

The development of bioethics in Africa

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Bioethics in Africa has come a long way. Aside from ethics in the clinical context (which has always been a part of the practice traditional and western medicine in Africa), three key developments lie at the core of the evolution of African contemporary bioethics discourse:

- The Emergence of HIV/AIDS
- The Globalization of Biomedical Research.
- The Transfer of Biotechnology to African countries.

HIV/AIDS

The first AIDS cases in Africa were reported in 1983. A few years prior, clinical epidemics of chronic, life-threatening enteropathic diseases ("slim disease"), cryptococcal meningitis, progressive Kaposi's sarcoma and esophageal candidiasis were seen in Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire, and Zambia. Since it was first reported, the disease has spread at an alarming rate in Africa. Today, it poses the worst single health threat on the continent with approximately 28.5 million of people. Women and girls make up almost 57% of all infected persons in Africa.

The emergence of AIDS in Africa has brought a sharper focus on bioethics and human rights. The disease has been defined for decades by denial, confusion, stigma and discrimination. In most African countries, HIV-infected people and people with AIDS have had their rights violated by actions such as mandatory HIV testing; restrictions on international travel, employment discrimination, barriers to access to housing, education, medical care, and/or health insurance. AIDS has also given rise to many privacy and confidentiality questions, including name reporting and partner notification. Bioethicists and health policy makers in Africa are now not only dealing with ethical questions at the micro-level such as the duty to treat those suffering from AIDS, but macro-level issues as well, such as global justice and the ethical obligation of resource-rich countries to bridge the global health divide.

Out of these concerns a bioethics movement has arisen, firmly rooted in a human rights framework. This framework has continued to be the bedrock for subsequent AIDS debates such as the demand for free or cheaper treatment for those suffering from the disease in poor countries. HIV/AIDS has thus unpacked several pressing bioethics questions in Africa, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

The Globalization of Biomedical Research

In the last few years, there has been a significant increase in international research in the developing world, particularly Africa. A combination of the increased burden of disease in the developing world and

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the absence of affordable therapies and vaccines has raised the sensitivity of health professionals to issues of ethics and equity in international biomedical research. Foremost among the concerns are whether new treatments should be compared against Western standards of care or against existing local standards. Other issues include the difficulty of obtaining informed consent, questions about how communities should benefit from the research results, and issues surrounding the sorts of relationships that foreign researchers should forge with host communities.

There has been much debate in the international arena about these issues but little consensus has emerged on a number of these questions including, what should constitute fair benefits for poor countries engaged in international research. Many African countries are now attempting to develop research ethics standards that are relevant to the African context. Several others are also undertaking constant review of those standards to suit changing times and philosophies, promoting capacity building, development of ethics review mechanisms and standard operating procedures.

African bioethicists and health policy makers are also addressing ethical concerns in the treatment of human subjects in research, including the choice of appropriate research questions and design; ensuring prior scientific and ethical review of the protocols to be used; the equitable selection of participants; obtaining the voluntary informed consent of participants, and providing appropriate treatment to participants during and after trials. Again, these international research ethics debates have drawn greatly from the human rights movement, and because several trials in Africa on HIV/AIDS they also raise a host of AIDS related concerns.

The Transfer of Biotechnology to African countries

Although for years, biotechnology has been seen as belonging exclusively to the West, recent debates revolving around the potential benefits of genetically modified crops, and the potential of genomics to improve the health of the poor, have directed the biotechnology debate to Africa. Modern biotechnology involving genetic engineering and applied in agriculture and medicine raises number of social, economic, legal and ethical questions. The main questions raised for the new biotechnology applications include; if they can eradicate hunger, can they assure sustainable development? Will they affect biodiversity and the environment? Can they provide a disease free world? Will they ensure a renewable resource economy and most importantly what is their contribution to sustainable development?¹ Despite the growing optimism for the role of biotechnology in Africa, many important questions remain about the continent's ability to incorporate, manage and regulate these various technologies sufficiently.

Once again, African bioethicists and policy makers are deliberating on the extent to which Africa will be affected by the genomics revolution -

¹ Bhardwaj, Minakshi. 2001. "Biotechnology, Bioethics and the Poor." *Electronic Journal of Biotechnology* [online] 4:3 available from <http://www.ejb.org/content/vol4/issue3/issues/04/index.html> SSN: 0717-3458 (Visited on January 13, 2005)

including gene therapy, cloning of DNA and xenotransplantation, the development of genetically-modified foods; the development of new drug and vaccines, and the protection of the intellectual property of African researchers. There seems to be an ethical consensus emerging among African countries that biotechnology requires a change from the present commercially driven agenda to a more human development focus, combining old and modern biotechnological techniques for the improvements in the health and living conditions of the poor.

Reflection

These are the three main developments that have occupied bioethics space in African countries recently. There are, however, several other issues that are the subject of bioethical debate, the most important of which perhaps is the provision of basic health care for all Africans—this is one of the most challenging tasks for governments and for the international community. Other ethical issues include the commercialization of human organs for transplantation, the emergence of reproductive technologies and its ethical implications, and end of life questions. Africans continue to engage positively in bioethics discourse, and their views deserve to be taken seriously both locally and internationally.