**Strengthening NGO and IRB cooperation through the establishment of Joint Working Groups**

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**Why Joint Working Groups?**

Marie Stopes International (MSI) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that has provided sexual and reproductive healthcare for more than 30 years. Following the expansion of research programmes alongside its service delivery, MSI created an independent Ethics Review Committee (ERC) in 2010 (comprised of members from diverse fields and representing experience in sexual and reproductive health, qualitative and quantitative research methods, as well as clinical and social science research), to review research protocols submitted in compliance with international best practice.

In early stages of developing ethics standards and review procedures, MSI research staff accustomed to working in accordance with urgent service delivery timelines, had to adjust to new ERC requirements and requests for changes to be made to protocols. To strengthen ownership of ethics in research across MSI, three joint Working Groups were created in early 2013, comprised of members of the MSI ERC, as well as staff from MSI’s research and operations teams.

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**Working Group Objectives**

The two objectives of joint Working Groups were to develop tools to design and conduct ethical research, which are grounded in realities faced by MSI in the study contexts, while strengthening collaboration and understanding between MSI and the ERC.

1) **Substantive Objective**

To create tools tailored to the specifics of MSI’s work and challenges in the field, including:

- An Ethics E-Learning Module
- Ethics guidance on Community Engagement in research
- A global template for Mystery (Simulated) Client Studies.

2) **Practical Objective**

To promote institutional buy-in by strengthening:

- Collaboration and cooperation between the ERC and MSI.
- MSI understanding of research ethics, towards mainstreaming protection of human subjects in the development of research
- ERC understanding of the unique ethical challenges faced by MSI, towards grounding ethical reviews in the realities of MSI research.

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**Case Study 1:** Ethics E-Learning Module

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<tr>
<th>Substantive Objective:</th>
<th>An interactive Ethics E-Learning Module, to introduce MSI’s research team, operations department, country-based operations, programme staff, and global support office-based staff to the MSI ERC and the process for submitting protocols.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Working Group Composition: | ERC members: n=3  
| MSI members: n=2  
| Other (MSI/ERC): n=1  
| Total members: n=6 |
| Output: | The interactive e-learning module was launched across MSI in December 2014. |

**Case Study 2:** Ethics Guidance on Community Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substantive Objective:</th>
<th>Ethics Guidance on Community Engagement to support MSI to strengthen community engagement in the design, development, implementation and dissemination of research, and to guide the ERC in review of protocols.</th>
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</table>
| Working Group Composition: | ERC members: n=2  
| MSI members: n=7  
| Other (MSI/ERC): 1  
| Total members: n=10 |
| Output: | The guidance was launched across MSI in December 2014. |

**Case Study 3:** Global Template for Mystery Client Studies

| Substantive Objective: | A Global template for Mystery Client Studies to support MSI research staff in designing high quality and ethical Mystery Client Studies (MCS). The template offers a standard for MCS, deviations from which require submission to the  
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Working Group Composition: | ERC members: n=4  
| MSI members: n=2  
| Other (MSI/ERC): n=2  
| Total: n=8  |
| Output: | The ERC reviewed the global template in November 2014, with those ERC members involved in its development not voting. |

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**Lessons learnt from joint Working Groups**

Working Groups offer IRBs and NGOs a means of collaborating to create high-quality outputs. The outputs that resulted from these Working Groups (an e-learning module; guidance on community engagement; and a global template for ethical Mystery Client Studies) are user-friendly global goods that staff across MSI can access, to improve the quality of their work.

There were many challenges associated with the process of the Working Groups:

- None of the Working Groups was as participatory as was envisaged at their inception.
- Challenges appointing leads and discussions about Working Group composition resulted in significant delays.
- Work was not equally distributed between Working Group members.
- Progress was only made when select individuals assumed responsibility for producing substantive content.

**Effective joint Working Groups require NGOs to designate staff time to participation.**

There were many positive by-products of the Working Group process:

- Although most Working Group members did not provide substantive inputs, many took the opportunity to comment on drafts that were circulated.
- Although the work of elaborating the products was not equally shared, the opportunity to collaborate resulted in a sense of joint ownership of outputs.
- Providing opportunities to contribute is valuable, irrespective of the extent to which that opportunity is taken.

**Future approach to joint Working Groups**

- Allocate responsibility for substantive drafting of ethics tools to one or two ERC members only.
- Reconceptualise Working Groups as ‘Review Groups’ to comment on substantive drafts.
- Explore ways of engaging Review Groups in dissemination and uptake of final products.

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