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Preparing for Research Abroad: Fieldwork Requirements in Rwanda

As foreign nationals are required to secure permission before commencing research activities in Rwanda, conducting fieldwork in the East African country has been a complicated matter for many researchers, especially those investigating politically sensitive topics such as the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. However, a host of researchers know little about the authorisation process or simply neglect to go through it. As Jessee (2012) points out, the failure to satisfy the requirements is attributed in part to a reluctance to invest time and money in seeking government permission or “lack of familiarity with Rwandan protocol”. Since Jessee delineated how to explore the process in 2012, it has changed quite considerably without detailed instructions available in the public domain. Having navigated the new procedure ourselves, we intend this written piece to provide up-to-date information based upon our findings, verified with the relevant government agencies in person and over the phone between October 2018 and April 2019.



Figure 1: Kicukiro District of Kigali City (Photographed by Sangwon Park)

Unfortunately for those residing outside Rwanda, it is virtually impossible to find the comprehensive information necessary to explore the authorisation process. Our observations point to a lack of coordination between the authorities involved in it. This can lead to confusions, misinformation or, in some cases, significant delays and thus necessitates up-to-date guidance on the new procedure, which was announced this year. Even though this bureaucratic hurdle may create an atmosphere of frustration, there is no justification for undertaking unauthorised research activities. Not securing permission or doing so by furnishing the authorities with false information about the details of proposed research compromises the integrity and legality of the data collected in the country and possibly leads to suspension of fieldwork. Accordingly, non-Rwandan researchers have both legal and ethical obligations to meet the requirements before commencing their fieldwork. As obtaining a research permit can take up weeks and months, this guidance clarifies the requirements in detail so as to help those considering Rwanda as a potential field site go through the process as efficiently as possible.



Figure 2: National Council for Science and Technology (Photographed by Sangwon Park)

First and foremost, it is of paramount importance that one understands Rwanda's political and historical contexts. Fieldwork tends to end up with discussions on the genocide, irrespective of the research topic. Although the physical destruction the genocide caused may no longer be visible, most people's lives remain very much affected psychologically, socially and economically. For this reason, grasping a contextual understanding would help researchers of any discipline conduct fieldwork in a way that is ethically sound and socially responsible. Moreover, there is a belief amongst researchers that the Rwandan government creates a hostile environment for foreign nationals conducting fieldwork in the country. In discussing her experience in Rwanda between 2006 and 2007, Thomson (2013) illuminates the challenges that she faced whilst researching the genocide. Rwandan authorities were unwilling to let her interview alleged perpetrators of the genocide who had been incarcerated. Although this rather restrictive environment would not be

conducive to any research, it was inevitable given that those responsible for the genocide and other human rights violations were still being prosecuted. An estimated two million people were put on trial between 2005 and 2012 (France 24, 2019), during which the East African country strived to prevent any external influence on the process of restorative justice. The East African country no longer has such a hostile environment. In fact, it has gradually made it easier to obtain a research permit over the past decade. The principal reason for the latest revision of the process is also to better respond to growing numbers of local universities, their post-graduate programmes and research projects conducted by national and international researchers in the country.



Figure 3: National Ethics Committee, housed within the Ministry of Health (Photographed by Sangwon Park)

Since the authorisation process has been set out to protect Rwandan citizens and national interests, the rationale and methodology of research and its implications for knowledge production and Rwandan society should be clearly demonstrated. It is equally crucial to elaborate on how to ensure the safety of participants and of researchers themselves. Proposals lacking such details may result in re-submission or disapproval. The Rwandan government has the right to determine what is done within its sovereign territory, as does any national government. Therefore, research projects which appear to be unethical, poorly designed or potentially detrimental to the interests of the people and the country may be rejected.

The process entails four steps: screening, ethics review, permission, and registration. It does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, disability, political leanings, or other markers of identity. Rwandan researchers, too, are required to go through an ethics review if their projects involve human subjects. The main concern is, rather, whether the

proposed research has the potential to benefit knowledge creation and, more importantly, Rwandan society. As research proposals are reviewed on their individual merit, the requirements may be subject to modification. The fact that the proposed research has already been approved by the review board of researchers' home institutions has no bearing on the likelihood of approval by the Rwandan government. For sector-specific issues arising during or after the process, researchers are advised to consult with those who have previously conducted research of similar nature, organisations operating in the country, or relevant local authorities.

No.	Items to be included in the application for a research permit
1	Cover letter
	<i>Addressed to the NCST Executive Secretary</i>
2	Curriculum vitae
	<i>All researchers involved</i>
3	Research permit application form
	http://ncst.gov.rw/sites/default/files/documents/docs/Application%20Form.pdf
4	Letter signed by authority of the affiliating local institution
	<i>List of recognised institutions: http://ncst.gov.rw/sites/default/files/documents/docs/affiliating.pdf</i>
5	Affiliation confirmation form
	http://ncst.gov.rw/sites/default/files/documents/docs/AFFILIATION%20CONFIRMATION%20FORM.pdf
6	Research proposal
	<i>Comprehensive of all details</i>
7	Copy of identification document
	<i>Passport or national identity card</i>
8	Recommendation letters
	<i>Research institution and local supervisor</i>
9	Two passport photos
	<i>All researchers involved</i>
10	Payment of research clearance certificate
	https://ncst.gov.rw/content/research_fee

Figure 4: Application Materials for Research Permit

The specific requirements of each step are listed in Figures 4 and 5. Nevertheless, it is advisable to double check with the relevant authorities before submission in order to avoid disappointment. One major change made to the authorisation process is that the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) no longer has any involvement in it, but surprisingly many still believe that permission is granted by MINEDUC. The role of MINEDUC in issuing a research permit has been handed over to the National Council for Science and Technology (NCST), a regulatory entity created in response to growing numbers of post-graduate programmes and both local and foreign researchers doing fieldwork in Rwanda. In the initial step, NCST reviews the details and legitimacy of the proposed research. If human subjects are involved in it, researchers receive an introduction letter necessary to apply for an ethics review by the Rwanda National Ethics Committee (RNEC), which was established in 2008 to safeguard the rights of participants and protect researchers. The subsequent step may be

waived for those whose research does not involve human subjects. During the second step, researchers make a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation during the monthly meeting of the RNEC held on the first or second Saturday of each month. Required documents must be submitted, preferably in person, at least 15 working days in advance. The presentation is followed by a Q&A session with the ethics panel consisting of eight committee members. It is worth noting that research projects dealing with politically sensitive subjects can be subject to more scrutiny. It takes roughly two weeks for written feedback to be given, possibly with some conditions attached. Once the conditions have been fulfilled, the proposed research is granted ethics clearance. In the third step, NCST produces a legal permit. The final – and rather formalistic – step is taken at the Directorate General of Immigration and Emigration. Foreign nationals are required to acquire an appropriate visa even if their fieldwork can be completed within the period allowed by a visitor’s visa. Last but not least, should it become necessary to renew a permit, both NCST and the RNEC must be informed of the reason for an extension.

No.	Items to be submitted 15 working days before the scheduled meeting date
1	Introduction letter
	<i>Issued by NCST</i>
2	Research proposal
	<i>Including a summary</i>
3	Informed/patient consent form and information sheet
	<i>In English or French AND Kinyarwanda</i>
4	Curriculum vitae
	<i>All researchers involved</i>
5	Student identity card from the applicant’s institution
	<i>Students only</i>
6	Recommendation letter from the applicant’s institution
	<i>Students only</i>
7	Approval letter from the National Health Research Committee
	<i>Medical research only</i>
8	Details of research budget
	<i>Organisations/institutions only</i>
9	Copy of compact disc (CD)
	<i>All required documents to be put in one PDF format and burnt to a CD</i>
10	Payment of RWF 850,000
	<i>RWF 100,000 for self-funded students only</i>
No.	Links to the information regarding the specific requirements
1	Requirements for organisations/institutions
	http://www.rnecrwanda.org/images/pdfs/required_documents_institution_new_2.pdf
2	Requirements for students of bachelor’s, master’s or doctoral degrees
	http://www.rnecrwanda.org/images/pdfs/required_documents_student_new_2.pdf
3	Schedule of RNEC monthly meetings
	http://www.rnecrwanda.org/index.php/meetings-calendar

Figure 5: Application Materials for Ethics Review

The new procedure is unlikely to change for the time being, for it was announced in 2019. That said, we reiterate the importance of regularly ascertaining whether any amendment has been made. It has come to our attention that the authorisation process, which looks complex and overwhelming at first, discourages some researchers from choosing Rwanda as a field site. Our observations suggest, however, that securing permission is a relatively straightforward process even for those seeking to address sensitive topics, provided that the rationale, methodology, and implications of research are duly addressed with appropriate actions for risk mitigation taken. Furthermore, the process entails benefits for researchers themselves. It does not only enhance the ethical rigour of research, but also ensures adequate support for those who are unfamiliar with their field locations. For example, the requirement of local affiliation, which the Rwandan government considers as proof of the relevance and legitimacy of research, turns out to be instrumental in providing foreign nationals with a degree of protection and logistical assistance whilst in the field. So long as researchers elucidate the details of fieldwork, present thoughtful ethical considerations and submit all required documents on time and to the right place, obtaining a permit should not be as daunting a process as it may seem from afar.

References

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About the Research

The written piece is based upon findings from the early stages of an ethnographic research project that centres on gender and education in post-genocide Rwanda and emphasises the importance of recognising the specificity of individual countries. The study is designed to explore the ways in which, and the reasons for which, girls' education is used as a way of promoting gender equality, ascertain its effects on – and through – everyday lived experiences, and cast light on discrepancies between statistical evidence and narrative accounts. The blog post conveys useful information drawn from the authors' first-hand experience of obtaining a research permit in preparation for their data collection activities. In doing so, the authors, as a foreign researcher and a Rwandan national, provide a uniquely balanced view of the authorisation process for those who consider or plan on conducting research in the East African country.

Sangwon Park is a PhD candidate in International Development at the University of Edinburgh where he also works as a tutor for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. His research interests include but not limited to the following: 1) gender and (post-conflict) development with emphasis on the subtle but critical distinction between gender equity and equality; 2) the social and moral effect of radically divergent concepts of gender equality, such as instrumentalism and rights-based principles of women's empowerment; 3) electoral gender quotas and political representation of women.

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