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Commentary

REFLECTIONS ON THE AJFAND PUBLICATION AND PEER REVIEW PROCESS

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The AJFAND Publication process

AJFAND follows a structured publication process and every manuscript submitted undergoes rigorous scrutiny to meet the journal's high academic integrity standards. This several-tiered process involves both technical and peer review to improve the quality of research published in the journal and prove the studies' compliance with the journal's requirements concerning the research methods used and the research's relevance.

The process starts when a manuscript is submitted to the journal through the AJFAND manuscript submission system and an acknowledgement note is sent to the author. This step formally commences the action of the whole reviewing procedure. After this, the manuscript goes through the secretariat checklist for evaluating if the manuscript meets the general requirements of the journal. If the manuscript satisfies at least these initial criteria, then it is marked to be "conformed", assigned a unique serial number and is passed to the next phase. However, if the manuscript is deemed "non-conformed," it is paused and sent back to the author with an invitation to correct and re-submit. This helps weed out manuscripts of lower quality and those not well formatted. Authors can always track the status of their manuscripts from the AJFAND Manuscript Status Database, and a tracking system is available online using the following link:
https://www.ajfand.net/AJFAND/manuscriptstatus.html#gsc.tab=0

The manuscript enters the peer review stage after passing the secretariat checklist. In this particular stage, the manuscript is sent out to 2-3 peer reviewers who are specialists of the relevant field; this process takes about 3-4 months on average. The reviewers' feedback focuses on the originality, scientific validity of the manuscript, relevance to the journal's scope and contribution to the body of knowledge. This process also makes a formative part of the entire course of publication since it involves an evaluation of the quality of the manuscript by peers. At this stage of operation, the manuscript may be accepted for publication, rejected or sent back to the author for amendment depending on the opinion of the reviewers.

In the event that the reviewers accept the manuscript it goes to the technical reviewing stage. However, if it is rejected, then there are only two possibilities left: the manuscript is returned with the indication that it has been rejected, but the author can submit the paper again once they have made some improvements based on the reviewers' comments; or the manuscript can be out rightly rejected with no chances of seeking resubmission to the journal. For manuscripts that pass the peer review stage, the next step is the technical review. This stage confirms that the manuscript is ready to be published and all the technical requirements of the journal in terms of fonts, references, figures and among others meet the journal's standards. After the technical review, the manuscript is returned to the Editor-in-Chief for acceptance or

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rejection. The Editor-in-Chief evaluates the manuscript holistically, considers the general suitability of the manuscript to the journal and its general state for publication. Once the manuscript is approved and accepted for publication by the Editor-in-Chief, the details are communicated to the author and notified of the Article Processing Costs (APCs) charges. The payment is done before the article is published in the journal, the manuscript is aligned to the issue of publication and the authors are notified via email that their paper has been published online.

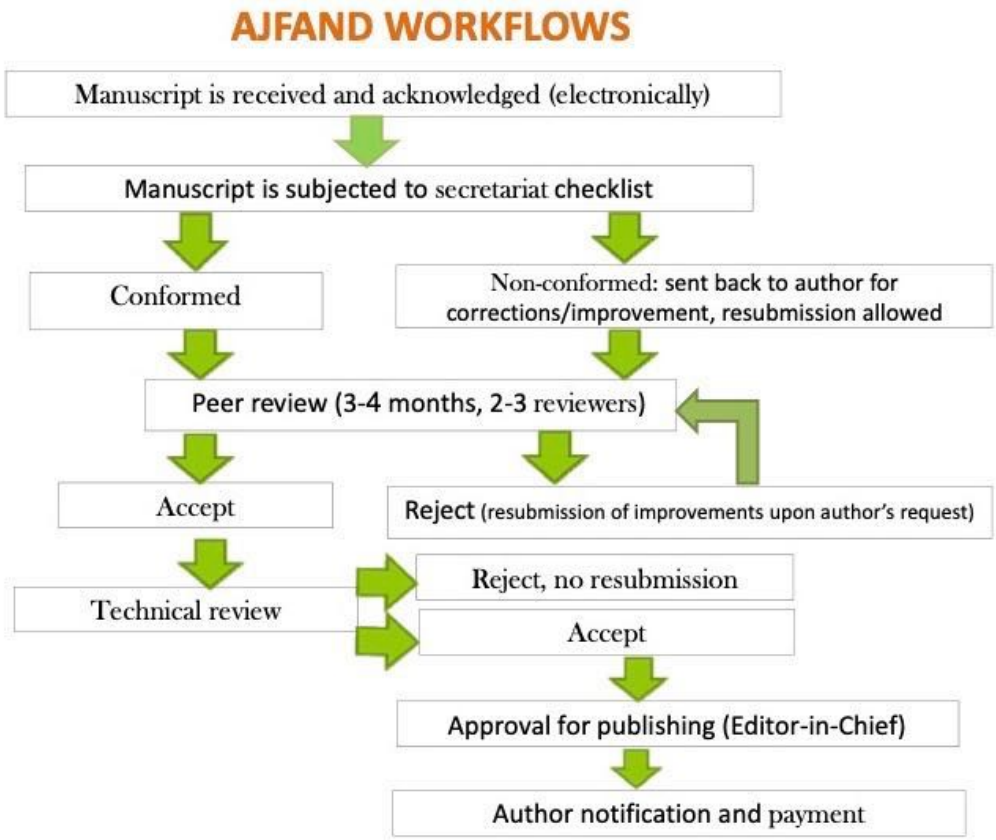

Figure 1: AJFAND Manuscript publication workflow

Insights into the publication process

The experience I have gained in the publication process has also become wider over the years. I have now seen how important each process is right from when the manuscript is submitted all the way to when it is published. The shuttlecock-like communication between the authors, reviewers, and respective editors is for refining the quality of the manuscript. Most manuscripts submitted for publication are initially not well polished and the peer review process guarantees that every paper that appears in AJFAND meets the expected research standard. I have observed manuscripts pass through several revisions that show how much work is done in refining a piece of work. It is not a mere process of pointing out mistakes or omission; instead, it is designed to guide authors in improving the coherency of their reasoning

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and justifications and valid conclusion supported by data. One of the things that make peer review most enjoyable is the collaboration that takes place between the reviewer and the author. I also have quite a feeling of satisfaction knowing that the feedback I have provided has assisted the authors to improve their work and correspondingly the research they disseminate might continue to inform policies or shape new inventions.

My peer review journey with AJFAND

My engagement with AJFAND has been a rich and deeply transformative experience, both academically and professionally. After being invited to become a junior peer reviewer in this journal, I embarked on a learning process that enhanced me analytically expand my knowledge in scientific writing, peer review and publication processes. As a junior peer reviewer, I started a practice that honed my analytical skills knowledge about scientific writing and value for peer review. I undertook a Publons peer reviewer course and had to familiarize myself with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines. I also attended webinars on the publication and peer review processes organized by Training Centre in Communication (TCC) Africa, Taylor and Francis Group, Sage Group and among other institutions to upgrade my peer review skills.

Early stages: The junior reviewer experience

As a junior peer reviewer, I was initially assigned to review less complex manuscripts which addressed specific research questions and adopted the simplest methodologies. During my first couple of weeks, I found that such assignments were beneficial to accustom myself to the structure of scientific papers and what is expected of me. The Editor-in-Chief, Prof. Ruth Oniang'o was always available and willing to help me if I encountered some difficulties in the process of review. I learned to assess the flow of information, ensuring that each section contributed meaningfully to the overall narrative of the research. In these stages, I focused on how clearly the authors formulated hypotheses, if the objectives corresponded to research questions and whether the chosen methodology allowed to answer these questions. I was also aware of the importance of critical appraisal of manuscripts including the results but also the logic behind the findings. My role was not just to critique the manuscript but to provide meaningful feedback that could help the authors improve their manuscripts while encouraging their continued contribution to the academic world.

Growing expertise: Transitioning to a Senior Peer Reviewer

The change to senior peer reviewer position came with new assignments I needed to undertake. Gradually, I began reviewing more comprehensive studies such as randomized controlled trials and longitudinal research studies. The review not only

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focused on the outcomes of the analyzed studies but also statistical significance of the results, the reliability of the conclusion made and new knowledge added to the subject content. In the review process, I understood how to engage with interdisciplinary research. There are clear linkages between the food, agricultural, and nutritional sciences in general with various sub-disciplines like public health, economics, and environmental sciences. As a senior reviewer, I learned how to evaluate manuscripts with a broader lens of various methodologies ranging from qualitative interviews to analytical statistical models and how this can be useful to enhance the pool of knowledge.

The position of the senior reviewer has been both intellectually stimulating and professionally rewarding. With years of my work, I have developed a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of the peer-review process and realized that this process is decisive for the quality of publications. Among the most fulfilling has been contributing to the academic dialogue by ensuring that the work I review is both rigorous and impactful. I derive a lot of satisfaction from being able to improve an author's details and justification of the research that they put into their papers. There have been a few challenges that I have encountered in the peer review process. Sometimes I have encountered manuscripts that require significant revisions or even rejection. However, the decision is never easy when the author has spent his or her time on it. Further, the pragmatics of reviewing while engaging in other professional commitments time has enhanced my time management skills and prioritization of activities. The period I have served as a senior reviewer has reinforced my commitment to fostering high-quality research and provided me with a rich learning experience in return. It's a role that requires both critical insight and a dedication to advancing knowledge in my field and I'm proud to contribute to this essential scholarly process.

Authors' feedback on the impact of peer review

As a journal that focuses on an advancement of research in food, agriculture, nutrition and development, AJFAND recognizes the importance of peer review in maintaining the highest academic standards and in providing good quality publications. In the years and several issues published, authors who have appeared in our journal have always had something nice to say about the hardworking and helpful reviewers who have made this a collective effort. For instance, Kevin Obonyo, one of the authors who conducted research on the level of maternal nutrition knowledge and the role of mobile phone application sharing in health information among mothers at Kenyatta National Hospital, Nairobi, was moved by the hard work of reviewers of AJFAND. His comment underscores the positive impact that thoughtful, constructive feedback can have on shaping research:

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> *"I extend my heartfelt thanks to the reviewers and editorial team for the hard work and support throughout the publication process. I truly appreciate the opportunity to contribute to AJFAND platform for my research." (Kevin Obonyo, 27th July 2024)*
> https://www.ajfand.net/AJFAND/readerscomments.html#gsc.tab=0

This sentiment is echoed by many authors who appreciate the ample amount of time that reviewers spend to see that the manuscripts that are submitted meet the highest standards of scholarly rigor. The journey to publication is often a challenging one, filled with revisions, re-evaluations, and improvements, yet authors like Monica Akokuwebe, whose manuscript journey spanned from 2019 to 2021, see this process as one of growth and transformation:

> *"I am so happy....I just feel to send drinks and foods for this celebration....it's been a long journey since 2019 to 2021.....grateful to God. I want to use this medium to thank Prof and all the AJFAND team as well as all the reviewers who made this manuscript to come to reality as a publication in highly esteemed AJFAND journal". (Monica Akokuwebe, 2nd September 2021)*

This feedback also refutes the criticism that the peer-review system solely enhances the scientific evidenced nature of the works as well as consultative learning intervention for the authors. It promotes accountability, mutual respect and scholarly relationship. Most authors understand that apart from being subjected to constructive criticism, AJFAND reviewers want them to produce research that is more informative and as easy to communicate as possible. We encourage authors to be providing feedback on their experience with our peer review process for improvement of the Journal.

Commitment to AJFAND's Mission

In my capacity and as a senior reviewer, I am glad to serve the journal in the effort to enhance research that seeks to respond to existing gaps that affect the African nations in areas of food insecurity, agriculture and nutrition. AJFAND plays an important role of promoting visibility of research from African scholars and responds to the context relevant issues in Africa. I am honored to contribute to a journal that is inclusive and that welcomes authors from many fields and global locations. Looking ahead, I am committed to continuing my contribution to the peer review process, providing thoughtful and constructive feedback and supporting the development of emerging researchers in the field. The experience has significantly shaped my academic career and I look forward to furthering AJFAND's mission of advancing knowledge and fostering innovation in food, agriculture and nutrition in Africa and beyond.