

NOTE #7

Consider your Culture: African Ethics of Ubuntu

By **Martha Wium and Luiz Fernando Zerbini**



RRI IMPLEMENTATION IN BIOSCIENCE ORGANISATIONS

GUIDELINES FROM THE  STARBIOS2 PROJECT



Andrea Declich with the STARBIOS2 partners



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Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human ... you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life.

Desmond Tutu

Bioethics aims to ensure that the way in which research is conducted is morally justifiable and socially acceptable. This can however not be a “one-size-fits-all” solution because of cultural differences among populations. Africa alone has 54 countries with more than 3000 ethnic groups that speak more than 2000 languages (Bamgbose, 2011), emphasizing the need to be culturally conscious/mindful. Although the impact of cultural differences on bioethics is widely recognised, it remains Western-dominated (Andoh, 2011; Barugahare, 2018). In bioethics, the “African voice is not sufficiently included in the development of the international guidelines” (Pan-African Bioethics Initiative, 2003) in other words it lacks ‘Africanity’/‘Africanness’. In general, Africa cultural morals and beliefs are grounded in a natural sociality of human beings that embodies a social/communitarian ethics in contrast to the individual ethic (Eze, 2008; Msoroka & Amundsen, 2018). African bioethics should embody the Spirit of Ubuntu.

In the words of Nelson Mandela (President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999), “In Africa there is a concept known as ‘ubuntu’ – the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of

others; that if we are to accomplish anything in this world it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievement of others”.

The Nguniword, Ubuntu, referred to as the foundation of African ethics, can be defined as “the moral-quality of a human being”, “I am because we are” or “generosity, respect for man irrespective of position” (Lutz, 2009; Gade, 2012). Examples of how the principle of Ubuntu can be applied to conflicting ethical problems in public health and medicine in Africa can be found in Cooper et al. 2019.

Ubuntu shifts the meaning of bioethics to the everyday values of the African people; it embraces the core value that individuals should act in the best interest of the community without causing disadvantages to him/herself.

ABOUT THE STARBIOS2 GUIDELINES

This guideline aims to help readers formalize and trigger structural change aimed at introducing appropriate RRI-related practices to their own organisations. This is not a series of prescriptions, but an itinerary of reflection and self-interpretation addressed to different actors within the biosciences. To support this itinerary of reflection and self-interpretation, the document provides...

- a description of a general RRI Model for research organisations within the biosciences, that is a set of ideas, premises and “principles of action” that define the practice of RRI in bioscience research organisations,
- some practical guidance for designing interventions to promote RRI in research organisations in the Biosciences, putting into practice the RRI Model,
- a set of useful practices in implementing the structural change process,
- and information on particular STARBIOS2 cases and experiences, as well as materials, tools and sources, are also provided in the Appendix and in the Annex.



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