



**Rift Valley Institute**

MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



# ETHICAL RESEARCH IN SOUTH SUDAN

A STATEMENT FROM ACADEMICS AND RESEARCHERS

*In August 2022, a group of South Sudanese academics, early-career researchers, independent research consultants, research assistants and professors gathered at the Rift Valley Institute in Juba to discuss ethical principles and practices for an equal, vibrant research community in South Sudan. The meeting built on discussions on ethical research that RVI has been engaged in since 2019 and was supported by Cardiff University. The following statement summarises this conversation and sets out key actions.*

## THE PROBLEM

The research economy in South Sudan is mostly externally set and funded. It focuses on fast-paced, 'urgent', extractive, and often-repetitive research, and is heavily reliant on casualised and mostly male researcher labour in often risky circumstances. This has created an uneven research landscape, with over-researched topics and often exhausted or frustrated informants, and has produced limited research infrastructure and training, few career paths and embedded gender inequalities and exploitations. As South Sudanese academics and researchers, we know that external partners, funders, and colleagues recognise these inequalities and challenges. **Together we suggest the following:**

### > CENTRING SOUTH SUDANESE THEORY AND METHODS:

Locally rooted methodologies and approaches are critical for high-quality, ethical research. Questions that are designed inclusively and inductively, within communities and with South Sudanese researchers, will build research enquiries that communities think are smart and necessary. Many people are fed up with the same (often rude) questions about poverty and conflict. Research questions must be made locally useful, set by community peer review and priorities, to stop the spread of anger, alienation, and boredom among 'the researched'.

**> BUILD RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE:**

Research on South Sudan must support national institutions as centres for resources, knowledge, and research training. Public institutions like the University of Juba have significant national credibility despite longstanding problems with financial management systems. In this challenging context, South Sudan's academics and researchers invest heavily in underpaid and under-resourced teaching and academic leadership to support emerging scholars, alongside other paid work. The university sector's own work to improve its transparency and efficiency must be taken up by international researchers and funders: overheads and research investments could provide vital space, internet, laptops, library resources and fairer pay for good teaching and research supervision.

**> CHALLENGING RISKS AND INEQUALITIES IN CONTRACTING:**

The widespread practice of contracting individual researchers – outside of any institution – has created deep inequalities of pay, opportunities, and risks. Freelance research must stop outsourcing high-risk fieldwork to South Sudanese researchers without providing insurance or safety systems. Contracting and salaries must be transparent to challenge deep pay inequalities. South Sudanese researchers should be employed for more than basic quantitative data collection: projects will benefit from supporting skills in multi-lingual research, community co-design, and collective data analysis. Flexible, transparent, insured, and slower-paced research would also support women researchers who face pervasive harassment, higher risks, and stereotyped roles in research.

**> ETHICAL STANDARDS IN RESEARCH:**

With no widely established national ethical review process, and concerns over surveillance, ethical research in South Sudan needs adequate time; linguistic care; local engagement; and the avoidance of repetition. Research should also give time to translation and inductive design to better understand and avoid community frustrations with very personal or repetitive research. Trustworthy research must challenge the fatigue, anger and alienation felt by many of South Sudan's over-studied residents: it must be locally accountable and visible, not just by funding validation and dissemination, but also through designing projects locally. Research priorities should be driven by community priorities and what people need from research.

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