

An impact evaluation of climate adaptation actions on nutritional and psychosocial health in rural mid-Zambezi Valley:  
Review and discussion of ethical issues arising

## Global Forum on Bioethics in Research



Global Forum on  
Bioethics in Research

*19-20 November 2024*  
*Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*



Institute of  
Natural Resources

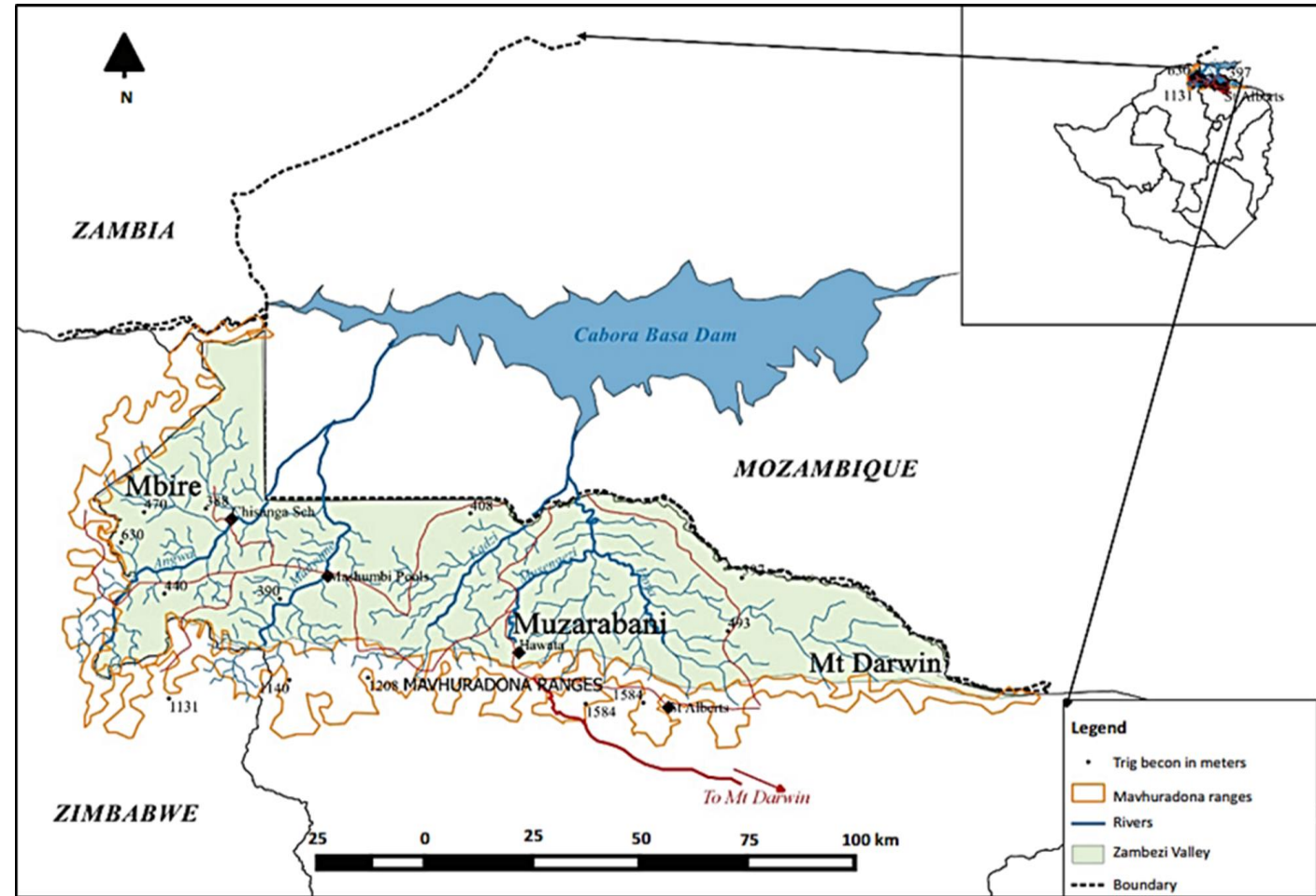
**Admire M. Nyamwanza, PhD**  
**Institute of Natural Resources, South Africa**

# Presentation Outline

- Introduction and background
- Ethical issues in focus
- Recommendations

# Introduction and Background

- Presentation based on ethical issues arising from a Wellcome-funded project - *'Climate adaptation and sustainable rural health outcomes in Southern Africa'* (2019-2022)
- Project aimed at evaluating nutritional and psychosocial health outcomes of 3 major climate adaptation actions in the mid-Zambezi Valley – a climate change hotspot in Southern Africa



# Introduction and Background 2.

## □ Adaptation actions evaluated:

- Shifting from predominantly maize farming in main dryland fields to drought-tolerant sorghum production over the years
- Increased reliance on indigenous knowledge vis-à-vis consumption of wild fruits (during crop failure due to increasing droughts and drought cycles)
- Increased reliance on indigenous knowledge with respect to using unique meteorological, insect and atmospheric indicators to predict increasingly erratic rainfall patterns and droughts



## Ethical issues in focus

- How and why research into health and climate change should be participatory
- Ethical issues from interdisciplinary research
- Researcher obligations to participants exposed to dangerous climate risks



# How and why research into health and climate change should be participatory 1



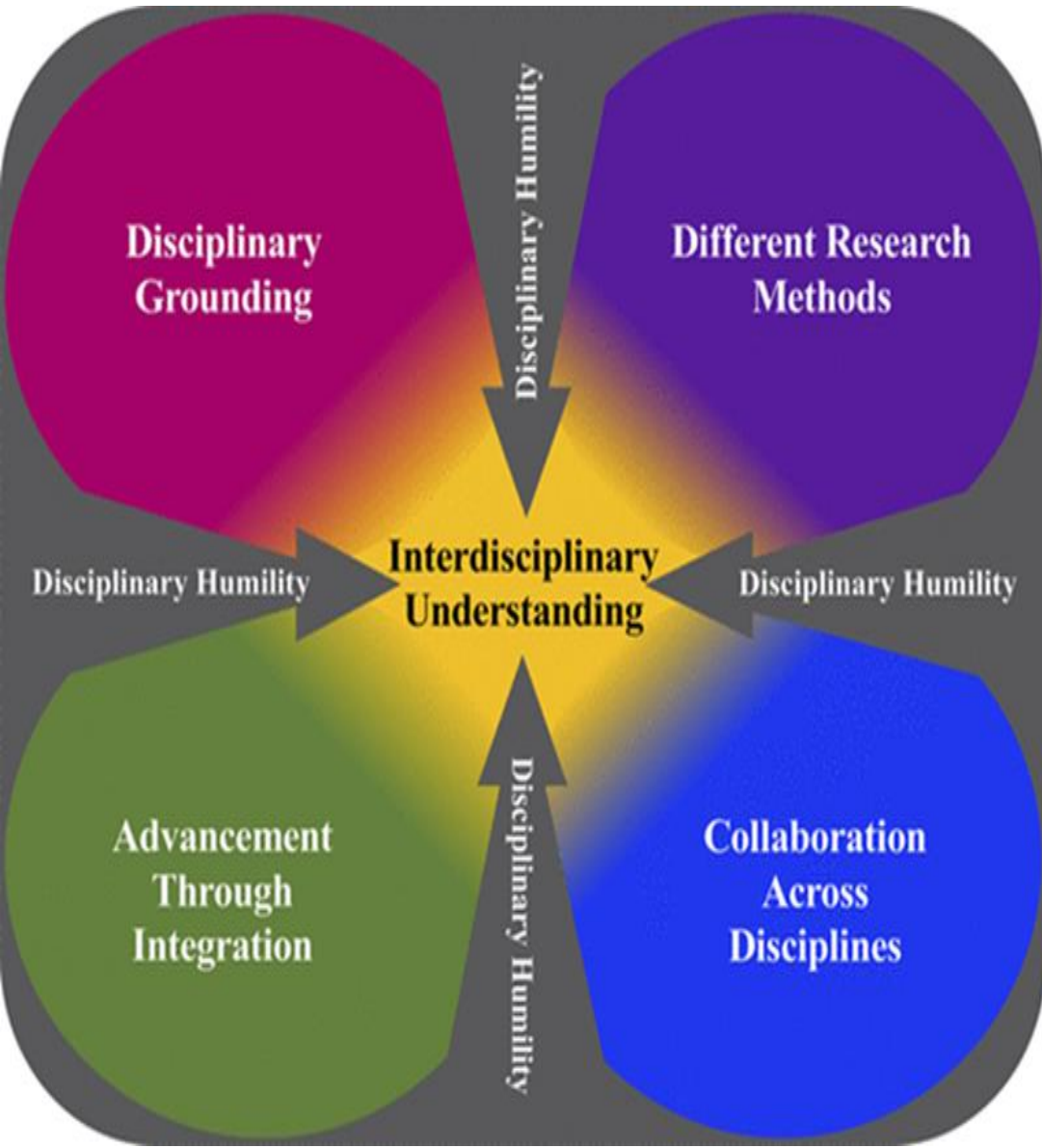
- Grounded in ethical considerations of epistemic justice – particularly concerns around hermeneutical justice.
- Hermeneutical justice focuses on systemic barriers that prevent certain groups from contributing to the collective understanding of social issues.
- In the context of climate change and health research, hermeneutic justice is crucial vis-à-vis dismantling knowledge hierarchies.

# How and why research into health and climate change should be participatory 2

- Creating platforms and processes that allow for diverse ways of knowing
- Critical from a moral perspective since health challenges are inherently personal, hence creating participatory platforms becomes important in shaping narratives.
- Research team collectively identified (with communities) the adaptation actions which were to be evaluated; collectively defined and refined the research questions; and established partnerships with key community stakeholders
- Project also included participatory workshops and interactive focus group discussions to allow for extensive participatory processes



# Ethical issues from interdisciplinary research 1.

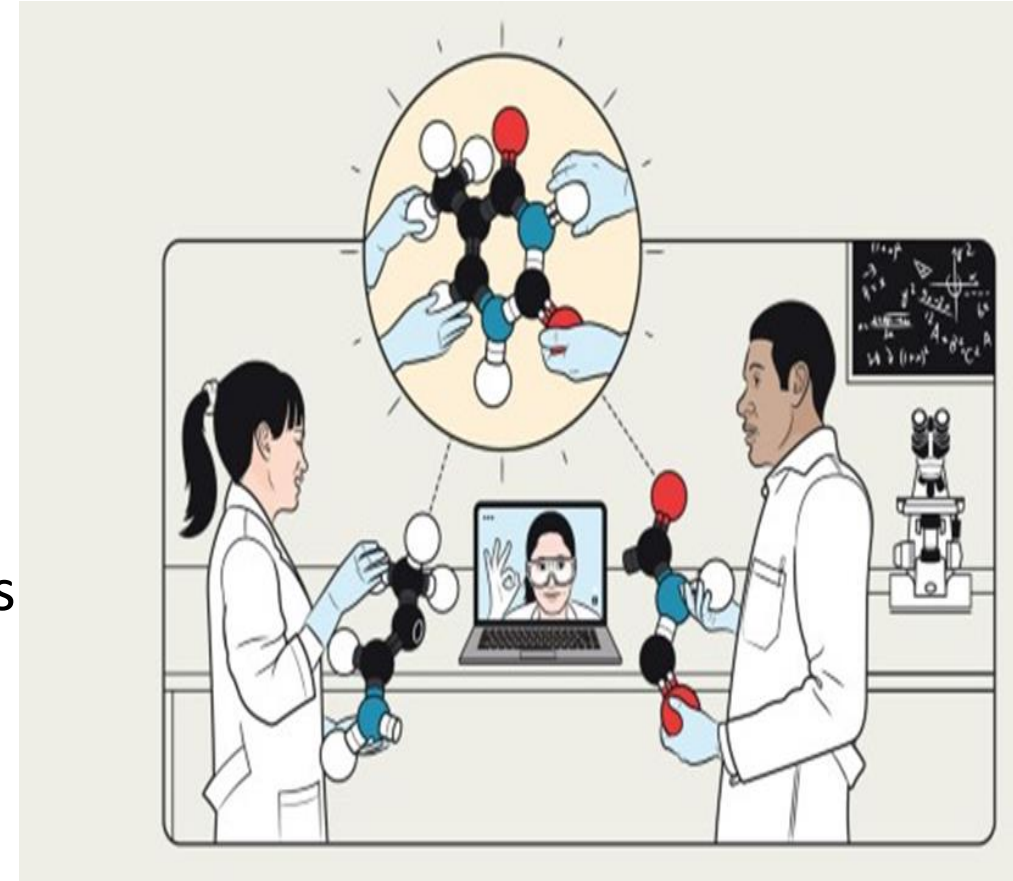


- Given the scale and urgency of the impacts of climate change on health, it is critical, from a social justice perspective, that research in this field involves a wide range of views, approaches and perspectives from different fields so that:
  - the right research questions are prioritized in engaging communities, and
  - researchers are able to fulfil an urgent moral imperative to translate research findings into effective action towards meaningfully addressing the needs and interests of the most vulnerable
- Impactful and transformative results are obtained by incorporating conceptual and methodological strategies from a variety of research disciplines
- Project team was multidisciplinary and comprised of researchers and practitioners from different backgrounds



# Ethical issues from interdisciplinary research 2.

- Ethical dynamics which arose within the team because of the multidisciplinary outlook - mainly to do with equality of respect for all disciplinary approaches involved
- Work package approach initiated to address this challenge
- Fostering equality of respect among disciplines aligns with principles of fairness, justice, and inclusivity
- Failure to address disparities in respect among disciplines risks perpetuating biases that favor certain methodologies/epistemologies over others, which can distort research outcomes



# Researcher obligations to participants exposed to dangerous climate risks 1.

- Research involving participants at some degree of climate risk raises important ethical questions about obligations to mitigate or respond to that risk.
- This is steeped in the ethical concern around researchers ensuring, as far as reasonably possible, the physical and mental wellbeing of research participants.
- Case study was in an area considered one of the climate change hotspots in Southern Africa - highly exposed to dangerous climate risks.



# Researcher obligations to participants exposed to dangerous climate risks 2.

- Nature of our study obliged us to be alert to specific critical ethical issues around:
  - managing participant expectations and transparency (i.e. around food aid and/or material support/benefits)
  - provision of post-research support around availing psychosocial support
- Likelihood that some of our questions/discussions could trigger traumatic memories of unpleasant past experiences
- Roped in Zimbabwe's Mashonaland Central province's mental health office to assist with the provision of counselling support services for participants who required these.



# Conclusion and Recommendations 1.

*To improve the ethics of research into health and climate change, 2 main recommendations emerge from our study:*

1. There should be clear guidelines and deeper reflections (beyond the guidelines) on what ethical questions and dilemmas are anticipated and how a research team plans to address the issues.

- Key to this would be ongoing project team reflections during implementation & subjecting the ethics considerations to a rigorous ethics review by reputable research ethics committee(s) (RECs).
- Ethics review was conducted by two reputable RECs which thoroughly interrogated and recommended some key ethical considerations, emphasized more acutely because the research was about health and climate change

## Conclusion and Recommendations 2.

2. Research teams exploring climate and health issues should be as multidisciplinary as possible towards impactful and transformative results.

- Project produced findings which resonated with and were embraced by different scientific and non-scientific stakeholders
- One of the main reasons being that the project team comprised of researchers and practitioners with expertise and interests in different fields



Global Forum on  
Bioethics in Research



Institute of  
Natural Resources

*Thank You*

