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## **An Assessment of Ethics and Proactive Communication Practices in The Nigerian Statistical System**

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### ***Abstract***

Nigeria has witnessed increasing demand for diverse, refined, and timely data in ever-increasing quantities, which is characteristic of an ever-changing society. As the data environment becomes increasingly competitive, it is crucial to maintain public trust, and this requires statistical offices to proactively adopt and communicate ethical values and practices to avoid loss of trust in them.

The code of practice for official statistics in Nigeria, as published by the National Bureau of Statistics, states that “the official statistics generated by the National Bureau of Statistics and the other statistics-producing members of the National Statistical System NSS must be presented clearly and comprehensively and disseminated appropriately, thereby enabling equitable access by all users”, and “The National Bureau of Statistics and other producers of statistics in the National Statistical System engage actively with the users of statistics to promote trust and maximize public values”.

As Nigeria’s statistical system continues to develop and evolve with current trends, there is the need to assess ethical practices in the dissemination and communication of official statistics, challenges being faced, as well as available opportunities.

This study aims: examine ways of communicating ethical values within statistics offices, along with their effectiveness; discuss unique challenges associated with implementing the laid down code in disseminating and communicating official statistics; assess the use of media for proactive communication practices in Nigeria’s statistical system; as well as determine the effect of ethics and proactive communication in building public trust. The major objective is to propose ways to enhance ethical and proactive communication of official statistics in Nigeria. These recommendations would address the perceived needs of Nigeria’s national and sub-national statistics offices, the role of various stakeholders in the statistical system, as well as their interrelationships.

# An Assessment of Ethics and Proactive Communication Practices in The Nigerian Statistical System

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## *Paper*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The Nigerian Statistical System (NSS) plays a crucial role in providing accurate and reliable data for decision-making, policy formulation, and development planning. However, the integrity of statistical data hinges not only on the technical proficiency of statisticians but also on ethical conduct and effective communication practices. This paper assesses the ethical standards and proactive communication strategies within the Nigerian Statistical System NSS, examining their impact on data credibility, public trust, and policy effectiveness.

#### **1.1 Importance of Ethics and Proactive Communication in Statistical Systems**

In the context of this paper, ethics in statistical practice refers to a set of values used by statisticians to guide their professional activities and to recognize their obligations to all stakeholders (Chuwa, 2015). This means adherence to moral values, professional integrity, and responsibility in ensuring that accurate, objective, and reliable statistical information is produced and disseminated through the statistical system.

Ethics in statistical practice necessarily means that statisticians should abide by principles of integrity and objectivity, avoiding biases or conflicts of interest. This entails that statisticians must ensure confidentiality of individual data and protect the privacy rights of respondents; be transparent about methods, assumptions, limitations, collection methods, analysis, and interpretation; ensure accuracy and reliability of findings, using appropriate statistical methods and techniques to minimize errors and uncertainties; promote fairness and equity, avoiding discrimination or bias in data collection and reporting; and adhere to professional standards and norms, maintaining competence, honesty, and accountability in their interactions with colleagues, clients, and the public.

Ethics in statistical practice is essential for upholding the credibility and relevance of statistical data, which are fundamental for informed decision-making and societal progress. Adhering to ethical principles ensures that statistical information serves the public interest and contributes to the advancement of knowledge and understanding in various fields.

Proactive communication in official statistics involves reaching out to users, making statistics accessible, and promoting their use for informed decision-making using different communication channels (Nyman-Andersen, 2017; UNECE, 2021). This facilitates effective dissemination and stakeholder engagement, building public trust by enhancing accessibility and understanding of statistical data by promoting openness, engagement, and trust between statistical agencies and their stakeholders. By adopting proactive communication strategies, statistical agencies can ensure that their data is widely accessible, easily understood, and effectively utilized for decision-making, research, and public discourse (Gelman, 2018).

### **2.0 An Overview of The Nigerian Statistical System**

The *National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)* is Nigeria's central statistical agency that coordinates and oversees official statistics in Nigeria. Various government *ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs)* collaborate with the NBS to collect and maintain statistical data related to their specific areas of responsibility for internal use and for sharing with the NBS. State governments in Nigeria have their *State Statistical Bureaus* that also

collaborate with the NBS and other relevant state agencies to ensure consistency and standardization in statistical practices across the country.

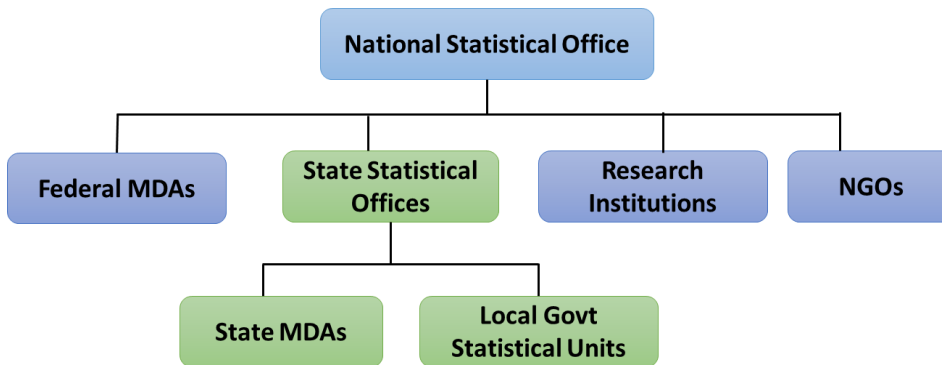


Fig. 1.0: Nigerian Statistical System

In addition to government agencies, specialized research institutes, educational institutions, private sector organizations, and NGOs often generate data on specific topics or sectors to advocate for policy change, raise awareness, and support development initiatives. This network of institutions and agencies involved in data production is coordinated by the National Bureau of Statistics per the Statistics Act (2007).

## 2.1 Legal and Regulatory Frameworks Governing Statistical Activities in Nigeria

Nigeria’s legal and regulatory frameworks serve to establish and assign roles and responsibilities to relevant institutions, ensure the confidentiality and protection of statistical data, and promote the integrity and transparency of statistical processes. We shall consider some key legal and regulatory structures in place for governing statistical activities in Nigeria:

The *Statistics Act (2007)* is the umbrella legislation governing statistical activities in Nigeria. It establishes the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) as a central statistical authority responsible for coordinating statistical activities nationwide and provides for the establishment of Sub-national Statistical Offices to coordinate statistical activities at the state level. The *Freedom of Information Act (2011)* grants individuals the right to access information held by public institutions, thereby promoting transparency and accountability by empowering individuals to request statistical information held by government agencies, subject to certain exemptions and limitations.

The *National Code of Health Research Ethics (2007)* and the *Data Protection Regulation (2019)* provide guidelines for protection of personal and health data collected and processed by all entities in Nigeria. These regulations ensure that statistical data containing personal information is handled per data protection principles, including consent, purpose limitation, and data security.

The *Central Bank of Nigeria Act (2007)*, the *National Health Act (2014)*, the *National Data Strategy (2022)*, and other similar sectoral laws and regulations govern statistical activities regarding sector-specific data. Nigeria is also bound by international agreements and commitments like the *African Charter on Statistics* and *United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics*, which provide the required guidelines and standards.

## 2.2 Challenges and Opportunities in the Nigeria’s Statistical System Landscape

We shall examine the challenges and opportunities in the NSS and develop an understanding of how to enhance the capacity and improve the performance of the NSS.

### 2.3.1 Challenges

Data Quality and Reliability are affected by insufficient human and institutional capacity in terms of skilled statisticians, analysts, and technical expertise. Similarly, data accessibility and timely dissemination are

impaired by poorly developed dissemination channels, lack of awareness among data users, and bureaucratic bottlenecks. There are inefficiencies and inconsistencies due to duplication of efforts among different government agencies and departments. Lastly, technological infrastructure and inadequate IT systems for data production are outdated due to insufficient investment in modernizing.

### **2.3.2 Opportunities**

Modern technological advancements present opportunities for modernizing data activities and harmonizing data collection efforts within the NSS, just as capacity-building programs for data practitioners can strengthen the human capital within the NSS. Another opportunity is collaboration with the private sector, civil society organizations, and academia, which can enhance the capacity and availability of resources to the NSS. Similarly, increasing awareness of the importance of data will result in greater demand for reliable and timely statistics. Finally, regional and international cooperation initiatives can improve knowledge sharing, capacity building, and best practices.

Addressing these challenges and exploiting these opportunities requires concerted efforts from the government as well as all stakeholders and will enable the NSS to strengthen its capacity to produce high-quality data.

### **3.0 Ethical Standards in The Nigerian Statistical System**

A product of the *Statistics Act (2007)*, the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics (2016)* maintains a coordinated statistical system to serve the government and society in statistical processes, institutional environment, and statistical output. It conforms to *United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* as well as the principles of integrity, honesty, objectivity, and impartiality, which are core values of civil service. It defines these concepts as “putting the public interest above organizational, political, or personal interests”, “being truthful and open about the statistics and their interpretation”, “using scientific methods to collect statistics and basing statistical advice on rigorous analysis of the evidence”, and “acting solely according to the merits of the statistical evidence, serving equally well all aspects of the public interest”, respectively.

Furthermore, national professional bodies such as the Nigerian Statistical Association (NSA) and international professional bodies such as the International Statistical Institute (ISI) continue to provide standards and guidelines for ethical conduct in statistical practice, while the *Data Protection Regulation (2019)* provides guidelines for handling and safeguarding personal data per data protection principles.

### **3.1 Ethical Challenges and Dilemmas in the NSS**

Ethical challenges and dilemmas encountered by statisticians in Nigeria often arise from the need to balance adherence to professional standards and upholding the integrity of statistical data. According to Gelman (2018), dilemmas arising when analysing and communicating uncertainty and variation are practical realities that statisticians face. Interactions among statisticians in the NSS have revealed ethical challenges and dilemmas such as manipulating data to achieve desired outcomes or meet predetermined targets; professional obligations conflicting with personal interests or external pressures; deciding whether to use, discard, or report questionable data; unwillingness or inability to obtain informed consent from vulnerable populations or minors; selectively reporting or publishing research findings that support predetermined or preferred conclusions while disregarding contradictory evidence.

A multifaceted approach is required to address these ethical challenges and dilemmas – promoting ethical awareness, providing training and support for statisticians, establishing clear guidelines and standards for ethical conduct, and fostering a culture of ethics within the statistical profession.

### **3.2 Scenarios Illustrating Ethical Considerations in Various Stages of the Statistical Process**

We shall consider possible scenarios illustrating ethical considerations in various stages of the statistical process within the Nigerian context:

**Scenario 1 – Data Collection:** During data collection on healthcare access in rural communities, enumerators encounter resistance from some community members who doubt the confidentiality of their health information. *Ethically*, statisticians must ensure that data collection procedures respect the rights and privacy of survey respondents by obtaining informed consent, guaranteeing confidentiality, and honestly addressing concerns about data security to build trust and encourage participation in surveys.

**Scenario 2 – Data Analysis:** During data analysis of a study on household income inequality, the researcher discovers inconsistencies and outliers in the income distribution. *Ethically* they should adhere to rigorous statistical methods, document analytical procedures, and disclose limitations to ensure the accuracy and credibility of research findings (ASA, 2018).

**Scenario 3 – Data Interpretation:** Media outlets misinterpret the findings in a report on poverty trends based on household survey data, leading to sensationalized headlines that inaccurately portray poverty rates and trends, distort public perception of poverty, and cause confusion and misinformation. *Ethically* the statistics office should proactively and ethically communicate by providing context, explaining uncertainties, and avoiding sensationalism or exaggeration when interpreting statistical findings.

**Scenario 4 – Data Dissemination:** A portal to disseminate statistical information lacks accessibility features, such that people living with disabilities are unable to access and navigate the data, thereby limiting the inclusivity and usability of the portal. *Ethically*, the statistics office should consider accessibility standards and guidelines, provide alternative formats or accommodations, and solicit feedback from users to improve the usability and effectiveness of data dissemination platforms.

#### **4.0 Overview of Communication Practices and Strategies in the NSS**

The NSO produces a wide range of official publications, reports, and analytical studies that provide comprehensive information on key economic, social, and demographic indicators. In addition, it maintains data portals and websites that serve as central repositories for statistical information, issues press releases, and media briefings to announce the release of new statistical data that highlight key findings and provide context. It also leverages social media platforms to engage with stakeholders and disseminate statistical information.

Furthermore, the NSS uses data visualization techniques and infographics to present statistical information in a visually appealing and easy-to-understand format. It organizes capacity-building forums to enhance the skills and knowledge of data stakeholders, conducts stakeholder engagement activities to solicit feedback and build collaboration, and collaborates with government agencies, academic institutions, research organizations, civil society groups, and international partners to strengthen data production efforts.

#### **4.1 Challenges and Opportunities for Ethical Conduct and Proactive Communication in the NSS**

Identifying barriers to ethical conduct and proactive communication within the NSS is essential for addressing challenges and improving practices. Here are some common instances:

Lack of awareness and training on ethical principles or the importance of proactive communication results in unintentional unethical conduct or failure to prioritize proactive communication efforts. Limited financial resources, inadequate staffing, and outdated technology infrastructure can impede efforts to promote ethical conduct and proactive communication within the NSS. Burdensome bureaucratic processes and institutional inertia can hinder the implementation of ethical guidelines and proactive communication strategies within the NSS, and a lack of incentives causes individuals to prioritize other tasks or objectives that are perceived as more immediately beneficial to their career advancement or organizational goals.

Furthermore, political interference and pressure from government officials may compromise the independence and integrity of statistical agencies within the NSS, thereby undermining the ethical conduct and credibility of statistical data. Cultural norms and organizational culture in statistical agencies can influence ethical conduct and communication practices, such as prioritizing compliance over ethical decision-making. Finally, ambiguous or conflicting legal frameworks governing statistical activities may create

barriers to ethical conduct and proactive communication within the NSS by creating legal uncertainties that hinder proactive communication efforts.

#### **4.2 Multifaceted Approach for Addressing the Barriers**

These barriers could be addressed by providing comprehensive training and awareness programs on ethical principles and proactive communication. It is also critical to allocate sufficient resources for capacity building, infrastructure development, and communication initiatives, streamlining bureaucratic processes and promoting an ethical culture within the NSS. Establishing clear incentives and recognition mechanisms for ethical behaviour and effective communication would create an enabling environment for ethics, just as safeguarding the independence of statistical agencies from political interference would ensure adherence to professional standards and best practices. Finally, reviewing and updating legal and regulatory frameworks to support ethical conduct and proactive communication within the NSS will reposition the NSS for ethical conduct and proactive communication.

#### **4.3 Lessons from Best Practices in Statistical Systems**

Comparing the Nigerian Statistical System (NSS) with international best practices and drawing lessons from other statistical systems can provide valuable insights and guidance for addressing challenges, improving practices, and enhancing the effectiveness of the NSS. Here are some key comparisons and lessons learned:

*Autonomy:* International statistical systems often prioritize the independence and autonomy of statistical agencies to ensure the credibility, objectivity, and impartiality of statistical data. Strengthening the legal and institutional framework for Nigeria's NSS will enhance its independence from political interference and ensure adherence to international standards of statistical integrity and professionalism.

*Transparency:* Leading statistical systems prioritize transparency and accountability in data collection, analysis, and dissemination processes, fostering public trust and confidence in official statistics. Promoting greater transparency and accountability within Nigeria's NSS through proactive communication, disclosure of methodologies, and engagement with stakeholders will enhance the credibility and reliability of statistical information.

*Professionalism:* International best practices emphasize the importance of ethical conduct, professionalism, and adherence to professional standards and codes of ethics in statistical practice. Implementing comprehensive ethics training programs, establishing clear guidelines and standards for ethical conduct, and fostering a culture of integrity and professionalism within Nigeria's NSS will uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct and professionalism.

*Reliability:* Leading statistical systems prioritize data quality and reliability, employing rigorous methodologies, quality assurance processes, and validation procedures to ensure the accuracy and consistency of statistical data. Investing in capacity building, modernizing data collection methods, and enhancing quality control mechanisms within Nigeria's NSS will improve data quality and reliability, thereby enhancing the credibility and utility of statistical information.

*Accessibility:* Successful statistical systems actively engage with users, solicit feedback, and prioritize the accessibility and usability of statistical information to meet the diverse needs of stakeholders. Adopting innovative communication strategies, leveraging technology platforms, and engaging with diverse user groups will enhance the accessibility, understanding, and utilization of statistical data among policymakers, researchers, and the general public.

*Benchmarking:* Leading statistical systems actively participate in international collaboration, benchmarking, and peer review initiatives to exchange best practices, share experiences, and learn from global counterparts. Engaging with international organizations, participating in peer review mechanisms, and benchmarking against international standards will identify areas for improvement, adopt best practices, and enhance the performance of Nigeria's NSS.

## **5.0 Impact of Ethics and Communication on Data Credibility and Utilization**

The relationship between ethical conduct, effective communication, and data utilization for decision-making and policy formulation is multifaceted and interdependent. We examine how these elements are interconnected thus:

*Ethical conduct* within the statistical process involves upholding principles such as honesty, integrity, objectivity, and respect for confidentiality, thus ensuring that statistical data is collected, analysed, and disseminated in a manner that is transparent, accurate, and reliable. This instills trust and confidence in statistical data, increasing its credibility and reliability. Decision-makers and policymakers are more likely to utilize statistical information that is perceived as ethically produced and free from bias or manipulation.

*Effective communication* involves conveying statistical information in a clear, concise, and accessible manner to diverse stakeholders using appropriate communication channels, formats, and strategies to reach and engage with target audiences effectively. This enhances accessibility and understanding of statistical information, making it more likely to be utilized for decision-making and policy formulation. When data is communicated clearly and comprehensively, decision-makers can make informed choices based on evidence rather than intuition or incomplete information.

*Utilization of statistical information* refers to the integration of data into decision-making processes, policy formulation, program planning, and evaluation. Statistical data informs strategies, identifies trends, assesses outcomes, and guides resource allocation to address societal challenges effectively. Ethical conduct and effective communication facilitate the utilization of statistical information by enhancing its credibility, accessibility, and relevance because decision-makers are more likely to rely on data that is produced ethically, communicated effectively, and perceived as trustworthy.

There is a feedback loop between ethical conduct, effective communication, and the utilization of statistical information. Ethical conduct and effective communication enhance the utilization of statistical information by building trust, increasing accessibility, and improving understanding. In turn, the utilization of statistical information reinforces the importance of ethical conduct and effective communication in the statistical process.

## **6.0 Recommendations for Enhancing Ethics and Proactive Communication**

### **6.1 Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Ethical Standards and Enforcement Mechanisms Within the NSS**

To strengthen ethical standards and enforcement mechanisms within the Nigerian Statistical System (NSS), we recommend the development of comprehensive ethical guidelines that outline principles, standards, and best practices for ethical conduct in all aspects of statistical activities per international standards, tailored to the specific context of the NSS. We also recommend implementing regular training and awareness programs on ethical principles and guidelines for all personnel involved in statistical activities within the NSS on data confidentiality, integrity, objectivity, and conflicts of interest, emphasizing the importance of ethical conduct in upholding the credibility and integrity of statistical data. It is also critical to establish robust institutional mechanisms for oversight and enforcement of ethical standards within the NSS and to promote transparency in statistical processes by ensuring that methodologies, data sources, and assumptions are documented and accessible to stakeholders.

It is imperative to strengthen confidentiality and data protection of individual data in the NSS, with senior management leading by example of ethical behaviour and accountability. We also recommend strengthening collaboration with relevant stakeholders to share best practices and address ethical challenges collectively and conducting regular evaluations and reviews of ethical practices within the NSS to identify areas for improvement and ensure continuous adherence to ethical standards.

By implementing these policy recommendations, the Nigerian Statistical System can strengthen ethical standards and enforcement mechanisms and foster public confidence in official statistics. This will ultimately

support evidence-based decision-making that empowers the government to deliver good governance and sustainable development in Nigeria.

## **6.2 Strategies for improving communication channels and engagement with stakeholders**

Improving communication channels and engagement with stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and the media, is essential for enhancing the accessibility, relevance, and impact of statistical information.

There is a need to conduct a stakeholder mapping and analysis to identify key stakeholders relevant to the NSS and analyze their interests and communication preferences to tailor engagement strategies accordingly. This should be backed by organizing regular stakeholder consultations, focus group discussions, and feedback sessions to solicit input and address concerns regarding ethical statistical and communication practices in the NSS. The next step is to establish dedicated communication channels for these engagements with different stakeholder groups periodically to stay up-to-date with changes in society, with frequent evaluation of the effectiveness of these communication channels to ensure consistency.

Establishing data literacy units across statistical agencies to enhance understanding and interpretation of data is another important strategy that will ensure continuous capacity-building in the NSS using customized communication materials tailored to the specific needs of different stakeholder groups. To entrench ethical and proactive communication in the NSS, it is important to provide journalists with timely access to statistical data, expert commentary, and spokespersons for interviews and inquiries. This is closely related with the need to build partnerships and collaborations with government agencies, academic institutions, civil society organizations, and media outlets to amplify the reach and impact of communication efforts.

It is also important to develop communication plans for crises when rapid response mechanisms are needed to address misinformation and data inaccuracies to maintain trust and credibility. Finally, it is imperative to ensure that communication strategies and materials are culturally sensitive and accessible to diverse linguistic and cultural demographics.

## **6.3 A Call for Investment in Capacity Building on Ethical Behaviour and Proactive Communication**

Calls for investment in capacity building to promote a culture of ethical behaviour and proactive communication among statisticians are essential for upholding professional standards and fostering trust in statistical information. Investing in training and capacity building is crucial because it raises awareness among statisticians about ethical principles, proactive communication skills, critical thinking for dealing with dilemmas, analytical skills, and generally staying abreast with best practices.

It also fosters a culture of continuous learning and professional development, adaptability to evolving needs and challenges, and maintaining public trust in official statistics. This is essential for promoting a culture of ethical behaviour and proactive communication among statisticians.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

We conclude with a call to action for policymakers, statisticians, and stakeholders to prioritize ethics and proactive communication as fundamental pillars of the Nigerian Statistical System NSS. As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, where data-driven decision making is paramount, we must prioritize ethics and communication as fundamental pillars of the Nigerian Statistical System (NSS). To policymakers, statisticians, and stakeholders alike, we issue this urgent call to action:

**7.1 Policymakers** need to recognize the critical importance of ethical conduct and effective communication in production, dissemination, and utilization of statistical information. They also need to allocate adequate resources and support to strengthen ethical standards, capacity building, and communication efforts within the NSS. Lastly, they should enact policies and legislation that safeguard the independence,



integrity, and credibility of statistical agencies, ensuring they operate with transparency, accountability, and professionalism.

**7.2 Statisticians** should embrace a culture of ethics, integrity, and professionalism in all aspects of statistical practice, adhering to ethical guidelines, principles, and best practices. They also need to invest in continuous learning, training, and skill development to enhance ethical awareness, communication skills, and data literacy among statisticians. Lastly, they should champion transparency, openness, and accountability in statistical activities, promoting public trust and confidence in official statistics through ethical conduct and transparent communication.

**7.3 Stakeholders** need to advocate for the prioritization of ethics and proactive communication as core principles of the NSS, emphasizing the importance of ethical behavior and effective communication in shaping public policy and decision-making. They also need to continually engage with statistical agencies, policymakers, and CSOs to promote dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding on ethical issues, data quality, and communication strategies. Lastly, they should hold statistical agencies and policymakers accountable for upholding ethical standards, ensuring transparency, and fostering public engagement and participation in statistical processes.

Collective commitment is required to build a Nigerian Statistical System that upholds the highest ethical standards, and that communicates statistical information proactively, effectively, transparently, and inclusively. By prioritizing ethics and communication as fundamental pillars of the NSS, we can ensure the credibility and impact of statistical data in supporting evidence-based decision making, promoting sustainable development, and advancing the well-being of all Nigerians.

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## Annex I: Laws and Regulations Relating to Statistical Ethics in Nigeria

- a) *Statistics Act (2007)*, available at [https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/resource/NBS\\_ACT\\_2007.pdf](https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/resource/NBS_ACT_2007.pdf)
- b) *Freedom of Information Act (2011)*, available at <https://archive.gazettes.africa/archive/ng/2011/ng-government-gazette-dated-2011-05-30-no-36.pdf>
- c) *National Code of Health Research Ethics (2007)*, available at [https://www.nhrec.net/nhrec/NCHRE\\_July%2007.pdf](https://www.nhrec.net/nhrec/NCHRE_July%2007.pdf)
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