

Research Ethics After COVID-19: Perspectives from the CESET Team



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Introduction

CESET is an international research project funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Global Challenges Research Fund and managed by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project involves researching community energy at different scales, including engaging with the political economy of community energy, mapping salient community energy initiatives across the three countries of study (Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique), and creating opportunities to deliver energy access at the local level.

Like any other international development project, CESET raises questions about who owns knowledge and how knowledge travels across contexts. CESET will also engage with different groups of policymakers and users. The research implies ethical challenges related to the relationship between the researcher and the researched and how the researcher's privileged position shapes research encounters. Such research encounters also occur in social contexts where people express different identities. Those identities relate to the forms of oppression or exclusion that people endure and require an intersectional analysis. Hence, intersectionality is both a research theme in CESET and a concern in the delivery of research.

In 2020 CESET also faced COVID-19 challenges. Some of those challenges have ethical dimensions, but there is still insufficient information to understand how the pandemic will shape the research landscape going forward.

Engaging with the ethical challenges of an international, interdisciplinary project requires a broader dialogue across the project to capture both the team's experiences of ethical dilemmas and their views on future uncertainties. When writing the proposal, we expected this complex dialogue to happen informally in project meetings and field visits. Limited by current traveling restrictions, we are examining ethical dilemmas through online conversations. We conducted a survey with CESET's team members as a means to foster such conversation. The survey had 12 questions, two specifically about COVID-19. Eight CESET partners completed it. The following sections provide an overview of the issues raised in the survey concerning the project's core ethical challenges, the emerging risks, and the anticipation of new challenges after COVID-19.

Core ethical challenges of a research project on community energy

CESET follows UK-based research conventions and responds to UK funders' requirements, but most of the actual work will occur in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Mozambique. Our survey shows that doing research in four different countries requires understanding the ethical procedures in each country. For example, researchers in Mozambique carry a 'credential,' that is, a formal document that identifies them

as ‘authorised’ researchers. This credential is not a requirement in all countries. On the one hand, researchers accredited by their hosting institutions in Mozambique legitimates their role and supports Mozambican partners’ engagement in any international research project. On the other hand, the credential is a mechanism to distinguish deserving scientists from undeserving ones. This dilemma clashes with the aims of CESET, a research project that seeks to engage urban dwellers in producing knowledge about their environment. Since the project focuses on recognizing multiple, distributed knowledges as valuable, the procedures that enable our research also constrain it. The default is treating this as an administrative requirement, whose impact on the project can be minimized. At the same time, accepting the use of the credential implies reproducing the research practices that restrict who is a legitimized producer of knowledge, an act of epistemic violence. Survey respondents stated that the credential and other official letters help to ‘open doors’ to facilitate research, which further underscored the tremendous inequalities faced to access the process of knowledge production in CESET. The dilemma reflects the inequalities faced by knowledge producers who cannot always speak from an ‘authoritative voice’ if they do not bear such credentials.

Such challenges are inherent to research, and sometimes there is no way around it. Another participant noted that the implementation of different procedures varies in different situations. A typical example found by CESET researchers and many other projects is asking for and recording informed consent, which is always sensitive to factors beyond the researcher’s control, such as literacy levels and social norms. Researchers may be asking participants to sign a consent form to demonstrate they are doing their best to protect them. Still, many participants may find the requirement to sign a form a threatening one, particularly if the researchers start a recorder after they have signed. In contexts where every research act is officialized (like Mozambique), this may be even more obvious.

A host of alternatives emerge, for example, asking consent from community leaders before approaching individuals. However, that type of consent also defers the decision to a local authority, hence depriving the actual interviewee of autonomy. Community leaders can be research allies but they can also act as gate keepers, deciding themselves who will be involved in the research project and who will not.

CESET also explores how uneven power relations shapes communities themselves and access to energy. This requires CESET to engage with a multiplicity of actors, often beyond traditional community leaders. Again, researchers’ response is often a pragmatic one, of ensuring consent is obtained at all levels and, perhaps, performing the act of signing the form on behalf of the interviewee or even taping the consent. Yet, these pragmatic, temporary, site-dependent solutions leave unsolved the question of the interviewee’s autonomy. This is likely to be particularly acute in CESET’s pilot mini-grid projects, where research participants will also directly benefit from the project (i.e. by receiving electricity from the mini-grid). In this specific instance, individuals might find themselves obliged to take part in the research and share sensitive information in exchange for a much needed service. Whilst there is not one size fits all approach to resolve these issues, careful considerations to uneven power dynamics within communities and between communities and the CESET research team will be a central concern for the project.

In CESET, the burden is shifted to researchers in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Mozambique to ensure that the project complies with the local ethical requirements and that implementation procedures are sensitive to cultural and social constraints. Avoiding harm is always the first concern. In-country researchers also play a crucial role in negotiating any inconsistencies between CESET’s overall approach to research

ethics and the local requirements. CESET researchers facing these burdens expressed their commitment to provide guidance to all researchers and to adapt research practices in each case in the survey.

A meaningful engagement with the ethics approval process at different institutions may help CESET to address local concerns and country-specific challenges. Some CESET members mentioned that they required an additional ethics approval process at their institution. Such processes need to be coordinated so that the process of dialogue generates a better understanding of different requirements.

There are also risks, for example, if ethical requirements are misinterpreted. For example, many ethical committees in the UK ask to define whether the research will engage with vulnerable population groups. But in locations where community energy plays a role in facilitating energy access, most of the population is vulnerable. Their vulnerability is even more evident in their interactions with ‘legitimated’ researchers who have institutional support and a credential to demonstrate it.

Some researchers have highlighted that, despite its extended use, vulnerability is most often a vaguely-defined concept in ethical approval procedures and that there is not a general agreement on what it means.¹ Identifying vulnerability has become really fundamental because it influences the extent to which participants can make informed choices:

“The vulnerable individuals’ freedom and capability to protect one-self from intended or inherent risks is variably abbreviated, from decreased freewill to inability to make informed choices.”²

The ESRC provides guidance to do research with vulnerable populations, providing examples of research with refugees, young carers, or people with dementia.³ Their case studies suggest that the variables underlying vulnerabilities are easily identifiable. However, in practice, researchers may not be equipped to map those vulnerabilities, let alone preventing actual harm. One CESET colleague mentioned that we might encounter people with physical disabilities and physical and mental illness. The same colleague recommended that we should only include participants who have the ability to provide informed consent. We may also face mistrust in some communities, or some confusion as to our purposes for being there. We need to communicate these as clearly as possible in languages that are widely understood (or with appropriate translation). The community energy laboratory may also require working with vulnerable customers (e.g. light for children and older people). All these needs must be carefully considered.

The CESET team will work with the information available, especially previous experiences in community energy and other projects involving communities. In the survey, one team member noted that political economy questions may raise concerns about the sensitivity of certain investment profiles, and about the distribution of revenues within energy projects. Another issue relates to the implementation of a microgrid in situ, which will require the involvement of users over the long term and whose data will need to be handled carefully (in this case, personal data collected in situ to manage the micro-grid will not be passed on to the research team). Operating the grid may raise further ethical

¹ Bracken-Roche, D., Bell, E., Macdonald, M.E. and Racine, E., 2017. The concept of ‘vulnerability’ in research ethics: an in-depth analysis of policies and guidelines. *Health research policy and systems*, 15(1), p.8.

² Shivayogi, P., 2013. Vulnerable population and methods for their safeguard. *Perspectives in clinical research*, 4(1), p.53.

³ ESRC, undated, Research with potentially vulnerable people <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently-raised-topics/research-with-potentially-vulnerable-people/>

challenges for example, in the establishment of differential payments (if any) for microgrid services, the extent and provision of microgrid services (e.g. who gets electricity and who does not?), the contractor selection process with a transparent and fair tendering, etc. And further along the project, ethical challenges emerge to involve the community in governing the grid after the completion of the project, as communities themselves deal with their own political challenges. CESET is targeting these issues head on, as part of its core agenda of research, and the team members have experience in this area, but these challenges will not go away and will be central to the delivery of the project.

In summary, and as highlighted in the survey, we need to remember that the CESET team's diversity- with the different ways of operating across the project- is a very positive thing. CESET adds value because it brings a range of perspectives, experiences, and intents to understand what works for community energy in very diverse national and subnational contexts. CESET constitutes a great opportunity to learn from one another. Keeping regular communication opened including spaces to reflect and share experiences and work across work packages is essential to harness these opportunities to learn from each other and together over the next three years. At the same time, CESET's structure needs to be flexible enough that enables different ways of operating, responding to different incentives, but with a common goal of advancing community energy in East Africa.

Reflection on research risks (to researchers and participants)

An important component of research ethics entails considering the risks that a project poses to both researchers and participants. In the context of the COVID-19, the question of risks is tainted with expectations about the operation on the field and the risks associated with international travel: respondents noted the risk of falling ill/transmitting the virus, and risks related to communities' mistrust of 'strangers.' Perhaps the most important impact has been the temporal suspension of the project. At the same time, the focus on COVID-19 should not distract the team from understanding the wider context of risk that we are facing.

For example, at the time of writing, the armed conflict in the Tigray region, in Ethiopia, is affecting the project directly. More than affecting the project's activities (that can be rethought and rescheduled) the conflict affects people's lives and emotions. It is fair to say that no amount of good will is sufficient to empathize with the difficult situations that project members may find themselves in. Similarly, there is an ongoing rebellion in Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, near the Tanzanian border. How can we best support collectively all our partners and the difficulties they face in conflict situations? This is a question that has to be formulated in regards to supporting all members of the project appropriately, rather than emphasizing the risks to the project outputs. From avoiding lone working to reducing the risks of being in a dangerous situation, CESET has a responsibility to care for all its members – a responsibility which is prioritized ahead of delivering research results.

The theme of the research may also create specific risks. For example, researchers may face reputational risks if they are seen as exposing 'failed' projects and policies in publications. For a nascent off-grid energy industry, having the permission to fail is a central component of the long road to facilitating energy access. In some countries, researchers face risk of retribution from political or commercial actors if they are seen to expose failures or poor practices. In principle, our strategy is to abandon the language of success and failure and move into an analysis of the development of projects. Social science is often presented as an instrument to identify errors. However, in this case, we are seeking to explore projects in context, as they unfold, departing from a definition that considers infrastructure delivery as work-in-progress.

The commitment to the creation of a community energy laboratory raises practical risks, such as accidents related to electrical design and technological deployment for on the ground staff and technical partners or external risks such as flooding of the installations, robbery, etc. All those risks will have to be carefully compiled, minimised and monitored but full prevention is impossible. Indeed, the question of 'who' will get access to the microgrid poses risks in itself, and will likely cause conflicts within the community and between the community and the researchers. A conflict resolution plan is a constitutive part of the project, but also poses ethical challenges.

The specific risk embedded in CESET's design means that we have to develop a parallel research agenda to make sure CESET does not cause any harm to researchers or participants. This includes measures such as following closely all relevant electrical design regulations and guidance, developing site safety procedures of highest standard that technical partners can follow, or conducting extensive and transparent engagement on governance and with potential microgrid users to ensure equitable access and explanation to those without access. This also includes an effort to manage expectations around the community energy laboratory - e.g. being transparent about the fact that it will only extend so far and have so much capacity. As explained above, questions of vulnerability and informed consent

mean that the recruitment process for surveys and interviews must attend explicitly to the needs of the participants in the communities. Avoiding being burdensome or demanding too much of their time is central to our research practice: delivering community's well-being must take precedence over delivering research objectives. Other CESET members have highlighted the importance of shared protocols for all primary data collection/stakeholder engagement, including giving participants the opportunity to offer feedback.

Research ethics in the time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has colored our whole life in 2020. It is almost impossible to discuss any topic without reference to its impact. The pandemic has significantly affected research activity, as the possibility of traveling around and meeting people has been highly constrained. Observation and interaction, the social researcher's main tools, have been compromised during the coronavirus pandemic.

In CESET we have rearranged research plans, particularly considering the project's suspension during the initial months, which has delayed the project. Delay is a problem in itself, but one which at the moment appears manageable. However, apart from the practical aspects of dealing with the pandemic, we were concerned that the coronavirus pandemic would also influence some ethical aspects of the project.

Our question was whether the partners would anticipate ethical dilemmas emerging from the research. Seven out of eight respondents say no, only one respondent wrote that "There is a chance that some researchers in partner countries (Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique) may find their life/work conditions affected by COVID-19 and therefore unable to contribute to the project as initially expected." In practice, the restrictions have been more difficult to navigate in the UK than in the other countries in the proposal. That said, partners' responses to more general questions related to ethics procedures also highlighted possible difficulties related to the pandemic. A particularly important one is the potential inability to travel to conduct research (particularly for UK-based researchers) but also the implications of the pandemic for building interpersonal trust throughout the research process, particularly with community groups. Even with a vaccine, questions remain as to who will be able to access it, when, and how effective it will be in terms of preventing viral transmission.

However, when asking for measures to respond to do research during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers envisaged a completely different way of conducting research, as shown in Table 1. A project like CESET, starting in the midst of COVID-19, provides the opportunity to evaluate whether research practices have changed after this global crisis.

Possible changes in research practices after COVID-19	Examples of expectations from CESET members
New public health standards for fieldwork will change researchers practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wearing masks should be mandatory for all researchers/research assistants when talking with an interviewee; they should also keep the appropriate distance when talking with others; and carrying hand sanitizer with them all the time. They should know and comply with the pandemic emergency measures in place in the country where they are ● Testing, temperature taking and wearing of masks will be helpful during visits to the field. ● May require rescheduling of fieldwork; for fieldwork to be undertaken by other partners within the region or country; extra funds for self-isolation.
New protocols for community interactions will be required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Any community engagement by project staff needs to be conducted in line with current Covid-19 protocols in place in the respective countries and if any of the project team are to be conducting fieldwork they need to know they are not at risk of exposing others to the virus
New requirements for international travel may change researchers' interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● For UK researchers, it is possible we are unable to travel to partner countries to conduct fieldwork as had been anticipated. This could lead to a rethink of what UK-based researchers can do remotely and to a reallocation of resources from UK institutions to partner countries. ● International / regional travel moving virus to microgrid deployment site. Any conferences, etc. a large risk to researchers. Long term concerns about progress of COVID-19 in Southern Africa may lead to bringing virus back into EU after rates have dropped. ● We could certainly consider alternatives to travel in some cases, but I am very much hoping that some travel will be able to continue!

Table 1: Changing research practices after COVID-19

Conclusion

Ethics is a central concern of CESET, built into the research program and in its engagement strategies. Ethical dilemmas are also accepted within the team as part and parcel of the research project which, at its core, focuses on one technology and how it works. Understanding the ethical dilemmas that emerge within CESET will inform our collective learning journey.

Despite the challenges experienced in 2020, the CESET team continued collaborating and working in a difficult and uncertain context. The pandemic will undoubtedly impact the way we work and conduct fieldwork in the future. Travel restrictions, uneven access to a vaccine and social distancing/protective measures are all likely to impact how project team members interact with informants, partners and communities in the foreseeable future. CESET was already built upon the strong decentralization of work packages and the leading role of country partners in shaping the project. This way of working will help the whole team navigate uncertainties related to COVID-19, and to develop risk mitigation plans that are appropriate to different contexts, with specific attention to how we will engage with possibly vulnerable groups throughout WP3 and WP4 activities. Furthermore, both Ethiopia and Mozambique are experiencing political unrest and the recent armed conflict in the Tigray region in Ethiopia raised concerns for the safety of one of our team members. It is our duty as a team to keep monitoring these developments closely in order to redefine the project's objectives to navigate these turbulences and ensure the safety of everyone in our team and of all the other actors involved in the project. Local ethical procedures will be very helpful in managing ethical risks in a way that is attuned to the local specificities and context of different work packages. Monthly CESET meetings and one-to-one meetings between the PIs and the co-Is will also be the opportunities to raise any new ethical issue arising and to explore collective solutions for resolution when appropriate.

CESET Briefs are short reports on ongoing matters of importance for the project's development and delivery

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Thanks to: Vicky Simpson and the CESET team

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