

EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK

2024 – 2028

This framework is informed through online workshop discussions held by the MRC-International Statistics and Epidemiology Partnership (ISEP) Equitable Partnerships Working Group from May to September 2024

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I. DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Activity	Actions taken through which inputs, such as funds, are mobilised to produce specific outputs and outcomes.
Equality	Where everyone is given the same resources or opportunities irrespective of their circumstances. Equality is also an outcome of the equity process.
Equity	A process for treating people fairly based on their circumstances. It recognises that people have different circumstances and need different opportunities and resources to achieve an equal or fair outcome.
Gender	“A social and cultural construct, which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, girls and boys, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women” (UNICEF 2017)
Gender balance	“...a human resource issue calling for equal participation of women and men in all areas of work.” (UNICEF 2017) “In a scenario of gender equality, women and men are expected to participate proportionally to their share of the population.” (European Institute for Gender Equality).
Gender equality	“The concept that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development.” (UNICEF 2017)
Gender equity	“The process of being fair to men and women, boys and girls, and importantly the equality of outcomes and results.” (UNICEF 2017)
Impact	Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by an activity or project, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.
Independent member	A member of the Steering Committee who is not a part of ISEP or ISEP partner institutions.
Monitoring and evaluation	A system and a process which involves collecting and analysing data to assess the effectiveness and performance of projects, programmes and policies over a period of time.
Outcome	The change made as a result of inputs, activities and outputs. Short- to medium-term effects of an activity or activities (intervention) – and eventually impacts.
Output	Delivered services or products e.g. “Equitable partnerships framework created” resulting from program/project activities. Outputs lead to outcomes.
Reflexive thinking	A dynamic process which involves individuals or groups of individuals questioning assumptions and understanding and encouraging thinking from different perspectives.
Steering Committee	A group of stakeholders that provides oversight and guidance on a project, programme or organization.
Theory of Change	An adaptable methodological framework for what should happen in order to achieve intended outcomes.

II. BACKGROUND TO ISEP

The UK-MRC (Medical Research Council) International Statistics & Epidemiology Partnership (ISEP) is developing and implementing a sustainable strategy to expand capacity in applied medical statistics in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Our long-term goal is to improve health in SSA by ensuring high-quality epidemiological studies and enhancing capacity for surveillance and response to current and emerging health threats. The objectives of ISEP are to:

- Create a supportive and sustainable network of early-mid career medical statisticians (“ISEP statisticians”).
- Increase knowledge of medical statistics for global health research.
- Raise awareness of the need for increased capacity in medical statistics.

The intended impact of ISEP is to create a fully supportive and equitable African-led network of early-mid career medical statisticians by the end of 2028, through increasing capacity (knowledge, skills, access to resources) early to mid-career applied medical statisticians at six sub-Saharan African research institutions.

ISEP is currently comprised of: 47 early to mid-career medical statisticians - some of whom are ISEP Co-Investigators (Co-Is), the ISEP Principal Investigator (PI), programme and administrative staff. The ISEP PI, Co-Is and programme and administrative staff are part of ISEP’s Management Team who assume the responsibility of ensuring that ISEP programme activities are carried out in accordance with its Theory of Change.

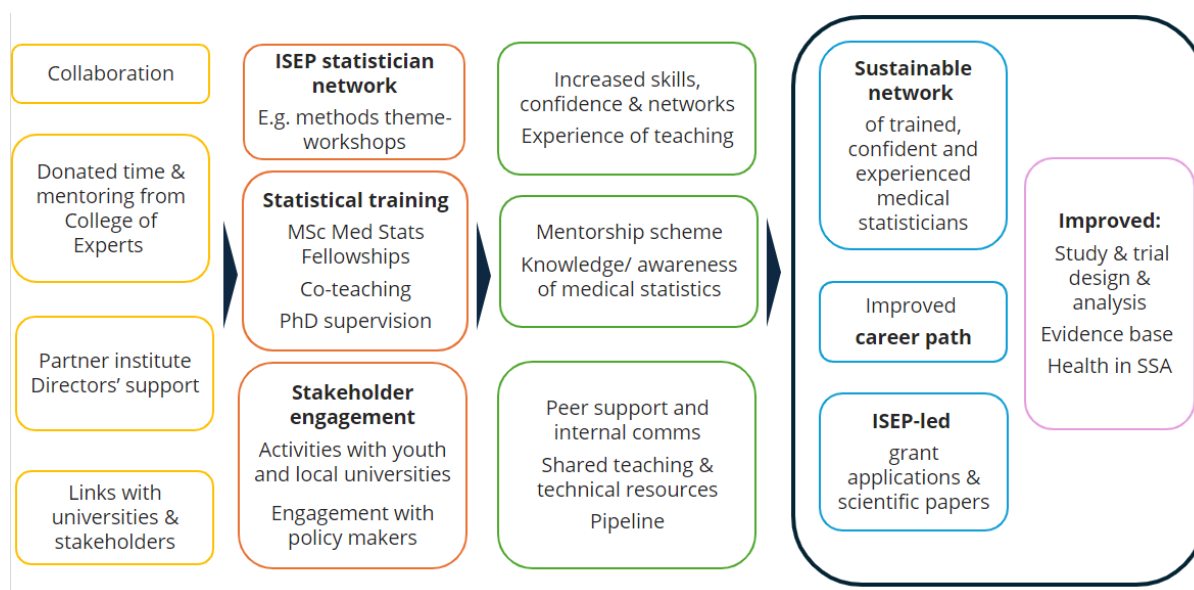
ISEP is guided by an independent Scientific Advisory Committee to help us achieve our objectives and act in accordance with ISEP’s equitable partnerships framework.

ISEP has a set of tools and frameworks – including this framework – that are harmonised to help guide ISEP towards achieving its objectives. Examples of these are as follows:

- Theory of Change
- Monitoring and evaluation framework
- Outcomes framework
- Equitable partnerships framework
- Self-assessment survey
- Joint-assessment tool
- Programme activity action tracker

ISEP’s outcomes are detailed in its Theory of Change, and summarised in the diagram below:

Figure 1: ISEP Theory of Change (simplified version).



Key: yellow boxes = inputs; orange boxes = outputs; green boxes = outcomes; blue & purple boxes = impacts.

III. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘EQUITY’?

- For ISEP, we consider ‘equity’ to be a **process** and about **opportunity & fairness** - i.e.

“Everyone being empowered and having the opportunity to contribute/take part/benefit, and taking into account the way that this is done might be different for different people.”

– ISEP member.

Whereas ‘equality’, is more of an outcome of the process, where equitable practices result in equal benefits for everyone in relation to their needs and wants.

- We recognise that it is difficult and perhaps inequitable to hold ISEP statisticians who do not receive salary funding from ISEP accountable to achieving ISEP’s objectives. We also acknowledge that not everyone will want, or have time (for example, due to other conflicting priorities) to contribute in a way that is meaningful to ISEP.

- We acknowledge that unequal (but not necessarily inequitable) contributions towards ISEP objectives and towards ensuring equitable partnership practices could limit ISEP's success.
- However, we believe 'equity' to be positioned as being an "ethical imperative" (Kakoti, 2023) – i.e., in respect of everyone in the partnership having equal opportunity to contribute to and benefit from ISEP.
- Following from this ethical imperative, participation in a short online annual survey (see section '[X. TOOLS FOR ASSESSING EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS PRACTICES](#)'), will be expected for all ISEP members regardless of salaried time from ISEP. This is because taking actions in response to the survey findings will be key to achieving a partnership that is equitable and sustainable.

Gender balance, equality and equity

On creating this framework, we realised that gender balance, equality and equity are not mentioned in the ISEP proposal for funding or Scientific Advisory Committee Terms of Reference. As pointed out by a Steering Committee member, we here recognise, at present, the gender balance of ISEP to be: more males than females in leadership (Co-I) and ISEP statistician positions. We plan to monitor the male/female ratio of ISEP members stratified by seniority as the network expands and as ISEP statisticians progress through their careers while being a part of ISEP over the next 5 years. However, gender balance only tells us a part of the picture of how ISEP is working towards equitable partnership practices. To address this, we have developed qualitative survey questions to monitor and evaluate gender equality and gender equity in more detail. For example, under the survey heading 'Gender equity': (1) 'Do you feel supported by colleagues and management in terms of your daily work and aspirations?'; (2) 'Do you experience gender discrimination or stereotyping in your daily work (e.g. attitudes, assumptions, roles and gendered division of labour)? If so, how does it manifest?'; (3) 'Are you involved in decision-making at all? If not, what prevents you?'

IV. ISEP EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

ISEP's Equitable Partnership Principles

To hold ourselves accountable, we have developed a set of equitable partnership principles which ISEP feels are meaningful for the work that we do in and through ISEP - and how we work together.

Principles can be considered as **guideposts** for supporting partnership work, thinking and behaviours and decision-making in practice.

Without (re)creating harm in our structures, strategies, and working relationships, partnership work should be:

Key Principle 1: In service of equity and values-led.

Key Principle 2: Built and continue to be built on trust, transparency and fairness.

Key Principle 3: Multiculturally valid and oriented towards Africa partner ownership.

These key principles are underpinned by more specific, interrelated and tangible principles for application in practice:

- Decide on objectives together
- Build up mutual trust
- Share information
- Develop and share networks
- Share opportunities
- Share responsibility
- Create fairness and transparency e.g. through timely sharing of useful information
- Monitor and evaluate the partnership

V. EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE

To work effectively together, we must acknowledge and think about how to overcome barriers to equitable partnership practices as well as promote opportunities for equity. Below are some examples of typical barriers and enablers of equitable partnership practice (Equitable Evaluation Framework, 2023).

Barriers

- Existing attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, policies, and processes may hinder efforts to establish trust and advance equity. In some cases, they may **even reinforce existing inequities when working together**.
- **Low trust** in partners and/or ISEP initiative.
- **Funding and related time constraints**. Partners may want to assume (more) ownership of project(s) and processes, etc., but they may have other priorities and/or not enough budget allocated to compensate for their contributions.

Barriers, tensions and sticking points can provide entry points for conversation and opportunities for reflection and adapting behaviours and/or practices.

Enablers

- **Co-producing** tools and frameworks.
- Partnership dynamics can also change over time and so we will need to be active participants in trying to achieve and sustain equity in our work by **adapting to different circumstances**.
- **Regular joint and self-assessments** to enable open discussion and identify and address any tensions within the Partnership and find a way to move forward as a collective, for example, through a problem-solving workshop.

Addressing barriers and embedding enablers to equitable partnerships helps to build trust and creates space for continual dialogue relating to equity within the partnership.

Equity in Practice: an ISEP scenario

Barrier:

Not everyone will have time due to conflicting priorities to contribute to developing the framework over time – what implications does that have for ensuring equitable contribution to their (ISEP members) development and partnership success?

Solution:

- Acknowledge that some of us may sometimes have little time to contribute to ISEP activities.
- In the case of lack of time, we would need to think of innovative ways for making time, for example, task-sharing, delegating etc., while accepting different levels of contribution.

- Acknowledge that availability to contribute to ISEP’s objectives may change over time over the course of the partnership and may affect the extent to which ISEP outcomes are achieved. We can monitor this via annual surveys and joint assessments.

VI. WHAT IS AN EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK?

It is a set of principles, tools, and processes that can help us define the goals, roles, and expectations for achieving and sustaining equitable partnerships.

A partnership framework can also help us to:

- align our ways of working to achieve ISEP programme activities, outputs, outcomes and goals;
- optimise programme design/enable course correction by e.g., changing or removing a desired outcome in order to ensure programme success;
- resolve conflicts and work together effectively;
- measure impact in the future.

An equitable partnerships framework considers the diversity of its members and acts as a point of reference to act in an equitable way. The **ISEP Equitable Partnerships Framework:**

- Seeks to **challenge** existing personal, cultural and structural norms and practices within the partnership.
- Invites a reimagining and potential **unlearning** of how we approach our work through partnerships.
- **Creates space** for asking questions and learning from one another in ways that inform our recommendations, actions, and decisions to align with aims and intentions.
- **Addresses critical questions** about the effect of ISEP’s programme and structure, on working relationships across different cultural contexts and institutions, career opportunities for early-mid career researchers, research (related to the project) outcomes and the underlying systemic drivers of inequity such as funding allocation and time availability.

VII. WHY HAVE AN EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK?

- ISEP is funded by a partnership grant – we could just assume ISEP is a partnership and it would work – but we **shouldn't assume** that this is the case some or all the time.
- We should question whether it is equitable and working as it should and **hold ourselves accountable** for ensuring it is equitable.
- An equitable partnerships framework will help us to **be transparent** from the beginning of the partnership– and help us to be honest with ourselves and to recognise when something needs to change.
- The framework acts as **a guide** for how we can work together in a respectful and open way and will support us in achieving ISEP's outcomes.
- Such a framework can help us define our roles better, so that **expectations of each other** are clear for enabling effective equitable partnership practices.
- It can promote reflexive thinking and create space for open and honest conversations with each other to enable and facilitate effective collaboration.

VIII. WHO IS THE FRAMEWORK FOR?

- The framework is for everyone within the ISEP network and any future ISEP collaborations.
- It is also for the Steering Committee – as independent reviewers and users of this framework when working in collaboration with ISEP.
- Although the framework is tailored to ISEP's objectives and goals, it is produced in a way that is easily adaptable to other research capacity strengthening partnerships, with the aim of promoting shared learning beyond ISEP.

IX. TOOLS FOR ASSESSING EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS PRACTICES

The two main tools which will be used for assessing how well or not well we are working in an equitable way are as follows:

I. JOINT ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

Comprised of: (1) ISEP Equitable Partnerships Tool (with joint assessment questions) and (2), traffic light tool (for scoring responses to each joint assessment question). The toolkit is a blend of the LSHTM (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine) EquiPar tool and INGO Asylum Access' 'Accountability Toolkit' and is adapted towards ISEP's aims, objectives and goals.

Figure 2: Snapshot of the LSHTM EquiPar Traffic Light Tool

Traffic Light Tool to assess equitable partnership needs in projects

	A	B	C	D
	Theme	Criterion	Time of review (mm of project)	How are we faring (score out of 3, with 3 being best performance)
1	People management & professional relationships	Governance arrangements		3
2		Roles and expectations		3
3	People management & professional relationships	Staffing arrangements		2
4		Mutual capacity strengthening		1
5	People management & professional relationships	Developing relationships		1
6		Evaluating partnerships		2
7	Research activities and outputs	Proposal development		2
8		Ethical obligations		1
9	Research activities and outputs	Co-production		3
10		Data ownership, storage and access		3
11	Research activities and outputs	Publishing, dissemination and policy impact		3
12		Budget and payment		3
13	Contracting and resource management	Contractual arrangements		3
14				3

Source: (LSHTM, 2023)

These joint assessments are held annually, at the beginning of each year from Y2, among Co-Is only, to assess as a collective how well ISEP is working in an equitable partnership way.

The ISEP joint assessment toolkit is:

- A consultative tool, rather than prescriptive or rule-based.
- Simple to use and adaptable.
- A set of categorised questions to use systematically and to be considered at various points in time through different stages of the partnership.
- The question categories or themes are:
 - (1) **People management and relationships.** E.g. "Are methods of communicating accessible and inclusive (e.g. for people with disabilities, or for people from different institutional partners)?"
 - (2) **Research activities and outputs.** E.g., who produces outputs, authorships? .
 - (3) **Contracting and resource management.** Related to e.g. who gets to travel to workshops and conferences and how it is arranged etc., organising training workshops, planning workshops.

II. SELF-ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Conducted annually, at the beginning of each year from Y2, aimed at ISEP statisticians, Co-Is and programme/administrative staff to determine whether or not ISEP is on the path to or has achieved its outcomes against each work package.

These surveys contain a specific section relating to equitable partnerships for all ISEP members to have the opportunity to provide their opinions in relation to equitable partnerships outcomes.

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