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Building and Strengthening Research Ethics Review Capacity in Liberia

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Health priorities require a national ethical review system that is capable of protecting the welfare of research participants. With clinical research, especially from disease outbreaks, becoming a critical priority in Liberia, the need for adequate ethics infrastructure cannot be overemphasized. It is essential to ensure efficient review, approval, and oversight of research studies, as well as the protection of study participants. Therefore, a development of a sustainable ethics infrastructure in Liberia is highly important, especially during public health emergencies (PHEs) wherein the country continues to experience an unprecedented exposure to clinical research studies for reviews, evaluation, approvals and oversight, respectively.

These objectives are being addressed by the European-African collaborative network that facilitates the implementation of efficient procedures, standardized guidelines and educative training programs. The potential areas that were identified, based on gap analysis, for significant ethical program strengthening in Liberia included:

- Training needs for research ethics reviews of clinical and biomedical trials.
- Regulating ownership, storing and managing biological samples as it relates to ethical issues during emergencies like Covid-19.
- Advocating, raising awareness and dissemination.
- Strengthening office-based infrastructure.
- Harmonizing local ethical standards in concurrence with sub-regional, regional and global frameworks for the review of biomedical, including genomic, research protocols from the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreak and other PHEs.
- Developing framework to assess research protocols for risks to both participants and study investigators during PHEs.

As part of these activities, the NREB and ACRE-IRB completed an assessment and analysis of its respective ethics procedures and processes. Several gaps were identified with respect to application review tools and documents, standard operating procedures (SoPS), guidelines, technological platform and information management system for submission and review, and dissemination and continued staff training. As a potential next step, the project consortium is initiating exchanges with international ethical networks, working groups, and platforms to discuss appropriate resolutions.

In conclusion, several communication and dissemination activities were organized and conducted in collaboration with different networks of stakeholders.