicious or undependable actors often posed a demanding task in developing a reliable and valid research and peacebuilding outcomes as far as the Institute was concerned. Conflict environment or setting in this context refers to the dynamic communities experiencing breakdown of law and order due to violence, and could suffer further rapid deterioration.

IPCR is the federal government's agency established by the President Olusegun Obasanjo administration in 2000 and saddled with the responsibility to investigate the causes and dynamics of violent conflict in Nigeria and Africa, and offer its policy recommendations to the government. It is also tasked with peacebuilding and advocacy (IPCR Establishment Act, 2007). Morality or ethics is expected to guide and be the hallmark of what it does and accomplish. This means that ethical consideration should support the management of conceptualization, production, distribution, implementation and evaluation of both research and peacebuilding interventions respectively.

Therefore, the study investigates how the Institute has coped with these challenges and promoted ethical standards among its research and peacebuilding team. Having knowledge of this aspect of Nigerian experience is important to the quest of understanding ethical challenges researchers and practitioners are confronted with in seemingly intractable conflict environment, especially in Africa.

## II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The problem to be addressed through this study is the low-level of institutional culture of promoting ethics and integrity in conflict research and peacebuilding in Nigeria. Unethical practices are increasing among conflict researchers and peacebuilding practitioners in Nigeria, and if allowed to endure, could undermine local and international efforts at mitigating violent threat and insecurity in the country. Disregard to ethics, integrity and accountability may also worsen human rights and impugn social justice. Again, the study aims to reduce unethical practices in conflict research and interventions by sharing IPCR's experience to identify where improvements are needed in the Nigerian context.

Unfortunately, the current body of literature does not mention Nigeria's ethical practices in conflict research and peacebuilding practice in a relatively new but developing area of study globally. Instead, internet searches on the subject matter will direct one to mainly ethics in health issues or medical research. While there is a national code and bioethics committee recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) in Nigeria, there are no national ethical regulatory frameworks and manual in humanity or social science.

Besides the online, obtaining published or produced physical literature on ethical conflict research appears non-existent. This suggests that Nigeria does not have a standardized culture of ethics on conflict research and peacebuilding practice. That is to say, as the problem exists, the practice is not documented by any research finding or the phenomenon may not have been studied extensively and shared. If there are, each institution including civil society could be promoting ethics within the confines of its staff, without making them public.

## III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the environment in which peace and conflict researchers operate in Nigeria;
- To outline the kinds of ethical problems that IPCR research and programme teams are susceptible to;
- To discuss how effective the Institute responded to the ethical challenges; and,
- To suggest how researchers and peacebuilders can report conflict-sensitive issues and do-no-harm with a view to mitigate ethical problems in a conflict setting.

## IV. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The Nigeria's Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution is the study area, is chosen because it is the government's sole agency with mandate to investigate causes of conflict and promote peace. Its ethical burden and expectation is high. The study draws from the researcher's fieldwork experiences in the last 22 years at the Institute. Qualitative data are obtained from a combination of primary and secondary

sources: field research and designing and implementing peacebuilding including conflict prevention, resolution and management including desk reviews. There is a need to identify, understand and analyze the ethical challenges the Institute's research and programme teams have experienced in the field particularly in the last 13 years since the Boko Haram terrorism was launched, and affiliated groups spread across the country.

Though this study does not exhaust the potential harms inherent in conflict research and peacebuilding practice ethics from the researcher's perspectives, but it substantially dealt with the positive benefits and suggests evidence-informed ethics policy and practice options. Identities of the study subjects are kept from this report. Also since ethical decision-making is context specific, no theory is utilized for the study but the Beauchamp and Childress's principles (1985) guided its analysis and conclusion. The researcher has no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or submission for publication of this article.

## V. FINDINGS

The study found out that most peace and conflict researchers including peacebuilding practitioners are operating in the environment where there are no formal guidelines or code of conduct on ethics. In IPCR, there was no form of document in terms of policy and procedures on research ethics, and regular professional training on ethics necessary to guide and direct research and peacebuilding activities. Likewise, no training or awareness has been offered on intellectual property and the likes of creativity rights. The absence of ethics policy portends a major drawback in the fight against unethical behaviour among researchers and peacebuilders in conflict zones.

Besides the terrorist violence in the northeast of the country, there are banditry and communal violence that involved the farmer-herder conflict in the northwest and northcentral. Also, in the southern part of the country, violence exists between farmer and herders. Having no guideline, manual or direction on ethical conduct undermined efforts to invoke "do-no-harm" approach and support moral responsibilities of research and peacebuilding interveners.

Similarly, the study found that due to the sensitivity of conflict or politicization of security in the country, mentioning actors and perpetrators of violence by name, ethnicity or religion became difficult. For instance, appellation or naming perpetrators of violence could pose a problem for the government's conflict researchers or the institution. A particular ethnic group where the president of the country belongs has been caught fomenting widespread violence in almost all parts of the country. While the confidentiality of research participants was observed, reporting what was discovered posed ethical challenges to the researchers due to politics. Ethical decision in this environment raises political questions about power, information and accountability in this context (Goodhand, 2015). It also poses danger to the researchers.

Secondly, the research discovered that there are a wide range of ethical problems that IPCR research and peacebuilding teams were susceptible to in the course of working in conflict environment. Problems of making informed decisions, setting conflict-sensitive questions, insensitivity to the needs and fears of conflict-affected communities, unacceptability of neutrality and altruism of interveners, struggle making ethical choices between right and wrong, and infringing on participants' rights are real. Similarly, the study observed that, due to the risks involved in violent areas that could impinge on safety and ethics, individual research was mostly done academically, that is, on desk review, rather than empirical. Lack of research funding also contributed to this practice.

Since there are no ethics culture and ethical-informed guidelines or instructions except those written as required in surveys (first page of questionnaires), researchers and peacebuilders did experience ethical-decision conflicts and are prone to "do harm" when they did not intend to do so. As noticed, such personal experience was often not shared. This complicated ethical problems of research and peacebuilding in conflict environment. In addition, as at the time of this report, the Institute has not integrated plagiarism checks such as Turn-it-in and PlagScan softwares into its system to detect any unprofessional citation of published materials. Promoting academic and practice integrity can help in reducing harmful and unintended consequences of research and peacebuilding in conflict communities.

Thirdly, on the question of how effective the Institute has responded to the ethical problems, the study uncovered different forms and approaches that it adopted to promote ethics in conflict research and peacebuilding. One of the ways was letting the researchers and peacebuilders understand the importance of their work to the promotion of peace and security of Nigeria. As the government's research institute, any unethical or insensitive actions of its researchers investigating and reporting conflict issues could have a backlash. Another way the Institute ensured ethical practices at conflict zones was through the training it seldomly offered its research and peacebuilding staffers. Though not a stand-alone course, but mainstreamed into other research modules as occasionally held. Each time they were to go to the field, the

researchers, like commonly done universally, would ensure instructions on declaration of intent, purpose, and others are written in the top page of survey questions. Field research funded by development organizations often came with standardized ethical guidelines in which the research team must adhere to.

In addition but more broadly, the study unwrapped some practices that are in line with universal research ethics in which the research team followed most especially in the earlier stated survey format whenever conflict research and peacebuilding were to be undertaken. These practices are in accordance with the Beauchamp and Childress' principles (1985): autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. In autonomy, the Institute considered that in the course of research in conflict communities or wherever, the respondents or participants are free to make their own decisions and also recognizes the capacity of a rational individual to make an informed, un-coerced choice to participate in an interview or survey or not.

However, the study observed that where the Institute found out that some research participants are not well informed, they therefore, have to be supported or helped in terms of given suggestions. It emphasized that risks and benefits of the research and peacebuilding should be explained to the participants. If the opposite happens, the research study cannot be said to be autonomous as far as the above principles are concerned. A victim of violence or sexual exploitation might consider his or her life to be in danger and hence might not be in a position to take rational or reliable thought. All what the interviewer could do was to offer some assistance to accomplish the study. This becomes important because human subjects should be protected from any potential harm that might come from participation in research (Wood, 2006).

On the principles of beneficence that underpins the research, the study gathered the Institute's researchers and peacebuilders in conflict environment acted in the best interest of the participants. That is, they promoted anonymity, confidentiality and others in the interest of both research participants and the Institute. For example, in 2013 during the visits to prisons and hideouts as a member of the Presidential Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North, IPCR adopted similar stance in protecting actors or perpetrators of the Boko Haram insurgency as required by norms and the committee's rules.

So also was the March 2021 baseline study on preventing violent extremism through education it conducted in partnership with the United Nations Education Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Asking participants who are victims of violence to relive their experience could be highly emotional and induce more traumas. Risk to researchers and relations' lives is also to be taken serious. Such practice has the tendency to reduce the risk of stigmatization and vulnerability of research and peacebuilding participants and beneficiaries.

As regards non-maleficence, IPCR promoted do-no-harm approach as earlier mentioned. This in essence was to ensure its researchers do no harm from design, administration to reporting of research. Non-maleficence requires a high degree of knowledge and responsibilities from the researcher on what constitutes 'harm'. It will not serve any purpose opening old wounds of a victim or community that is recovering from violence. Risks and benefit of the study must be weighed for ethical purposes. Thus up till the time of reporting, IPCR identified important concerns of victims. For instance, asking distressing account of a crisis or attack could trigger trauma or aggravate a traumatic patient. Framing qualitative questions is useful here such as *"as far as possible"*, *"in your view or opinion"* etc.

On the principle of justice, the Institute has to some extent ensured adequate distribution of research resources and access to benefits, fair distribution of risks and benefits to all its researchers. For example, researchers are tasked to critically consider who is included and who is excluded and why in the conduct of their investigations; who is the population and why are they the focus of the study; who is selected for the sample and how are they selected are equally important? Ignoring certain participants and problem of methodology in this case must not arise. All in a way to ensure that its research design, conduct and output are just. In the peacebuilding activity, conflict sensitivity, norms and customs of the context of the community and beneficiaries particularly the vulnerable groups are considered. Chances of exploitation or worsening the situation of target audiences are minimized. Rights to participate and free expression of opinions are adhered to. Compromise was strictly rebuked and chances of improvement are allowed and encouraged.

Nevertheless, the study discovered that above practices are not exhaustive as the Institute promoted morals such as respect, truthfulness and honesty. These relationship qualities are very important to bolster its research design and conduct for coherent and effective outcomes particularly in places that have witnessed violent conflict and insurgency. Respect, truthfulness and honesty are imperative to restore peace and community cohesion. But it realized that deception, fallacy unwholesome social behavior, indecent dresses, disrespect for participants and their culture, non-acknowledgement and other unethical behaviours could undermine research in conflict and peacebuilding environments and thereby exacerbates violence. Respondents' trust and confidence could be lost.

Though no official document on ethics as earlier pointed out, but on the whole, IPCR researchers and practitioners are constantly reminded of their ethical obligations in their conflict research and peacebuilding activities by words of mouth and during training. Unethical approach to research is a violation of human rights and freedom. The research team must not obtain data through illicit means or against ethical issues such as exploiting vulnerability of participants, or unauthorized disclosure. Any unforeseen ethical issues in the middle of a research and peacebuilding project are raised and addressed professionally.

## VI. DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the findings, one could discern that though IPCR has made quite a number of attempts at promoting ethical practices among its researchers and practitioners, but they are not necessary the effective approach to mitigate unethical problems in conflict environment in Nigeria. The approach that is based on verbal instruction and occasional training without a formal set of guidelines would not be able to build strong and sustainable ethical culture among research and peacebuilding teams. Nigeria needs to build an effective culture of ethical practices as it mitigates recurring incidences of violent conflict and terrorism.

Nigeria is fundamentally different from many countries that are suffering from conflict challenges in the world. It is complex, highly religious and politicized society. One could understand why formalized approaches of promoting ethics and integrity of research are a challenge. But having ethical-based research and peacebuilding practice could provide relevant and appropriate ways to intervening in a crisis. To worsen the matter, the country does not have a known ethical framework to assist researchers and practitioners committed to ethical decision making and legal norms, let alone having it for conflict environment.

It is also crucially important to point out that addressing ethical concerns in an environment infamous for violent conflict, criminality and social vices such as corruption is difficult. As informed in one of the field studies, some respondents have begun demanding for tips before that could answer questionnaires or respond to interview invitations. Their argument was that what has happened to the previous exercises they participated. Instead, violence is recurring. That habit portends great danger to ethical research. Similarly, researching violent community is hard, though not impossible as earlier stated. From the Institute's standpoint, there was always a conflict between research ethics and the nature of conflict investigation, conflict management and peacebuilding. For example, researchers participating in violent environment cope with some value systems such as the society, methods and materials. That is, studies can interfere or violate community values and creates suspicion or anxiety. This has the tendency to make the researcher be in dilemmas.

Also, one should not expect zero-sum ethical standards from IPCR. This is because there is limit to what it can do in an environment of intractable conflict as far as ethics are concerned. The risk of the rising escalation of ethno-religious, political violent conflicts and violent extremism has made ethical or moral values and rules more complicated. Between December 2020 and July 2021, Nigeria has witnessed quite a number of violent attacks on schools and abductions of schoolchildren. Armed bandits who restrict people's access to farmlands and markets are taxing some communities. Having willing and trusted subjects in such communities would be hard, and collecting reliable data and information or engaging in conflict resolution in such circumstances would require rigorous methodology with ethical values. Every person is a potential criminal suspect due to the trust gap among the people and security agencies. The moral questions such development thrown up in the country seems difficult to manage for an agency like IPCR.

Morality is in question here. This is as violence or killing of human beings is an aberration and morally wrong. Prior to the outbreak of violence in 1999, shortly after Nigeria returned to the democratic governance, journalists, researchers and other fact-finding missions found it difficult to access information or gather data from the actors, victims and others in the crises simply because of lack of trust, uncoordinated or unstructured security and intelligence system, lack of accurate data on number of deaths, use of plagiarized data, shadowed influences and many more. This problem challenged ethical ability to ascertain or scrutinize the causes and dynamics of violent conflict and as a result, affected the design and management of peacebuilding and conflict prevention interventions to such upheavals. That is to say, the inability to access valid information and data could affect our report and be a moral burden on the researcher.

Equally, in conflict research and peacebuilding strategies, processes and participants are prone to fallacies, distortions, sensationalism, violent victimization, misuse or misappropriation of data "...in ways that are not intended by the users or the data-gathering organization" (Gelinis *et al.*, 2017), and thereby ruining ethical standards. In other words, the environment is such that is difficult to conduct credible,



valid and reliable research and implement effective interventions because of the prevailing circumstances of lack of or inadequate technical and management resources, dearth of experts, hostile environment, community suspicions, amongst others.

Likewise, researcher's judgment may be compromised when personal safety is seriously endangered (mental and emotional challenges), and in that case ethical values could be undermined. There might be lapses in judgment of a researcher whose life is under threat. The outbreak of insurgency in the north-east had not only posed life-threatening harms to the community residents, security personnel and members of the Civil Joint Task Force/Vigilantes alone but also researchers, humanitarian workers, and peacebuilders. An instance of this danger was when some suspected militants killed eleven persons including three aid workers and three others missing (possibly kidnapped) at an Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp in Rann, Borno State in 2018 (Reuters, 2018). One could imagine what the fate of a researcher would be in that circumstance. The brutal incident made the United Nations to suspend aid work in the region. Fear and anxiety to life and safety could jeopardize one's moral soundness, lead to ethical vulnerability of victims, and therefore have grievous impact on the output and outcomes of research and interventions.

Lastly, the Nigerian societal value can be called to question due to the issues indicated above. As could be noticed, unethical practices have surged under the environment of corruption, extreme poverty and exclusion. Research is part of the mostly-affected areas of national development. Copy and paste, and armchair researchers are not uncommon. The value orientation or value system is low and requires attitudinal change. Often times, the Federal Ministry of Information through the National Orientation Agency launched programmes and activities to sensitize or reawaken the citizens to doing the right things. Example is the current national reorientation campaign slogan "*Change Begins With Me*" that was inaugurated in 2016. There is need for both institutional and individual change in Nigeria.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. *Mitigating the Ethical Problems*

Even though the study asserts that it is difficult to address all the ethical problems or vulnerabilities that the Institute's conflict researchers and peacebuilders are confronted with, it hereby, based on the researcher's knowledge and experience, offers some suggestions to checkmate the existing and rising cases of ethical problems in research in conflict environment in Nigeria. They are as follow:

- There is need for the setting up of Ethical Clearance Committee or Research Ethics Committee in IPCR and other research institutions and peacebuilding organizations in Nigeria. As the vanguard of ethics, it would allow for guidelines, direction and disciplinary norms in conflict research and peacebuilding. Every research proposal should be subjected to ethical clearance process before the commencement of field study. The issued ethical clearance certificate will highlight the procedures that need to be followed in the research.
- Any conduct or material that breaches ethical undertakings or events that impact upon the ethical conduct of the conflict research and peacebuilding intervention should be reported to appropriate quarters immediately. Any ethical considerations that require special attention will also be taken care of. Research approaches should be informed by and consistent with international and local norms and best practices as well as ethical guidance.
- Informed consent of the participants, parent/guardian, access letter requesting permission, etc. is critical to the ethical standard of any conflict research and therefore should be sought accordingly. Purpose of the research and intervention should be explained clearly and consistently to participants at all stages of the process. Considerations such as highlighted above (confidentiality, vulnerable population, victim vulnerability, etc.) should inform the informed consent process. Early warning/violence informants, prisoners, refugees, IDPs, children, etc. should be protected, or acknowledge their individual's autonomy.
- Permission to access conflict environment or affected populations/information should be sought and obtained.
- Permission to use documents/copyrights clearance is important.
- Data collection instruments must be in appropriate language, and respect culture and tradition of the population.
- Protection of individual's rights of those involved in conflict research is important.
- Ensure personal relationship should not affect the research and peacebuilding interventions, and ensure the research does no harm but good
- Ensure the dignity and respect for all concerned, and the publication of the information in the research.
- Sanctions such as withdrawal, cancellation, etc. of any revealed or suspected unethical principles or practices should apply, and also if relevant information has been withheld or misrepresented.

- All research must disclose any conflict of interest, and with scholarly integrity and excellence.
- The proposed committee should initiate methods and approaches of monitoring activities of organizations and individuals (security agencies inclusive) intervening in crises for unethical practices and unpleasant challenges.
- The healthcare/mental wellbeing of conflict researchers should be cared for regularly to uphold core ethical principles and practices.
- The Freedom of Information Act can be applied in case of access to any information or data at any time during the course of the research.
- Regular training with clear methodology should be organized for researchers and peacebuilding practitioners to promote the highest ethical standards.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The study has attempted an examination of the ethical problems of conducting research and building peace in Nigeria's conflict environment. Using the government's agency on conflict studies, research and peacebuilding, the study concludes that the question of ethics is a moral burden that IPCR has been contending with since its creation. Though it is not alone battling this challenge, but has tried to some extent to fill the gaps in ethical practices such as the non-existence of an ethics manual or guidelines and direction in the conduct of research and intervention in conflict by advising, training and supervising its research and peacebuilding teams to uphold validity, reliability and trustworthiness of their work including do-no-harm principle. The vital trust about research and practice is to do good and avoid evil as espoused by Beauchamp and Childress' principles. The need to carry out its mandate in research and intervention in conflict environments should not be compromised. If not, undermined integrity, brewed mistrust and mismanaged ethics could fuel violent conflict and militate against the goals of conflict management in a country that is seriously desirous of peace and security.

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