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Fairness Initiative Ramps Up

*RFI pilot workshops win CAAST-Net Plus support*

**The Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) is emerging as a novel and innovative platform, which promises to address some of the challenges affecting health research partnerships globally.**

Led by the Council on Health Research for Development, the RFI aims to create a reporting system that encourages governments, businesses, research organisations and funders to share their efforts to develop fair partnerships. By describing their partnering policies and practices transparently, RFI envisages the development of better guidelines and benchmarks that will increase global capacity to deal with the challenges of global health, equity and development.

With support from CAAST-Net Plus and the Kenyan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, a first consultative RFI workshop was held in May 2016 at the offices of the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) in Nairobi. The workshop’s goals? To generate substantive inputs from leading Kenyan public, private and governmental institutions, and potential future users of the RFI, on the purpose, content, format and implementation of the RFI; and, to assess the usefulness of the RFI as a collaborative platform for supporting bi-regional EU-Africa research partnerships.

In terms of participants’ expertise and experience, the cohort that attended the two-day event reflected an appropriate mix of scientific and policy communities. Both the panel sessions and group work stimulated important discussions between junior and senior researchers, employees of different departments at KEMRI, and national policymakers. More specifically, the direction of conversation concerned the broad issue of fairness in bi-regional research partnerships, ethics, as well as a series of issues related to the RFI’s applicability to KEMRI and other Kenyan institutions involved in health research and innovation.

**Key Discussion Points**

The issue of fairness in research partnerships between African and European partners was described by some participants as an area filled with ambivalence. On the one hand, funding from Europe can involve unfavourable conditions, such as sending samples overseas or the use of research material from the country of the funding institution. These practices, participants felt, can result in skewed benefits of research in the direction of European partners and can also create a funding dependency on European institutions. On the other hand, some participants reported that South-North partnerships are actually frequently equitable in terms of research outputs, such as publications. Many participants also felt that most collaborations start from the good intentions of individuals and later often result in inter-institutional Memoranda of Understanding (MOU), which serve to enhance fairness.

A specific discussion on fairness in the context of research ethics in Kenya was ignited by a panel representative from the World Health Organization. The point of contention was whether a single national ethics committee should supplant...
the more than 20 institutional ethics review committees in operation in Kenya at present. Some parties, such as Kenya’s National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, consider the quantity of information to be reviewed by separate review committees as well as the variations in practices at country-level as favourable for health research in Kenya. Others reported their preference for a national standard on ethical practices, which they said would serve to increase fairness.

Discussions on the RFI guidelines, in particular, led to the general consensus that research institutions in Kenya need to strengthen their legal and financial capacities to more efficiently engage in contract negotiations. This capacity need applies to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), Material Transfer Agreements (MTA) and internal framework conditions or guidelines.

Overall, the workshop stimulated serious engagement between participants about the research support infrastructure in Kenya as well as on the nature of research collaborations with European partners. Critically, the event also revealed some of the strengths and weaknesses of KEMRI’s collaboration in multilateral or bilateral research as well as gaps that could be filled by stronger institutional policy.

Road to Brussels

The second and third CAAST-Net Plus-supported RFI consultative workshops will be held in 2016 in Nigeria and Senegal. In Nigeria, the event is being supported by the National Office for Technology Acquisition and Promotion (NOTAP) in cooperation with the Nigerian Academy of Science (NAS). In Senegal, the workshop will be organised in collaboration with the Ministère de la Recherche Scientifique (MRS) and the SME, Pharmalyx. Information on how to increase fairness in bi-regional research partnerships that is gathered at these consultations will be presented to funding institutions and policymakers at the COHRED Research Fairness Initiative Conference, which will take place in Brussels on 28 September 2016.

Lasting Legacy for CAAST-Net Plus

Since 2013, the research and consultations conducted by CAAST-Net Plus partners have led to an in-depth understanding of Africa-EU research and innovation cooperation in health, of the challenges that need to be addressed, and of possible areas of intervention for improving partnerships and strengthening bi-regional cooperation. It is from this informed perspective that CAAST-Net Plus is lending its support to the RFI, and the anticipated outcome of this support, for CAAST-Net Plus, is a lasting legacy in the EU-Africa cooperation landscape of more equitable partnerships for improved health outcomes as well as, we hope, outcomes in other fields, such as food security and climate change. This legacy will take tangible form, through the work of the RFI, in opportunities for continuous dialogue between experts in the two regions for the elaboration of standards of fair and responsible practices in international collaborative partnerships.

Guidelines are currently being developed by COHRED for the purpose of the formal establishment of the Research Fairness Initiative. For more information go to http://rfi.coherent.org or contact Lauranne Botti (botti@coherent.org).

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Left: KEMRI’s Acting Director Dr Gerald Mkoji shakes hands with Katharina Kuss of the Spanish Foundation for International Cooperation, Health and Social Affairs. RFI Project Manager, Lauranne Botti of the Council on Health Research for Development, appears on the left. [Image credit: A. Cherry]
Right: Dr Gerald Mkoji hands a certificate of attendance to Dr Lucia Keter, Research Officer at the Kenya Medical Research Institute. [Image credit: A. Cherry]