



# A practical field guide to conducting nursing research in low- and middle-income countries

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of this report is to offer practical guidance to nurse investigators interested in international research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Lessons learned and strategies for planning and implementing an international research project are addressed.

**Methods:** Four nurse researchers who conducted studies in diverse international settings (Argentina, India, South Africa, and Tanzania) describe their collective experiences regarding study planning and implementation; data collection using a variety of methods; and cultural, contextual and ethical considerations.

**Results:** Nurses who undertake international health research projects, particularly in LMICs, can face unique challenges and opportunities. Recommendations for success include advance planning, remaining flexible, having a backup plan, cultivating an attitude of curiosity and cultural humility, establishing collaborative and respectful partnerships, and budgeting adequate time.

**Conclusions:** Nurse scientists often receive little training and support to conduct international research. Guidance to undertake research projects in LMICs can build capacity for nurses to make significant contributions to global health.

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## Introduction

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Opportunities to improve global health are unprecedented, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where the dual burden of infectious and noncommunicable diseases is significant and growing. Nurses are well positioned to make important contributions to global health (Gantz et al., 2012), and many nursing institutions are actively working to increase their international involvement via research collaborations, student exchanges, and volunteer projects (Ketefian, 2000). Additionally, the International Council of Nurses encourages global partnerships to promote innovation and capacity building (International Council of Nurses, 2014). Despite these goals and opportunities, nurses generally receive little training or support to conduct international research; nurses who do undertake global research projects often confront unique and complex challenges, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Armer & Wanchai, 2012; Chen et al., 2013; George & Meadows-Oliver, 2013; Suhonen, Saarikoski, & Leino-Kilpi, 2009; Webb, 1998).

The literature related to international nursing research primarily addresses topics of ethics (Harrowing, Mill, Spiers, Kulig, & Kipp, 2010; Hays, 2011; Ketefian, 2000; Olsen, 2003), methodological rigor (Im, Page, Lin, Tsai, & Cheng, 2004), and personal/professional development (Armer & Wanchai, 2012; Hunter et al., 2013; Jooste, 2004; Zanchetta et al., 2013). There is little emphasis on how to successfully implement nursing studies in LMICs. This article addresses this gap by providing practical guidance and strategies to help nurses conduct health care research in LMIC settings. Relevant issues related to study planning; data collection; cultural, contextual, and ethical considerations; and general lessons learned and pitfalls to avoid are discussed. The recommendations are based on the authors' collective experiences as primary nurse investigators, crossing continents and methods. Perspectives and specific examples from both novice and senior nurse researchers are presented (Table 1).

## General Planning

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An interest in conducting international research typically stems from a prior global health experience or an abiding interest in world health. Project specifics are often based on practical considerations such as who the researcher knows and where, priority health issues in the host country, and the relevance of the research question to local (host country) collaborators. It is also vital to consider whether the research will involve a new or established project. The amount of time and funding available, and potential sociopolitical factors in the host country that could disrupt, delay, or preclude data collection.

The importance of advance planning and allotting more time than usual in the study time line to conduct international research cannot be underestimated. Learning about nursing and the country's health care system, reading relevant academic articles and lay literature, and watching popular movies can provide an invaluable sense of cultural, historical, and social context during the planning phase. Global health or medical anthropology course work can help build the skills needed to conduct global research and introduce helpful new theoretical frameworks and perspectives. Conducting research in LMICs can be extremely challenging; flexibility, persistence, cultural humility, patience, and passion for the project are essential.

### *Establishing a Research Site and the Roles of Local Collaborators*

Networking, serendipity, and on-the-ground help from local collaborators in the host country are indispensable to develop the study and establish a research site. It is recommended to engage local collaborators early in the planning phase because without their strong support a project cannot even begin. Local collaborators may assume a variety of different roles; they can be key informants, the formal host sponsor, or members of the research team and may facilitate access to the research site, assist with participant recruitment and translation, and help navigate an unfamiliar culture and system. All authors relied heavily on multiple local collaborators throughout all stages of their research projects. For example, S.I. established a connection with a regional tuberculosis (TB) director while conducting a qualitative study during her time as a Fogarty International Clinical Research Scholar in Argentina. She maintained contact with the director and started the conversation regarding a potential research project. This established collaborator was an integral partner throughout the development of S.I.'s National Institutes of Health National Research Service Award grant proposal. V.L. met a physician through previous international work; she then sent an e-mail of inquiry to gauge the interest of this individual (Dr. P.) serving as the host sponsor for her Fulbright research project and to explore the possibility of the cancer hospital serving as the primary field site. Dr. P. agreed and served in a crucial role as a local collaborator and facilitator of the research before, during, and after V.L.'s fieldwork.

Selection of the research site depends on a number of related factors, including access to participants, variables related to the research question(s), previous connections and work at the field site, logistic feasibility, and strong support from a local collaborator or host country sponsor. Some funders will require formal, documented support from a country sponsor (Fulbright, 2014) for a successful application, and all grant reviewers will look for strong letters of support from the host institution. Obtaining letters of support from LMIC institutions may take longer than

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