Increasing Equity of Funding and Authorship is Critical to Improving WASH Research Quality

Authors: James B. Tidwell, Justine Lee – World Vision United States; J'Anna-Marie Lue, Kaelah Grant, Salamata Bah, Leila Nzekele – Drexel University

Abstract

Growing public awareness of unjust systems has led to calls for anti-colonialist and anti-racist initiatives within development. This study examined the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector, centering on the perspectives of researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to catalyze collective action in a sub-sector of global health where such action is feasible.

Nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with researchers of varied backgrounds about their experiences and observations of discrimination across various stages of the research process. Five interviews were conducted with key WASH research funders to assess perceptions of major obstacles faced by LMIC researchers, as well as successes achieved and challenges faced by their organizations in working toward more equitable research within the WASH sector. The findings were discussed and priority actions identified at two large international WASH conferences.

The results showed five major categories of discrimination:
- Power differentials and abuse of power
- Structural barriers due to organizational policies
- Institutional and individual indifference
- Othering speech, action, and practices
- Context-specific discrimination

Respondents were often reluctant to name actions as discriminatory unless clear intent was demonstrated by either people or policies. Ensuring pro-equity authorship and funding practices were identified as two keys to catalyzing change within the sector. Sector-wide efforts must move beyond just amplifying LMIC voices, to placing them in leadership positions related to identifying research questions, deciding who will lead in conducting research, and determining the format and participation for dissemination of findings.

Background

Acknowledging inequities that exist within global health and research has heightened with the confluence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic (Büyüm et al., 2020). Many have assessed the extent of such challenges in university leadership (Khan et al., 2019), authorship of peer-reviewed articles (Kelaher et al., 2016), and the editorial boards of journals (Bhaumik and Jagnoor, 2019). But many still struggle to identify concrete steps that they or their organizations can take to move toward decolonizing such arenas, especially when funders drive so much of the research agenda and budget.

Within the WASH sector, there is an increasing focus on inequity, especially on gendered user experiences of WASH services (Caruso et al., 2021) and imbalances in sector leadership (Worsham et al., 2021). Such challenges in the WASH sector often disproportionately affect the most vulnerable people. However, diversity,

equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues are more than just inequalities in outcomes—they are often the source of challenges we are seeking to address in our WASH programs. Many challenges result not only from power imbalances and other structural factors affecting service delivery, but from learning processes that do not fully address these challenges. Unfortunately, research agendas are often driven by global priorities rather than established in local contexts, so they may not address these underlying realities.

World Vision therefore seeks to put principles of decolonization into practice by addressing the inequities, power structures and dynamics, and colonial mindsets that influence research in development contexts. This effort began with a project investigating inequalities in the WASH sector by centering the experiences of low- and middle- income country (LMIC) researchers, examining the root causes of inequality, and exploring feasible strategies for moving toward a more equitable future. The primary objective of this work was to build an anonymized, synthesized base of evidence from which future research, guidance, and initiatives that support LMIC research could be built, ensuring that contributions from LMIC researchers are not marginalized, but centered.

Methodology

World Vision partnered with Drexel University to conduct 25 semi-structured interviews—First, we interviewed 19 researchers from eight LMIC countries. Interview guides and the entire research design were created in consultation with the researchers. We asked about direct experiences and observations of discrimination across funding acquisition, project implementation, dissemination, and career advancement and recognition. We analyzed these interviews using an inductive qualitative framework combined with the Socio-Ecological Model to understand where intra- and inter-institutional changes were needed or where larger cultural phenomena were driving inequities. We then conducted five interviews with key WASH research funders, assessing their perceptions of discrimination faced by LMIC

Power Differentials and Abuse of Power	Structural barriers due to organizational policies	Institutional and individual indifference	Othering speech, action, and practices	Context-specific discrimination
Disregard for local researchers and community member input	Incompatibilities between funder and recipient systems	Impact of English as the predominant language for everyday interactions and knowledge dissemination	From funders or funder representatives	High-level research questions often do not address context-specific discrimination such as caste-based or tribal discrimination
Lack of LMIC representation on review committees	Incompatibilities between research community priorities and local university roles		From journals, publishers, and peer reviewers	
Inequitable balance of responsibilities	Lack of informal networks and insider knowledge by LMIC researchers	Use of western metrics when evaluating competency		Context-specific discrimination may not be apparent to outsiders but can have powerful impact for LMIC researchers in their work and organizations
Inequitable distribution of authorship and acknowledgement	Discriminatory policies related to staff costs, indirects, or other costs		From communities in which research is conducted	
Internalized pressure to perform on the part of marginalized researchers				

Figure 1: Key aspects of discrimination in WASH research

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researchers and documenting key internal successes and failures among those donors and barriers to change within their organizations.

After gathering these perspectives, we jointly convened two interactive large-group meetings at the 2021 University of North Carolina Water and Health Conference to generate a prioritized list of feasible and impactful next-steps for promoting equity in how WASH research is funded, executed, and disseminated and in the broader development of research capacity. The result was a list of key actions and responsible parties.

Key Findings

Experiences of Discrimination

Key categories and aspects of discriminatory experiences are depicted in Figure 1.

Power differentials and abuse of power occur when those with higher positions or money consciously or unconsciously abuse those advantages, which often results in those with power assuming their own priorities or judgments are correct. This often manifests as LMIC researchers doing more of the work with less credit and increased stress.

Structural barriers due to organizational policies may lead to inequality because of favored status given to certain countries of residence or origin, legal restrictions on flows of funding, or because organizations are simply unaware of differences between institutional structures or priorities in different contexts. LMIC researchers also often do not have access to informal networks that promote research and career advancement and receive fewer resources to increase capacity as their role is viewed largely as research execution.

Institutional and individual indifference manifest as assumptions that those who can strive to integrate partially into a system are not then constantly held back by that system. This is clear primarily in language, where English often serves as a gatekeeper, and when metrics developed in high-income countries are thought objective and adequate, such as when the number of times an article is cited in peer-reviewed journals is equated with an article's significance.

Othering occurs when an individual or institution practices discrimination based on identities that individuals or organizations hold. High-income country- (HIC) based "global" organizations micro-manage local ones and eliminate their agency; journals give preferential treatment to authors based in HICs; and academic communities in HICs where research is published also normalize their own culture and perspectives, leaving LMIC researchers the "other" in many cases.

Finally, context-specific discrimination occurs differently in all settings. This may be due to tribal or caste-based identification among other possibilities depending on the country, and the research community is particularly susceptible to this issue when assuming homogeneity within a national context. Rural/urban, gender, and cultural divides may not be apparent to outsiders, but have powerful impacts within countries.

Recommendations

There are many actions that can be taken by a whole range of actors, though collective action is needed for the most critical actions

We collected 40 priority actions through two conference sessions and assigned 30 to individual actors, including funders, governments, HIC-based research institutions, international NGOs, local NGOs, scientific journals and conference hosts, and multilateral organizations. However, 10 of these actions, and some of the most urgent and important, require collective action. Different types of organizations must work together to establish norms and guidelines that can prevent silos, where each actor might narrowly focus on their own short-term research outputs rather than the longer-term flourishing of an equitable research community.

Funders should start by prioritizing equity in agenda setting, funding, and authorship

"Global" or HIC-based organizations often set research and learning agendas, drawing only on

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limited engagement with LMIC researchers or LMIC communities. Funding often also flows to or through HIC institutions, with higher indirect costs going to building individual and institutional capacity while funds to LMIC organizations go more toward operational expenses. Then, recognition in the form of authorship for peer-reviewed works or presentation responsibilities at conferences also tends to fall to those at HIC institutions. While not solving all issues identified in this study, equity in agenda setting, funding, and recognition would go a long way toward catalyzing change in the WASH research space or any research ecosystem. As World Vision plays a small part in this role for WASH, it behooves us (and other organizations in a similar position) to establish goals and targets for agenda setting, funding, and recognition in our Research and Learning Agenda and to make those targets and our progress against them public.

Conclusion

All actors involved in the research process must take action toward meaningful solutions to the lack of equity in WASH research and work toward its decolonization. Without an intentional yielding of power, there can be no justice in WASH research and practice.

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