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# Challenges in Obtaining Informed Consent: The Case of Forest Resources in Zigiwan

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## Description

An anthropologist conducting research on a program run by an international organization, she finds that members of the local community are hesitant to sign informed consent forms. However, her funding organization requires that all participants give written consent before participating in any kind of research program.

## Body

Anthropologist Dr. Miriam Clark is conducting research on farming practices in the country of Zigiwan. Her research explores the roles of participants taking part in an agro-forestry (i.e. intercropping of trees and agriculture) development project. Dr. Clark is a seasoned researcher, having spent more than 20 years researching issues surrounding human-environment interactions in the United States. This is, however, her first time of conducting international research.

International Farmer Support Network (IFSN), a non-governmental development organization (NGO) that provides assistance to farmers in developing countries, facilitates the program that Dr. Clark will be evaluating. The scope of the project is to combat deforestation by establishing woodlots for farmers. The woodlots are to

provide farmers with such materials as fuel wood, fodder for animals and poles for construction-; easing the pressures placed on the country's forests. Ultimately, the goal of the program is to restore the health and diversity of the country's wooded areas. In fact, human induced deforestation (e.g. overpopulation, slash and burn agriculture, etc.) has been deemed so destructive that it is now illegal to cut trees from many forested areas in Zigiwan.

IFSN mandates signed consent forms for any type of research involving its program participants. Dr. Clark is very familiar with informed consent because her university's institutional review board (IRB) mandates all university research to incorporate informed consent. Dr. Clark knows there are negative consequences of conducting research without informed consent and has obtained written consent for every research project she has ever conducted. Her plans of obtaining written consent for her upcoming research were no different. She was, however, surprised one day when a colleague of hers, Dr. Gordon, raised concerns of participants signing consent forms in Zigiwan.

Dr. Gordon has been researching religious beliefs in Zigiwan for the past 10 years. During this time he has noted the reluctance of individuals to sign informed consent documents While he does not know the exact reason for this reluctance, the fact that Zigiwan has been unstable in the past has not escaped him. Before the current president was in office, Zigiwan was ruled by a dictator who often had dissenters persecuted. While Dr. Gordon is able to find people to sign consent and take part in his research, it has been his experience that people are generally reluctant to sign anything. He believes the instability of the past has a big influence.

The reluctance of Zigiwans to sign consent forms makes perfect sense to Dr. Clark. Indeed, a good part of her study asks participants about their illegal collection of forest resources. Although she knows every possible measure will be taken to protect the identities of the individuals she interviews, she can't help but wonder what would happen if her research were to get into the wrong hands. She also knows there has been a lot of instability in the past, which potentially puts her participants at greater risk if the country were to become unstable once again. These factors are of great concern to Dr. Clark. At the same time, Dr. Clark is confident that her research findings will be of great benefit to the program. The results could provide policymakers with valuable social science research-;potentially making the whole program more effective. Thus, she is in the process of weighing the potential costs and benefits of carrying out her research.

### Questions

- Is writing the only means by which Dr. Clark can obtain informed consent? On what grounds might Dr. Clark appeal for another form of informed consent?
- How might alternate informed consent affect the risk posed to participants of Dr. Clark's research?
- Do the communal benefits of restoring the health and diversity of the country's wooded areas outweigh the potential individual costs of information (e.g. signed consent forms) getting into the wrong hands? What if the risk to individuals is low?
- What are the potential risks posed to the community if Dr. Clark conducts her research?
- At what point does the cost benefit analysis justify the research?
- What if Dr. Clark's findings challenge the dominant assumption that population pressure is not deforestation's primary driving force? How can she be sure that her research will influence policy if her findings are marginalized (i.e. not taken seriously)? How might this affect a cost/benefit analysis?

## Commentary on Challenges in Obtaining Informed Consent: The Case of Forest Resources in Zigiwan

Social science researchers have an obligation to protect research participants. While most researchers hold this as a central tenet of their research, it is by no means a straightforward process. This case study highlights two aspects of conducting ethical research-;obtaining informed voluntary consent and evaluating the costs and benefits of research. Both are challenging endeavors considering how social science research navigates a sea of multiple interests and meanings relating to both informed consent and cost/benefit analyses.

Dr. Clark, like many researchers, is affiliated with multiple institutions (e.g. IFSN, the university) and conducts research within many different cultural contexts. While her university's review board (IRB) may grant alternate informed consent considering her concerns, IFSN's consent process may have little to do with ethics. Indeed, IFSN's primary concern may involve issues of litigation rather than ethical considerations.

What if IFSN agrees to follow the decision of Dr. Clark's university IRB to grant an alternate form of consent (e.g. verbal)? How should Dr. Clark go about drafting this

considering appropriate forms vary depending on different contexts? For example, it may be more appropriate to use verbal consent when literacy rates among participants are very low.

It also is important to evaluate the positionality (i.e. cultural viewpoint) of all people involved with the study. For example, how does Dr. Clark's positionality (e.g. status as a Ph.D. researcher, woman, etc.) affect how she evaluates and interprets what constitutes informed consent? How might this be different from how Zigiwaians conceptualize informed consent? How might positionality (e.g. social class, race, etc.) among Zigiwaians affect interpretations of informed consent? For example, does an "educated" city dweller conceptualize consent different from a "non-educated" rural dweller? How should Dr. Clark approach informed consent considering these differences?

Whether or not Dr. Clark proceeds with signed consent or some other form of consent, she also will need to conduct a cost/benefit analysis. This includes evaluating the potential costs and benefits of her research on individual community members as well as the community as a whole. Unfortunately, this is not a clear-cut process. For example, how should Dr. Clark weigh costs and benefits between individuals and the community as a whole? Is it ethical potentially to compromise the safety of a few community members (e.g. by having signed consent forms and asking about illicit timber harvesting activities) for the potential benefit of the community as a whole.

Complicating the cost/benefit analysis further, there are many variables that cannot be clearly determined. For example, after conducting a cost/benefit analysis Dr. Clark may decide to move ahead with her research because she thinks its benefits outweigh the costs. In doing so, she is confident her research can strengthen IFSN's agro-forestry program. She cannot, however, guarantee that the results and recommendations derived from her research will be implemented or even considered. Should Dr. Clark take this into account when evaluating the costs and benefits of conducting the research considering these factors are out of her control?

While this case study highlights ethical considerations of informed consent in an international context, it illustrates ethical concerns that affect all social science research. Informed consent and cost/benefit analyses are central tenets of the research process, and we need to take them seriously. While there is no straightforward process of determining the best course of action, we can remain

committed to protecting the rights of research participants by anticipating and evaluating as many factors as our faculties allow. Only then can we be assured that we are doing everything in our power to meet the needs of the very people social scientists are committed to helping.

### References

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## Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh's Commentary on Challenges in Obtaining Informed Consent: The Case of Forest Resources in Zigiwan

Informed voluntary consent is not really about having a signature on a piece of paper, but rather ensuring that research participants are given all the facts necessary to make a sound decision and that their choice to participate is not coerced. Assuming Dr. Clark discloses all the facts about her work-;its aims, methods, and applications--;then she is well on her way to obtaining informed consent. That said, informed consent in many ways only marks the beginning of the relationship between a participant and a researcher. Dr. Clark will have many other responsibilities on this project, including taking measures to protect the confidentiality of her sources, particularly in a politically tense place such as Zigiwan. The practical problem of having a signed form could be solved in various ways, such as having the form faxed to the United States while the original is destroyed, or perhaps using a coded system that only Dr. Clark and a trusted assistant could decode. However, even if such steps were taken, with this kind of research in a rural setting, it seems likely that community members would still know who participated and be able to identify individual collaborators. The larger problem then concerns whether or not the risks presented to the individual participant

outweighs the potential benefits of the research.

Suppose that there is little risk to the research participants in Zigiwan. Intuitively, we might initially think there would be little problem for Dr. Clark to proceed. However, if Dr. Gordon is to be believed, then the implication is that these individuals could potentially face extreme violence & torture or even death. In other words, while the risk in terms of chance is generally small, particularly since the country is now stable, should violence erupt again, the research participants might suffer terribly. With the possibility of extreme brutality, the bar must be raised for the project's potential benefits. However, the benefits of the project do indeed seem compelling: the heath and diversity of the country's wooded areas. Since in this case the individuals bear the greatest risks, they should be the ones to decide if the benefits make it worth their effort to participate. Assuming Dr. Clark offers full disclosure and protects her informants so far as possible, the choice should be left to individual community members. Already individuals are reluctant to sign informed consent forms, indicating that they are already cautious and well aware of what kind of behavior creates risk.

What if the risks were great and harm almost certain? Would it still be ethical for Dr. Clark to proceed, even if she could find willing participants? An analogy: imagine a researcher needs to try out a new surgical procedure to cure acid reflux disease. The researcher is close to certain that nine out of the ten needed patients will die as a direct result from the experimental method. Yet, when the researcher posts the advertisement for the procedure, ten sane people come forward and volunteer. Even though these individuals are fully informed and willingly volunteer, would it still be ethical for the researcher to carry out the experiment?

The answer will depend in large part how one views individual autonomy. One response may be that so long as the individual willingly agrees and is fully informed, then the project should move forward. In opposite terms, another response is that while individual autonomy should be respected, this does not mean that scholars may do whatever they please so long as their participants agree to participate. The latter position, to which I am sympathetic, recognizes that even as autonomy is a core value, researchers have responsibilities to enact other values, such as benevolence, the propensity to do good. It is far from charitable to cause certain harm even if some limited good may result. In this case, curing acid reflux is hardly worth the life of nine human beings. Similarly, with the Zigiwan case study, if the risks were great and harm almost certain for the participants, then I do not think it

would be ethical for Dr. Clark to continue with the study. While a healthy environment is important for a country, it does not mean that achieving this goal should be pursued at any cost.

## Contributor(s)

Brian Schrag

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Case Study / Scenario

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