

**The Wellcome Trust**  
**Social, Ethics and Public Policy Research on Biomedical Science**

*Research Summary*

<b>Title:</b>	Studying 'trial communities': an ethnographic study of a medical field trial site in western Kenya
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<b>Institution/s:</b>	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
<b>Type of grant:</b>	Project
<b>Time period (in months):</b>	24
<b>Start date:</b>	January 2006

**Background**

Over the past two decades, several large-scale medical research units have emerged in Africa (and elsewhere) in collaboration between local and international medical research organisations. Increasingly, publicly funded clinical research is concentrated in these institutions, which provide advanced research facilities to local and international scientists.

Most of the research based here involves local study populations, often at a very large scale, in the vicinity of the respective research unit. The KEMRI/CDC unit in Kisumu, Kenya, has since the 1980s developed into one of the largest medical field research operations in East Africa. Initially studying malaria, the collaboration has also moved into HIV/AIDS, and a large interdisciplinary team of international scientists conducts an array of innovative studies.

Fieldwork involving study populations of more than 100,000 persons, over 6000 sqm of custom-built advanced laboratory and administrative buildings in Kisumu and a growing fleet of vehicles have made KEMRI/CDC unit, which locally employs of over 500 people, well known in Kisumu and surrounding rural districts. For many western Kenyans, 'research' equals today KEMRI/CDC, making the unit a very suitable study site to explore the conduct of medical science in Africa.

**Aims**

The study aims to contribute to sustainable and fair relations within trial communities of collaborative medical research in and outside Kenya. Its objectives are:

1. To describe medical research as social field, making visible the concrete practices and relationships that constitute it.
2. To analyse the knowledge and motivations, and the ethical considerations of researchers and other staff, study subjects and other community members touched by field research.
3. To situate the trial community's members in the context of their everyday lives, their social biographies, and within wider social connections.
4. To identify problematic areas of the trial community and critical moments in the social processes of field research.

## **Methodology**

The study is a 'community-based' ethnographic study of the CDC 'trial community'. Our study population includes potentially everybody involved in KEMRI/CDC research work, with a particular emphasis on HIV/AIDS research. Local communities from where study subjects are recruited are an important part of the constituency. Equally important is, however, the KEMRI/CDC unit and its staff.

Rather than studying researchers and study populations separately, our focus is on their interaction, on their joint life as members of the overall trial community. In addition to researchers and researched, i.e. those directly engaged with each other in the trials, indirect participants and observers can be significant members of the trial community. Family members of staff and study subjects, and influential local groups who take a position towards medical research, will thus also be included in the trial community that we propose to study.

The study will employ an ethnographic study design based on participant observation, accompanied by informal conversations and interviews. Participation will take two different perspectives. In one, the investigators will be part of the research teams, participating in their work on all levels from planning and management, through community sensitisation, consent and specimen collection, to laboratory work, data analysis and presentation of findings. In the other perspective, the researchers will be based in on-going or planned study areas, studying social life, the ethics of everyday life and the place of research in it, and perceptions and attitudes to research and its impact.

## **Main research questions**

The 'trial communities' studied in this project include everybody involved in a trial or research site. The questions we shall address will be, for example: What do scientists, field staff, study community members and the public do with each other in the field? How do different actors construct fieldwork? Where do they get in contact with each other and through which practices? Which understandings and misunderstandings arise from their encounters? Which are the critical moments of their interaction? Why and how do their relationships vary and change?

New questions will arise in the course of this open-ended exploratory research. Understanding the social reality of fieldwork from such an ethnographic point of view – studying the mutual engagement of researchers and researched as an open social process – will make a contribution to debates about overseas medical research ethics, and to improving the practice of necessary medical research. It will create an awareness of the everyday reality of research, and the ethics that guide it, the problems it encounters, and how these are solved in practice.

## **Applications of research results**

The findings will benefit KEMRI/CDC and other research units in Kenya and East Africa, and be of use for medical interventions or trials in similar resource-poor settings. They will contribute to ongoing debates on overseas research ethics, to the better understanding and improvement of research practices, and to discussions about the place of medical research and science in the context of globalisation.

## **Further information**

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