



## DOING RESEARCH ETHICALLY

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Principles and practices for international development practitioners and evaluators

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Authors: Madleina Daehnhardt and Cathy Bollaert

Project lead: Madleina Daehnhardt

Copy editor: Seren Boyd

Design and publication project management: Rachel Paton

Illustrations project management: Charlene Hayden

Design and illustrations: Wingfinger

Funding: Impact and Effectiveness team, Tearfund

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## Contributors:

Talatu Aliyu – Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Manager, Christian Aid

Cheryl Bannatyne – International Communications Coordinator, Tearfund

Jenny Burns – Senior Programme Officer – Digital, Christian Aid

Nimesh Dhungana – Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics

Andrew Eckert – Global Security Advisor, Christian Aid

Charlotte Flowers – Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Tearfund

Nina Kurlberg – Theology Development Officer, Tearfund

Rachel Paton – Research and Learning Analyst, Tearfund

## Internal reviewers (Tearfund):

Stephen Boyo – Safeguarding Advisor

Paul Cook – Head of Advocacy

Prabu Deepan – Head of Thematic Support Team

Patriona Dejean – Director of Strategy and Impact

Charlotte Flowers – Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer

Matt Gregora – Head of Risk and Compliance

Kyle Hanna – Impact and Effectiveness Team Lead

Caroline Hill – Market Research and Insight Manager

Julia Kendal – Policy Associate

Marina Kobzeva – Quality Standards Manager

Nina Kurlberg – Theology Development Officer

Anna Ling – Programme Effectiveness Advisor

Jané Mackenzie – Resilience Programme Manager

Madhu Thapa – Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor, Asia

## Internal reviewers (Christian Aid):

Talatu Aliyu – Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Manager

Andrew Eckert – Global Security Advisor

Suzanne Fisher-Murray – Research Communications Advisor

Marianne Leite – Women's Rights, Poverty and Power Strategic Advisor

Karen McDonnell – Programme Accountability Advisor

Moto Michikata – Data Quality Advisor

Kate Newman – Head of Programme Policy, Research and Learning

Kas Sempere – ECID (Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development) Research Associate

Eoghan Walsh – Safeguarding Manager

## External reviewers:

Dr Nimesh Dhungana – Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics

Pradeep Narayanan – Director, Research and Capacity Building, Praxis, Institute for Participatory Practices, New Delhi

Christine Wilson – Head of Research, Research and Policy Insight, British Council

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The e-version of this document, together with the stand-alone tools translated into French, Spanish and Portuguese, can be found at <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/research-and-policy/how-we-research> <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/our-work/research/capacity-development>

# PREFACE

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In 2020, we were tasked with thinking about research ethics, in our roles as Research Advisors for Tearfund and Christian Aid. Deepening our understanding of ethical approaches is part of a drive in our respective commissioning organisations to improve upon the quality of our evidence. As members of the Research Advisor Network (RAN), we realised we were developing this thinking in parallel and decided to collaborate. This publication is therefore the result of a constructive, peer-agency research collaboration.

When we started screening the resources for international development practitioners available at the time, we noticed an absence of published, accessible practical research ethics guidance. This was true for both mainstream development and for faith-based organisations. Notably, existing research ethics guidelines are mostly found within academic institutions, funding bodies and professional associations, but these often lack practical relevance for practitioners and examples from the context in which (I)NGOs work. We also found that the guidance that was available for development practitioners was quite siloed across different thematic areas, such as safeguarding, data protection, gender equality or social inclusion. Given the way these issues intersect with doing research in the development sector, we felt there was a need for a guidance document that brought these interconnected strands together – a sort of ‘one-stop-shop’ for doing good research and doing it ethically within the development sector.

As a result, we decided to write a comprehensive framework drawing from relevant examples in the sector. Here, it is important to understand our starting point: research, monitoring and evaluation work in (I)NGOs does not have the same infrastructural support as universities and professional research organisations. These have institutional review boards and research ethics committees (RECs). Given the priorities and infrastructure constraints in most (I)NGOs, research ethics will need to be as common sense and implementable as possible. We thus focus on procedural and practical ethics. Our suite of ethics tools embodies ethical principles in practical form.

As research practitioners we acknowledge that we have often fallen short of the best-practice standards we set out in this document. Moving towards ethical research is a journey with many complexities, turns and twists – some of which are touched upon in our examples. [Appendix 1](#) provides further reflections on Christian ethics in relation to research ethics, in the contexts where we work. Having tried to include insights from field-based staff, we also recognise that we have written this from the perspective of the HQs of our organisations, which implies a particular viewpoint and particular assumptions. In our commitment to the decolonising aid agenda, we hope this guidance document will provide a basis from which these assumptions can be critiqued. We also hope it will provide the space for including more diverse approaches and perspectives in how we think about and practise research ethics.

It is our intention and hope that this guide will inspire colleagues across the sector to think through the often messy, challenging yet important field of ethical principles and practices in the context of their own organisations. To this effect, we hope to have provided food for thought and tools that can be adapted to different contexts. It is our desire to make a small contribution to ‘doing research ethically’ within the (I)NGO sector and beyond. Feedback to inform future editions of this guide is most welcome.

**Dr Madleina Daehnhardt**  
*Impact and Research Advisor*  
Tearfund

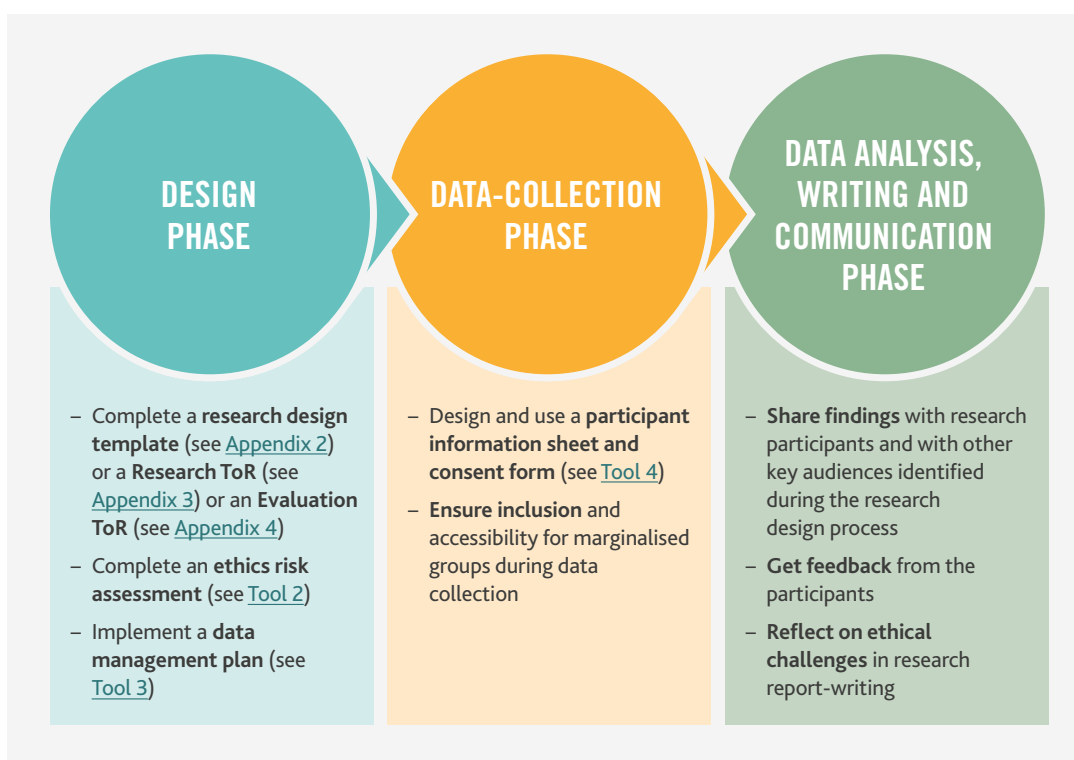
**Dr Cathy Bollaert**  
*Research and Evidence Capacity Development Advisor*  
Christian Aid

# QUICK OVERVIEW

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Doing research or evaluation work in international development in an ethical way requires us to engage with several distinct areas of expertise. These include safeguarding, protection, data protection, gender equality and social inclusion, conflict sensitivity and research design. This guide attempts to bring these different thematic areas together in one source document – a sort of one-stop-shop for research ethics. The flow chart below contains a summary of the ethics procedures required during the different stages of the research or evaluation process (Figure 1). This is supported by a series of tools you can find in Chapter 5 and the Appendices, which have been designed to help you carry out your research or evaluation ethically. These are easily accessible by clicking on the links provided in the flow chart. What follows in the remainder of this guide is all the information you need to be able to think through the issues and questions raised in the tools. We hope you will find that this guide creates helpful parameters in which you can engage safely and securely with your research or evaluation work, rather than seeing it as a barrier.

Figure 1 Summary of required ethics procedures during the research and evaluation project cycle



## Introduction

This guide makes an important contribution to ensuring the evidence we generate within the development sector is of good quality. In the introduction, you will be introduced to some key definitions that will help you to understand the scope and purpose of this guide – to whom and to what activities of (I)NGOs it relates. Key terms and core research ethical principles are introduced.

## Section 1: Ethics during the evaluation and research design phase

The guide is grounded in the understanding that research ethics ought to inform every stage in the process of conducting an evaluation or piece of research – from design and planning, to data collection, analysis, write-up and communication. It is structured accordingly, so that this section covers ethical considerations relating to the first stage: the design phase. During this stage it is crucial to: ensure the research design and methodology are coherent; draw from best-practice risk-management approaches; assess and mitigate the ethical risks associated with the research or evaluation; and plan for responsible data management and meaningful engagement.

## Section 2: Ethical principles during data collection in the field

This section covers the data-collection phase. Though it should not be the only stage at which ethical thinking occurs, data collection is usually the stage at which researchers and evaluators engage the most with participants, as well as their wider communities. Ethical implications of this engagement are considered here, including how to: plan for inclusion and participation; ensure the safety and privacy of participants; obtain consent from participants that is truly informed; and express respect and gratitude to participants in appropriate ways. Protecting the well-being of researchers and evaluators themselves is also considered as critically important.

## Section 3: Ethics during analysis, write-up and communication of findings

In this section, consideration is given to the ethics of data being analysed, presented and communicated in ways that are suited to the audience. It considers too how doing ethical research in development means maintaining and sustaining relationships with a web of research stakeholders (ie local intermediaries, interpreters, translators, gatekeepers etc), not just research participants (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). During this stage, those involved in evidence generation need to orientate their decisions and actions towards ensuring that the data and findings are of the highest-possible quality, and are presented and shared in a way that promotes fairness and social justice. The concept of 'reflexivity' is also defined and explored here – to describe how researchers and evaluators should be reflecting on power and representation when interpreting the data and communicating participants' perspectives. This section also stresses that reflexivity is not just about being sensitive and responsible to research participants. It is also about being constantly aware of the larger social and political contexts in which research is pursued, and about bringing such awareness to bear as part of the analysis and reporting of data (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

## Section 4: Sensitive topics and high-risk research

At this point in the guide, the authors call for particular care and caution to be exercised when planning and conducting 'high-risk' research or evaluation: any evidence-generating activity that involves children or adults who are vulnerable, including those affected by or reeling from conflict, or humanitarian crises, ie those who are defenceless in the face of 'external shocks' (Chambers, 1989). This also applies to: sensitive topics such as trauma, sexual or gender-based violence (SGBV), or bereavement; and/or where there are significant concerns for the personal safety of the participants, evaluators or researchers. This section includes real-life examples of managing the risks associated with high-risk research or evaluation.

## Section 5: Research Ethics Toolkit

The final section of the guide contains four tools, designed to assist (I)NGO practitioners to practise research ethics. Although research ethics concerns the *moral integrity* with which research or evaluation is carried out in practice – meaning that it is much bigger than the tools we use – tools are nonetheless important. (They are what we refer to as 'procedural ethics'.) This toolkit includes a short checklist to identify whether research ethics apply, an ethical risk assessment template and guidance, a data management plan, and a participant information sheet and consent form.

# KEY TO ICONS

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You will find that the guidance is supplemented throughout by definitions of key terms, real-life examples from Tearfund and Christian Aid, and 'practice links' indicating overlaps between research ethics and other related work streams, such as safeguarding or story gathering. The following icons and the list below will help you to identify and navigate quickly to this supplementary content:



Definitions



Examples



Practice links



Tools

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# ACRONYMS

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<b>CCM</b>	Church and community mobilisation
<b>DFID</b>	UK Department for International Development
<b>DME</b>	Design, monitoring and evaluation
<b>ESRC</b>	Economic and Social Research Council
<b>FBO</b>	Faith-based organisation
<b>FCDO</b>	The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>GESI<sup>1</sup></b>	Gender equality and social inclusion
<b>GDPR<sup>2</sup></b>	General Data Protection Regulation
<b>(I)NGO</b>	(International) non-governmental organisation
<b>IRB</b>	Institutional review board
<b>LGBTIQ+</b>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer or questioning
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and evaluation
<b>MFF</b>	Masculinité, Famille, et Foi
<b>REC</b>	Research ethics committee
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and gender-based violence
<b>ToR</b>	Terms of Reference
<b>UKRI</b>	UK Research and Innovation

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1 A GESI approach in development also serves as an umbrella term for SGBV issues and LGBTIQ+ issues.

2 The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a regulation in European Union law on data protection and privacy in the European Union and the European Economic Area.

# INTRODUCTION

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## Objectives of this guide

The five objectives of this guide are:

- to provide practitioners with **practical guidance on research ethics** relevant to data collection in the field
- to enhance **awareness of ethical challenges** in research, evaluation and data-collection processes among INGO staff, and to provide tools to tackle these challenges
- to provide practitioners with **a basis for engaging consultants and academic collaborators** in discussing and implementing ethical principles in research activities which involve data collection (see the section below and [Appendix 5](#))
- to serve as a **reference point** for including ethics in research funding applications
- to support NGOs in developing their **internal research ethics guidelines** and their internal research ethics tools (see [Section 5](#)).

## How to use this guide to engage consultants

Consultants need to show commitment to ethical research, and have knowledge of ethics and demonstrate a clear and proactive approach to mitigating and managing ethical risks.

There are different ways this guide can be used with research and evaluation consultants. For example:

- Share this document (or your organisation's ethics policy) with the consultant before even signing a contract with them, so that they are clear on expectations.
- The ethics risk assessment ([Tool 2](#)) and data management plan ([Tool 3](#)) should be included in a Terms of Reference (ToR) for commissioning a research or evaluation consultant.
- This guide could also be used as a frame of reference for reviewing an evaluation or research methodology that a consultant may submit. When asking consultants to submit their own proposals, make sure that submissions will be evaluated on how ethics have been considered.
- Consultants can be asked to use this guide to inform the design of the evaluation or research.
- The participant information sheet and consent form ([Tool 4](#)) can also be used as a template by consultants when interviewing participants.

## Audience and purpose of this guide

This guide is written for development practitioners, including programme managers, country staff and partner organisations and consultants, who are engaged in applied research, evaluation and evidence-generating activities in the widest sense (see definitions below).



### DEFINITIONS

#### Research and evidence-generating activities

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**RESEARCH** The systematic process of collecting and analysing data and information using tested methods to generate new knowledge, to answer questions related to your profession or practice, or to test a hypothesis (UNICEF, 2015, p. 3).

**PRACTITIONER RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENT** A process of systematic investigation using any appropriate research method, which is conceptualised, developed and led by development professionals. It may :

- generate evidence, deepen understanding or document new or excluded perspectives on an issue relevant to development practice
- intend to have impact on development thinking, practice or policies – either through the way the research is done or by producing useful, accessible outputs
- aim to shift accepted views of who researchers are and whose knowledge counts in research (Bingley et al. 2020, p. 5).

**EVIDENCE-GENERATING ACTIVITIES** The collection of activities and tools used to generate evidence, such as data collection and analysis, research, evaluations, baselines, needs analysis etc (UNICEF, 2015, p. 3).

**EVALUATIONS** The process of judging whether a project is creating, or did create, the changes it set out to achieve. Evaluation includes assessing efficiency (how well time and money were used), effectiveness (how well the project achieved its aims), impact and sustainability. It might look at any unintended consequences, both positive and negative. Evaluation is closely linked to learning, and a good evaluation will help generate understanding of what does and does not work in programmatic work, to be applied in future projects (Davies and Ling, 2020). Beyond assessing effectiveness and efficiency of the interventions, evaluations are also intended to help inform advocacy efforts and programmatic improvements which have implications for the choice of research design and associated ethical considerations.



📷 A focus group from Hwol Buji, Nigeria, participating in a regional evaluation of church and community mobilisation (CCM) in 2016. As INGOs we invest substantially in research, evaluations and all kinds of evidence-generating activities. It is imperative that ethical reflection and practices are embedded in these activities. Photo: Andrew Philip/Tearfund

## Scope of this guide

Although the term 'research ethics' is used throughout this guide, the ethical principles and practices discussed apply to all evidence-generating activities. As well as systematic research, this includes routine design, monitoring and evaluation (DM&E) and data-collection procedures involving human participants.

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As INGOs we often invest substantially in commissioning, conducting and co-creating research, evaluations and all kinds of data collection. This is because we want to learn, improve programming and build a strong evidence base for our work with people living in poverty. Since we want all our work to be respectful, beneficent and just, it is imperative that ethical reflection and practices are embedded in evidence-generation activities. In addition to the 'Do No Harm' principle, thinking proactively about research ethics is relevant to ensuring accountability and quality in our work. This guide sets out key principles of ethical thinking and good practice when engaging with participants during data gathering which could involve individuals, households and communities.

The distinct nature of development research also demands that ethics are set in the wider context of 'bigger questions' such as: Who sets the research agenda? How should we engage with local elites and policymakers? How do we ensure sustained and equal partnership with local researchers? Should we adapt the research to local ethical practices, and how? More specifically, ethics in development research relate to: a) the idea of development (eg whose notion of development is being applied, and why), b) the relationship between the development community (eg INGOs) and the communities they serve (eg power inequalities, power dynamics), and c) the research process (eg informed consent, confidentiality, privacy etc) (see Sumner and Tribe, 2008, p. 40).

For development practitioners, any form of research is about relationships (Fujii, 2018). In development research in particular, there is often a power inequality between the researcher and research participants. This calls for ethical reflexivity in the design, implementation and reporting of research; it also requires a rigorous and transparent process of informed consent which ensures that participants' agency, capacity and right to participate in or withdraw from the research are upheld (Block et al. 2013). In that sense, development research calls for what Fujii (2018) terms 'ethical sensibility': being aware of one's power and privilege as a researcher, and of how one's power shapes the process and relationships with both participants and other actors (eg interpreters, partners, gatekeepers etc).

Ultimately, readers of this guide will want to ensure that communities involved in the work of (I)NGOs are treated with the utmost dignity and are protected. As the work of (I)NGOs often reaches those most vulnerable, further steps are needed in data-collection processes to ensure we are not working in ways that may undermine organisational goals. To this end, users of this guide will want to develop and strengthen their research reflexivity skills (see [practice link](#) on extractive research, knowledge, power and reflexivity).



## PRACTICE LINK

### Extractive research, knowledge, power and reflexivity

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Research-related activities can have a tendency to be 'extractive': we know what we want to get from it, but it is less clear what the participants involved get out of it. Thinking about how research can avoid becoming extractive, but rather be mutually agreed and mutually beneficial, is key to research ethics and raises many more questions (some of which will be addressed in this guide).

#### Reflexivity and ethics

Reflexivity is a concept very much at home in the world of social research, and it is also key in doing research ethically. Research is primarily an 'enterprise of knowledge construction', an active process that requires awareness, scrutiny, reflection, and interrogation of the data, but also of oneself, one's colleagues, the research participants and the context that they inhabit (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 274). Reflexive researchers, such as ethnographers, are conscious that research is not just simply reporting 'the facts': instead they seek to question actively how they construct and reach interpretations of what they see throughout the research process (Hertz, 1997, p. viii).<sup>3</sup> Reflexivity in research is then 'a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 274). This includes understanding power and positionality, and how the researcher's personal identity and characteristics inform the research design and implementation. This requires a 'critical, ongoing examination of the way the researcher engages with others – be they participants, research assistants, interpreters, or other interlocutors' (Fujii, 2018, p.1). In other words, being a reflexive researcher means balancing insider and outsider perspectives in engaging with local communities that are different from the researcher's own background (Berger, 2015). Keeping research logs, regular reviews of fieldwork and peer consultation can help with this.

#### Knowledge is power

Development research is closely intertwined with questions of power and power dynamics. One of the key dimensions of ethical research in development is the question of who sets the agenda for development and on what terms (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). This means we need to establish ethical relations with the research participants and local communities, and subscribe to ethical processes that are reflective of local socio-political realities.

It also requires thinking about how we are creating, co-creating, sharing and co-communicating research with participants. Who holds onto that knowledge afterwards? Are the different parties recognising their own power? How can we be going further, beyond not being extractive, so it does not become yet another tokenistic 'tick-box' exercise to share the findings later? Good research and evaluation recognises the knowledge local people have and even strives to ensure all processes of the research cycle are supportive of participants' empowerment. So when creating knowledge, the question to ask is: What power do we have and how are we transferring power in our evidence-generation activities?

These questions are also key to the decolonising development agenda. Decolonising knowledge and development is, of course, a pressing contemporary debate shaping the present and future of the sector, one of the 'big-picture' contextual issues in which this guide is set. This is particularly important, as organisations in the global North are often criticised for the control they hold over knowledge and for the way they are becoming the 'de facto guardians of ethics' (Narayanan, 2020).

[Section 3.2](#) discusses power and reflexivity in more detail.

Source: the authors, with input from Nimesh Dhungana – Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics

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<sup>3</sup> Field-based and qualitative researchers are often well versed in the demands and debates around reflexivity. However, the issue of reflexivity, power and privilege is less discussed in quantitative research. Reflexivity, nonetheless, should transcend qualitative and quantitative divides, as quantitative statistics are in no way exempt from ethics. For example, findings from research that uses demographic data, or census data, may be seen as threatening by state authorities, or may be used in a way that causes harm to general populations (Brydon, 2006).

## Methodology

The framework of this guide is based on desk-based research and review of existing research guidelines (ASA, 2011; BSA, 2017; IOD PARC [for DFID], 2019; ESRC, 2020; SRA, 2003). A framework relevant to the (I)NGO context was derived from extracting core research ethical principles and adapting them to the international development context. The authors also drew from lived experience as (I)NGO-based research brokers and collaborators, and from their own academic and practice-based fieldwork. Case studies and examples were collected from relevant practitioners within Tearfund and Christian Aid, including regional DM&E advisors, M&E managers and those with expertise in overlapping fields, ie safeguarding, gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), as well as data protection, risk and compliance. These examples are to be found throughout the guide. The guide has gone through a rigorous internal and external review process. It has also been piloted in a research partnership with academics and practitioners based in Myanmar, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and with consultants carrying out research in Bangladesh.

## Core research ethical principles



### DEFINITIONS

#### Research ethics

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**RESEARCH ETHICS** refers to both the principles and values that shape our research, evaluation and evidence-generating activities (including the design, collection, analysis, presentation and communication of the research and findings) and the integrity with which the research or evaluation is carried out. Any such activities must avoid causing harm to the research participants: not only physical harm, but also psychological and emotional trauma or distress. This is known as the principle of 'Do No Harm' – the single most important principle to which all research should adhere. However, ensuring we 'do no harm' also requires us to ensure that the research or evaluation we are carrying out has the potential to do good and make a positive contribution to development knowledge and practice.

There are several questions that are central to research ethics:

1. How should we treat the people involved in the research, evaluation and evidence-generating activities? (Bryman, 2016, p. 121)
2. Are there activities in which we should – or should not – engage in our relations with those people? (Bryman, 2016, p. 121)
3. How can the data be collected and shared in a way that promotes transparency, fairness, inclusivity and accountability?
4. Are we collecting only data we need and will use?
5. Is the research design coherent, appropriate to the evidence needs and context, and aware of power dynamics and values shaping the research?

See [Tool 1](#) to find out if research ethics apply to your work.

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All research and evaluation projects should adhere to at least 'minimum ethical standards' (Dua and Raworth, 2012). These standards are based on the three fundamental principles outlined in the *Belmont Report on ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research* (Department for Health, Education and Welfare, 1979). These principles are the foundation of many regulations and guidelines governing research ethics today (Rivera and Borasky, 2009). They include:

- **respect for persons:** individuals should be treated as autonomous agents and persons who are vulnerable are entitled to protection
- **beneficence:** do no harm and maximise possible benefits and minimise possible harms
- **justice:** consideration is given to who benefits and who bears the burden of the research and whether the rights of participants are upheld in the research process: eg in terms of the time that these projects often take out of a person's day, which could have been used more productively to generate income etc.

Different organisations repackage and expand upon these principles in different ways. Below are two examples of well known UK agencies: Department for International Development (DFID) (now part of the newly formed Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [FCDO]), and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which provides funding and support for social sciences research and which is now part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

These examples illustrate different ways in which the fundamental principles of research ethics have been adopted. The purpose of this guide is not to develop new adaptations of these principles. Rather, these key principles both underpin and inform the practice of research ethics outlined in this guide and we draw from them in one way or another at every stage of the research cycle.



#### EXAMPLE

### Underlying research ethics principles in funding bodies

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The recently merged DFID had four ethical principles informing its research, evaluation and monitoring activities:

1. Seek to maximise benefit and minimise harm.
2. Respect people's rights and dignity.
3. Act with honesty, competence and accountability.
4. Deliver work of integrity and merit. (IOD PARC, 2019)

The ESRC sets out good practice for social science research in six principles for ethical research:

1. Research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm.
  2. The rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected.
  3. Wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed.
  4. Research should be conducted with integrity and transparency.
  5. Lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined.
  6. Independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit. (ESCR, 2020)
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## PRACTICE LINK

### How do research ethics relate to organisational values and programme quality standards? Tearfund example

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Research ethics and organisational core values and quality standards are often interlinked in (I)NGOs in that they are embedded in wider organisational remits, and should not be seen in isolation.

Tearfund's Quality Standards, which embody its core values, promote 'work to the highest possible standards with integrity and transparency'. They address areas such as behaviours, impartiality and targeting, accountability, gender equality, empowerment and participation, technical quality, resilience and protection. In many ways, these standards overlap with the research ethics principles outlined in this guide, such as respect, dignity and inclusion, and safety, Do No Harm and protection. For example, what is listed under wider ethical 'behaviours' in Tearfund's Quality Standards resonates with the research ethics principles: 'We stand against all forms of exploitation, abuse, fraud, bribery and any other conduct that is incompatible with our values. We strive to transfer power to the people we serve, to transform our own, our partners' and communities' attitudes and practices on inclusion, conflict sensitivity, accountability, gender and learning' (Tearfund, 2020a).



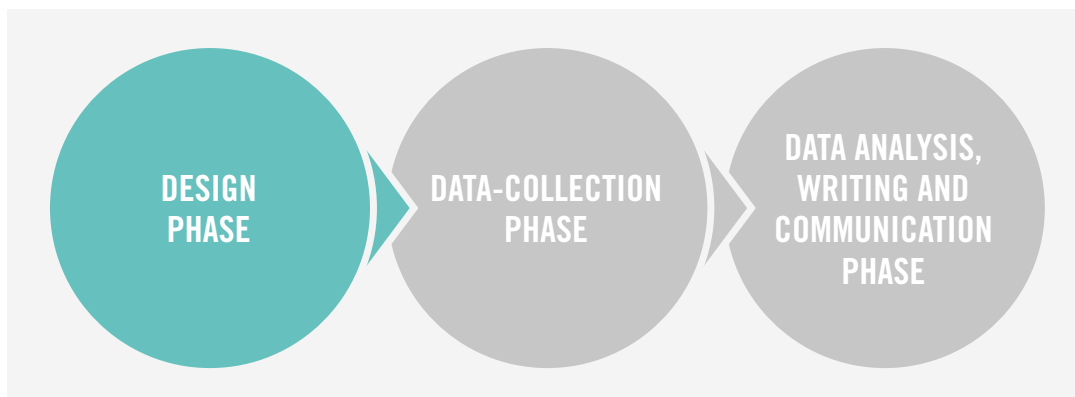
📷 Arjan Guyo, a member of staff at Action for Development, a Christian Aid partner organisation, facilitating a meeting of the Barimel Radio Listening Group in Arebore Community, Ethiopia. In (I)NGOs' country programmes, long-term engagement and trust between staff, partners and local communities can be the basis for good ethical research, as can their organisational core values and quality standards. Photo: Indrias G. Kassaye/Christian Aid

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# 1 ETHICS DURING THE EVALUATION OR RESEARCH PROJECT DESIGN PHASE

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Evaluation design or research design refers to the overall approach and methodology that is employed during any process that involves the systematic collection of data. This might include data that is collected:

- in response to a problem, issue or question of which you want to gain a deeper understanding
- for evaluating the impact and outcomes of a programme
- for a project needs assessment, context analysis etc.

No matter what the purpose of the research or data collection, from a research ethics perspective, this requires the following:

- ensuring the research design and methodology are coherent ([Section 1.1](#))
- best-practice risk management ([Section 1.2](#))
- assessing and mitigating the ethical risks to ensure a 'Do No Harm' approach is adopted ([Section 1.3](#))
- planning for meaningful engagement ([Section 1.4](#)).

## 1.1 Ensuring the research design and methodology are coherent

A robust and coherent research design is central to the integrity of the data, the quality of evidence that is generated and for maintaining professional standards in research. A useful way of ensuring that a research design is coherent is to follow a clear and systematic research process, as follows (see also [Appendix 2](#)):<sup>4</sup>

1. Identify the **purpose and evidence needs of this project and ensure you have a focused research question(s)**. Think about the *problem* that needs to be addressed and what you want to *achieve* (the research/evaluation objectives). What do you want to *find out* about the problem (the research questions) and what evidence do you need to find this out? Is this new research or evaluation really necessary or can we draw from existing evidence? We want to avoid 'over-researching' groups which can lead to research fatigue and the disillusionment of participants (Saferworld, 2019, p. 5). Who decided on the research topic? We can aim to be technically perfect in our research design but we also want to ensure the research is contributing to development priorities and what matters to those 'left behind' (Bradbury-Huang and Reason, 2001).
2. Go to the **literature**. For research projects, review internal project notes and external reports, academic journal articles and similar projects to see what is already known about the topic. What data and groups

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<sup>4</sup> In Tearfund's case, the research design is incorporated in the Research ToR ([Appendix 3](#)) and the Evaluation ToR ([Appendix 4](#)) respectively.

are included in and/or missing from the existing body of evidence? What are the gaps and issues in the existing evidence base that your research or evaluation will contribute to? In other words, how will your research contribute to new learning, knowledge and/or improved development practices? How will you ensure the literature you consult is diverse and representative of different voices, so that even the choice of literature consulted and quoted is ethical?<sup>5</sup> Are there other organisations you can collaborate with to find out about previous research initiatives and what, if anything, resulted from them?

3. Decide which **research/evaluation methods and data-collection tools** you will use to gain answers to your research questions and achieve your research objectives. For example, will you be using key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and/or quantitative surveys? Who will you be collecting the data from and are they from high-risk groups (see [Section 4](#))? Will your methods meet your evidence needs or answer your research questions? Crucially, are there any national or international legal requirements (eg General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR], safeguarding and/or ethical approval processes) you need to adhere to?



## DEFINITIONS

### Research fatigue

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**RESEARCH FATIGUE** is a sense by participants that the same questions are asked over and over by agencies, NGOs and researchers, experts and consultants who visit their communities – and nothing changes in response. As a result communities may feel they do not benefit from participating in these exercises. They could be using the time in ways that are more productive and beneficial to their household. The research design needs to consider that 'research fatigue' is a problem in research, which can impact on the quality of data being gathered: participants may be too tired or have no vested interest in answering questions, and are less likely to engage meaningfully in interviews. There are different ways we can help to reduce research fatigue. One way is by keeping the number of research or evaluation questions, and thus the number of questions that we have to ask participants, to a minimum. Another way to reduce the risk of research fatigue is by ensuring the research is something the community is interested in. We can also explain how the findings will be shared with the communities so they can learn from and 'own' the research generated by them.

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4. **Identify your intended audiences.** Development research occurs in multidimensional ethical environments and relationships, requiring different strategies and practices. Key questions to think about in this regard are: What will different audiences want to use the research/evaluation findings for, and in what format will they want to access them? For example, is your audience local government, policymakers, members of the community etc? Are their evidence preferences graphs, images, narrative, blogs, audio recordings etc? Remember: research participants are also part of your audience. How will you share your findings with them?
5. **Identify the key benefits** of the research/evaluation to all stakeholders. While research ethics generally focuses on identifying ethical risks and mitigating these (see [Section 1.2](#)), naming the benefits is also useful. Articulating the benefits during the research/evaluation design stage will help develop a comprehensive view of what the benefits (and risks) are, to whom, when etc. This involves:
  - thinking about the benefits (and risks) of research or evaluation in holistic terms: 'What benefits beyond the physical might arise from this research, such as emotional, psychosocial, spiritual or other benefits?' (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 11)
  - thinking about the benefits of research in terms of whether they are short term or long term (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 14)
  - thinking about the benefits of research to individuals who participate compared to others in their communities (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 12).

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5 In terms of assessing the quality of secondary literature sources, depending on the type of publication, the following may be considered: What is the purpose of the publication? Who funded and authored it? Are the research methods coherent and appropriate to the topic? Is the analysis unbiased and does it acknowledge power dynamics? Has it been edited or peer reviewed? Has it been through an ethics review process?

## 1.2 Risk management<sup>6</sup>

Risk management is critical to the success of any research or evidence-generation project and to ensuring that the project is implemented ethically. It is the process of identifying, assessing and mitigating risk throughout the life cycle of the project, playing a central role in ensuring that the project is completed on time, within budget and to the required quality standards.

Risk management should not be viewed as a means to eliminate all possible risks which may arise during the course of a project. It is a process which should be implemented to identify foreseeable risk (and benefits) to the project and its stakeholders and ensure that appropriate steps are taken to reduce the risk to a level which is determined to be acceptable. What is regarded as an acceptable level of risk (or what might be construed as a benefit) often varies between different donors, organisations and researchers but is informed by their risk appetite and legislation in the home or host nation.



### Creating a risk assessment

While a risk register provides a high-level view of risk to a research or evaluation project and its stakeholders, a risk assessment provides an important opportunity to explore risk and mitigation measures in greater detail.<sup>7</sup> Depending on the scope of the research project, it may be appropriate to have a risk assessment for each host country or region, or for each research subject within the host country where data collection is expected. In either case, each risk assessment should be drawn up by the researchers with input from stakeholders such as intended participants, community leaders and local staff. Filling in a risk assessment form is therefore likely to be a team effort (see [practice link](#) on risk assessments, risk acceptance and

<sup>6</sup> We would like to acknowledge Andrew Eckert (Global Security Advisor – Christian Aid) for his contribution to writing Section 1.2.

<sup>7</sup> A project usually begins with creating a risk register in the design stage. This can be used to identify, describe and rate appropriate mitigations for the main risks to:

- the sponsoring organisation (ie reputation, operational, financial)
- the researchers or evaluators
- the research participants
- the wider community of research participants (geographic or demographic).

This produces a high-level overview of the potential risks. In turn, this can be used to identify and assess the risks involved in a research or evaluation project.

approval). Before carrying out data-collection activities, organisations should specify who the competent authorities are in the various areas of risk, one of which should relate to ethics, and who should sign off risk assessments. Data-collection activities should not begin in a specific country or region until the risk assessment has been signed off by relevant stakeholders in the commissioning organisation.

To ensure that the commissioning organisation fulfils its duty of care obligations to the researchers and upholds the principle of 'Do No Harm', a risk assessment should identify foreseeable threats to researchers, support staff, participants and participants' communities. Typically, risk assessments identify hazards and threats relating to:

- health and safety
- security
- safeguarding
- protection
- data protection
- financial misappropriation.

In some cases, it may be appropriate or an organisational requirement to have individual risk assessments for each of these areas of risk, and researchers should consult staff responsible for these areas within the commissioning organisation for their guidance. (See [Section 4](#) for more information on carrying out high-risk research.)



#### PRACTICE LINK

### Who is involved in risk assessments, risk acceptance and approval?

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Risk assessments are only as good as the people involved in them. Every (I)NGO will have their own internal procedures. It may be necessary to involve:

- (I)NGO project management staff who coordinate the risk assessment
- specialist input (eg on data protection, safety/security, safeguarding, protections), especially for research/evaluation that involves sensitive topics/high-risk research
- relevant stakeholders within the commissioning organisation such as the budget holder, department head and internal REC (or similar body) who can approve the completed risk assessment
- local representatives (eg from the community or INGO) in helping identify risks and mitigations, especially for research/evaluation that involves sensitive topics/high-risk research.

It is quite possible that there will be differences in the risks identified by local community participants compared to outside (I)NGO staff and researchers (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 14). Community consultation about research ethics, where possible, encourages 'reflection [...] promoted by and among all those involved in the design, implementation and dissemination of the research, and wherever possible with participants and their communities. Different people will see different ethical issues in the same piece of research and therefore *broad consultation is best*' (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 6, emphasis added).

When (I)NGOs do not have formal processes for approving research, this can be a key issue with regard to approval of risk. In the absence of formal risk-approval processes, good practice would be to seek independent review and approval of the risk assessment by their line manager and/or the local country manager. This is especially true of research that involves sensitive topics/high-risk research.

Once approved, the risk assessment should be reviewed periodically throughout the project to record any changes in risk exposure, ensure that mitigation measures remain effective, and confirm that risk is still being managed to an acceptable level.

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## 1.3 Assessing and mitigating the ethical risks to ensure a 'Do No Harm' approach is adopted

Assessing and mitigating the ethical risks in any research or evidence-generation project is central to upholding the principle of 'Do No Harm' and to ensuring the quality and integrity of the data that is collected. This requires:

- engaging critically with how the research interacts with the research participants, the researchers or enumerators (data collectors), and the organisations involved in carrying out the research
- ensuring that the rights and dignity of the research participants are at the centre of the process and that the research (and the way it is designed) will lead to clear social development benefits in people's lives
- respecting people's right to decline to participate in research, which is often overlooked in development research (Dhungana, 2020)
- managing your data in a way that is safe, secure and responsible
- carrying out a power analysis looking at the different levels of marginalisation and context-specific nuances such as those present in conflict settings and those related to GESI.

An assessment of the ethical risks involved in any research activity and the actions that have been taken to mitigate that risk is usually always required in academic research. This is also becoming a requirement among publishers and funding bodies. We suggest that a useful way of achieving this in (I)NGO research, and of implementing an ethically rigorous research project, is to complete an ethics risk assessment (see [Tool 2](#)), and a data management plan (see [Tool 3](#)).



### PRACTICE LINK

#### Responsible data management

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**Responsible data management** is the practice of gathering, storing and using information to maintain the principles of 'Do No Harm'. Data protection focuses on privacy and legally enforceable rights but responsible data is broader: the possible effects of your work with data go far beyond the privacy of individuals. Data offers us opportunities to better understand people's needs and behaviours and to increase efficiency and impact. When used sensitively and appropriately, the information we collect, stories, perspectives and experiences of those people we serve can help bring about tremendous positive change. Data exercises power. It can create it, redistribute it, amplify or disrupt it. It can entrench certain perspectives and privilege certain actors, but it can also empower new voices and approaches. It can reveal and unravel atrocities, but it can also expose the vulnerable and marginalised, and exacerbate existing stigmas.

To ensure you 'do no harm' through your data practices, we recommend Oxfam's Responsible Data Lifecycle (2017), which is made up of eight steps as depicted in [Figure 2](#).<sup>8</sup>

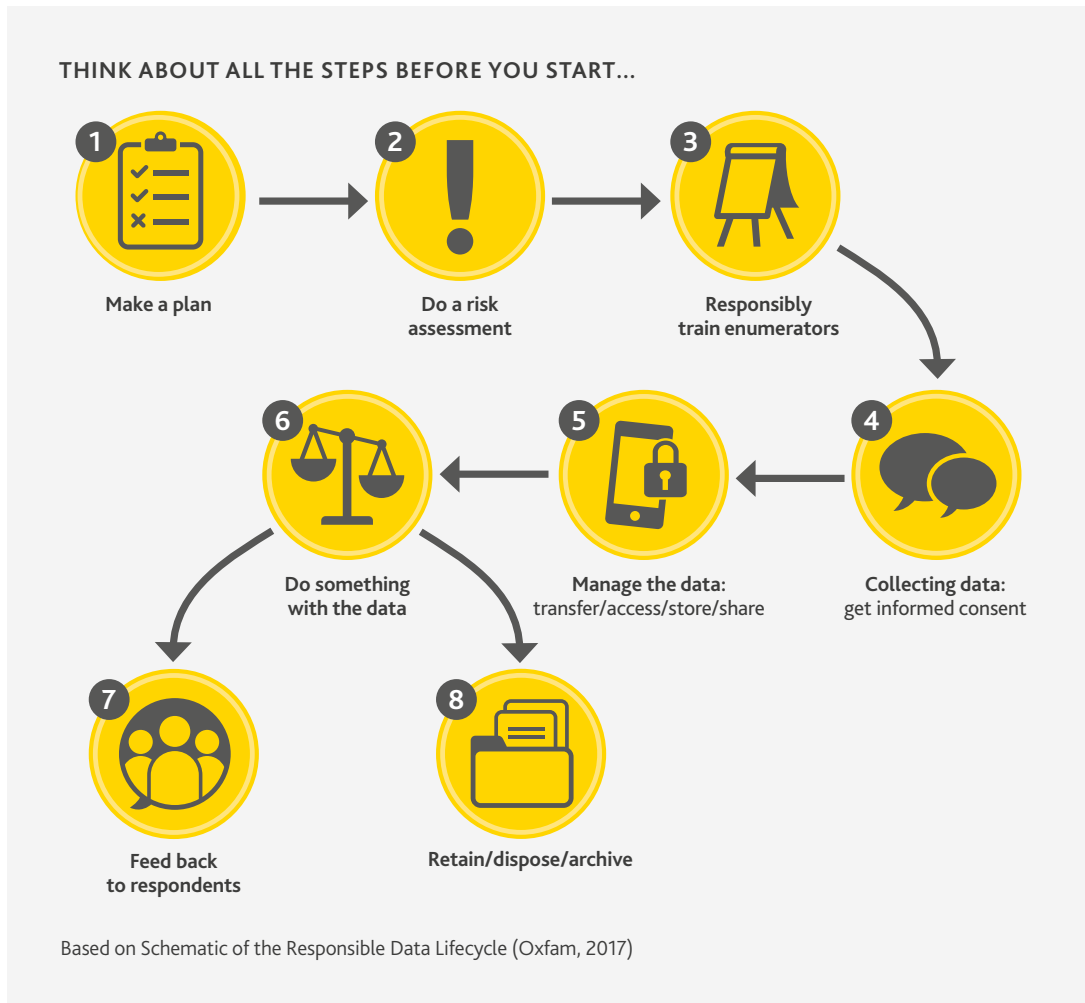
Questions to accompany these steps are included in [Tool 3](#).

Source: Jenny Burns, Senior Programme Officer – digital, Christian Aid

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8 As you work through these eight steps, remember that responsible data is much more than data protection. It covers inclusion, accountability, safeguarding, ethics and security. You can find further resources and guidance at [The Engine Room](#), [Oxfam's Responsible data management training pack](#) and [Principles for Digital Development](#).

Figure 2 Eight steps to ensuring you 'do no harm' through your data practices



## 1.4 Planning for meaningful engagement

(I)NGO research is largely practice-led, which means its objective is often to address local needs, benefit communities and improve programming practice or policies. We want the research process to be an empowering (or at least not disempowering) experience for all involved. To avoid the research being extractive and to promote the principle of 'giving back', the research design should maximise opportunities for meaningful engagement and empowerment (see [practice link](#) on extractive research, knowledge, power and reflexivity).

Ideally, research participants should feel they are gaining something from the questions being asked. So researchers should plan the research in such a way that participants gain something from discussing questions and from reflecting on the topic of inquiry. Participants should also feel they benefit from being listened to, either individually or in a group setting, which can be uplifting or even therapeutic. Feeding back to participants about the results of the research can be part of gaining something from the research, for example, if the research relates to advocacy. The research findings could empower participants to advocate more specifically on the issues that affect them. In the following [example](#) of the Qualitative Impact Assessment Protocol (QuIP), the idea of 'giving something back' has been limited to soliciting feedback and sharing findings with participants. However, we recognise it should also be extended to mean that the research participants have a say in or control over how the data is used, published and disseminated. This is a journey that we are still on.



## EXAMPLE

### The principle of 'giving something back' to the community in the Qualitative Impact Assessment Protocol (QulP) research design

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In 2016 Tearfund commissioned Bath Social and Development Research Ltd to undertake a Qualitative Impact Assessment Protocol (QulP) study in Uganda to assess the impact of the church and community mobilisation (CCM) programme there. From the outset the priority was to share the learning not only within Tearfund, but also with partners and community participants. A key feature of the QulP approach is that participants and researchers are 'blindfolded' to avoid bias: they are not told of Tearfund's involvement until after the interviews process.

Tearfund facilitated an 'unblindfolding' workshop at the end of the study to bring researchers and project staff together to discuss findings and determine what they might mean for future projects. This allowed the partners to challenge any initial interpretations they disagreed with and also began the process of drawing out recommendations. This meant partner staff and facilitators played a key role in generating new ideas for adapting and improving the programme, ideas that were then shared at two national gatherings of local church partners and facilitators.

It was important also to ensure community members involved in CCM could engage with the evaluation findings. During interviews, they were not aware Tearfund had commissioned the research, and the researchers were given no knowledge of Tearfund or CCM in advance. The participants only knew that the researchers were from a Ugandan university and had been commissioned to research changes in households' well-being. Later, at the 'unblindfolding workshop' in the study locations, staff was able to share the research findings, celebrate the community's achievements and reinforce the message: 'You have done this, not us.' This was in line with the CCM ethos of participation, empowerment and local ownership.

From the outset, we were concerned about the ethical implications of the blindfolding. We therefore asked how the participants found the research and provided a box where people could leave complaints or suggestions by way of feedback. Generally, they felt the approach meant they could be completely open about their situation.

Participants were encouraged to give feedback about preliminary findings from the study. Using a five-year timeline of CCM, we mapped some of the outcomes referred to in the QulP research, creating a pictorial diagram of what had happened, the key drivers of change and how the community had grown. This allowed the CCM group to reflect on their journey and discuss new ideas to improve their situation further. This included a discussion of what farmers had learnt about crops and planting cycles over the previous five years in the context of changing weather patterns.

Source: Charlotte Flowers, Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Tearfund



📷 An 'unblindfolding' workshop with participants in the QulP research study, at Angopet Pentecostal Assemblies of God Church in Soroti, Uganda. Feeding back to participants about the results of research can be a good way for researchers to 'give something back' to them. Photo: Charlotte Flowers/Tearfund

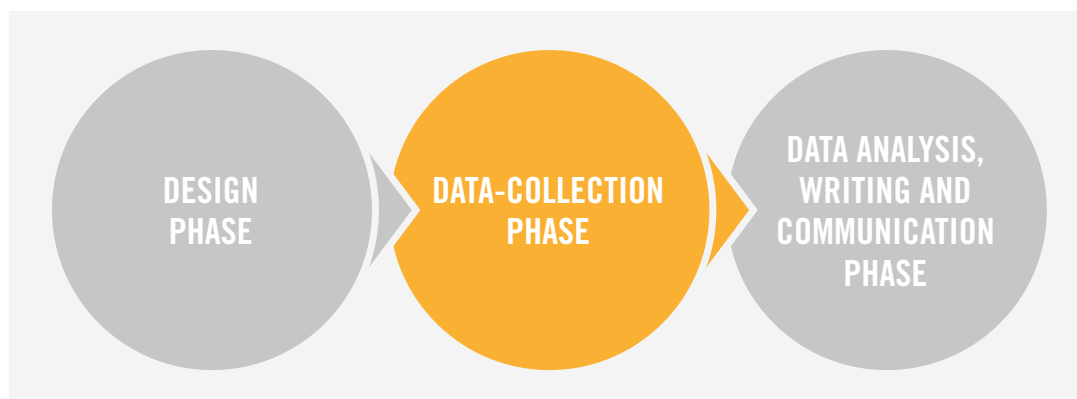
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## 2 ETHICAL PRINCIPLES DURING DATA COLLECTION IN THE FIELD

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Areas of ethical consideration in research and data collection often overlap and cannot always be neatly broken down. Generally, they need to include:

- planning for respect, dignity, inclusion and the rights of participants
- ensuring the safety and protection of all involved in data collection
- developing context-sensitive referral mechanisms
- gaining informed consent
- considering how participants will be compensated and how their privacy and confidentiality will be maintained
- emotional self-management.

A subsection approach has been chosen here for easier readability. In reality, the boundaries between these principles are highly fluid, and the overlapping realities involved in design and practice are often complex.

### 2.1 Planning for respect, dignity and inclusion of participants

Respect for individual persons and the wider community is a most basic ethical principle in engaging with human research participants. Respect, alongside professionalism, compassion, courtesy and sensitivity, are desirable qualities in researchers (Rivera and Borasky, 2009).



#### EXAMPLE

#### Different ways of expressing respect

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##### By selecting appropriate enumerators

The choice of enumerators during survey collection is one of the most important decisions to make, and they should be fully committed to the respect, dignity and inclusion of participants. Ideally, enumerators are people who speak the same language as the participants, who understand the local sensitivities and who are diverse and inclusive in their representation. Enumerators have to build a good rapport and trust with the interviewee, otherwise answers may not be completely open and can lead to biased results.

### Through choice of dress

Field workers are best advised to demonstrate respect by dressing in a way that is sensitive to the way participants dress, taking into account what they perceive as acceptable and safe. Expressions of respect in data collection can take many forms, such as consciously choosing contextually appropriate behaviours, speech and dress. Through actively considering what you wear in the community and what this may convey, you show reflexivity and respect. By neither 'overdressing' nor 'underdressing', visitors to the community are making an effort to be approachable and culturally sensitive. For example, urbanites' way of dressing might come across as showy in rural areas. Shorts and sleeveless shirts may look odd in conservative areas. Dressing too smartly or wearing expensive outfits or watches may be inconsiderate in poorer areas.

### By being mindful about timings for interview visits

Designing long interview sessions that take up the best part of people's day, or researchers not turning up on time as agreed, can compromise respect and can ignore the fact that time is precious to most research participants. Intentionality over being brief and precise in interview timings is a way of being mindful of participants' time. A common mistake is conducting surveys or interviews when participants are busy with agricultural or other tasks such as getting water. Considering when people are busy and recognising they have other important responsibilities are ways of paying respect.

Enabling participation in the research takes conscious planning on the part of (I)NGO staff, so that otherwise excluded participants have a chance to be included. Arrangements that are made should meet their particular requirements. The most common reasons for exclusion are communication and language barriers, disabilities (such as hearing impairments), accessibility, not understanding the task, and expenses incurred in travelling to remote or hard-to-reach venues.

Another key issue to consider, which is often a significant obstacle to participation, is the issue of power dynamics within communities: Who has power to speak and who might not be comfortable participating? These dynamics could be affected by many factors, including patriarchal norms, socio-economic status, gender and age.



Understanding these local power dynamics and developing a research design to overcome them is important (see [practice link](#) below). For instance, developing a focus group design which splits the groups by both gender and by age might encourage participation by younger women who might otherwise sit in silence. Researchers can also actively include people who are not 'power-holders' in communities, making sure their inclusion does not create more risk for participants. For example, a woman who may take part in a GBV focus group might be battered when she gets home if her husband disapproves of her participation. Do No Harm is much wider than just ensuring that a researcher does not cause direct harm; it needs to take into account the current norms of society.

The way work is prioritised due to a lack of time may also result in exclusion. (I)NGO staff are often under time pressure and juggle multiple work demands. Although they may have the best of intentions for inclusion, time pressures can lead to short-cuts. Realistic planning of the timescales are an essential part of professionalism and ensuring inclusion.

Respect for the dignity and inclusion of individual participants is to be reflected in the way focus groups and individual interviews or home visits are conducted. Here the framing of questions, and the use of inclusive and respectful language in survey and interview questions, are important. If the interview questions are written in English and need translating, they should always be cross-checked by local bilingual staff for culturally and context-specific appropriateness. When respect underpins conversations, questions and even mannerisms of field staff and consultants in data-collection processes, the overall mandate of (I)NGOs is reflected, and these processes become part of the organisation's wider work.



#### PRACTICE LINK

### Research ethics, gender equality and social inclusion

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An ethical approach in international development requires that individuals who are marginalised (such as women and girls, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities) are given the opportunity to participate in any research or evidence-generating activities, and feel safe to do so.

Ensure your research methods and tools are accessible to those with low literacy or those living with disabilities. With more data collection taking place remotely, consider how to ensure the participation and engagement of (already) marginalised groups who may struggle to access and use written and digital tools (including people with low literacy). Also, use accessible language, avoid technical jargon, complex words or sentences, and contextualise/adapt your tools before any sessions or interviews with participants.

When designing your data-collection and measurement tools, refer to the Washington Group Questions, designed to identify people with a disability and devised by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics.<sup>9</sup>

During interviews, be aware of the power dynamics in the room, as this will have an impact on meaningful participation. An equal number of different participants does not always lead to equal participation. Be prepared in advance for how to engage and seek out the voices of those who are marginalised. Also, avoid reinforcing existing biases and norms (eg researchers/evaluators agreeing with or laughing at gendered or racial jokes).

Consider differences in culture, behaviour and norms, religious beliefs and practices, sexual orientation, gender roles, disability, age and ethnicity, and other social differences such as class and race. Identify such differences within the group, as well as between the researcher and participants.

Consider:

- **when** your research activities take place. For example, should they occur at a certain time of day to fit with childminding schedules? Perhaps they need to take place at certain times of the month or year to fit with farming cycles, national holidays or adverse weather patterns?

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9 Available at: <http://www.washingtongroup-disability.com>

- **who** the research activities are with. For example, if your research is on a sensitive topic such as SGBV, consider which research tools are most appropriate (see more in the [example](#) of data collection on SGBV). Can you use a FGD or is an individual interview more appropriate? Also, consider that mixed groups (as regards age and gender) might be a barrier to women sharing their experiences.
- **where** your research activities take place. For example, is the location you are using safe and accessible to people with disabilities or people living in remote areas, and those without access to transport?
- **the type of spaces** that are created. Are they 'neutral' spaces where all can participate and be heard equally? Is Interpretation available for linguistic minorities and individuals with sensory impairments, or those who have psychosocial or cognitive disabilities? How might the researchers' identity influence the 'neutrality' of the group? For example, female researchers may be more appropriate for female-only research activities, while a facilitator with a disability may have more credibility working with people with disabilities.



## 2.2 Safety, 'Do No Harm' and protection of all

Harm to participants may arise from a number of factors, such as the stress of participation, loss of self-esteem or psychological turmoil from questions (SRA, 2003, p. 35). However, ethical research should not only 'do no harm', but also have potential 'to do good' (Madge, 1997, p. 114, cited in Clark, 2018). In order to be able 'to do good', ensuring safety is crucial – the safety of both researchers and research participants. In fact, ethical guidelines are put in place to protect research participants as well as researchers, but they are also intended to protect institutions and organisations in relation to reputational damage arising from badly conducted research (Bryman, 2012, p. 134).

Researchers should make every effort not to place themselves in dangerous situations. For example, researchers or evaluators should avoid being out in the field alone or interviewing people by themselves. Equally, research participants and interviewees should not experience any harm from expressing views or participating in the research, either during interviews or afterwards. Organisations should be protected from the legal and social repercussions of harmful and ethically unacceptable research practices by individuals representing them.

Interviewing at-risk (vulnerable) adults and children can come with particular ethical and safeguarding risks (see [Section 4](#)).<sup>10</sup> Extra care must be taken to protect the rights and well-being of vulnerable populations (SRA, 2003). A parent, guardian or close family member of these individuals, and/or other trusted people, should be present at the time of interview. In short, according to the basic principle of beneficence, the physical, mental and social well-being of all research participants should be protected, but those who are vulnerable should have special consideration. The protection of the participant is the primary responsibility of researchers and staff collecting the data (Rivera and Borasky, 2009). In engaging with vulnerable children as research participants, for example, researchers are also expected to strike a balance between the obligation to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, as well as the responsibility towards the welfare and well-being of children (Devries et al. 2015). Protecting children against potential backlash or stigma is important. At the same time, children may report something concerning their health and well-being that demands urgent attention.

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10 A child is defined as anyone under the age of 18, regardless of local definitions.



## PRACTICE LINK

### Research ethics and safeguarding policies – Tearfund example

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Safeguarding is about protecting children, young people and vulnerable adults from abuse and harm and the measures an organisation has in place for that purpose. Safeguarding is not about the risks posed by the environment in general (Saferworld, 2019, p. 9). The Charity Commission defines safeguarding incidents as 'allegations or incidents of abuse or mistreatment of people who come into contact with your charity through its work' (Bond, 2019b, p. 22). The Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub provides access to a wide range of materials relating to safeguarding in the humanitarian sector.<sup>11</sup>

According to Tearfund's safeguarding policies, staff and representatives must ensure that their behaviour promotes and allows everyone, but particularly children and vulnerable adults/adults at risk, to live free from:

- harm and abuse – including physical, sexual and emotional
- physical and sexual exploitation
- neglect
- discrimination
- human trafficking.

When research reveals any of these forms of harm, through disclosure of information in interviews or direct observation, confidentiality may have to be breached through internal reporting mechanisms provided it does not cause further harm (see [Section 2.5](#)). Reported unacceptable behaviours, practices or wrongdoing by Tearfund staff, representatives and partner staff are treated differently from incidents in the community more generally (Tearfund, 2020b).

Note: This example draws from safeguarding policies specific to Tearfund. For further safeguarding guidance, you should refer to your own organisation's policies as approaches may differ.

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## Developing a context-sensitive referral mechanism

When considering the safety of all parties involved in the research or evaluation, it is important to ensure that contextually sensitive referral mechanisms are implemented from the very beginning of the project. Such a mechanism should allow for reporting on any adverse events or incidents as a result of participating in the research, including:

- safeguarding and protection incidents such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, bullying, bribery and exchanging of benefits (eg goods, food and money in exchange for sexual favours)
- discrimination at work
- job losses
- security incidents (eg theft or accidents).

A referral mapping should be carried out to ensure that those showing distress or raising issues of concern can be given information about support services available in the area where they live. It is also important to be clear about the responsibilities of different stakeholders for acting on issues of concern. Referral mechanisms should be appropriate, safe and accessible for different groups involved in any given project. A mapping of available referral services would ideally involve organisations working with marginalised groups (or those easily discriminated against) that need special consideration in relation to referrals, eg women, people living with disabilities, people living with HIV, displaced people and people with diverse gender identities. A referral system would also need to consider the legal environment as well as the social norms and attitudes towards the groups involved in the research.

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<sup>11</sup> See Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub: <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/>

When providing information, or making a referral, great care should be taken over how this information is given. For example, information regarding gender-based violence should not be given in a standalone document, but as part of a list of all services so that it does not highlight the issue the individual is facing (in case, for example, someone witnesses the exchange).

## 2.3 Informed consent

Gaining 'informed consent' is regarded as a key element of ethical research by all professional associations and research organisations, and is a requirement under GDPR.<sup>12</sup> In this section we seek to gain a broader understanding of 'informed consent' beyond the usual consent form (see definitions below), and then offer some practical suggestions and observations on good-practice informed consent in the (I)NGO context.




### DEFINITIONS

#### Informed consent in research

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**INFORMED CONSENT** in research is defined as the act of providing information to a potential research participant through which they gain a full understanding of their involvement in the study and the researcher's responsibilities towards them as a research participant. This enables them to decide whether or not to take part in the study. It involves three steps: the giving of information; the discussion, clarification and review of the information; and obtaining the person's written and/or verbal consent (Roper, 2007).



 Participants giving their consent prior to taking part in Christian Aid research in Kaduna state, Nigeria. 'Informed consent' is key to ethical research/evaluation, but should be understood as a dynamic process of communication between the researcher and prospective participant, which includes, but is not limited to, the documentation of consent. Photo: Emmanuel Bagudu/Christian Aid

**CONSENT AS AN INTERPERSONAL PROCESS** People understand informed consent in differing ways. We understand consent as part of a communication process between the researcher and the participant, which starts before the research is initiated, and continues for the duration of the study or interview (Rivera and Borasky, 2009). It is helpful to think of informed consent as a process more dynamic and all-encompassing than just the

<sup>12</sup> GDPR sets a high legal standard asking for, recording and managing consent (see ICO, 2020).

act of verbal or written consent. While documented consent (signed forms or verbal recordings) may be the required legal proof of consent, a more dynamic understanding of informed consent covers both the researcher and participants for the duration of the entire process (eg participants have the right and option to withdraw consent even after data collection). Guillemin and Gillam (2004) writing on 'Ethically important moments in research' put it like this: 'Informed consent is at heart an *interpersonal process* between researcher and participant, where the prospective participant comes to an understanding of what the research project is about and what participation would involve and makes his or her own free decision about whether, and on what terms, to participate' (ibid. p. 272, emphasis added).

**PROCEDURAL CONSENT AND CONSENT IN PRACTICE** While (I)NGO practitioners want to understand consent as less of a 'tick-box' exercise, we still need practical, feasible tools to use. In other words, two dimensions of research ethics are important in informed consent: both 'procedural ethics' (the tools we use), as well as 'ethics in practice' (the everyday ethical issues requiring ongoing reflexivity) (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

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Talking about 'procedural ethics', it is considered standard good research practice that researchers and evaluators obtain informed consent of those interviewed, either written or verbally, indicating their voluntary participation in the data collection. For most research institutions and professional associations, this involves signing a written consent form. However, in the case of INGOs' community work, obtaining verbal consent prior to interviews is sometimes more appropriate, especially when participants are illiterate. This involves verbally explaining the nature and purpose of the research (using [Tool 4](#) in Section 5). Staff and collaborators need to decide whether to obtain written or verbal consent on a case-by-base basis, as appropriate. For the purpose of documentation, verbal consent should be audio-recorded at the start of each interview. Participants should also understand that they can remove their consent at any time.

A key concern in achieving informed consent is maintaining an ethically appropriate relationship between researcher/evaluator and participant in the community. This covers the issue of 'dependent relationships' which can exist between individuals who have known each other in a different context, such as relatives, friends, former colleagues etc. In some occasions, to keep the data-collection process neutral and unbiased, recruiting into a study/survey participants who are connected to the researchers in such 'dependent relationships' can be problematic. On other occasions, such as discussions on SGBV or in very sensitive contexts, a well known trustworthy person may be more appropriate to achieve better-quality data.

'Gatekeepers', interpreters and translators, who can be of enormous value to the interview process, need to be brought on board too, making sure they are taking consent seriously. Given the power dynamics that can exist between gatekeepers and community participants, the latter might feel obliged to give consent to maintain good relationships. When working with interpreters and translators, there is a risk that they may speak on behalf of the participants or even over them – this is of real ethical concern. Briefings by accompanying I(NGO) staff on the principles of informed consent in data collection for gatekeepers, local officials and other professionals involved in the research process is vital to achieving informed consent. When engaging with local gatekeepers, researchers also need to consider their power and status and the potential influence they have over local communities or research participants or research audiences (eg government officials, policymakers) as this can have implications for how the research is designed, operationalised and disseminated (Brydon, 2006).

## Research study information sheet for participants

For the purposes of obtaining consent from research participants, a research study 'participant information sheet' should be written up in accessible, clear language. We have developed a template which can be used and adapted ([Tool 4](#) in Section 5). Getting the amount of information right is important, and is bound to vary from project to project. There needs to be enough information to ensure participants are adequately informed about the purpose and nature of the study or evaluation, so that they can decide if they want to participate in it, but it should not contain too much, to avoid overwhelming them with incomprehensible details (SRA, 2003).

This sheet can be read out to participants in briefing them. Spoken agreement can then be sought (verbal consent), or the sheet can be given to the participants to read and sign themselves (written consent). Both the briefing and the subsequent verbal consent should be recorded on an audio device.

It is helpful for staff and consultants to 'test' it for sense and clarity by reading it out to colleagues before actually using it with research participants, ie feedback from other staff members could be incorporated.

## When informed consent is not possible

Formally obtaining consent is not always appropriate, and sometimes simply not feasible. In some cases, trust may be undermined, and the likelihood that people feel comfortable in participating in the research may be reduced by insisting on their signing formal consent forms. Where communities are suspicious of formal bureaucratic procedures and the state in general, having to sign a printed form may be seen as problematic (ASA, 2011). As ethnographic studies show, when staff or researchers are present in a community over some time, it would be disruptive and artificial to pause informal conversations relevant to the research or evaluation and explain the process in every instance (Daehnhardt, 2019). When working with research participants who have limited literacy or learning difficulties, obtaining formal consent may not be the right thing to do; instead, giving the chance to discuss the interview process in an accessible way with participants, their friends, family members or guardians may be more appropriate (ASA, 2011). When formal consent is not obtained for whatever reason, INGO staff must always act in the 'spirit of informed consent' (Fluehr-Lobban, 2003). This means, at a minimum, people should be generally aware why (I)NGO staff and collaborators are collecting this data and what it is for (see, for instance, the [practice link](#) on the importance of ethical story gathering). A short acknowledgment of how this was done can be included in the final research report.

## Other dilemmas in informed consent<sup>13</sup>

Although informed consent is considered the basic principle of ethical research, securing informed consent is far from straightforward. Research participants may consent to participate in research due to perceived superiority of the researchers, or even unspoken benefit that the research might yield in future (Fujii, 2012). This issue brings to the fore power dynamics that may shape the research agenda and process.

The nature and process of informed consent may also be more complex in certain research approaches. For example, in participatory research, interactions with the research participants may begin well before the procedural approval of the research project is secured and formal consent is given by participants. In addition, the individualised nature of informed consent that mostly focuses on the rights and autonomy of individual research participants may also come into conflict with the collaborative ethos of participatory research (Bussu et al. 2020). In participatory research, it is common for participants to know of each other's lived realities and their perspectives, making it difficult to maintain privacy and confidentiality towards individual research participants. The process of informed consent, privacy and confidentiality is also complex in certain research methods. Compared to individual interviews where it is easier to ensure privacy and confidentiality of information, in focus group discussions maintaining such privacy is not only difficult but it may be at odds with the group perspectives.

Being sensitive to local refusals and reluctance to participate in the research project may need consideration. Such refusals may also mean giving consideration to alternative forms of research designs and methods. For example, where participants refuse to be interviewed, it may be more appropriate to use participant observation that helps illuminate the everyday realities of the local communities.

The concept and process of informed consent is also far from stable in volatile contexts (see [Section 4](#)). The common practice may be to respect the privacy and anonymity of research participants. But in some exceptional cases research participants may wish to be identified in the reporting of the research, in which case the researcher may have to respect the wish of the participants to be named.

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<sup>13</sup> Nimesh Dhungana (Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics) contributed to writing this section, for which the authors are grateful.





## PRACTICE LINK

### The importance of ethical story gathering

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▣ Pastor Pedro Angel Ortiz Rivero telling his story, of how he came to be building a church in the Lomas 14 de Agosto neighbourhood of Cochabamba, Bolivia. Good practice in ethical story gathering involves 'stewarding the stories of others'. Ethical research and evaluation also involves 'stewarding' – doing justice to – the contributions and perspectives of participants. Photo: Tom Price-Ecce Opus/Tearfund

It is worth bearing in mind that it is not only research and M&E that deal with data: other work streams in (I)NGOs, such as fundraising, campaigning and media activities also involve data collection. (I)NGOs rely on the images and personal stories of the people they work with to communicate the importance and impact of their work (Bond, 2019a). Story gathering for these purposes may be done alongside evidence-generating data collection, or as a separate activity. However it is achieved, 'stewarding the stories of others' is an ethical concern for community and non-profit practitioners (Ethical Storytelling, 2020).

While the nature of the data, or content, being gathered may be different, eg a fundraising story will often require more personal information, extensive background and a range of images, the central ethical principles outlined in this guide still apply. For both types of gathering the 'Do No Harm' principle is fundamental, as is the practice of ensuring informed consent. Ethical considerations need to be applied in both the process of gathering the information and in the portrayal of that information.

What is most crucial in any of these activities – which are different ways of looking for and at data – is to remain transparent and open with the participants, clearly explaining why the stories are being gathered, how they might be used, for what purpose and who might see the stories. And, importantly, the participants should know that they have the right to opt out.

There may be some differences to be aware of. For example, anonymity is a key ethical concern in research data collection, and pseudonyms (replacement names) are used in the write-up to guarantee research participants' privacy. In contrast, when collecting stories and images for fundraising purposes, specific consent to use original names of participants in the communication of stories is sought, as long as there is no risk to the individual in doing so.

Other major ethical issues for best practice in the collection and use of images and stories include responsible portrayal, such as accuracy and context, avoiding perpetuating (negative) stereotypes of 'poverty' and using third-party content appropriately (Bond, 2019a). Practically this means, for example, a balanced portrayal of reality in different country contexts, using images truthfully and providing accurate and informative captions, as well as being intentional about mentioning copyright.

If you are gathering content for purposes other than research, additional guidance may apply and you should connect with appropriate people in your organisation to access that, or refer to guidelines specific to the collection of content (Bond, 2019a).

Source: Cheryl Bannatyne, International Communications Coordinator, Tearfund

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## 2.4 Remuneration

In line with common research practice, research participants should not be paid for their time to participate in (I)NGO-initiated surveys or interviews. Financial remuneration can reaffirm socio-inequalities and create expectations that researchers or organisations may be unable to meet, and in the worst-case scenario it may skew or distort research results (Clark, 2018). For example, people may feel that having been paid, and to get a chance to participate again, they need to provide positive feedback in their contributions to an evaluation (IOD PARC, 2019, p. 23). Incentive payments to encourage research participation are contentious and risk breaching the principle of informed consent. Paying someone to participate in the research process can mean individuals, or family members who influence them, experience a form of coercion to take part since they want the money (IOD PARC, 2019, p. 23). Indirect financial remuneration, such as the provision of services provided by the (I)NGOs, or vouchers used to purchase services provided by the (I)NGO, should not be used as incentives for participation either.

In some instances, such as with FGDs which may require participants to travel to a common venue, it is appropriate to reimburse participants for direct travel costs incurred, such as bus tickets or train fares. It should be clearly communicated that only direct costs (such as transport) are compensated for. This will help manage expectations between those who live locally and those who have had to travel so that any cause for suspicion can be avoided. Child care can be provided at the interview venue so that parents – in the majority of cases, mothers – are not prevented from participating. It should be clearly explained to those living in the research location (and therefore, not travelling) that others are receiving compensation for the costs of transport and for that reason only.

In any case, it is important to express gratitude to participants. This can be through a small gift, as a 'token of appreciation', such as some fruits, staple foods or branded pens. Offering hospitality, such as biscuits and tea or lunch after a focus group interview, is appropriate.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.5 Privacy and confidentiality

The research should be conducted in places where participants feel comfortable and safe. This could be in their own homes or in socially acceptable and appropriate places for socialising. It is important not to conflate confidentiality and anonymity. **Confidentiality** means not reporting or writing up something the interviewers have been told in confidence, while **anonymity** means not disclosing the source, but the information itself can be reported or analysed (Clark, 2018).

Confidentiality can pose a real ethical dilemma for (I)NGO-based research. One question is confidentiality among participants, which applies mostly to FGDs. Will participants be asked and expected to maintain confidentiality towards other participants, protecting their private stories and views, and not discuss these with others outside the interview? How will this be addressed in a group interview?

Another question is confidentiality by the (I)NGO staff towards the participants. When observing forms of violence or safeguarding issues involving (I)NGO staff or partner staff, these would have to be reported using internal safeguarding reporting policies and structures (see [Section 2.2](#)). In that sense, the principle of research confidentiality may have to be broken in individual cases. Similarly, when thinking about the analysis, publication and dissemination of the research findings, complete confidentiality is often not feasible. *Anonymity* may be more realistic to aim for and attain in these circumstances, and should be guaranteed to participants, unless they explicitly want to be acknowledged in the research or evaluation for what they said. However, this needs to be considered alongside the potential for negative effects on the anonymity of others in the same research or evaluation (see [Section 3.1](#)).

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<sup>14</sup> On a different note, if the researcher is going to someone's home, they may be offered tea or food and not accepting hospitality could be considered offensive. Accepting hospitality can build trust and rapport.



## EXAMPLE

### Data collection on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)

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A unique set of ethical challenges and responsibilities is attached to any data-gathering activity that touches on the issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This includes collecting data from people who are survivors of SGBV, and also asking people who *may* be survivors, questions about a highly personal, sensitive topic. Failure to protect the privacy of participants can result in physical, psychological and social harm and may even put lives at risk (WHO, 2007).

Developed by Tearfund, Transforming Masculinities is an approach to promoting gender equality and positive masculinities within faith communities (Deepan, 2017). The goal is prevention of SGBV via transformed social and gender norms. This innovation has been adapted among Protestant congregations in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where it is known as Masculinité, Famille, et Foi (MFF). Following research to evaluate its effectiveness and scalability, MFF is being scaled up in other parts of DRC and in Rwanda.

The research into the effectiveness of MFF, including data collection through surveys and in-depth interviews with congregation members, was guided and informed by an ethical protocol (IRH, 2016). Under the protocol, measures were taken to protect participants' privacy by maintaining confidentiality. These included conducting each interview in a private place of the participant's choice, not holding events where participants would meet, and following strict data-management procedures. Researchers did not carry data between communities, and instead, at the end of each day, returned recording devices, tablets, consent forms and notes to the offices of the research partner. There, paper-based consent forms and notes were kept in a secure, locked location and made accessible only to study personnel. Computer-based data was removed from the data-collection devices, encrypted, password-protected, and made available only to lead study personnel. All audio recordings were deleted as soon as they had been transcribed, to guard against voice identification.

Other measures taken under the protocol included: an informed consent process conducted in the preferred language of the participant and assisted by independent witnesses; matching the sex of participants and researchers (men interviewed men, women interviewed women); and making appropriate referrals to local health and support services. All of these measures were grounded in researchers' specialised training and experience, with which comes the awareness and ability to take a whole host of 'measures', small actions and decisions that together make a big difference to their own and participants' well-being. Examples include: developing a rapport with participants in order to minimise distress; sensitively offering participants multiple opportunities to end or pause an interview; being able to judge when it would be appropriate to offer information and advice about referral services; and being self-aware of emotional and social harm that may come to them, as researchers, and how to cope.

Source: Rachel Paton, Research and Learning Analyst, Tearfund, based on WHO (2007) and IRH (2016)



📷 A team of SGBV practitioners and experts, photographed in 2014. It is vital that, for SGBV research, all members of staff are selected carefully and have specialised training and experience. Photo: Andrew Philip/Tearfund

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## 2.6 Emotional self-management

Managing your emotions in response to what research participants say is an important aspect of social research, both during data collection and write-up of findings. Researchers' outer demeanours, as well as internal emotions and attitudes, and inner perspectives of the social world, have the potential of 'doing an injustice' to research participants and colleagues (SRA, 2003, p. 27). Too much (or too little) emotional involvement can have a detrimental impact on the research process, while a healthy level of empathetic, yet respectfully distant, emotional engagement can benefit the interviewing and writing process. Awareness of emotions in research raises important questions, such as how to respond to and manage stress, anxiety and anger evoked in yourself, participants and colleagues during the data-collection process (Alderson, 2007). Awareness and management of your own emotions is crucial in achieving ethical and 'unbiased' research processes and outputs.



### EXAMPLE

#### Trauma sensitivity and researcher reflexivity

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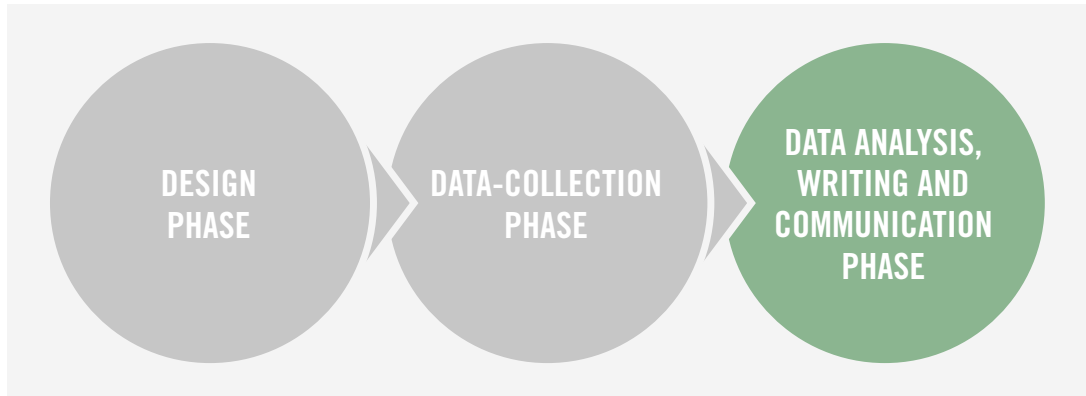
Emotional self-management in (I)NGO research can have many aspects and impacts. For example, in conflict and peacebuilding research, researcher fatigue is very common, and self-care – looking after one's personal well-being such as getting enough rest – is important for those working in such challenging settings. A great deal of pressure is placed on researchers or evaluators who work in difficult, stressful circumstances, such as in conflict settings, where they discuss highly sensitive issues on a daily basis. Listening to the life experiences of participants – especially very violent ones – can be traumatic to the listener and is sometimes referred to as 'vicarious trauma' (SVRI, 2015). During such moments, if researchers sense stress is being triggered by what they hear, pausing the interview and taking a break or asking a colleague to continue can be helpful. More substantial support mechanisms, such as providing access to stress-management or counselling services, may be needed at times (Saferworld, 2019, p. 5).

Trauma sensitivity is important – the ability to identify trauma in oneself as a researcher and knowing how to process traumatic experiences and re-lived experiences. So too is researcher reflexivity, the ability to reflect how one's traumatic experience may impact on the neutrality of data interpretation etc. The same applies to other traumatic experiences or processing different forms of violence and abuse witnessed by the researcher in the community. These can impact a researcher particularly strongly if at some point in their lives they have experienced abuse personally. This can cause re-traumatisation and even post-traumatic stress disorders.

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### 3 ETHICS DURING ANALYSIS, WRITE-UP AND COMMUNICATION OF FINDINGS

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Once the data has been collected, consideration needs to be given to the ethical issues encompassed in how the data is analysed, presented and communicated. This requires thinking about the quality and integrity of the data, the purpose of the data, and how it is shared. A key ethical principle is that only data that is going to be used should be collected, and it should be of the highest-possible quality – through good practice in recording, transcription and translation (if conducted in a different language from that of the report or any other communications output). It should be shared in a way that promotes fairness and social justice, and enables others to use it.



## 3.1 Making choices to achieve high-quality research

Research ethics and research quality are related. In some ways, poor-quality research is *unethical*, because it does not do justice to the participation and voice of participants. For example, from experience, one of the challenges with data quality during analysis and writing-up can be researchers submitting forms containing errors when completing multiple (if not hundreds) of forms in a short space of time, in the same location and possibly in a rush late at night. This is a serious ethical concern as it invalidates and discredits the research findings.

There are several things you can do to ensure your data is both of good quality and inclusive:

1. **Note-taking or transcriptions of interviews.** Plan for high-quality recording, transcription (and if necessary translation) of interviews, because rigour in good-quality data recording will help with the accurate portrayal of people's voices in the writing-up phase. If you do not have time or financial resources for transcribing the data collected, then ensure that the notes taken are detailed enough. This is the second-best option, but does not produce material for detailed direct quotes. If you use quotes in your writing, ensure this is exactly what was said: otherwise use an indirect style where a more approximate idea of that data can be shared.



### EXAMPLE

#### Ensuring quality transcriptions of interviews – questions to think through

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- If the interviewers are not fluent in the local language, who will interpret for them?
- How will you ensure that the authenticity of the interviewee's answers is maintained? Taking notes may be the easiest and cheapest way, but is it ensuring the highest quality?
- How will interviews be recorded, transcribed and, if necessary, translated into English? Will this be verbatim – word for word – to allow for exact quotes of research participants? Will you hire the best-available professionals for this? Can you reduce costs by using a computerised transcription service which will be edited by a translator?



📷 A researcher recording her interview with a participant in the village of Nyamdehun Bessima, Pujahun district, Sierra Leone. High-quality recording and transcription of interviews supports the accurate portrayal of participants' voices in the writing-up phase. Photo: Tom Pilston/Christian Aid

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2. **Participant feedback.** Consider how participants will be involved in providing feedback on the data and research findings, to ensure they are appropriately represented and have ownership of their data. When analysing your findings, think about your coding schemes and the way in which you will label and refer to the different groups who are represented in your research. Are the terms you use to reference a group respectful and inclusive? Plan to meet participants to validate the results and ensure they represent their views. Give them feedback on what happened with their data and, where possible, involve them in any subsequent action planning. All interviews and research activities carried out should include at least two feedback channels that are accessible to the participant (eg suggestion box, phone number, WhatsApp etc).
3. **Disaggregated data analysis.** When analysing your data, decide which categories you will use to disaggregate your data. At the very least, it should be disaggregated by **location** and by **sex**. Where possible, you should also disaggregate the data by **age** (actual age where possible) and **disability** (based on Washington Group Questions).<sup>15</sup> Depending on the research objectives and context, other vulnerable and/or marginalised categorisations should be factored in.<sup>16</sup>
4. **Using pseudonyms.** Safeguard participants' privacy in the write-up and communication of findings. This is particularly important in the case of sensitive research topics or localities and research with children, to avoid putting them at risk of potential abuse. No real names should be used in the writing-up phase of evaluation findings or research case studies. In fact, even interview transcripts should not use real names, to avoid these being used by secondary researchers or analysts. When people are quoted, they can be given either pseudonyms or a descriptor indicating some biographical information, without revealing the actual identity of a person, such as 'Older woman in the south district'.<sup>17</sup>
5. **Safeguarding participants' anonymity is not always as simple as changing names.** Ethical considerations of assigning pseudonyms include: using culturally appropriate names for the region/ethnic group that the interviewees are from, while also not making them too identifiable in so doing, and considering whether first names or surnames (Mark or Mr Gonzales) may be more appropriate. In addition, sometimes anonymising locations or organisations is necessary to eliminate the possibility of research participants being identifiable. At all times, beware if biographical information could be indicating who the person is because, for instance, only one 'older woman in the south district' was interviewed.



## DEFINITIONS

### Anonymisation and pseudonymisation

**ANONYMISATION** can be defined as the removal from data of any personal identifier, thereby making it impossible to relate the data or sample back to the participant.

**PSEUDONYMISATION** refers to the process of coding the data (sometimes at the time of collection) and removing all personal identifiable data for analysis, including real names.

Source: Roper, 2007

6. **Use and communication of data.** Ensure that the data is used for its intended purpose and that the use of the data is maximised (see [Tool 3](#)). This should be decided in the research design phase and explained to participants as part of the participant information given prior to interviews. A communications plan should be developed to help think through how best to communicate the research to key audiences (including the communities who were in the research). Different audiences will need to be reached in different ways – through different channels and languages. Depending on objectives, the research findings could be shared with the media, to raise the profile of the research, or with governmental bodies if the aim is to influence

<sup>15</sup> The Washington Group Questions are available at: <http://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/>

<sup>16</sup> The extent to which you are able to disaggregate your data and look at the intersectionalities also depends on your sample size; the more categories we include the less representative the sample will be.

<sup>17</sup> For more examples on biographical descriptors in research reports, refer to Daehnhardt and Paton (2020).

policy. Consideration should be given to sharing the data with national research bodies with similar research interests. If the intention is to publish the research findings in order to reach academic audiences, these should be made available through open access. If the data is used for additional purposes beyond those originally stated, this will need to be explained to the participants during the informed consent process.

When publishing any of your findings, consideration should be given to who will be acknowledged. All contributors should be fairly acknowledged. There should be clarity on who owns the data and on who holds the intellectual property of any research outputs and publications. Key stakeholders should agree on who should be named in the research and who should be kept anonymous (and why). These issues should be thought through before the analysis and write-up stages, so that everyone involved will be duly acknowledged, and ethical conundrums arising from these issues can be avoided.

## 3.2 Reflexivity: power and representation



### EXAMPLE

#### Ethical functions of reflexivity

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Reflexivity is defined as ‘the act of someone being able to examine his or her own feelings, reactions, and motives (ie reasons for acting) and how these influence what he or she does or thinks in a situation’.<sup>18</sup> In research and evaluation, reflexivity serves a number of important ethical functions.

It can help you both to reflect about how your research intervention might affect the research participants before any actual research is conducted, and to consider how you would respond as a researcher in the sorts of situations that you can at this stage only envisage (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 277). By doing this, reflexivity can help researchers and evaluators to pre-empt some of the ethical risks involved in the research and respond appropriately.

It can help reduce the risk of ‘researcher bias’ which can negatively impact the quality of the data. Reflexivity recognises that when carrying out research you are immersing yourself in a social and political context and a reality that is different from your own. This risks the researcher or evaluator imposing their own worldview and beliefs about the nature of reality onto the research. This can influence both how you are received (and therefore the quality of the data that is collected) and how you analyse and interpret the findings (Smyth and Robinson, 2001). This risks compromising the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. Reflexivity positions you within the research and helps you be more critical about how you interpret the data (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

Ethical responsibilities of presenting a fair account of what research participants said and meant are not easy to navigate. Fieldwork, ie data collection, but also writing, are located within contexts of power, and ideals of participation often remain aspirational (Clark, 2018, p. 15). Therefore, reflexivity in research can help you to understand and acknowledge the power dynamics that operate between yourself, the research and the participants, and the impact this might have on your research (see [practice link](#) on extractive research, knowledge, power and reflexivity). Ultimately, this has an impact on how valid and trustworthy the data is.

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18 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/reflexivity>



Introducing reflexivity into the research process assists in mitigating these risks. This requires discussing and reflecting on the following:

1. The different aspects of your own identity as well as that of the research participants, such as race, gender, age, class, disability, ethnicity, nationality etc (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). How do these different identities intersect and relate to each other? It also requires thinking about your positionality within the research context. Are you an insider or outsider to the community in which your research is located? How will your identity and positionality be perceived by the research participants? Will they trust you enough to be open and honest about the information they are sharing with you? Similarly, what does this mean for how you perceive the participants? How will this impact on how trustworthy and valid your data is?
2. Who is asking the questions and who is answering the questions. How does this shape and impact on which questions get asked and how the findings are represented?
3. How our research and data-collection practices may (unintentionally) be reinforcing or endorsing unequal power structures eg the way researchers can present themselves to a community by arriving in a sophisticated car, or engaging only with certain members of the community.
4. How a range of stakeholders and participants can be involved in the interpretation of the data and discussion of findings. Have you reviewed what formats and languages will meet the needs of different groups and have you consulted on formats with different audiences? What spaces allow for this?
5. What is the plan to evaluate how well ethical issues were identified and addressed before and during the research, with special attention given to any unanticipated ethical issues that arose during the process?



#### EXAMPLE

### Reflexivity and conflict sensitivity throughout the research process – reflections from Christian Aid

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An international organisation wants to carry out research on SGBV in a rural region of an African country. The nation has a long history of communal violence and is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines. Women and people who identify as LGBTIQ+ also face major discrimination.

The INGO has decided to send a group of young men and women to carry out a series of FGDs. Although the researchers work for an international charity, they are all from the local community and all from the same ethnic and religious group.

Consider the identities of the researchers and the research participants. What power dynamics are there in this relationship? How might this translate and impact the FGD? For example, how likely is it that women will share their experience of SGBV with a young male researcher? How would their responses change if the women conducting the research were married or older?

Do the participants in the FGD come from both sides of the community divide? What if they all came from the same side? What power dynamics does this bring with it and how might it impact the discussion? Will the participants trust the researchers and evaluators? How will this affect the quality of the data and the findings? How would this change if the researchers were from outside the community or even from another country?

Finally, what approach will you take to ensure your research is inclusive of intersecting identities such as women with low literacy, living with disabilities or identifying as LGBTIQ+, or men who have been affected by abuse? How will you ensure the FGD allows for safe and meaningful engagement with marginalised groups?

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## 4 SENSITIVE TOPICS AND HIGH-RISK RESEARCH

When research is considered to be 'high risk', (I)NGO staff, partners and collaborators must be particularly careful. High-risk research includes any research activity that involves one or more of the following:

- children (defined as anyone under 18 years old, irrespective of the local definition) or adults who are vulnerable or at risk (see [Section 4.1](#))
- significant concerns around personal safety or physical discomfort for the participants or researchers (see examples of [humanitarian crisis contexts](#), and other [high-risk research settings](#))
- sensitive topics such as trauma, bereavement, drug use, SGBV, human rights such as sexual and reproductive health etc. The sensitivity of the topic will depend on the context (see [Section 4.2](#)).



Any research that is considered to be high risk should ideally go through a formal ethics review process. While this has generally been the case in academic research, it is now also starting to gain currency among practitioners within the development sector. An alternative approach, which is gaining traction among community-based practitioners, is to develop community-led ethics reviews (see Narayanan, 2020). Both approaches involve careful thinking about ethical implications and addressing these concerns, making decisions to minimise the risk of unintentionally harming vulnerable individuals. (See [practice link](#) on risk assessments, risk acceptance and approval.) In some instances, this may mean not conducting a particular aspect of the research, or modifying it (see [example](#) on ethical dilemmas in high-risk research settings). Given the mandate of (I)NGOs and FBOs, and the kind of communities where they and their partners work, aspects of vulnerability and risk can frequently be expected to be a part of data-collection processes.

We now look at two aspects of high-risk research: research in humanitarian crisis contexts, and the particular ethical dilemmas that can arise for researchers in high-risk research settings.



## EXAMPLE

### Research in humanitarian crisis contexts – Elrha example

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A humanitarian crisis can be defined as a situation in which there is a widespread threat to life, physical safety, health or basic subsistence that exceeds the coping capacity of individuals and communities (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 2). It is increasingly recognised that, in order to respond to the needs of people affected by humanitarian crises, research involving them as participants is vital. In humanitarian contexts, however, ethical challenges associated with research tend to be exacerbated. Faced with high levels of humanitarian need, many types of intervention – not only research – demand funding, attention and time. Therefore, ensuring that research is relevant, important and beneficial for affected communities is an acute ethical concern. Meanwhile, some humanitarian crises lead to sudden influxes of international personnel to implement all kinds of interventions. This gives rise to the risk that research will undermine, rather than strengthen, local capacity, through local researchers being pushed out of opportunities to lead studies.

Crisis-affected people may experience new and heightened vulnerabilities, having suffered serious losses and trauma. This presents a number of ethical risks related to participation, including: the risk that people may be re-traumatised through their participation in research, and the risk that they will perceive participation to be a condition of receiving aid. Yet, many will show remarkable resilience and the desire to tell their stories. Thus, it is an ethical challenge to assess and respond to participants' vulnerability without viewing them all as 'powerless victims' or resorting to other, similar generalisations that provide little in the way of ethical guidance.

Finally, insecurity and physical danger, lack of resources and damaged infrastructure, and challenges of access all have ethical implications in that they affect the feasibility of research and the safety of researchers.

It is telling that Elrha, an INGO whose organisational focus is on supporting humanitarian response through research and innovation, has developed a particular sensitivity to ethical issues associated with its work. Elrha's R2HC (Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises) programme was established in 2013. Under R2HC, research proposals are informed by an ethics framework and tool, which consists of a series of questions about ethical issues, designed to promote reflection, discussion and proactive response (Doherty et al. 2017b). Perhaps the most critical question in the tool is this: 'Why does this research need to be done in a humanitarian crisis and not in a non-crisis context?' (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 9).

Source: Rachel Paton, Research and Learning Analyst, Tearfund, based on Doherty et al. (2017a) and Doherty et al. (2017b)



📷 Thuli Maya, 78, being interviewed about the assistance she received from Tearfund's partner, RADO, following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Those who carry out data collection in humanitarian settings have to balance different ethical responsibilities against one another. These include assessing and responding to participants' potential vulnerability, whilst also recognising that they may possess remarkable resilience and desire to tell their stories. Photo: Tom Price/Tearfund

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## EXAMPLE

### Ethical dilemmas for researchers in high-risk research settings

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Some research calls for heightened ethical responsibility on the part of researchers to protect and promote the right of research participants. For example, researchers intervening in the lives of the people affected by or reeling from conflict or humanitarian disasters need to exercise extra caution in terms of confidentiality, disclosure and participant rights. Often, researchers who are working in sensitive contexts or on sensitive topics are faced with the unexpected challenge of acting as a 'secret keeper' (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007, p. 338), carefully and sensitively managing the stories and secrets shared by participants who are affected by or survivors of crisis.

Conducting research in environments where civil liberties are constrained poses different sets of ethical challenges and contradictions. Ethical frameworks to conduct research in such settings are available, but they are far from adequate. For example, in non-democratic settings, the ethical demands to 'do no harm', secure informed consent and protect the anonymity of research participants become even more complicated (Wackenhut, 2018). Lack of serious efforts to protect the identity of the research participants may subject them to political backlash. There can also be a great deal of emotional stress involved for researchers working in unpredictable and high-risk environments such as conflict (Wood, 2006). Such stress can, in turn, affect researchers' ethical sensibility and pose harm to research participants.

Certain contexts, such as large-scale humanitarian disasters, tend to attract massive research attention, involving international researchers, academics and experts. In the process, there is a risk of local communities being overburdened by researchers. It also risks displacing local researchers and local research infrastructures (Gaillard and Gomez, 2015). If foreign researchers or (I)NGOs are involved in doing research in such contexts, their ethical responsibility should reach beyond the research participants to include research assistants, translators and gatekeepers. If the research interferes with the physical and mental well-being of the local researchers, it may need to be suspended or even cancelled.

Source: Nimesh Dhungana – Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics

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## 4.1 Research with children and adults who are vulnerable



### DEFINITION

#### Thinking through the term 'vulnerability'

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In the field of development, there is no general consensus on the definition of **VULNERABILITY**. However, one classic definition is provided by participatory development theorist Robert Chambers, who terms vulnerability as having two sides: 'an external side of risks, shocks, and stress to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss' (Chambers, 1989, p. 1). Vulnerable groups, in turn, mean more than just poor communities, but include those who lack a political voice, and the ability to make an informed choice. Understanding vulnerability requires us to understand the priorities and preferences of people themselves (Ibid.).

Understanding the term vulnerability in the context of research ethics brings with it a number of complexities. Vulnerability as a term has been criticised. Elrha, in the context of humanitarian research, highlights that vulnerability has been 'questioned as a poorly defined concept that can be applied to almost everyone, and may promote paternalistic attitudes towards participants as powerless victims to be protected by those with resources. If vulnerability leads to generalised categorisations of people, it provides little ethical guidance' (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 4). It may be more helpful to understand vulnerability as a condition or a state that is shaped by both internal capability but also external drivers (Chambers, 1989).

Regardless of how vulnerability is defined, the concept acts as 'an important reminder of the ethical responsibilities of those conducting [humanitarian] research towards participants, especially those who have suffered serious losses and are often disempowered' (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 4). To this effect, efforts have been made to come up with a systematic understanding of vulnerability and vulnerable groups. For instance, a review of research ethics guidelines found that the groups that are frequently referred to as vulnerable in policies include: children, minors or young people, prisoners, as well as persons with mental health issues, patients in emergency settings, and certain ethnocultural, racial or ethnic minority groups (Bracken-Roche, 2017, p. 7).

As for the concept, vulnerability is more than just an individual impairment to provide informed consent or influence the course of research. Being sensitive to vulnerability also means taking account of the structural and relational aspects of research, in terms of the context of research and power inequalities that shape or constrain the voice and choice of individual participants in the research process.

What is more, a counter-issue to vulnerability is participants' resilience and their willingness to accept risk, ie their 'risk appetite' and motivations for it. In humanitarian contexts, for example, this includes: the dualities of 'people's fragility during and after crises, yet also their remarkable resilience and desire to tell their stories; the importance of protecting people from harm, but also remembering that some people are willing to accept the risks involved in research; the complexity and subtlety of various power issues; and the potent psychosocial influences on voluntary consent that can lead to subtle forms of coercion' (Doherty et al. 2017a, p. 4).

Vulnerability is a multidimensional and dynamic concept. For example, people affected by disasters may be temporarily vulnerable in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, given the widespread collective suffering and deprivation. This demands a different ethical sensibility on the part of researchers to protect the well-being of research participants. Such vulnerability may evolve into resilience and agency as the situation evolves into recovery and reconstruction, and the affected communities are able to mobilise wider political support.

Source: the authors and Nimesh Dhungana – Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics

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A large range of research participants are potentially vulnerable, which impacts on their ability to give informed consent. According to Tearfund (2017), potentially vulnerable participants include:

'(a) People whose competence to exercise informed consent is in doubt, such as:

- infants and children under 18 years of age [see [example](#) of data collection involving children];
- people who lack mental capacity [...] for example, people with learning disabilities, people with dementia or conditions that give rise to cognitive impairments such as stroke [see [example](#) of data collection involving adults with dementia];
- people who suffer from psychiatric or personality disorders.

(b) People who may socially not be in a position to exercise informed consent, such as:

- people who depend on the protection of, or are controlled and influenced by research gatekeepers (eg school pupils, children and young people in care, members of the armed forces, young offenders, prisoners, asylum seekers, organisational employees);
- [extended] family members of the researcher(s); and
- in general, people who appear to feel they have no real choice as to whether or not they can refuse to take part.

(c) People whose circumstances may unduly influence their decisions to consent, such as:

- people living with disabilities;
- people who are frail or in poor health, older people, people who are in care;
- relatives and friends of participants considered to be vulnerable;
- people who feel that participation will result in [preferential] access to better treatment and/or support for them or others;
- people who anticipate any other perceived benefits of participation [...].'



## EXAMPLE

### Data collection involving children

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Children under 18 can only give informed *assent*. UNICEF defines assent as: 'the willingness to participate in research, evaluations or data collection by persons who are by legal definition too young to give informed consent according to prevailing local law but who are old enough to understand the proposed research in general, its expected risks and possible benefits, and the activities expected of them as subjects. Assent is similar to the process of informed consent. Assent by itself, however, is not sufficient' (UNICEF, 2015, p. 2). In addition, consent is also needed from the child's parent or guardian who ought to be present or nearby when the child is being 'interviewed' where this is possible. Where the child has been separated from their parents, due to conflict or a humanitarian emergency, and they do not have an obvious guardian, this may prove challenging. The organisation's policy on whether consent may be sought from the children themselves, if their viewpoints are essential to the research, should be discussed and decided upon in advance.

Involving children in research activities can take many forms, not only standard qualitative interviewing techniques, but also creative and visual methods which are fun and accessible to children: 'draw and write' or 'draw and tell' exercises, role plays, storytelling and story-writing, or written 'homework' on the research topic in the case of older children (see Daehnhardt, 2019). Child-focused (I)NGOs have developed useful guidance specific to involving children in data collection (see Save the Children, 2004, 2008; UNICEF, 2016).



- ❏ A support worker helping children with an art activity in a Child Friendly Space run by Christian Aid's partner Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK) in Jamtoli camp, Bangladesh. Involving children in research activities can take many forms, not only standard qualitative interviewing techniques, but also creative and visual methods which are fun and accessible to children. Research with children constitutes 'high-risk' research, meaning that all who are involved – (I)NGO staff, partners and collaborators – must be particularly careful. Photo: Adam Finch
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## EXAMPLE

### Data collection involving adults with dementia

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Collaborative research between Tearfund in Rwanda and the University of Birmingham on ageing showed the importance of the participation of family members and carers during interviews (see Davis et al. 2019). The researchers conducted FGDs with mobile older people in church halls, but more fragile older people, those with disabilities or dementia, were visited in the comfort of their own homes for one-on-one semi-structured interviews. In effect, these one-on-one interviews often became group discussions, as the elderly interviewee was sometimes joined by whoever else was at home: a carer, grandchildren, the participant's spouse or neighbours.

In one case in particular, the spouse and young male carer acted as 'translators' for a man of nearly 90 with signs of dementia. It would have been ethically questionable – and also unproductive – to interview the man on his own. The visit was an obviously enjoyable experience for the older man who was able to recall striking details from the past, while confusing present-day events. Although he might not have understood the nature of 'informed consent', his family members acted as a household unit in giving verbal consent.

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## 4.2 Research on sensitive topics

Research on sensitive topics poses a high risk to the principle of 'Do No Harm'. This is particularly the case in contexts where the rule of law is weak and can pose a risk to the researchers, evaluators and participants. Different organisations have different policies on how research on sensitive topics is handled internally.<sup>19</sup> We recommend that at the very least an ethics risk assessment (see [Tool 2](#)) should be mandatory when dealing with sensitive topics. However, this should not become a barrier to doing research on sensitive topics, but rather a facilitating tool.

Potentially sensitive topics include:

1. research on religious faith which can be sensitive or even dangerous in some socio-political contexts
2. research that could attract allegations of wrongdoing: eg research on terrorism and/or terrorist groups; where a researcher needs to view pornography or disturbing images, details of child abuse and other crimes; research that may be seen as political and/or includes questions about political settlement, and research on land
3. research on inequality and exclusion that may challenge the status quo, including gender hierarchies, cultural norms and traditions, and social discrimination
4. research with stigmatised populations: eg sex workers, people living with HIV, and people who identify as LGBTIQ+
5. research on topics that are likely to cause distress: eg experiences of child abuse, gender-based violence, domestic abuse, conflict, life-threatening situations, drivers of exclusion (stigma, attitudes towards certain groups)
6. research involving sensitive information. Under GDPR, sensitive information includes information on racial or ethnic origin, political beliefs, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, health and sexual orientation.<sup>20</sup>

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19 For example, at the British Council, any research that falls under the parameters of 'secure or sensitive' – because of location, subject or participant group – has to be run by the central research team, has to be reviewed by the Head of Research, and has to have enhanced risk management (eg a risk log that the Head of Research can regularly review); in certain areas, it would need consultation from expert colleagues, eg the Security Team.

20 This data is defined as 'special category data' in GDPR. As [Section 2.3](#) explains, it does mean we need to be clear with the participant that we are collecting this information before we do the research (see also [Tool 4](#)). We also need to have a clear reason for holding this data (see [Tool 3](#)).

However, it should be recognised that the degree of sensitivity in all these research areas are subject to local and cultural definitions which can differ widely between geographical regions (see [example](#) below).



## EXAMPLE

### Research and conflict analysis – Christian Aid example

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Throughout the cycle of research planning, Christian Aid country offices should systematically ensure that the design and implementation of any research does not aggravate the existing conflict dynamics in a society. This can be achieved through using a conflict-sensitivity lens when carrying out any kind of research or data collection, especially in communities who have experienced conflict.

For example, research was carried out in Kaduna state, north-west Nigeria, on the influence that faith leaders have on the age of marriage for adolescent girls. Early marriage is very common in the region, particularly within the Muslim community, and is deeply embedded in the culture and tradition. The centrality of religion in Nigeria enables religious institutions and leaders to exercise considerable influence regarding early marriage, making faith leaders key actors for change. This study listened to community members and leaders, Christian and Muslim faith leaders, and adolescent girls themselves, in three different areas of Kaduna state to find specific ways in which faith leaders could contribute to changing practices around early marriage.

For the research to be sensitive to the local conflict dynamics, the team needed first to carry out a **conflict analysis**. This was so they could understand the **drivers of conflict**: (existing) local conflict dynamics and conflict-triggering factors. Northern Nigeria is deeply divided along religious and ethnic lines and has suffered decades of conflict and communal clashes. By being sensitive to these local tensions, the research team were able to carry out the research in a way that was appropriate to the culture and religion of the people. Failure to do so would have risked exacerbating existing tensions.

Secondly, the conflict analysis was also used to understand the **players in the conflict** (the religious and traditional leaders, and the young people themselves). Before carrying out their work, researchers had to meet with the leaders to ensure their buy-in. In understanding the drivers of the conflict and who the players were, the team decided to change the language they used, from *early marriage* to the *time of marriage*.

Thirdly, the team also needed to understand how the different **players** handled conflict (**conflict-handling style**). The approach they used was to work with a faith leaders' dialogue forum that had representatives from both faith groups from the different geographic areas. As custodians of the culture, these are the people the community listens to. So, by working through the forum a collective approach and 'buy-in' to the research could be reached – one that was mindful of both the religion and culture of the society and sensitive to the conflict dynamics.

The project team produced a Faith Leaders' Toolkit to support the faith leaders engaging in the issue – including theological perspectives on the topic from both a Christian and Muslim perspective.

Source: Talatu Aliyu, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Manager – Christian Aid

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# 5 RESEARCH ETHICS TOOLKIT

This section contains four tools for research ethics in practice, namely:

1. Checklist: Do research ethics apply to your project?
2. Template: Ethics risk assessment
3. Template: Data management plan
4. Template: Participant information sheet and consent form

## TOOLS AVAILABLE IN FRENCH, SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE

The three templates (Tools 2, 3 and 4) are available as stand-alone Word documents that are easy to adapt, fill in and print. They are available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

To access and download them, please visit:

<https://learn.tearfund.org/en/research-and-policy/how-we-research>

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/our-work/research/capacity-development>



## TOOL 1

### Checklist: Do research ethics apply to your project?

Answering the questions below will help you to identify whether 'research ethics' apply to your evidence-generating activities in the first place. We expect that most of the (I)NGO research and evaluations we do will need to apply these research ethics.

#### When do 'research ethics' apply to (I)NGO work?

Does your evaluation or research project involve any evidence-generating activities including the commissioning, collection, analysis or communication of data?

YES  NO

Does your evaluation or research project involve human participants (eg surveys, interviews, FGDs, case studies, participatory methods, storytelling, observations etc)?

YES  NO

Does your evaluation or research project involve the collection and/or the analysis of secondary data that is not publicly available?

YES  NO

Does your evaluation or research project involve the analysis of secondary data that has the potential to harm vulnerable groups, communities and/or organisations?

YES  NO

Does your evaluation or research project involve analysing records where an individual's information has not been anonymised?

YES  NO

**If you answered YES to any of the questions, then research ethics must be incorporated into your project.**

Source: adapted from UNICEF, 2015



## TOOL 2

### Template: Ethics risk assessment

As this guide has shown, doing research carries with it multiple risks to the research participants and enumerators/researchers. An ethics risk assessment provides a useful way to identify these risks and develop a mitigation strategy. Not only does this ensure that 'Do No Harm' principles are built into the research or evaluation project, but it also helps improve the integrity and quality of the data. (If your organisation has a project-level safeguarding risk assessment, we would recommend carrying it out alongside the ethics risk assessment.)

Below is a checklist for identifying anticipated or actual ethical issues as well as ways to address or mitigate these identified ethical risks in the research process.<sup>21</sup>

Question	Assessment of risk	Mitigation strategy
<p><b>Does your project involve working with children, people under 18 years or vulnerable adults?</b></p> <p>(See <a href="#">Section 4</a>)</p>	<p><i>If yes, state which groups are included in your research (eg adolescent people living with disabilities).</i></p> <p><i>List the additional risks they might face in relation to their safety, inclusion and participation (eg ability to access interview location).</i></p>	<p><i>Examples include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ensure all the facilities have disability access.</i></li> <li>• <i>Seek informed consent from a parent/guardian.</i></li> <li>• <i>Ensure safer working practices such as not working alone with participants.</i></li> <li>• <i>Check if researchers need to have a criminal background check or similar.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Does your project involve engagement with marginalised and/or stigmatised groups?</b></p> <p>(See <a href="#">Section 4</a>)</p>	<p><i>If yes, state which groups are included in your research (eg victims of SGBV).</i></p> <p><i>What risks are associated with working with this group? (eg risk of individuals being identified, which risks further victimisation)</i></p> <p><i>What are the risks associated with your choice of research methods and data collection? (eg participants might not trust you enough to give you the information and data you need)</i></p>	<p><i>Examples include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Conduct workshops with researchers/evaluators and partner organisations to raise awareness about the complexities of SGBV.</i></li> <li>• <i>Conduct interviews in private settings.</i></li> <li>• <i>Make sure the researchers/evaluators are female if interviewing females.</i></li> <li>• <i>Ensure participants understand how their data will be kept private.</i></li> <li>• <i>Consider ways of compensating your research participants for their time and inputs.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Are you engaging with sensitive topics?</b></p> <p>(See <a href="#">Section 4</a>)</p>	<p><i>If yes, state which topics (eg research on gender-based violence; experiences of conflict; experiences of local government service provisions; topics of faith, religion or church)</i></p> <p><i>What are the risks associated with the topic(s) and research methods? (eg risk of causing distress or re-traumatisation; increase in domestic violence)</i></p>	<p><i>Examples include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Provide participants with a list of relevant referral services.</i></li> <li>• <i>Make sure the researchers are aware of the broader political context, social and cultural norms.</i></li> <li>• <i>Discuss with researchers/evaluators how to respond in the event that someone shows signs of distress.</i></li> <li>• <i>Carry out interviews in a private and safe space.</i></li> </ul>

<sup>21</sup> Adapted from Christian Aid's 'Template for commissioning a research or evaluation project'

Question	Assessment of risk	Mitigation strategy
<p><b>Is there clarity on information and consent procedures?</b> (See <a href="#">Tool 4</a>)</p>	<p><i>Explain how you will go about gaining informed consent from your participants (eg over the telephone, face to face etc).</i></p> <p><i>What risks does your selected process pose to people living with disabilities and other marginalised groups? (eg how will a person who is hard of hearing or who is partially sighted be able to give consent?)</i></p> <p><i>How (if at all) does the individualised consent process contradict the need for collective consent?</i></p>	<p><i>Examples include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Explain clearly how you are going to use this data and in a language/method that is appropriate to that individual.</i></li> <li>• <i>Consider giving the research participants time to discuss the research/process with their family members.</i></li> <li>• <i>Read out the participant information sheet and consent form.</i></li> <li>• <i>Where appropriate, record consent verbally.</i></li> <li>• <i>Keep a record of participants' consent.</i></li> <li>• <i>Inform participants that they can withdraw their consent at any time.</i></li> <li>• <i>Ensure participants have a way of contacting you and you have a way of contacting them – if what you are doing with the data changes.</i></li> <li>• <i>Consider the option of group consent in the case of participatory/action research.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Is there clarity on anonymity and confidentiality?</b> (See <a href="#">Section 2.5</a> and <a href="#">Section 3.1</a>)</p>	<p><i>What risks do your research and chosen research methods pose to participant confidentiality and anonymity? (eg how will you ensure any electronic or hard copies of the consent form or interview transcripts are not lost, visible to others or stolen?)</i></p>	<p><i>Examples include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Implement a data management plan (see <a href="#">Tool 3</a>).</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't use actual names: use pseudonyms or letters for people.</i></li> <li>• <i>Only collect personal information that is necessary.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>What power relations are represented in your research?</b> (See <a href="#">Section 3.2</a>)</p>	<p><i>How do the different aspects of your identity interact with the identities of the research participants? (eg race, gender, age, class, disability, ethnicity, nationality etc)</i></p> <p><i>What risks does your identity pose to the quality of the data and how you interpret the findings? (eg participants might not trust you enough to provide you with honest and in-depth responses)</i></p> <p><i>How does your research seek to engage with, or employ, local intermediaries (interpreters, researchers, gatekeepers), and what is their role in the research?</i></p> <p><i>How might the use of specific research tools or methods improve or undermine local research capacity?</i></p>	<p><i>Examples include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Identify and explain the different power relationships that exist, including those within the community.</i></li> <li>• <i>Explain how you might mitigate those power dynamics (such as separating respondents into different groups).</i></li> <li>• <i>Select researchers/evaluators who already have a relationship with the participants.</i></li> <li>• <i>Select alternative researchers if you consider their pre-existing relationships might influence data collection and analysis.</i></li> <li>• <i>Avoid the use of data-collection methods that may displace or undermine field-based, local researchers.</i></li> <li>• <i>Reflect on how your biases might influence how you interpret the data.</i></li> </ul>

Question	Assessment of risk	Mitigation strategy
<p>What (security/harm) risks does the research pose to the participants and do you have appropriate referral mechanisms in place?</p>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>physical risks:</b> eg illness, community violence, hunger due to taking people away from their farming/labour</li> <li>• <b>social risks:</b> eg causing a group of people to be exposed to further stigma or social isolation</li> <li>• <b>psychological risks:</b> eg reminding people of traumatic events, allowing people to be harassed, bullied or to feel ashamed</li> <li>• <b>safeguarding and protection risks:</b> eg exploitation; sexual, emotional and physical abuse; sexual harassment</li> <li>• <b>political risks:</b> eg risks from authorities and power-holders.</li> </ul>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before conducting an interview or a survey, first make sure participants are in a safe space. If necessary, make new arrangements to meet or call the participants.</li> <li>• Provide participants with a card that lists information about referral services in their area. (These should be assessed for disability access.)</li> <li>• Include contact information for feedback and complaints on your participant information sheet.</li> <li>• Provide safeguarding training for your evaluators/researchers and ask them to sign your organisation's code of conduct.</li> <li>• Ensure people do not work alone.</li> </ul>
<p>What (security/harm) risks does the research pose to the researcher or evaluator?</p>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>physical risks:</b> eg traffic accidents en route to the research location, illness, community tensions and violence</li> <li>• <b>social risks:</b> eg reputational damage</li> <li>• <b>psychological risks:</b> eg secondary trauma</li> <li>• <b>safeguarding and protection risks:</b> eg exploitation; sexual, emotional and physical abuse; sexual harassment.</li> </ul>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow your organisation's safeguarding procedures and mechanism for reporting any adverse incidents (including safeguarding and protection incidents).</li> <li>• Carry out a security risk assessment plan.</li> <li>• Consider the various security concerns and risks, particularly in politically constrained environments.</li> </ul>
<p>What (security/harm) risks does the research pose to the data?</p>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the risk of accidentally losing your data or it getting stolen</li> <li>• the risk of a breach of confidentiality and data being shared or seen by others outside the research or evaluation team.</li> </ul>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement a data management plan (see <a href="#">Tool 3</a>).</li> <li>• Train researchers/evaluators on managing data responsibly.</li> <li>• Train researchers/evaluators on how to use the data-collection tools.</li> <li>• Ensure those associated with your data understand what it is used for.</li> </ul>
<p>Is your research or evaluation conflict-sensitive?</p>	<p>What is the risk of the research contributing to fuelling community tensions?</p> <p>How does the research or evaluation interact with the issues driving the conflict and/or the fragility of the community?</p> <p>What is the position of stakeholders in relation to the conflict?</p> <p>What cultural values or beliefs are carried through the research and how are these the same as or different from those held in the local context?</p>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carry out or update your conflict analyses.</li> <li>• Consider working with stakeholders who collectively are representative of the community.</li> <li>• Review your research tools to ensure they are appropriate to the social, cultural, security and geographic context.</li> </ul>
<p>What local or national legal and ethical requirements does your research need to comply with?</p>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)</li> <li>• child-protection and safeguarding policies</li> <li>• ethical guidelines for health research.</li> </ul>	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete your organisation's training on GDPR, safeguarding and child protection (as applicable).</li> <li>• Check with local authorities about ethical approval processes in the country where you are working and say how you will adhere to these.</li> </ul>



## TOOL 3

### Template: Data management plan

Data plan questions	Response and actions
<p><b>Using the data:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What data will be created or re-used?</li><li>• What are you going to do with the data?</li><li>• Why do you need this data? (You should only collect what you need.)</li><li>• How often do you intend to review this plan?</li></ul>	
<p><b>Managing the data:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do you need to provide a way for participants to correct or update the data they have provided to you?</li><li>• Which stakeholders are involved in collecting and sharing the data?</li><li>• Who will own or hold the data?</li><li>• What are your plans for data sharing?</li></ul>	
<p><b>Protecting the data:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How will you ensure that any personal data you collect is only used for the purposes for which it was originally collected?</li><li>• How will you protect your data and those associated with your research or evaluation?</li><li>• How will you ensure the data is documented and labelled in way that is systematic and anonymous?</li><li>• How are you going to transfer the data internally? Have you 'password-protected' the data?</li><li>• How are you storing the data? Is it stored on an encrypted site or hard drive? Is it kept in a locked cabinet?</li></ul>	
<p><b>Feedback to participants:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is your plan to provide feedback to participants?</li><li>• How often will you do this?</li><li>• What is your chosen methodology and did the respondents select this themselves?</li><li>• All interviews and research activities carried out should include at least 2 feedback channels that are accessible to the research participant (eg suggestion box, phone number, WhatsApp group etc).</li></ul>	
<p><b>Retaining/deleting the data:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Which data will you or consultants retain and preserve after your project ends?</li><li>• How long will you need to keep the data? (Only keep the data for as long as you need it.)</li><li>• What is your plan for data deletion?</li><li>• Do you have measures in place to guard against unauthorised or unlawful processing of personal data and against accidental loss, or destruction of, or damage to, personal data?</li></ul>	



## TOOL 4

# Participant information sheet and consent form – a two-part template

## PART A Participant information sheet

The headings in this part of the template are what you might expect to see in a participant information sheet. Under each heading, examples of what information you may want to include are given in green. Please use your own words to replace the wording in green with information specific to your project.

### Introductions

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *Who the researchers are, whom they represent (organisations and/or funders) and how they can be contacted*

### Invitation and explanation

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *How the participant is invited to take part in this piece of research (describe the interview or focus group process) and why they have been selected*
- *An explanation of what data you are collecting from the participant and why you need it*

### Purpose of the study

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *The purpose and content of the evaluation or research*

### Use of data

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *How the data you are collecting may be used in the future, including what outputs you are planning to write (eg INGO reports, articles, training manuals, broadcasting), how photos or video footage (if taken) will be used, and who can access these outputs where*
- *The potential for wider use of the data in the future*
- *The potential for case studies, quotes, video footage or photos of the participant to be used for any other purpose (by your communications or fundraising teams)*
- *Who will own the data (this may well be communities themselves) and whom you will share it with*

### Anonymity

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *A guarantee of anonymity and an assurance that no real names will be used in the write-up or use of quotes and stories, and identifiers will be removed*
- *An assurance that if the participant does not wish to be photographed, you will take group photos from an angle that excludes them*
- *An assurance that photos of the participant, if they are being taken, will not be used with their real name, or in a way that connects them to their words*
- *An assurance that all the information that the participant may give about themselves will be kept safe and secure (in line with your data management plan)*

## Benefits and risks

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *The benefits (and risks, if any) of the research to individuals or communities. You need to manage the participant's expectations here.*
- *Compensation arrangements, ie the fact that there will be no payment for participation, but (where relevant) lunch and reimbursement for travel costs will be offered*

## Data recording and storage

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *How the participant's personal data will be stored (eg on a password-protected computer) and for how long. If you are using an audio recorder to capture the interview, explain that this is so that you can listen to it again afterwards, but that the recording will be kept private.*
- *The fact that the participant will have the right to request their data (eg an interview transcript if one has been made)*

## Participation and rights to withdraw

*Add your own wording here. It could cover the following:*

- *The fact that you will not collect any data if the participant chooses to opt out. Explain that you will ask them if they are happy to take part in the study, and that they can answer 'no' without any negative consequences.*
- *The fact that participants can opt out of any questions or choose not to answer or continue the interview for any reason at any time. Even if they initially give consent to participate, they can withdraw without any negative consequences.*
- *An assurance that the participant can ask any questions about the study at any time during the interview*

## What you can expect from us

*You could use the following wording:*

All individuals involved in the study shall be treated equally, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, religion/or none, sexual orientation, profession, lifestyle, marital status, age, community background or disability. No one will be judged or discriminated against on the basis of any aspect of their identity.

If you feel any adverse/negative effects as a result of participating in this interview, you should report it immediately. This might include feeling bullied or harassed, unhappy about the conduct of the person interviewing you, or simply feeling more at risk as a result of participating in the interview.

*Provide contact details for your safeguarding representative.*

Please get in touch with:

Contact name and role:
Contact email:
Contact phone number:

## Contact details

*You could use the following wording:*

We understand that you might change your mind in the future. You can contact us at any time if you want to withdraw from the project, if there is any information you do not want us to use, or have any questions or complaints about your participation in the project.

*Provide appropriate contact details.*

Please get in touch with:

Contact name and role:
Contact email:
Contact phone number:

*You must be confident that arrangements for the participant to contact the researchers are practical. For example, communities who do not have access to the internet will be unable to contact the researchers by email. It may be equally inappropriate for them to pay to make a phone call to the researchers. In contrast, they may be able to speak to a representative of your organisation who regularly visits the community, who in turn may be able to pass on the feedback/complaint.*

### How to use Parts A and B with a participant

Once you have finished adapting Part A for your own project, and you are satisfied that it is ready for use with participants (eg it has been translated as necessary), print multiple copies of the whole document on headed paper (bearing your organisation's logo). In order to brief a participant, read Part A aloud to them. Take time over this, allowing them to ask any questions they may have. Try to check they understand, being attentive to any ways in which they may appear to have misunderstood the information.

Part B (the consent form, below) should only be completed once the person has been given the relevant information about their participation in the research, and any questions have been answered. Read the questions in the consent form aloud, and, depending on the participant's answers, tick 'yes' or 'no'. Note that the participant will not, therefore, be asked to sign. However, the entire briefing, and the consent questions and answers, must be recorded on an audio-device.

Each participant should then be given a complete copy of Parts A and B for their future reference. You should keep a copy too. Note that this may require filling out and signing the consent form twice.

Note that the consent form is set up for verbal consent. Depending on your project and circumstances, you can adapt it for written consent.



## PART B Consent form

<b>Consent questions:</b>		
Do you confirm that you have been given and have understood the information provided for the above study, and have asked and received answers to any questions you may have?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you understand that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without your rights being affected in any way?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you understand that <i>(name of organisation)</i> _____ will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence, and that all efforts will be made to ensure that you cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law) and do you give permission for the researchers to hold relevant personal data?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you agree to take part in the above study?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you agree to the interview being digitally voice-recorded?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you agree to photographs being taken of you, and being used in a way that will not connect you to your words in publications?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you agree to the use of your words in publications without mention of your name?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you agree that your information used in the study may be stored (without your name(s)) electronically, until the programme has been completed and the information is no longer required?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
<b>Name of participant:</b>		
<b>Location of interview:</b>	<b>Date of the interview:</b>	
<b>Researcher / evaluator declaration:</b>		
I, <i>(name of field researcher/evaluator)</i> _____, declare that I have accurately represented and recorded the consent of the participant.		

# APPENDIX 1: REFLECTION ON RESEARCH ETHICS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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For faith-based organisations (FBOs) such as Christian Aid and Tearfund, it is helpful to connect reflection on ethical principles and practices in research to broader Christian ethics. This is firstly because of our own distinct Christian faith identity, and secondly because of the communities in which we work, which are often in contexts where faith plays an influential role in society.

What is to be understood by Christian ethics? As Christians, our primary model for ethical living is Jesus. Throughout his life and work, Jesus taught those around him what it meant to live ethically, often through asking questions or by storytelling. He told the story of the Samaritan who stopped to help the wounded traveller, for example, to show people how to love their neighbours (Luke 10); he stopped on a mountainside to teach crowds of people about the principles and values at the heart of an ethical way of life (Matthew 5–7). Yet, Jesus did not simply teach people about ethics: he also embodied ethical living. The gospels are full of examples from Jesus' life and interaction with others, but the most pertinent is the account of his crucifixion. This was the ultimate act of love, orientated towards the good of others (Philippians 2:5–8). If this is the example for us to follow, it has implications for all we do. Christians understand that Jesus was able to live in this way because of his communion with God through the Holy Spirit, and it is therefore also important to emphasise that genuine Christian ethical living emerges from a relationship with the triune God.

***Keep company with [God] and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.***

Ephesians 5:2, *The Message*

If our research ethics are to be rooted in Christian ethics, this means that they must be more than a tick-box exercise. Principles such as 'Do No Harm' are helpful because they provide a means of holding us to account, but we need to go beyond this. Conducting research ethically is about being orientated towards the good of others and having their dignity and well-being in mind. This encompasses everything, from the purpose and design of our research, to the way we relate to our participants throughout the process and even to the way we report and disseminate the findings.

Source: Nina Kurlberg, Theology Development Officer, Tearfund

## APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH DESIGN TEMPLATE

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<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/our-work/research-design-resource>

## APPENDIX 3: RESEARCH TERMS OF REFERENCE (ToR)

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<https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/tools-and-guides/terms-of-reference-for-research-projects>

## APPENDIX 4: EVALUATION TERMS OF REFERENCE (ToR)

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<https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/tools-and-guides/terms-of-reference-for-an-evaluation>

# APPENDIX 5: RESEARCH ETHICS IN (I)NGO–ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS

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Academic institutions and (I)NGOs can hold considerably different views and practices on research ethics frameworks. (I)NGOs such as Tearfund and Christian Aid may focus on practical ethics in country programmes, where long-term engagement between staff, partners and local communities takes place. This relationship is often the basis for good ethical research, based on trust. (I)NGOs are not focused on research in the same way as research institutions are, but it is an aspect of the work (I)NGOs are engaged in and an important part of good programming.

Few (I)NGOs will have strict internal RECs and approval procedures in place. Part of the challenge with review boards is that they can be expensive and often take a long time to approve research, which is often incompatible with the work rhythms of (I)NGOs. However, (I)NGOs will have general practices, policies and standards in place with regard to safeguarding, safety, quality standards, accountability and security of staff, which require sign-off. While this provides an element of ethical review, these may not necessarily be specific to research processes. Part of the purpose of this guide is to strengthen (I)NGO practices relating to research, evaluation and data collection, especially as they relate to high-risk research.

In contrast, universities will have more formalised research ethics frameworks that issue guidelines about ethical research practices, often based on codes developed by professional associations or funding bodies, such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK.<sup>22</sup>

However, university academics are often not as up to date as (I)NGOs in understanding everyday realities in the field, and the often-shifting socio-political conditions in their empirical context. For instance, academic researchers, mostly in the early stages of their career (eg PhD students, post-docs), may have less training in, or information related to, the changing risk situation in specific countries. Risk environments, for example, may change fast during the time in which academic research completes the institutional review process of risk assessments and secures ethical clearance. Changing local conditions may require adaptation or improvisation in the original research agenda and design. Academics may also have a limited idea of whether or how the research findings may benefit or harm local communities. Issues surrounding the best course of action for disseminating research findings, and around the potential backlash from this, are also areas where academic researchers can benefit from engagement with development practitioners.

As doing ethical research is also about managing relationships with research stakeholders, in collaborative research it means managing the expectations of research intermediaries. It is also about making sure there is full transparency over and disclosure of research agendas, funding sources and findings dissemination. The local researchers should be made full partners in the research process. Contracted academic consultants who undertake research for INGOs as part of their university staff contracts and affiliations may be required to submit research plans and tools for ethics approval to an REC at their end. It is therefore helpful to discuss understandings and requirements of ethical practices in data-collection processes at the start of the collaboration and to reach a shared understanding on research ethics (Cornish et al. 2017).

Source: the authors, with input from Nimesh Dhungana – Fellow, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics

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<sup>22</sup> In the UK, such professional associations are, for example, the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2017), the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA, 2011) and the Social Research Association (SRA, 2003).

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## NOTES

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100 Church Road, Teddington TW11 8QE, United Kingdom  
T UK +44 (0) 20 3906 3906 E [publications@tearfund.org](mailto:publications@tearfund.org)

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