



# Standards for Research Ethics Across East Africa

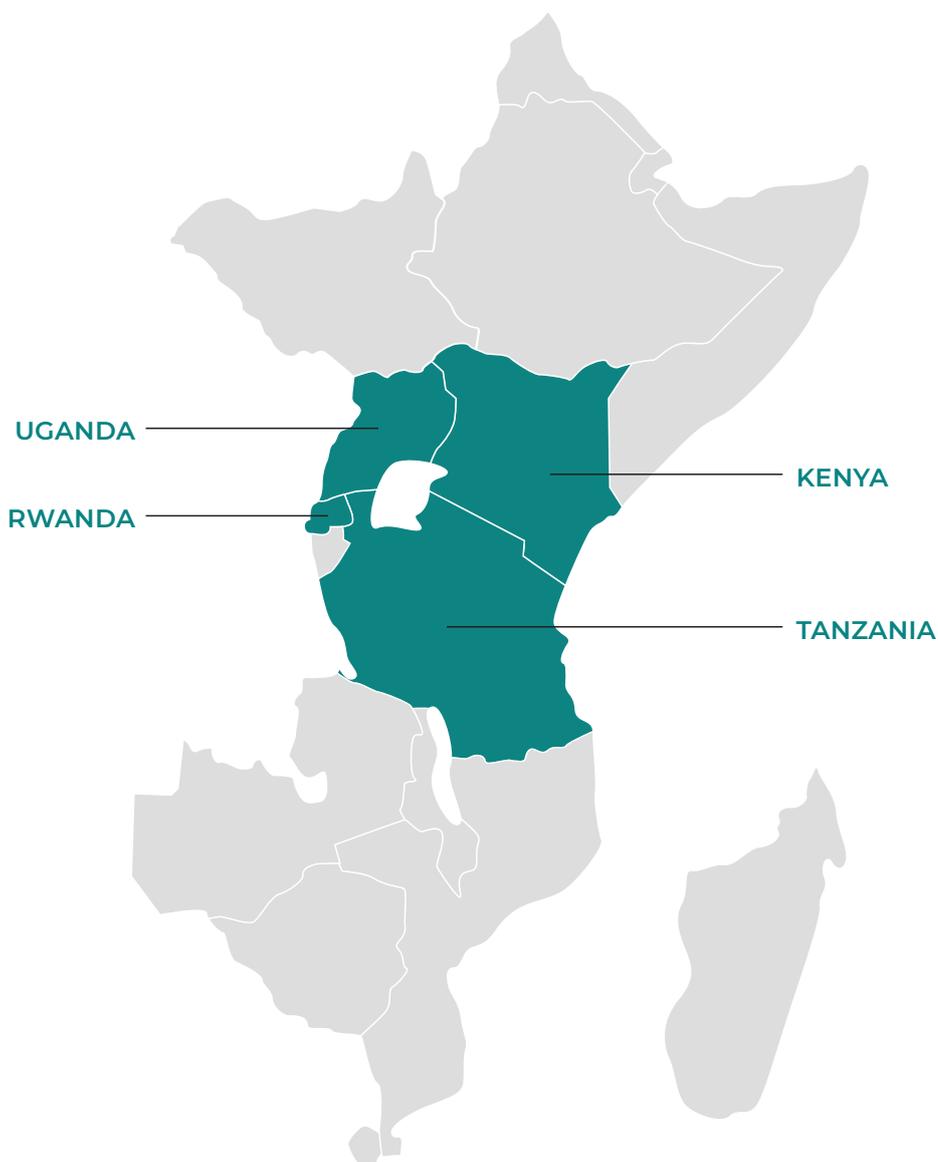
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When researchers are carrying out studies with human subjects, it's important for the research to meet [the highest ethical standards](#). In most countries, ethical review is carried out by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB reviews research projects to ensure that they will minimize the risk of harm to subjects, and clearly explain all research processes and consent forms to the subjects.

As the Mawazo Institute expands its [PhD Scholars programme](#) from Kenya to the broader East African region, while serving this broad regional base through digital platforms like the [Mawazo Learning Exchange](#), we want to make sure that our beneficiaries know how to comply with their countries' national requirements for research ethics. Individual countries all have unique national processes for Institutional Review Boards (IRB), which is why we've put together the summaries and tables below to help guide researchers through the review processes in the following East African countries: Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda.

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## Kenya

In Kenya, there are three permits required to carry out human subjects research. These are **an ethics approval** by an accredited IRB, **a national research permit** from the **National Commission on Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI)**, and **a local research permit** from the county where the researcher plans to work.

NACOSTI runs an accreditation programme for the **30 accredited IRBs** in Kenya. Researchers doing human subjects research must get approval from an IRB which is accredited for the specific type of research they are carrying out, whether it is biomedical research or social science research. If a researcher's own institution does not have the correct type of IRB for their research, they can apply to an IRB at a different institution. There is a fee which must be paid for IRB review.

Once the researcher has IRB approval, they must apply for a **research permit** through the NACOSTI website. This research permit is required for people doing any type of research in Kenya, even if it does not involve human subjects. PhD students should list their supervisors as co-authors on their projects for the NACOSTI permit. There is also a fee which must be paid for the permit.

Finally, once the NACOSTI research permit has been issued, the researcher should approach the government of the county in which they will be collecting their data, and obtain a local research permit. This permit is meant to facilitate cooperation with local research subjects. Counties occasionally charge a fee for this permit.

### Kenyan Research Requirements

RESEARCH TYPE	IRB APPROVAL	NACOSTI PERMIT	LOCAL PERMIT
Human subjects (social science)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Human subjects (biomedical)	Yes	Yes	Yes
No human subjects	No	Yes	Yes (if collecting data within Kenya)

## Rwanda

In Rwanda, different types of research permits are required depending on the subject of the research, and whether it is done in collaboration with a foreign university. At most, researchers may be required to obtain four permits: **a letter of support** from a PhD supervisor, **ethics approval** from an accredited IRB, **a national research permit** from the Ministry of Health, and **an international research permit** from the Ministry of Education.

At the time of writing, the minimum level of approval needed for human subjects research by PhD students enrolled at a Rwandan university, is a letter of support from their supervisor. This is meant to facilitate cooperation with local officials and research subjects. The letter of support is the only approval required for human subjects research in the social sciences. It's worth noting that the absence of ethical review for social science research is unusual by international standards, and it is likely that national policy will shift to require such approval in the future.

Biomedical research must undergo ethics review by an accredited IRB. Various Rwandan universities, including the [University of Rwanda](#) and the [University of Gitwe](#), have in-house IRBs. If a researcher's own institution does not have an IRB, they may approach one of these IRBs, or request ethics review from the [Rwanda National Ethics Committee \(RNEC\)](#). A fee is generally charged for review by university IRBs and RNEC.

Once IRB approval has been obtained, biomedical researchers must obtain [a national research permit](#) from the Ministry of Health. No fee is charged for this permit.

Finally, researchers in any discipline who are conducting research in partnership with a non-Rwandan researcher or university must obtain [an international research permit](#) from the Ministry of Education. A fee is charged for this permit.

### Rwandan Research Requirements

RESEARCH TYPE	LETTER OF SUPPORT	IRB APPROVAL	NATIONAL PERMIT	INTERNATIONAL PERMIT
Human subjects (social science)	Yes	No	No	If done in partnership with foreign scholars
Human subjects (biomedical)	Yes	Yes	Yes	
No human subjects	No	No	No	

## Tanzania

In Tanzania, different types of research permits are required depending on the subject of the research. At most, researchers may be required to obtain three permits: **ethics approval** from their university IRB, **ethics approval** from the [National Institute for Medical Research \(NIMR\)](#), and a **national research permit** from the [Commission for Science and Technology \(COSTECH\)](#).

All researchers carrying out human subjects research in Tanzania, in both the social and the biomedical sciences, should apply to their own university's IRB, or to that of another university if their university does not have one. Social scientists do not need any approval beyond this to begin their research. Fees may be charged for IRB review, depending on the institution.

Once biomedical research has been approved by a university IRB, the researcher must also submit it to [NIMR's Medical Research Coordinating Committee](#) for further approval. **Fees are charged** for this approval.

Once a researcher has IRB approval, they must apply for **a research permit from COSTECH**. This is required for people doing any type of research in Tanzania, even if it does not involve human subjects. Fees are charged for this permit.

### Tanzanian Research Requirements

RESEARCH TYPE	UNIVERSITY IRB	NIMR IRB	COSTECH PERMIT
Human subjects (social science)	Yes	No	Yes
Human subjects (biomedical)	Yes	Yes	Yes
No human subjects	No	No	Yes

## Uganda

In Uganda, two permits are required to carry out human subjects research. These include **ethics approval** by an accredited IRB, and a **letter of approval** from the **Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST)**. Unlike the other countries discussed here, these two permits can be obtained through a single application process.

UNCST runs an accreditation programme for Ugandan IRBs, also known as Research Ethics Committees (RECs). There are **25 IRBs in the country**. Researchers doing human subjects research must get approval from an IRB which is accredited for the specific type of research they are carrying out, whether it is biomedical research or social science research. If a researcher's own institution does not have the correct type of IRB for their research, they can apply to an IRB at a different institution. A fee is charged for IRB review.

Once the research has been approved by the IRB, the IRB will forward the approval to UNCST, which will then obtain a final letter of approval from the Office of the President.

### Uganda Research Requirements

RESEARCH TYPE	UNIVERSITY IRB	UNCST APPROVAL
Human subjects (social science)	Yes	Yes
Human subjects (biomedical)	Yes	Yes
No human subjects	No	No

These training materials are provided as part of the Mawazo Learning Exchange, a professional development platform for African researchers. The Mawazo Learning Exchange is a programme of the **Mawazo Institute**, a non-profit research organisation based in Nairobi, Kenya. Mawazo's mission is to support the next generation of female thought leaders and scholars in Africa, and get policymakers and the public engaged with their research.

**About the Author:**

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