Principles to Inform Global Health Research

Background
Responding to calls for action from the Gathering Perspectives Study, Phase I, this deliberative dialogue was intended to build a foundation for elaborating a set of principles designed to guide Canadians involved in global health research (GHR). The event brought together fifteen individuals from distinct regions, organizations, professional backgrounds, and research interests to deliberate on why principles are needed to guide global health research and what such principles should be. An environmental scan of existing resources, guidelines, and documents related to the ethical and principled conduct of research in relevant contexts was provided to participants as a foundation for dialogue. The guiding questions for the deliberative dialogue were:

1. Why are we, as individuals, compelled to contribute to this process of dialogue?
2. Why GHR, and specific principles to guide it?
3. What principles should be included (beginning definitions)?
4. How should these principles be implemented (beginning identification of examples)?

Why are principles needed to guide global health research?
Participants unanimously acknowledged the context of persistent and avoidable global inequities as a foundational reason and motivation for GHR. Participants collectively recognized that GHR exists and is needed, commenting that global health interventions need to be informed by evidence that comes from GHR. This acknowledgement was accompanied by a deep desire to contribute to the creation of something that could support, guide, assess, and inform both the conduct and the legitimacy of GHR. Participants were conscious of the tension between the potential for (often inadvertent) exploitation and reinforcement of inequities versus the potential to leverage and optimize the systems and resources that can reduce inequities. The principles emerging from this process were hoped to be both inspirational and aspirational, moving toward a more nuanced contemplation of ethics in GHR.

Who should the principles be from and for?
Agreement was reached that the principles should come from the CCGHR, endorsed by CCGHR members (including the Board and University Advisory Council) and collaborators (e.g. other key global health organizations), but be for anyone involved in GHR. This extends beyond simply those involved in doing GHR to those involved in using, teaching, assessing, supporting or funding, or collaborating on GHR. Participants agreed that the research team should make a concerted effort to include voices from our partners situated in lower- and middle-income countries around the world.

What principles should be included?
A beginning set of principles was identified by participants, recognizing that these initial principles would serve as a foundation for a continued process of consultation and discussion over the next eight months. Participants suggested that the language of the document overall be both strong and humble—ensuring that the principles are not simply ‘nice to do’ things, but a collective statement about what we ought to do and how we ought to act in GHR. Participants encouraged that the statement be inviting, compelling, and broadly applicable to any kind of GHR.

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Prepared by Katrina Plamondon
The following principles, each of which will be elaborated in more depth in the full dialogue report, were highlighted by participants:

- Shared responsibility among all partners involved in GHR for the creation and use of knowledge
- Commitment to longer-term visions for research, including addressing issues of sustainability and the needs of future generations
- Doing more (or far more) good than harm (beneficence and non-maleficence)
- Ensuring respect, mutuality, and reciprocity (beyond what might be obliged through research ethics boards)
- Honouring social accountability and the use of transformative approaches
- Challenging tokenism in favour of inclusivity that is founded upon equity
- Deep attention to power and power relationships—both within and among contexts, and within and among research teams
- Thorough grounding of GHR approaches in contextual understanding regarding historical, cultural, political economic and environmental reasons for health inequities
- Promoting transparency and accessibility
- Positioning ourselves with humility, a critical stance, and attention to process

How should principles be implemented?
Participants acknowledged that there are some principles that seem to be more operational in nature than others, but that all of the principles would be best supported by creating a complementary set of case studies. The case studies could explore ethically challenging experiences of those involved in GHR, and offer critically reflective questions to facilitate the application of principles in real-life settings.

Next steps...
The perspectives gathered at this November deliberative dialogue will be used to create a preliminary draft document presenting principles to guide in the practice of GHR. The document will maintain the why-what-how frame that was used to structure the environmental scan and this deliberative dialogue. This frame will imply that the document provides a strong rationale for the elaboration of principles, identifies and defines principles, and provides at least a starting exploration of how principles might be implemented.

The research team will also prepare a toolkit that can be used by a broad range of groups or individuals who wish to contribute to the elaboration of these guiding principles. The toolkit will be used, for example, to facilitate brief consultations at organizations, universities, or meetings over the next eight months. In particular, we will strive to ensure that voices from partners situated in lower-middle income countries are well reflected in the final document.

As a complement to the final document, the research team will pursue the elaboration of a set of case studies. This might be completed as part of a separate research project.

The final document will be presented at the next Canadian Conference on Global Health with a request for endorsement. Participants further suggested that the document be a source for reflection and ongoing dialogue, perhaps in an annual forum or online (e.g. CCGHR virtual platform laboratory). The continued efforts to learn from our experiences and implementation of principles of GHR could serve, in and of themselves, as transformative opportunities for learning.