Reviewer's report

Title: Ethical approaches to research with street children and youth in low- and middle-income countries

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Reviewer: Anselm Crombach

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Ethical considerations are very important when conducting research with street children and other vulnerable participants in low- or middle-income countries (LMIC's). They provide guidance to researchers but also to humanitarian aid workers how to approach these populations guaranteeing ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice. While the vulnerability of street children requires additional ethical considerations and actions, ethical guidelines need also to ensure their inclusion in research projects thereby enabling them to profit from evidence-based knowledge that might help to shed light on their lives and to design effective future interventions. Hence, a balance is needed between necessary actions to protect vulnerable populations and reducing potential social, cultural and economic barriers including also ethical standards that might not be appropriate.

The authors outline this potential conflict very well within the introduction. The method section describes the settings and the studies that allowed the researchers to gain their experiences with ethical considerations with street children living in LMIC's. Additional explanations about how they identified the different ethical difficulties would strengthen this section of the article. The section “Ethical considerations and solutions” that replaces the result section of common research articles could present some additional information how the suggested solutions did finally work out and more strongly emphasize the difficulties the researchers encountered. The discussion section could profit from a broader and more critical perspective regarding the implications of the ethical considerations, the challenges within political systems lacking structural stability, potential conflicts between ethical considerations and culture, different kinds of institutions and barriers preventing the implementation of research activities. Furthermore, the article has several limitations that should be addressed within the limitation section. The conclusions are well written and reflect very well the complexities working with such a vulnerable population.

Overall, the authors might consider presenting this article as a theoretical article instead of a research article. Eventually, the experiences of the authors – despite very valuable and interesting – were not collected systematically to evaluate ethical considerations.

Major Compulsory Revisions
1.) Title: As the authors report experiences of their work in Kenya, I would suggest including this information into the title. For example, adding “– using the example of Kenya”.

2.) Abstract:
The authors describe in the result section of the abstract using non-monetary compensation. However, within the “Ethical consideration & solution” section they discuss the issue of monetary compensation considering different aspects. Hence I would suggest either deleting the “non-monetary compensation” from the abstract or using a more cautious language. For example, “To address issues related to coercion and access to care, we evaluated different strategies: we worked to reduce…”. Overall the language could be more cautious within the abstract and difficulties with the implemented strategies could be discussed.

3.) Method section:
Ethical considerations depend often on cultural and social norms. Hence identifying ethical issues that need to be addressed most likely depend on declarations, literature and opinions of experts. As the focus of this article are ethical approaches, a methodological description how and by whom the different areas of interest and considerations were identified would strengthen the method section. Furthermore, outlining the different areas of interest (e.g., Community participation & equitable recruitment) within the result section would allow the readers to better understand the structure of the following section “Ethical considerations & solutions”.

4.) Ethical considerations & solutions:
This section of the article replaces the result section of common research articles. The authors outline different “ethical considerations” for specific areas of interest and are presenting the “solutions” they have developed conducting research in Kenya. As this article is limited to their experiences within a specific setting, I would suggest using a more cautious language. Instead of “solutions” I would suggest the word “approach”.

5.) Ethical considerations & solutions:
As this article is presented as a research paper, I think it might be particularly interesting how the different “solutions” worked out within the specific contexts and what problems the researchers had to deal with. I would suggest to restructure the whole section “Ethical considerations & solutions” to provide the readers with the opportunities to get insight into the experiences of the researchers. In addition to the subsections “Ethical considerations” and “approaches”, I would suggest adding a subsection “Acceptance & Difficulties” for each area of interest, in which the authors could summarize their experiences and difficulties. Restructuring the whole section would require of course a modification of the current subsections. For example, the sentence about monetary reimbursements, page 11, lines 293 – 295, would need to be included in the new subsection. Furthermore, I would be interested how additional
offerings of sanitary supplies to female participants were perceived and accepted by both, female and male participants.

6.) Ethical considerations & solutions, page 7 & page 10:
The authors mention the involvement of street youth leaders within mabaraza and informed consent procedures. From my experience with street children in Burundi, they are often organized in groups and the group members take care of each other. Nevertheless, the group leaders often favor children who pay them either with money or by performing duties. I would be interested how the researchers addressed this issue of “corruption” and ensured that the group leaders would not prevent some children from participation because they did not belong to their favorites and/or that they would push children belonging to their group to participate within a study.

7.) Ethical considerations & solutions, Informed consent, page 10:
I would be interested in some additional information about the suggested informed consent procedure. I agree that a general permission is necessary from the DCO or a similar institution, and even an individual permission can be obtained, as he seems to be their legal representative in Kenya. Nevertheless, in some LMIC with weak institutional structures such permissions might be given for official reasons and/or personal interests instead of being inspired by genuine care for the street children. I also agree that some collaboration with the street youth leaders is necessary. However, I am not sure the street youth leader has the right to give permission for the individual children because those might feel oppressed by him. Instead of defining the street youth leader as their guardian figure, I experienced that letting them choose a community member they trust as a guardian/witness of their participation might be more appropriate.

8.) Ethical considerations & solutions, Vulnerability of coercion & responsibility to protect, page 10 - 12:
Compensating street children for their time is an important and yet difficult aspect. The reimbursement in form of small monetary amounts or food most likely helps the children to ensure their daily income even though they do not have the opportunity to work the whole day. However, the reimbursement has to be adequate and useful to the street children without profiting from their precarious living conditions. I would be interested in how the street children perceived the non-monetary compensations such as the 2 pens and the workbook? Did they really need those or did they sell them after the participation? Small monetary amounts might be more appropriate in the latter case. I acknowledge that reimbursements might have coercive effects on street children if they profit from their needs. Nevertheless, we sometimes need to trust that street children might get interested in research activities and are not forced to participate by adequate reimbursements, just like participants in high-income countries.

A non-conditional service such as access to medical care or other services is desirable. However, it requires resources and being very well connected. While NGO’s and research facilities of high-income countries in cooperation with local
institutions might provide such services, local research facilities and students might lack the necessary financial resources. Nevertheless, local institutions and students should engage in research with street children because they have a much better cultural and social understanding of the situation of street children within their own country. As long as e.g., psychology students of local universities respect certain essential ethical considerations, such as transparent informed consent procedures and ethical permissions from local institutions, their research activities should be encouraged instead of being hampered by requirements they are not able to fulfill. Prohibiting their research would be an example of creating another barrier for the inclusion in research of vulnerable populations in LMIC’s.

Reporting human rights violations is a very delicate issue in LMIC’s that often lack the required infrastructure to deal with such cases, particularly as street children report many cases of victimizations by police forces. The lack of institutions providing psychosocial assistance for street children in LMIC’s or the overstraining need they encounter might interfere with a successful transfer of these children to appropriate institutions. I would be interested about the experiences of the authors in Kenya.

9.) Discussion:
I would suggest including some parts of the discussion within the previous section because I think they describe the evaluation of successful and ineffective strategies. Furthermore, I would broaden the focal point of the discussion and include the following issues: 1.) Ethical considerations do not only concern research institutions but to some extend also concern activities of NGO’s. Evaluating processes of NGO’s include presenting case studies, sometimes even without disguising the individual’s identity. To which extend the ethical requirements would also be appropriate to these NGO’s? 2.) I outlined in the previous section (8.)) of my review that not all research institutions might be able to fulfill the solutions described. Discussing the recommendations keeping the different local and international research institutions in mind might strengthen the article. 3.) While the ethical considerations are very important, they can also become another barrier hampering e.g., local research projects with street children. 4.) Are there any suggestions how to address referrals of street children who want to report abusive experiences or need psychological assistance within systems lacking the necessary infrastructure to properly assist them. 5.) What minimum requirements NGO’s have to adhere to, that they are considered as key stakeholder having the authority to provide informal consent? How does the informal consent differ from a professional exchange and a simple information procedure? 6.) What are the major limitations of the article? To what extend the conclusions can be generalized to other countries?

10.) Discussion, page 12:
The authors write: “In evaluating our processes, we identified successful and ineffective strategies as well as key recommendations to guide the development of ethical research practices with SCCY in LMIC.” The authors are referring to an evaluation of their ethical procedures. I would suggest describing their evaluation approach and methods in detail within the method section to allow the reader a
profound insight how they identified successful and ineffective strategies. Furthermore, I want to highlight once more the need to restructure the previous section “Ethical considerations & solutions” because I did not realize which “solution” they identified as ineffective strategy.

11.) Discussion, page 13, first paragraph:
I would appreciate a specification whom the authors describe as CBO’s?

12.) Discussion, page 14, first paragraph:
The authors describe their challenges to implement a research protocol that addresses also human right violations without an adequately developed child protection system. Do you have any recommendations?

Minor Essential Revisions

1.) Method section:
The tables are not numbered correctly. Within the text table 1 is labeled as table 2 and vice versa. Furthermore, I would suggest deleting table 2 (that includes the information about the participants) and including the information within the text.

Discretionary Revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests