**Principles and Guidelines**

for ethical research and evaluation in international development

*Updated August 2021*

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Table of Contents

[1. Introduction 5](#_Toc78819440)

[1.1 Scope and purpose 7](#_Toc78819441)

[1.2 Definitions of research and of ethics 8](#_Toc78819442)

[2. Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation 10](#_Toc78819443)

[2.1 Respect for human beings 11](#_Toc78819444)

[2.2 Beneficence 13](#_Toc78819445)

[2.3 Research merit and integrity 15](#_Toc78819446)

[2.4 Justice 17](#_Toc78819447)

[3. Competence in Ethical Practice 20](#_Toc78819448)

[3.1 A culture of ethical inquiry 20](#_Toc78819449)

[3.2 Responsibilities 21](#_Toc78819450)

[3.3 Working with partners and consultants 22](#_Toc78819451)

[4. Integration of Ethical Principles 23](#_Toc78819452)

[4.1 Ethical practice and the Project Management Cycle 23](#_Toc78819453)

[4.3 Ethical principles in pandemics 24](#_Toc78819454)

[4.4 Ethical principles in humanitarian activities 24](#_Toc78819455)

[4.5 DFAT Ethical Research and Evaluation 25](#_Toc78819456)

[5. Deep dives 26](#_Toc78819457)

[5.1 Respect for Human beings; informed consent 26](#_Toc78819458)

[5.2 Respect for Human Beings; privacy and confidentiality 31](#_Toc78819459)

[5.3 Culturally and context sensitive research design 32](#_Toc78819460)

[5.5 Beneficence; Management of risks 34](#_Toc78819461)

[Glossary 37](#_Toc78819462)

**Principles and Guidelines**

for ethical research and evaluation in development

*Updated August 2021*

About ACFID

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) unites Australia’s nongovernment aid and international development organisations to strengthen their collective impact against poverty.

**Vision**

* A world where gross inequality within societies and between nations is reversed and extreme poverty is eradicated.
* A world where human development is ecologically and socially sustainable for the benefit of current and future generations.
* A world where governments lead their societies in striving to protect and realise all people’s human rights.

This vision will be achieved through the collective efforts of civil society, governments, business, and all peoples who are concerned for the future of our collective humanity.

**Roles and Purpose**

ACFID’s purpose is to provide leadership to the not-for-profit aid and development sector in Australia in achieving this vision and to fairly represent and promote the collective views and interests of our membership.

We advocate with our members for Australia to be a leading force in international human development and human rights. We are the primary vehicle for collaboration and collective action by NGOs in Australia. We foster good practice and capture this in sector standards and self- regulation. We foster peer support, learning and networking amongst NGOs, and all interested in human development and human rights.

About RDI Network

Established in 2009, the [Research for Development Impact Network (RDI Network)](https://rdinetwork.org.au/) is a network of practitioners, researchers, and evaluators - working in international development. The Network has become a key outlet for accessing diverse research expertise, supporting collaborative partnerships, and encouraging supporting ethical research practice among non-government organisations (NGOs) and academia in Australia.

The RDI Network is a partner of and hosted by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). The RDI Network also acknowledges funding support from the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

About the team

The Principles and Guidelines were originally authored with and by individuals who were members of what was previously the ACFID University Network Committee (now the RDI Network Committee) and the ACFID Ethical Research Working Group from 2012 - 2014.

In particular, ACFID is grateful for the drafting and ongoing support provided by Professor Juliet Willetts and the Institute of Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Drafting and consultations were enabled with the funding support of the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The updates were developed by a team consisting of Dr Cameron Hill, Anna Noonan, Dr Philippa Smales and Whitney Yip. Thank you to who those who have provided significant support and input into the update of the Principles and Guidelines, particularly the members of the wider sector Advisory Group and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Research and Evaluation Ethics (REE) Working Group.

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1. Introduction

**Key Message:** Excellence in international development research and evaluation always require commitment to and confidence in ethical practice.

The Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development (henceforth the Principles and Guidelines) provide overarching direction and practical support for the design, implementation and utilisation of research and evaluation in international development settings. They are also designed to give practical expression to the ACFID Code of Conduct[[1]](#footnote-1) and Quality Assurance Framework, and the core values underpinning ethical practice in international development.

The original Principles and Guidelines was prepared by ACFID, in consultation with member organisations, academic partners and the ACFID University Network (renamed the RDI Network in 2016). It was developed to assist ACFID members and is aligned with the ACFID Code of Conduct.1 In particular, the principles proposed here complement the values that underpin the work of ACFID members in aid and development represented in this Code of Conduct. It also encompassed the various relevant national and international standards applicable to this area of work.

This includes, the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007), National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) and ‘Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research’ (2003). These documents specify the standards expected in the responsible conduct of research in Australia, and are aligned with international agreements such as the Declaration of Helsinki and international human rights instruments. Beyond these sources, this document also draws on literature on ethics in cross-cultural research, professional codes for evaluation and ethical guidelines for research or evaluation developed by Australian aid and development non-governmental agencies working in developing countries.

Originally published separately in 2013, the Principles, are relevant to any individual or organisation who commissions, manages, conducts or reviews research and evaluation, particularly in relation to poverty reduction, development and social justice. The Guidelines, originally published separately in 2015, function as an applied tool in support of ethical research in theory and in practice.

These documents were consolidated by the RDI Network into one user-friendly document, and updated in line with the changes to the ACFID Code of Conduct in 2017. An online interactive ‘Starter Kit’, was also developed to assist in the awareness raising and implementation of ethical research and evaluation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In 2020, COVID-19 intensified the challenges with regards to research ethics, such as the heightened risks to both the participants and the researcher, and the shift from undertaking evidence generation in person to remote methods. The response to COVID-19 also offers the chance to invest, design and implement more inclusive and accessible programs to improve social cohesion, and ensure no-one is left behind.

In 2021, DFAT finalised an Ethical Research and Evaluation Guidance Note for internal use (see section 4.5) as a step towards recognising the importance of ethical research and evaluation, as well as supporting the implementation of ethical research and evaluation. In parallel, the RDI Network updated these Principles and Guidelines in line with the DFAT Guidance note and the other developments in ethical research and evaluation since 2015.

**Table 1. Relevant Australian Guidance in Ethical Research and Evaluation**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Level | Title |
| DFAT | Ethical Research and Evaluation Guidance Note  [Ethical Considerations for Research and Evaluation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ode-evawg-ethical-considerations-for-research-and-eval.pdf)  [A Guide to Qualitative Research: Why, What, When, How?](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/a-guide-to-qualitative-research-why-when-and-how.pdf) |
| Sector-Specific | Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) [Code of Conduct](https://acfid.asn.au/code-of-conduct)  ACFID and RDI Network [Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/principles-guidelines-ethical-research-evaluation/)  RDI Network [Starter Kit: Ethical Practice for Research and Evaluation in Development](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/) |
| National | National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018)  NHMRC [Ethical Considerations in Quality Assurance and Evaluation Activities](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/ethical-considerations-quality-assurance-and-evaluation-activities)  Australasian Evaluation Society [Code of Ethics and Guidance](https://www.aes.asn.au/join-the-aes/membership-ethical-guidelines/7-aes-codes-of-behaviour-ethics.html) |

1.1 Scope and purpose

The purpose of this document is to support ethical research and evaluation in the International Development sector.

The Principles and Guidelines are designed for international development and humanitarian aid projects and programs that involve research or evaluation with human participants, regardless of value or funding mechanism. This document is intended to promote and support improved development practice in the areas of research and evaluation, to raise awareness, and to assist in the identification of ethical issues so that well-considered decisions can be made and justified. Ethical principles are considered to be important, as ethical practice in research and evaluation relies on active self-reflection, discretion, judgement and appreciation of context.

The principles outlined here are based on and extend existing internationally recognised ethical research principles and guidance for data collection with human participants. The extensions include an emphasis on cross-cultural elements, power relations, capacity building and understanding the ‘development’ imperative within research practice conducted with and through non-governmental organisations.

Ethical guidelines are not about a list of ‘do’s and don’ts’, as the types of ethical considerations will vary depending on the research methods and context. Rather, guidelines are about assisting with recognising, understanding and resolving ethical issues that may arise throughout a research process. Guidelines also provide a framework to apply principles of ethical research, so that research involving human participants can achieve its aims, while protecting the safety, rights, welfare and dignity of those involved (namely, the participants).[[3]](#footnote-3) Such considerations are paramount as ‘ensuring ethical research is a vital part of maintaining the legitimacy of research practice’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Principles and Guidelines was originally intended to be adopted or adapted to the work conducted by ACFID members. Given the diversity and range of research conducted by ACFID members, this document provides a starting point for advice and resources. However, ethical standards should be considered by anyone who commissions, manages, conducts or reviews research and evaluation, particularly in relation to poverty reduction, development and social justice. Therefore, the Principles and Guidelines applies to anyone working in international development and humanitarian aid, such as:

* Australian Government and public sector agencies;
* Multilateral organisations and bilateral donors;
* Private sector; and
* Civil society organisations (including NGOs, INGOs, contractors and subcontractors, Australian Volunteers International, civil society partnerships; and Public Private Partnerships).

These Principles and Guidelines should not be seen simply as aspirational targets, they also have a practical application. In an international development context, the research process itself should be viewed as an ‘intervention’, with its own impacts and consequences. As such, the research process should also carry a commitment to ethical practice, and to support participatory approaches and empowerment of research participants wherever possible.

1.2 Definitions of research and of ethics

**What is research?**

These Principles and Guidelines define research as “an original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight” (The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2018). Particular ethical considerations apply to the collection of information from ‘human subjects’ (including a person’s own personal information or where they are acting on behalf of another person or people), and to all research conducted either with the assistance or participation of humans, or that will impact human participants.

Three broad types of applied research are likely to be undertaken by those working in international development and humanitarian aid;

* Operational research: conducted for the purpose of informing design or programming (e.g., situational analyses, retrospective analyses, action research)
* Policy and advocacy research: conducted to investigate issues related to the needs of target populations for the purpose of informing policy and advocacy positions and campaign activities
* Market or stakeholder research: to collect and analyse information to be used for marketing purposes (governed by private sector industry standards).
* Monitoring and evaluation (see below).

For any of the types of research described above; where research involves human participants and results in unpublished or published material, ethical considerations outlined in this document should be taken into account and addressed. Research that involves human participants includes people’s participation in surveys, interviews or focus groups, or being observed by researchers.

**Is evaluation a type of research?**

While most people working in international development and humanitarian aid may not consider ‘research’ as part of their portfolio, managing or implementing evaluations, or monitoring programs or activities usually will be included.

In DFAT’s Good Practice Note: how to manage an evaluation, DFAT defines an evaluation as: “The systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed investment, program or policy. It is an in-depth process which takes place on a periodic basis. Evaluation aims to provide credible evidence which can inform major program management and policy decisions and highlight important development lessons”. The term ‘evaluation’ covers all systematic and objective assessments of an investment, program or policy.

Evaluations share the same interaction with ‘human subjects’ as other research activities, however, the purpose of evaluations often links more directly to policy and programming decisions. Compared to other types of research, this link creates a potential and particularly heightened risk of power imbalances between the organisation implementing the evaluation and the participant.

The ethical considerations for evaluations (that involve human participants) are the same as for other kinds of research. Ethical principles for evaluation in the development sector are pertinent for a number of reasons:

* Many evaluations present ethical issues, including serious risk of harm to participants. Evaluations also have strong ethical implications as they are often connected with policy and programming decisions that affect the lives of either participants or other populations. This increases the power differentials between evaluator (and/or commissioner and/or funder) and participants.
* Evaluations operate at the nexus of multiple stakeholder interests. These interests exert influence on evaluation foci and process, which in turn may constrain or reduce the priority given to participants’ perspective.
* There is currently no broadly adopted framework that governs quality of evaluation in the sector.

In practical terms, the differences between research and evaluation are often ‘less important than the way in which the process is conducted – they both require information to be gathered systematically, thoroughly and carefully’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Given that evaluation entails the use of methods and tools similar to other research processes, there is enough commonality in practice that they have been jointly addressed within this document.

The principles provided in this document should inform all stages of a research process - including commissioning, design, planning, implementation, analysis, dissemination and use.

Monitoring can also be a type of applied research, although usually not as formalised or as rigorous, and usually undertaken within shorter time horizons. Those working in international development and humanitarian aid, must be mindful of ethical considerations involved in any monitoring activities that involve human participants, including data collection and field visits.

From here-on the term ‘research’ will be used to encompass both research and evaluation, and ‘researchers’ to also encompass ‘evaluators’. Unless specified, ‘development’ refers to international development and humanitarian aid.

**What is ethics?**

‘Ethics’ is concerned with what is good and bad, moral duty and obligation, and with questions of what constitutes a good life and a good society. It encompasses the principles and rules governing the standards of conduct of an individual or group, such as a community or a profession.

Codes of Conduct lay down organisational guidelines or rules that determine the organisation’s shared values and behaviours. Employees of that organisation are thus bound by these shared values and expected behaviours as part of their professional practice. Ethical principles do not prescribe rules. Rather, they provide support to decision-making where specific contextual situations require unexpected deviation from the rules and unique responses are required.

2. Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation

**Key Message:** The Ethical Principles support best practice, help shape the design of ethically rigorous research projects, and provide a decision-making framework when unexpected issues or dilemmas arise.

Existing international and national codes and frameworks set the general benchmark for ethical research across universities, industry and government in Australia. In international development settings, research often involves vulnerable or ‘high risk‘ populations in circumstances that give rise to power imbalances. These additional ethical risks mean that robust ethical practice is imperative to ensure research activities adhere at a very minimum to the fundamental principle of ‘do no harm’.

The RDI/ACFID Principles and Guidelines are centred around four Ethical Principles. While presented separately, all four intrinsically linked.

The Principles are:

2.1 Respect for human beings

**PRINCIPLE:** Respect is an overarching consideration and represents recognition of each human being’s intrinsic value. As such, the opportunity for human beings to exercise autonomy and make their own decisions is paramount, as is a commitment to participant welfare over and above research goals. Respect requires prior knowledge of and due regard for culture, values, customs, beliefs and practices, both individual and collective, of those involved in research. It also requires being mindful of differences in values and culture between working in international development and humanitarian aid, and participants, thus avoiding ‘difference blindness’ which can undermine trustful relationships as well as the usefulness of the research.

Respect involves honouring the rights, privacy, dignity, and diversity of those contributing to research. Informed consent is fundamental to upholding the principle of respect, in giving a research participant the choice to voluntarily participate in the research process. Informed consent means a participant is given clear information about the research, is able to choose not to participate and is able to withdraw at any time, without consequence (any limits to this right should be explained).

**PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:**

In practice, the principle of respect can be broken down into three best practice concepts:

**Free, prior and informed consent:** Research participants choose to participate with full knowledge of the research and their involvement in it. This decision is conveyed in the most contextual, cultural and age-appropriate way, and consent can be withdrawn at any time (see Figure 1: The Consent Continuum)

**Cultural competence:** Those doing the research or evaluation are well-informed, capable, and confident of ensuring the research environment is safe, secure, and culturally appropriate. Where possible, research policies and guidelines of the country in which the research is conducted are adhered to.

**Privacy and confidentiality:** The rights and dignity of the research participants are always respected, including privacy and confidentiality before, during, and after the research takes place. Data management – or management of any information obtaining during the research – is key to ensuring that information remains confidential, and if required, anonymous.

**IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | DFAT Guidance | Sector Guidance |
| Informed Consent | Ethical Considerations for Research and Evaluation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, has some advice on informed consent for particularly vulnerable research participants.  Consent for use of images/videos | RDI Network, CBM, and Nossal, [Research for All: Making Research Inclusive of People with Disabilities,](https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/disability-inclusive-research/) p.37-49  RDI Network, [Starter Kit Respect for Human Beings Tools A – E](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/respect-human-beings/)  National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018), Section 2 |
| Cultural Competence | DFATs Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CALD) Strategy 2018-2021 for support on enhancing inclusion within DFATs work practices and on engaging with CALD populations. | Massey University [Pacific Research Guidelines and Protocols](http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/learning/departments/centres-research/pacific-research-policy/doing-research.cfm).  RDI Network, [How to collaborate with Pacific Churches for development research](https://rdinetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/RDI-Network_2018_How-to-collaborate-with-Pacific-Churches_fv.pdf)  RDI Network, [Starter Kit Respect for Human Beings Tool F](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/respect-human-beings/) |
| Privacy & Confidentiality | The DFAT Monitoring and Evaluation Standards requires an evaluation plan that identifies appropriate data collection, storage and reporting that does not inadvertently breach anonymity or confidentiality. DFAT Goods and Services contracts also contain clauses in relation to confidentiality and privacy.  The Australian Privacy Principles (APPs) contained in the Privacy Act 1988 | RDI Network, [Starter Kit Respect for Human Beings Tools G](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/respect-human-beings/) |

2.2 Beneficence

**PRINCIPLE:** Beneficence is action that is done for the benefit of others. This principle implies that the expected benefit of research activities to participants, or the wider community, justifies any risks of harm or discomfort to the participants. To fulfil this principle research must be of value to participants, their community, country, or to development practice more broadly, but also the research must be designed to minimise potential risks.

Underpinning this, and all Ethical Principles, is the concept of ‘do no harm’ (non-maleficence).

Do no harm is Principle 1 of the DFAT Safeguard Principles; “seek to protect the rights, health, safety, and livelihoods of people including, children, women, indigenous peoples, and other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups” (Environmental and Social Safeguard Policy, 2019). Harm can be immediate or long-term, and can be physical, social, emotional, psychological or cultural (such as racism or disruptions to community life). Harm, or the risk of harm, could come from partners or consultants, other staff or participants, the community, from the state, or from others acting on behalf of the state. Harm may also pertain to the welfare and security of an individual, institution, or a group.

To ‘do no harm’ means such risks of harm are anticipated, planned for, and the likelihood of harm should be used to decide whether or not to proceed with the proposed research. Beyond harm to participants, this principle also requires consideration of potential harm to the staff working in international development and humanitarian aid, as well as in country partners or consultants; particularly in terms of safety, potential trauma, culture shock, and availability of support.

**PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:**

In practice, the principle of beneficence can be broken down into three concepts:

**Benefits to participants:** Research should involve some expected benefit for participants that is clearly communicated. Some examples of different types of potential benefits for people involved with the research are:

* New skills: Research participants develop new skills in research through their involvement, providing new opportunities for training and professional development.
* Improved program delivery: Research participation allows development programs to best meet the needs of the individual, community and/or society.
* Enhanced knowledge: Individuals and communities gain new knowledge based on the research and its outcomes. The knowledge may assist their own advocacy or self-determination.
* Individual gains: Participants have an opportunity to voice their concerns and articulate problems to an independent observer without fear.

**Management of risks:** Risks posed by research must be identified early and managed through effective planning and design, and - if required - a formal or informal review. Scoping of local support mechanisms should be completed in advance, so that the research team is able to provide participants immediate advice on local support. Ideally, any potential unintended consequences should be monitored during, and also after, the research or evaluation data collection occurs.

**Protection from harm:** The research should pose no harm to research participants or the researchers before, during and after the research takes place.

**IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | DFAT Guidance | Sector Guidance |
| Benefits to participants |  | RDI Network [Research for All: Making Research Inclusive of People with Disabilities](https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/disability-inclusive-research/), p.123  RDI Network, [Starter Kit Beneficence Tool H](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/beneficence/) |
| Management of risks | DFAT Risk Management for Aid Investments Guide provides detailed instructions on the risk management process. The department also has a new online risk system Assurance and Risk Management System (ARMS) to support the management of risk and safeguards.  Risk and Safeguard Tool | RDI Network, [Starter Kit Beneficence Tool I-L](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/beneficence/)  International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam [Security Guidelines – for field research in complex, remote and hazardous places](https://ihsa.info/security-guidelines-for-field-research-in-complex-remote-and-hazardous-places/) |
| Protection from harm | Aid Programming Guide: “DFAT must consider a number of safeguards when planning, designing, delivering and evaluating all Australian aid investments. Failure to adequately address safeguards may result in harm to people” (Aid Programming Guide, 2020)  Ethical Considerations for Research and Evaluation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls  Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) Policy  Risk and Safeguard Tool | IWDA [Do No Harm Toolkit](https://iwda.org.au/resource/do-no-harm-toolkit/)  RDI Network, [Starter Kit Beneficence Tool M-O](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/beneficence/) |

2.3 Research merit and integrity

**PRINCIPLE:** Research merit and integrity means the research is of high quality, well-justified and well-designed, and is conducted by individuals or teams with sufficient experience and competence. To have merit and integrity also means that the research has clear aims, questions, methodology and methods, and those working in international development and humanitarian aid are appropriately attuned to local contexts including culture, political situation, history and values.

Inclusion of local researchers on the team, or using local in-country partners, will also improve research integrity, cultural appropriateness, and build research capacity in-country.

Research integrity involves ensuring the accuracy or validity of the research to produce further knowledge and understanding. This commitment is particularly important in development work where organisations or the government may have a vested interest that may or may not align with the research findings or the analysis of those findings. Integrity also encompasses the dissemination and communication of results to research participants to contribute to knowledge, and more broadly to permit scrutiny and to preserve and protect the trust participants place in those carrying out the research.

**PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:** In practice, the principle of Research Merit and Integrity can be broken down into three concepts:

**Design and methodology:** Research is designed using appropriate methodologies, is well-planned, and undertaken by experienced and competent staff or consultants.

**Participatory approaches:** A diverse range of research participants are actively involved, as appropriate, in the different stages of the research cycle, including in design and planning, and in evaluation. As noted in DFAT’s Monitoring and Evaluation Standards, this engagement is critical to mutual accountability.

**Maintaining integrity:** those working in international development and humanitarian aid must protect and uphold the integrity of the research, including managing potential or perceived bias, and responding to any complaints effectively.

**IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | DFAT Guidance | Sector Guidance |
| Design and methodology | Chapter 5 of the Aid Programming Guide provides further guidance on good quality design processes  A Guide to Qualitative Research – Why, When, What and How? provides important justification for ethical practice | Oxfam UK, [Research Guidelines](https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-approach/research/research-guidelines)  Education Counts, [Pasifika education research guidelines](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika/5915)  RDI Network, [Enhancing Research Impact in International Development: A Practical Guide for Practitioners and Researchers](https://rdinetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ERIID_V8_DIGITAL.pdf)  RDI Network, [Starter Kit Research Merit and Integrity Tool P](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/research-merit-integrity/) |
| Participatory approaches | A Guide to Qualitative Research – Why, When, What and How? discusses some methods and tools. | Oxfam UK, [Fostering Participation In Research](https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620709/gd-fostering-participation-research-29032019-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) |
| Maintaining integrity | Due Diligence Framework (in particular, the integrity systems check), and the accreditation process under the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) provides advice about assessing the integrity of partners.  DFAT Safeguard Principles, Principle 3 states; “provide accessible and culturally appropriate grievance redress mechanisms and ensure that grievances are handled promptly, transparently, and without retribution or cost to the party that raised the concern” (Environmental and Social Safeguard Policy 2019).  DFAT’s Fraud Control and Anti-corruption Plan also contains operational information for assessing and investigating allegations of fraud and corruption. | RDI Network, [Starter Kit Research Merit and Integrity Tool Q](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/research-merit-integrity/) |

2.4 Justice

**PRINCIPLE:** in this context justice as a principle relates to equity: a fair process for recruitment of research participants; no unfair burden of participation on particular groups; no deliberate exclusion of minority voices; and fair distribution of and access to the benefits of participation in research. Justice also means that participants should not be exploited in the conduct of research, and instead, the wellbeing of participants should be protected.

This principle involves treating all participants with dignity, regardless of gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, religion and culture, and requires that those working in international development and humanitarian aid are aware of existing power relations, so that broader principles of human rights and fairness can be upheld. This principle also involves ensuring that attempts are made to avoid further marginalisation, discrimination, and exclusion of under-represented people such as people with disabilities, as well as other marginalised groups such as women and girls, ethnic minorities, first nations people, and older people. This may involve adapting methods used to engage potential participants and collect data, including considering accessibility of communications and physical locations (for example, the location of focus group discussions or the development of child friendly tools) in order to maximise the likelihood of participation from under-represented groups.

Finally, justice requires making findings accessible to participants in a timely, clear manner in a format that is meaningful for participants.

**PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:**

In practice, the principle of Justice can be broken down into four concepts:

**Considerations for vulnerable groups:** Inclusion, consideration, and representation of perspectives and voices from vulnerable groups is crucial in international development research. However, research involving vulnerable groups requires additional ethical considerations because vulnerability can add a more complex set of power relations between working in international development and humanitarian aid and participants at all stages of the research cycle.

**Equitable and inclusive involvement:** Participants in the research should be selected and included in research equitably with no individual, community or vulnerable group excluded without valid reason. Participants should also not be inadvertently excluded because the barriers to their participation have not been considered or addressed (e.g., when selecting the time and location of data collection activities and the data collection tools and communication approaches). There should also be no unfair burden of participation on individuals or groups of people.

**Dissemination of research:** Outcomes of research should be shared with and disseminated to research participants and their communities in ways that are meaningful, age appropriate, accessible for people with disabilities, and helpful for their specific context or scenario.

**IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | DFAT Guidance | Sector Guidance |
| Consideration for vulnerable groups | [Reaching indigenous people in the Australian aid program: guidance note](http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/reaching-indigenous-people-in-the-australian-aid-program-guidance-note.aspx) provides operational guidance on delivering programs that improve outcomes for Indigenous peoples  Child Protection Policy and Taking Photographs of Children Guidance Note provide guidance on working with children.  Also see the relevant safeguards in the Environmental and Social Safeguard Policy, and Operational Procedures. | RDI Network [Research for All: Making Research Inclusive of People with Disabilities](https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/disability-inclusive-research/)  National Health and Medical Research Council [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018),](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018) Section 4.  National Health and Medical Research Council [Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/ethical-conduct-research-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-and-communities) 2018 |
| Equitable and inclusive involvement | DFAT Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy and the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in DFAT’s Aid Program – Good Practice Note contains more detail on gender-sensitive research  Ethical Considerations for Research and Evaluation on Ending VAWG  Development for All 2015–2020 Strategy and the Disability-Inclusive Development Guidance Note guides Australia's aid program in supporting people with disabilities in developing countries, including through research | RDI Network, [Starter Kit Justice Tool R](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/beneficence/) |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Dissemination of research | Transparency Charter mandates DFAT’s high level commitment to transparency with recipients including research and evaluation findings  Due Diligence Framework Operational Procedures contains important questions to consider including how results of research and evaluation activities are published, in a timely fashion and in a format that is useful and accessible | RDI Network [Enhancing Research Impact in International Development: A Practical Guide for Practitioners and Researchers](https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/enhancing-research-impact-in-international-development-a-practical-guide-for-practitioners-and-researchers/)  RDI Network, [Starter Kit Justice Tool S](https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/beneficence/) |

3. Competence in Ethical Practice

**Key Message:** Ensuring that research and evaluation is done in an ethical manner is everyone’s responsibility.

3.1 A culture of ethical inquiry

A culture of ethical inquiry encourages those working in international development and humanitarian aid to build their own individual competence and confidence in ethical decision-making. Underpinning the Principles is a strong emphasis on shifting away from compliance and risk mitigation as a motivating factor, to fostering a culture of ‘ethical inquiry’.

As stated in the UK Department for International Development (DFID) 2019 Ethical Guidance for Research Evaluation and Monitoring Activities, “working ethically requires you to reflect regularly on the ethical questions raised by your work and adopt a culture of dialogue and learning. It requires you to take personal moral responsibility for acting with honesty, integrity and respect for others” (p.3).

A culture of ethical inquiry means that instead of viewing ‘ethics’ as a set of rules or regulations, or a paperwork trail, those working in international development and humanitarian aid are instead encouraged to think both critically and reflectively about possible ethical issues and challenges that may arise during research and evaluation. It is also about those working in international development and humanitarian aid having the confidence to respond ethically, effectively and about other organisational policies and requirements.

CEOs and senior managers should aim to foster a culture of reflective thinking to ensure any ethical challenges in research and evaluation activities are negotiated in ways that are relevant and appropriate.

It will be particularly important that program managers continue to be encouraged by their senior managers to engage with risk or ethical dilemma when they arise and to work with local partners and consultants. Local partners can bring new perspectives to research and evaluation and can enhance development effectiveness and impact. This underscores the importance of moving away from a purely ‘compliance-driven’ approach to one that emphasises proportionality, reflection and learning in the application of these Guidelines.

Much of international development work relies upon the strong and trusting relationships between development practitioners, local partners, and communities. Ethical issues and challenges therefore differ from community to community and context to context. Therefore, there is not an easy set of ‘one-size-fits-all’ rules to follow.

Those working in international development and humanitarian aid who are working with local staff, organisations or stakeholders should consider variations in the legal and cultural context in which they operate, while still maintaining the high standards of conduct and ethics. Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) Policies are also able to be adapted to the many contexts and encourages those working in international development and humanitarian aid to apply judgment based on the risk context in which they are operating. In the same way, the local context should be taken into consideration for ethical research practices.

Those working in international development and humanitarian aid are encouraged to resist the temptation of relying on the formal or informal ethics approval processes of others in favour of thinking reflectively about two guiding questions:

* What does ethical research/evaluation practice look like in this specific international development context?
* What steps need to be taken to ensure that research and evaluation work is done as ethically as possible and aligns as closely as possible to the Principles?

3.2 Responsibilities

Those working in international development and humanitarian aid involved in managing, commissioning or themselves working on research and evaluation, are responsible to ensure it is undertaken ethically.

Responsibility includes identifying ethical issues, putting in place strategies and regular monitoring where there is a high risk of ethical issues. Regular discussion about potential ethical issues can also help ensure that when they arise and that issues are escalated as required. CEOs and senior managers are responsible for nurturing a proactive culture of ethical inquiry in their teams.

It is not enough to rely on the partner or consultancy organisations and individuals, or their assessment of potential ethical issues, as they may not be able to assess important or relevant ethical considerations or devise appropriate mitigation strategies from your organisation’s perspective. For example, disclosure of abuse can happen during research and evaluation activities and those working in international development and humanitarian aid need to be aware of the policies surrounding these.

It is mandatory for all Australian staff working in international development and humanitarian aid to report immediately any suspected or alleged case of child exploitation or abuse, alleged misconduct and criminal offences, sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment by anyone in connection with DFAT funded projects. It is also mandatory to report any concerns about the welfare of a vulnerable person participating in or affected by a DFAT funded program.

There are clear linkages between the principles which underpins most organisations policies; such as Safeguarding Policy, Child Protection Policy, and Preventing Sexual Exploitation Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) Policy, and the objectives of Ethical Research and Evaluation.

3.3 Working with partners and consultants

Those working in international development and humanitarian aid should work with partners and consultants in a way that will avoid duplication or unnecessary additional assessment, compliance and management planning requirements, to adhere to the Principles. However, where partners or consultants are working in a country that is not their own, then ensuring cultural competence is especially important. Where possible, Australian/ international partners should be guided by local researchers on customs, and local approval processes required to conduct research.

When using local in-country partners or consultants, it is important not to assume that they do not have the capability or mechanisms for ethical practices. Instead, consider the partners’ performance and handling of ethical issues in research and evaluations to date. If required, offer technical assistance to build upon partners’ existing ethical values, practices, or principles, and translate them into documented policies. Where policies exist but are not implemented, then encourage a culture of ethical inquiry and build their capacity to adhere to ethical practices.

**Common ethical issues in partner led programs can include:**

* Absent or inadequate consideration of the context or of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, particularly children, minorities, or people with disabilities
* “Nothing about us without us” - lack of representation of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in research teams (such as people with disabilities or other marginalised groups), or partnership with local organisations that could help address this gap (e.g., disabled persons organisations or women’s organisations)
* Inadequate consideration of gender equality, and disability inclusion including ability to participate in research or evaluations, and any potential risk of sexual exploitation and abuse
* Failure to consider potential impacts on participants or to work in cultural-sensitive manner
* Lack of consideration in terms of data privacy and storage
* Lack of provision for communication (or communication that is accessible for people with disabilities) of any results or outcomes to those who participated
* Lack of provision for the ongoing implementation, monitoring and evaluation beyond the funded program.

A resources and guides published by the RDI Network to drive better partnerships by finding common goals, setting out clear expectations and planning for mutual success, as well as a showcase of effective partnership examples and lived experiences from RDI Network members and partners can be found on the website.[[6]](#footnote-6)

4. Integration of Ethical Principles

**Key Message:** Integration of the Ethical Principles into policy and practice enables those working in international development and humanitarian aid to respond to the ethical issues and dilemmas that can arise at any point in the international development or humanitarian aid management cycle.

4.1 Ethical practice and the Project Management Cycle

The aim of integrating the Ethical Principles is to increase sensitivity to ethical issues; increase knowledge or awareness of ethical issues; and improve confidence and motivation of staff to make informed, principles-based decisions to resolve ethical dilemmas when they occur.

The Ethical Research and Evaluation should take a proportional approach; in that at different stages in the project cycle, those working in international development and humanitarian aid should assess the risk or likelihood of ethical issues arising and determine appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks. Assessing the risk or likelihood of ethical issues may take time and consultation and may need to be built into the project timeline, particularly in the early stages of design and procurement.

As a minimum and as a standard of good practice, all research should follow a defined research protocol or plan and any change in these plans will require renewed consideration and response to ethical implications. The Principles are useful for thinking through the ethical considerations that will need be explained and acted upon throughout the research process, from the conception and design, to participant selection, data collection, analysis and interpretation, through to dissemination of the results of the research.

The following questions and references provide a starting point for researchers to begin thinking through what the ethical considerations are, identifying how the Principles may apply and to design research accordingly in a research protocol or plan. This is not an exhaustive list of relevant considerations as these will vary depending on the subject matter and type of research being conducted.[[7]](#footnote-7)

When planning to conduct research, consider:

1. Is the research necessary and well justified? What are you looking to investigate and why is it important?
2. Is the research well planned? Does it connect to a particular program of work in your organisation? Do researchers have the relevant expertise to conduct the research?
3. What is the context in which the research will be conducted? How will this context influence the research design?
4. How is the methodology and analysis appropriate to the context and what is being investigated?
5. What are the potential harms and benefits for researchers and participants that could arise from the research?
6. What information about the research will be provided to the participants? How will free and informed consent be obtained and ensured throughout the research process?
7. Are there any other parties or partners involved in the research? What are their interests in the research? Who will benefit directly and indirectly from the research?
8. How do you plan to protect confidentiality and anonymity? What will happen to the data? How will it be accessed and secured?
9. Have researchers received training, information and assistance related to addressing ethical issues?
10. How will the findings be disseminated and used? Will participants have access to validating and receiving the results of the research? What will happen when the research is complete?

4.3 Ethical principles in pandemics

Research and evaluation activities across the international development sector have been affected by the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative that as research and evaluation activities modify to new pandemic-appropriate methodologies, the Ethical Principles continue to be considered. This includes cancellation or postponement of planned activities due to travel restrictions and social distancing requirements, as well as shifting to online or virtual modes of engagement. An increased reliance on digital literacy and access to technology and internet services, poses challenges to marginalised populations in under-resourced settings.

Pandemics also see unprecedented collections of personal data for the mapping of testing, vaccine roll-out and movements of people. During pandemics this additional evidence-gathering can pose additional risks to both the participants and those working in international development and humanitarian aid, and the need for information should also not outweigh considerations of privacy and confidentiality, particularly when it comes to medical information. Streamlined processes and an increased need for information should not lead to poorly designed or unethically implemented research.

All health and medical research should also comply with the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council’s [National Statement on the Conduct of Human Research](file://C:\Users\phill\Dropbox\RDI%20Network\RDI%20&%20DFAT%20Ethics%20Project\FINAL%20other%20documents%20for%20DFAT\Research%20and%20evaluation%20activities%20across%20the%20international%20development%20sector%20have%20been%20affected%20by%20the%20implications%20of%20the%20COVID19%20pandemic.%20This%20includes%20cancellation%20or%20postponement%20of%20planned%20activities%20due%20to%20travel%20restrictions%20and%20social%20distancing%20requirements%20as%20well%20as%20shifting%20to%20online%20or%20virtual%20modes%20of%20engagement.%20It%20also%20has%20seen%20an%20increased%20reliance%20on%20digital%20literacy%20%20and%20internet%20platforms%20and%20access%20to%20technology%20and%20internet%20services,%20which%20poses%20challenges%20to%20marginalised%20populations%20in%20under-resourced%20settings.%20This%20remains%20a%20significant%20challenge.).

4.4 Ethical principles in humanitarian activities

People living in areas affected by humanitarian crises are particularly vulnerable, and under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee [Grand Bargain](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain) (an agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to greater localisation to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action), Australia has committed to greater accountability to affected populations.

All partners implementing DFAT funded disaster risk reduction, humanitarian preparedness and response activities already commit to a ‘do no harm’ approach and should apply (where appropriate) the rest of the Ethical Principles. ‘Do no harm’ is one of the ten guiding principles in the DFAT Humanitarian Strategy and is an internationally recognised principle.

For research or evaluation carried out as a part of humanitarian assistance provided in the immediate wake of a crisis such as a disaster or conflict, all reasonable effort should be taken to apply the Principles, ensuring a proportional approach. As a situation stabilises and moves into recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction development, the Principles should be applied more rigorously to any research or evaluation.

Due to the nature of humanitarian responses, research and monitoring may be not as common or may take place rapidly with minimal time for consultative design. Due to the nature of humanitarian response, people may be particularly vulnerable or traumatised by the event/conflict and its aftermath, therefore any monitoring where people are asked questions, should adhere to the Principle of beneficence, in particular the concept of protection from harm. In the Sphere Handbook, it is captured in Protection Principle 1: ‘avoid exposing people to further harm because of your actions’.

In humanitarian response, a culture of ethical inquiry is even more important as ethical risks may not be determined in advance and plans may not be sufficient. For the monitoring of unfolding humanitarian response situations, the ability to think both critically and reflectively about possible ethical issues and challenges is key.

4.5 DFAT Ethical Research and Evaluation

The DFAT Ethical Research and Evaluation Guidance Note and the Activity Managers Checklist, provides an ethical practice framework. The internal Guidance Note aims to assist DFAT staff and funded partners to have the confidence to respond ethically, effectively, and consistently, in alignment with DFAT’s other policies and requirements through fostering a culture of ethical inquiry. Fostering a culture of ethical inquiry in DFAT’s research and evaluation activities is important to ensure that research is conducted rigorously, safely and in the best interests of DFAT and funded partners, as well as the research participants.

The Ethical Research and Evaluation Guidance Note specifically set out the requirements for ethical practice in research and evaluation, and aligns and reinforces DFAT’s existing policies related to international development management and standards of conduct and risk management, including:

* [Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment](https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/preventing-sexual-exploitation-abuse-and-harassment/Pages/default)
* [Child Protection](https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/child-protection/Pages/child-protection)
* [Environment and Social Safeguard](https://www.dfat.gov.au/aid/topics/aid-risk-management/Pages/environmental-and-social-safeguards)
* [Aid Risk Management](https://www.dfat.gov.au/aid/topics/aid-risk-management/Pages/default)
* [Aid Programming Guide](https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/aid-programming-guide)
* [Partnerships for Recovery: Australia’s COVID-19 Development Response](https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/aid/partnerships-recovery-australias-covid-19-development-response)

5. Deep dives

This section will dive into some guidelines on how to implement certain Principles, this section is from the original ‘Guidelines’ of the Principles and Guidelines, with some updates and inclusions.

For further guidance see the digital version of the Starter Kit: Ethical Practice for Research and Evaluation in Development, and Case Studies for Ethical Research Practice, both on the RDI Network website.[[8]](#footnote-8)

5.1 Respect for Human beings; informed consent

Informed consent is one of the basic minimum requirements that must be addressed to ensure that ethical research principles are upheld. Informed consent should be considered at the beginning and throughout the research process, especially in longer initiatives. Specific procedures and considerations should be observed in the case of particular groups such as children and young people; and people with disabilities and are described in the subsections below.

The core idea is that a participant agreeing to take part in research should do so voluntarily, without coercion and with sufficient understanding of the research procedures, potential risks and potential benefits. Informed consent serves to support this process. Such consent does not absolve the researcher from protecting participants.

**Figure 1: The Consent Continuum Image of the Consent Continuum. Arrange in a table of circles and text beneath the circles. From left to right: The green circle represents Consent. The text beneath reads An individual gives freely and voluntarily the permission to engage in an action and/or activity. The individual has full knowledge of the processes, consequences, risks and benefits.   

The yellow circle represents Compliance. The text beneath reads An individual reluctantly gives permission to engage in an action and/or activity in order to please or not disappoint. 

The orange circle represents Pressure. The text beneath reads an individual reluctantly gives permission to engage in an action and/or activity through the use of bribery, implied threats and/or emotional manipulation (eg. guilt, shame or sense of duty). 

The dark orange circle represents Coercion. The text beneath reads An individual does not give permission, and engages in an action and/or activity through direct threats of physical harm, violence, and/or bribery. 

The red circle represents Force. The text beneath reads an individual does not give permission, and engages in an action and/or activity through the means of violence.  

A double-sided arrow sits underneath the circles to represent the sliding scale of the continuum and in italics underneath reads consider the cultural and family dynamics that may contribute to this, especially if there is compensation involved. **

Informed consent means that a participant is given clear information about the research, is able to choose not to participate, and is able to withdraw at any time and without consequence. Any limits to this right should be explained.

Informed consent is an ongoing process and must be renegotiable, so that participant understanding, and comfort is assured. Information provided to participants (either verbally or written) should include:

* Research aims and objectives
* Details of information that is being sought
* How responses will be recorded and used
* The degree to which participants will be consulted prior to publication
* How findings will be communicated to participants
* Potential benefits and consequences of participation, including potential risks
* Reimbursements or incentives (if any) that will be provided for participating in the study
* The name of the organisation that is funding the research
* Contact details for someone independent of the research process for inquiries and complaints
* An explanation of the voluntary nature of the participant’s involvement
* The name of the researcher(s).

An informed choice should be made between written (signature, thumbprint, or other personal mark) and verbal consent. In all cases, it is advisable that an informed consent script or form be completed to ensure that all elements of the informed consent process are adhered to, documented, and clearly communicated.

Illiteracy, low literacy, fear, or suspicion of written consent is the basis for using verbal consent, or for having a witness present. In the case of verbal consent, the researcher may document that the consent procedure has been followed, noting whether permission has been granted.

Those working in international development and humanitarian aid should also closely consider the relevant cultural context[[9]](#footnote-9) for the research and the potential for participants to be in a real or perceived ‘dependent or unequal’ relationship with the researchers, which could affect consent.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Some considerations to consider are:

* Permission to seek consent from the participant may be needed from formal and/or informal ‘gatekeepers’ as well as the individuals.
* Opportunity may need to be provided for potential participants to ask questions and to discuss participation with someone who is able to support them in making their decisions.
* Visual aids may be necessary to explain the research in certain settings.
* Ongoing communication and confirmation of consent may be required during the research to ensure that the concept of consent is understood, particularly towards the end of the research process.
* The researcher should avoid setting unrealistic expectations about the potential benefits and outcomes of the research.
* Communicating the findings of the research to participants needs to be ensured, and the ways in which this will happen also needs to be communicated to participants during the consent process.
* Careful, culturally appropriate decisions need to be made on the nature of any recompense to participants or a community for participation, ensuring that any recompense is not perceived as an undue inducement. For instance, benefits in the form of building participant knowledge or capacity through providing training or other support could be considered.
* According to the National Statement, an accessible, local contact should be available to participants, including someone independent of the process to handle any complaints.[[11]](#footnote-11)

More practical resources and tools on consent can be downloaded from the RDI Network website.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Informed consent for children and young people**

Before including a child or young person in research, those working in international development and humanitarian aid must firstly ensure that participation is not contrary to that child’s or young person’s best interest, and maintain alignment with any relevant Child Protection Policy and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). Under the age of 18 is considered a child, and 19–24 is considered a young person.

Informed consent raises particular challenges when research involves children and young people, arising from four main concerns:

1. Children’s or young people’s capacity to understand what the research involves, and therefore whether their consent to participate is sufficient
2. Possible coercion of children or young people by parents, peers, researchers or others to participate
3. Potential for conflicting values and interests of parents, guardians or primary caregivers and children
4. During a research process, possible disclosure by a child of information that raises child protection concerns (e.g., information indicating that they are currently at risk of or are experiencing violence, exploitation or abuse), obliging researchers to report such circumstances.

The following guidance is provided to help addresses these concerns.

**Clarify the approach to informed consent in research design.** All children and young people should be engaged in discussion about the research purpose, and information must be provided in a way that is appropriate to their age, competencies, context and evolving capacities.[[13]](#footnote-13) Research designs should specify how researchers will judge the child’s capacity to consent to participation in research, and how the research will be presented in a child-friendly manner to address children’s right to understand the parameters of their participation. [[14]](#footnote-14) Participant consent for use of images should be included where relevant.

**Sufficiency of consent.** A child’s or young person’s consent is sufficient only if he or she demonstrates sufficient maturity to understand the relevant information and to give consent. Often, additional consent is required from parents (or guardian or primary caregiver) whereby a child agrees to participate, however the parents provide consent. In this case, care must be exerted to ensure that participating in the research really is and continues to be in the child’s best interests. At all times, children and young people have the right to cease participating in research activities if they choose and opportunity for this should always be provided (and any limits to this explained). This relates to the principle of respect in consideration of the dignity of the individual participant their capability and right to make decisions about matters that affect them and the researchers’ responsibility to uphold ‘children’s right to dissent, that is to refuse participation and to withdraw at any time and to prioritise this over their parents’ or others’ wish for them to participate’.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Local law.** There may be local laws that govern at what age children are able to provide consent; such laws should be consulted and compliance ensured.

**Child protection.** Researchers should be aware of relevant child protection laws, policies and procedures of each institution from which participants are recruited (i.e., schools, community groups) and should be familiar with in-country child protection referral mechanisms and child protection focal points. They should also be well equipped to handle a disclosure (in terms of training and skills) and should have a reporting or referral plan in place to be able to respond. As part of the consent process, participants (and/or parent/ guardian/primary caregiver) should be advised before research commences that, should any information they provide indicate that they are at risk of abuse or exploitation, researchers will need to follow relevant procedures.

**Informed consent for people with a disability**

People with a disability[[16]](#footnote-16) are entitled to full and equitable participation in research as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This includes people with a cognitive impairment, intellectual disability or a mental illness. Many people with disability will have full capacity to participate in research and should not be deemed to be of high risk solely due to their disability. The impact of a disability is often dependent on environmental barriers; hence researchers should be cognisant to ensure that research processes are inclusive of people with disability and that their specific participation limitations are addressed.

The following guidance is provided to address potential participation limitations.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Clarify the approach to informed consent in the research design.** Researchers need to clearly describe in their research design how they will determine a person’s capacity to consent to the research, who will make this decision, and the criteria on which it is based. Ideally, the broader research focus should be clearly aligned with development objectives established by people with disability and/or disabled people’s organisations.

**Approach to securing informed consent.** People with disability should have risks, confidentiality and the purpose of the study outlined with the clear option to withdraw from research at any point (or with any limits to this fully explained). The consent process should include information on potential benefits that the research may have to people with disability. Informed consent to participation in research should be sought either from:

* The participant or
* The participant’s guardian or other person or organisation authorised by law.

Whether a person has the capacity to consent depends on the nature of their condition, including fluctuations in the condition, and the complexity of the research. Ideally, consent should also be witnessed by a person who has the capacity to fully comprehend the potential benefits and risks of the research, who is independent from the research team and, where possible, knows the participant and is familiar with his or her condition. Where potential participants are especially vulnerable, consideration should be given to the appointment of a participant advocate. However, at all times, participant resistance, discomfort or refusal to participate must be respected regardless of the views and opinions of others in the consent process.

**Appropriate methods of communication.** Where appropriate, background information and consent forms and actual research tools should be provided in varying formats such as plain language, pictorial/visual cues, large print, Braille and/or audio, based on individual preference.

Research is not just about evaluations and data-mining from the local community; research findings and recommendations can have huge impact on policies, programming and access to services. Ensure positive impact; empowering local Disabled Persons Organisations to participate in decision-making, build capacity in people with disabilities, and entwine local solutions for sustainable development.

The RDI Network, Nossal Institute for Global Health, and CBM Australia collaborated together to provide advice and practical steps for practitioners, researchers and policymakers; guidance provides case studies, checklists, and tools to ensure inclusive practices in the research cycle. The resulting guidance ‘[Practical Guide: Making Research Inclusive of People with Disabilities’](https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/inclusive-research-and-evaluation/) can be accessed on the RDI Network website.[[18]](#footnote-18)

5.2 Respect for Human Beings; privacy and confidentiality

Research participants should have the right to remain anonymous and to have their rights to privacy and confidentiality respected. In this sense, privacy and confidentiality refers to how much information a participant may wish to share and entrust with the researcher, as well as how the information they share is obtained, protected and stored. Researchers may give opportunities to participants to choose varying degrees of confidentiality, from anonymity to different forms of identification such as by number or age or sex. When working overseas and in developing countries, interpretations of ‘privacy’ may vary, and local meanings of the term should be taken into account. In particular, this may be the case in those countries with a strong focus on the collective rather than the individual.

It may also be respectful to ask participants how they would like to be represented in research products, their desire for an opportunity to comment on this representation, and who should have access to the knowledge generated.

Researchers should be aware that preserving anonymity requires that there be no link between the data (responses) and the source (the participant), and in some cases this might be impossible since characteristics of the participant may identify them. In such cases, it may be possible for researchers to take care that information is sufficiently aggregated or with sufficient details changed so that no community, household or individual can be identified.

If there are any limits to confidentiality (for instance, mandatory disclosure of cases of abuse) then these limits should be made clear to participants during the consent process. Privacy also requires that researchers take responsibility for data to be stored securely with access limited to designated, authorised people.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Ethical questions regarding knowledge generation, ownership and related rights of participants should be considered, as should the potential value of the material for further research.

5.3 Culturally and context sensitive research design

Culturally and context sensitive research design could be considered under Respect for Human Beings; cultural competency, but also under the Principle of Research Merit and Integrity.

This section encourages researchers to think about how a given piece of research should reflect the context in which the research takes place. Research cannot be assumed to have beneficial outcomes for host communities or relevant research participants. To design research that aligns with the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, research merit and integrity, and justice, requires a firm grounding in the relevant local cultural values, norms[[20]](#footnote-20) and the local historical and political context. For any given context, a first step is to identify key cultural values and customs and analyse how these impact on meaningful adherence and interpretation to ethical research principles.[[21]](#footnote-21) This process requires critical reflection on researchers’ own cultural values, how these influence proposed questions and design, and challenging them with alternative perspectives at all stages of the research.

Models to support ethical research should be explored, many of which increase reliance on participatory, collaborative processes and concepts of partnership and reciprocity.

Examples of models and approaches that could be employed include:

* Involvement of participants in framing research and research questions and/or other steps such as deciding data collection methods, analysis methods or validation, seeking alignment with cultural norms.
* Explicit attention to offering specific skills training or other forms of support in return for participation in research, building on the concept of reciprocity and mutual value.
* Well-designed processes for how research findings are communicated to participants including methods to actively engage participants with the findings and their implications.
* Establishment of institutional arrangements with ongoing involvement of participants to ensure integrity of the research initiative. For example, involvement of an independent research reviewer at nominated stages to identify ethical issues that may arise, and consequent adaptations to the approach.
* Community/participant control over the research process itself, with the local people leading and implementing the research.
* Involvement of local co-researchers (not from the relevant community/locality) who carry relevant cultural values and insight. This approach may also provide other benefits through supporting local research capacity building. In such cases, researchers have the responsibility to ensure that local co-researchers undertake the research in an ethically appropriate manner.

Gender should be a key concern since norms and laws in many countries may require specific research design considerations. This involves reflecting on the implications of the research for male and female participants and being respectful of gender and sexual identities.[[22]](#footnote-22) Consideration should also be given to the intersection of gender with other factors that shape a person’s circumstances and interests, including age, ethnicity, (dis) ability or religion. While gender categories are helpful in identifying commonalities among members, individuals are diverse and the interests and needs of people who share the same gender will vary. Attention to such intersections is important because these can magnify disadvantage, risks and barriers to participation, as well as change the potential benefits of the research. Such intersections require specific consideration, particularly if the research aims to be representative or to target very poor or marginalised groups.

Gender-sensitive research is encouraged as it takes into account and values the implications of gender on individual circumstances including their roles, responsibilities, power relations, perspectives and priorities, as well as legal status and rights.[[23]](#footnote-23)

A gender-sensitive approach can also support empowerment[[24]](#footnote-24) through consideration of:

* The immediate effects of the research, for example, on women’s time and their ability to meet their gendered roles and responsibilities; or on the security of research participants, particularly where the research involves participants who are vulnerable or marginalised
* The longer-term effects, for example, on the awareness of or implications for human rights and legal protections; capacity to voice needs and priorities; or on wider community views about the capacities and contributions of a particular group.

5.5 Beneficence; Management of risks

Assessing risk is an important step towards identifying an ethical review and approval process that is ‘fit-for purpose’ for a given piece of research and identifying processes to minimise and manage risk. The following sections contain advice relevant to understanding this process.

**Determining high and low ethical risk**

Identifying and managing any potential risk of ethical dilemmas or harmful situations during research is key to ethical practice. Research is of negligible risk when there is no foreseeable risk of harm or discomfort, and any foreseeable risk is of inconvenience only. Research activities are normally considered to be of low risk when they do not involve vulnerable people, or do not involve sensitive issues (e.g., sexual behaviour, mental health, etc). However, international development often involves populations (not otherwise vulnerable) in fragile settings or conflict circumstances, or where there is an unequal relationship/significant power imbalance.

In these settings, the risk of harm is heightened. While there is no definitive list of who would be defined as ‘vulnerable’, in the DFAT Environmental and Social Safeguard Policy (2019) a checklist includes; women, children, female or child-headed households, people with disabilities, the poor, the elderly, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, religious and linguistic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex people, and people dependent upon the land of others for livelihood or residence.

It is the responsibility of those working in international development and humanitarian aid to minimise risks and respond to unexpected ethical dilemmas and be familiar with different strategies to mitigate these. Determining the capacity of implementing partners or consultants is just as important as identifying risks prior to the activity commencing.

Assessing the ethical acceptability of risks means including considerations of the following elements, using available evidence and a transparent process.

* Identify the risks and kinds of harm that may occur throughout the research (see ‘Beneficence’ in the Principles for an articulation of possible types of harm) and assess their likelihood and severity
* Identify who (participants and/or others) the risks or harm may affect and how
* Establish approaches for minimising, managing, and monitoring the risks
* Identify the potential benefits and who is likely to receive them
* Weigh up and discuss whether the benefits of the research exceed the potential harm.

When research is considered to have more than a ‘negligible risk’, some form of formal ethical review is advised, as described further below, and researchers have an ongoing responsibility to minimise risks to participants by re-assessing the need for the research (or who is best placed to lead or conduct such research), or the research aims or methods, or both. Researchers also have a responsibility to include mechanisms or a process to respond to and monitor predicted and potential harm.

**Formal ethical reviews**

These should be considered where:

* The potential harm and risk to those involved in the research (researchers and participants) is not ‘low’ or ‘negligible’, as discussed in section on assessing, minimising, and managing risk
* Research is exploratory in nature and gathers information beyond that routinely collected
* Research potentially impinges on the privacy and confidentiality of those involved in the research
* Research involves the secondary use of data collected from an evaluation activity for purposes other than those described to partners and participants and the intended use of the data goes beyond program improvement
* Research involves a comparison of cohort, randomisation, use of control groups or placebos
* Targeted or additional analysis of data collected from an evaluation activity that involves minority or vulnerable groups and the intended use of the data goes beyond program improvement.

While universities and large research organisations or other larger NGOs may already have access to Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC), some types of research and evaluation fall outside of HRECs’ remit. Not all HRECs include people who work in or have a background in international development or understand the context of the situation or country in which the research is taking place. Where there are HRECs in the country in which the research is taking place, these should be utilised. The advice and support of HRECs is important, but it should not be solely relied upon, nor does it absolve the ethical or managerial responsibility of those managing an international development and humanitarian aid project.

**In-country ethical approval**

Researchers should ensure that they are aware of, and follow, any national ethics processes, any relevant ethical review processes through local institutions, and comply with local laws. In addition, research conducted in other countries by researchers from Australian institutions must comply with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and National Statement. Where no national ethical approval process is available, it is expected that principles for ethical conduct, such as those articulated in the Principles, as well as how they are applied through the guidelines articulated here, will still need to be applied.

For a practical guide for NGO and independent practitioners on navigating the processes involved in formal publication of research and evaluation, see the RDI Network [Ethics Requirements for Research Publication](https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/ethical-practices-in-the-pacific-and-asia/).[[25]](#footnote-25) It provides information relating to access to Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs), assessment of risk and the ethics requirements of a range of Australian publications in the international development sector. Also see the RDI Network Ethics Approval Processes for Asia, and for the Pacific.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Glossary

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| Word | Meaning |
| **ETHICAL INQUIRY** | Rather than viewing ‘ethics’ as a set of rules or regulations, ethical inquiry encourages thinking both critically and reflectively about possible ethical issues and challenges that may arise. Fostering a culture of ethical inquiry encourages those working in international development and humanitarian aid to build their competence in ethical decision-making. |
| **ETHICS** | ‘Ethics’ is concerned with what is good and bad, moral duty and obligation, and with questions of what constitutes a good life and a good society. It encompasses the principles and rules governing the standards of conduct of an individual or group, such as a community or a profession. |
| **EVALUATION** | The systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed investment, program or policy. It is an in-depth process which takes place on a periodic basis. Evaluation aims to provide credible evidence which can inform major program management and policy decisions and highlight important development lessons. The term ‘evaluation’ covers all systematic and objective assessments of an investment, program or policy. |
| **RESEARCH** | “An original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight” (The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2018). Particular ethical considerations apply to the collection of information from ‘human subjects’ (including a person’s own personal information or where they are acting on behalf of another person or people), and to all research either conducted with the assistance or participation of humans, or that will impact human participants.  Throughout this document the term ‘research’ is used to encompass both research and evaluation. |

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| RISK | The effect of uncertainty on objectives. risks include events that cause damage or are negative in impact as well as events which prevent realising positive opportunities or benefits.  risk is understood in relation to research participants, researchers and research partners or consultants, but also the organisational consequences of conducting unethical research practice which may damage reputation or legitimacy.  risk for researchers and research participants can be considered along a spectrum from harm (serous or high risk), discomfort (less serious) or inconvenience (even less serious). risk for participants can occur during the conduct of research or because of research, i.e., dissemination of research findings. likelihood and consequence of risk for research participants is another aspect of risk to consider.  unethical research practice may cause risk to organisational reputation, legitimacy and contravene australian codes, policy, guidelines and law related to research. |
| **VULNERABLE /VULNERABILITY** | ‘Vulnerability’ is a multi-dimensional concept. In terms of humanitarian aid, it refers to the characteristics determined by physical, social, economic, and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, or a community, to the impacts of - or capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of - a natural, or man-made hazard.  More generally, vulnerability may be caused by external factors, such as the place they live in, economic, political, or environmental factors that affect the population as a whole and put them at risk. Population groups are often defined by a single characteristic (e.g., low income), even though the people in those groups have varying advantages and needs, leading some people to have increased susceptibility.  Vulnerability can be due to factors specific to an individual or group within the population. People may be considered to be vulnerable due to factors such as their age, disability, gender, race, sexuality, or health, and the vulnerability may be permanent or temporary. People may experience multiple and intersecting disadvantages, and could face increased vulnerability due to inequitable access, and marginalisation. |

1. The ACFID Code of Conduct is a voluntary, self-regulatory sector code of good practice. It was developed in 1997 and comprehensively revised in 2010 and 2016. References throughout this document refer to the 2016 version. Find out more: https://acfid.asn.au/content/ about-code [Accessed 28 June 2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. RDI Network, digital version of the Starter Kit: Ethical Practice for Research and Evaluation in Development, available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/>, accessed July 2021, [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion on this point, also see Thomson, C (2012). Why Ethics matters, An Address to the Third Annual conference of the Australasian Ethics Network, Brisbane, 16 February 2012, University of Wollongong. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. May, T (2011). ‘Social Research: Issues, methods and process’, Values and ethics in the research process, Third Edition, Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 46. For a discussion of the ethical issues facing NGOs see Horton K & Roche, C (eds) (2010). Ethical Questions and International NGOs: An exchange between Philosophers and NGOs. Library of Ethics and Applied Philosophy 23, Springer: London. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Australian Institute of Family Studies (2013). *Evaluation and Innovation in Family Support Services,* ‘Box 1: Evaluation and research – are they different?’ November 2013. Available at: http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/factsheets/a145794/index.html, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. RDI Network, Case studies on effective cross-sector partnerships, available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/case-studies-on-effective-cross-sector-partnerships/>, accessed July 2021. RDI Network, Effective partnerships and collaborations, available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/effective-partnerships-and-collaborations/>, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These questions have been adapted from Oxfam Australia (2009). Oxfam Australia Research Ethics Guidelines and Médecins Sans Frontières (2013), Research Ethics Framework: Guidance document. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. RDI Network, digital version of the Starter Kit: Ethical Practice for Research and Evaluation in Development, available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/>, accessed July 2021, and RDI Network, Case Studies for Ethical Research Practice, available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/case-studies-ethical-research-practice/>, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A useful text related to evaluating programs involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is: Williams, E, Guenther, J & Arnott, A (2011). Beyond informed consent: how is it possible to ethically evaluate Indigenous programs, Paper presented to the NARU Public Seminar Series, Darwin, 23 November 2011, pp. 1–11. Available at: https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guides/beyond­\_informed\_consent, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In many cases, the National Statement guidance on participants in dependent or unequal relationships may be relevant, particularly where developed country researchers are leading research. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For ACFID members, a suitable complaints process may be aligned with those developed as a part of their compliance with the Code of Conduct. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. RDI Network, Respect for Human Beings, available from <https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/ethical-practice-starter-kit/respect-human-beings/>, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Further recommended reading is available through the Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) project noted in Annex 1 – Resources and Supporting Documentation. For specific guidelines regarding informed consent involving children and youth, see Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (2013). Ethical Guidance: Informed Consent. Available at: https://childethics.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ERIC-compendium-Ethical-Guidance-Informed-consent-section-only.pdf, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For more on participation and different methods see ISF-UTS, ChildFund Australia, Transform Aid International and Insight Sustainability (2017) Exploring The Link Between Child and Youth Participation and Development Effectiveness, A Learning Paper. Published May 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (2013). Ethical Guidance: Informed Consent, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a rights-based model of disability, this guidance employs the term ‘people with a disability’. For further discussion on terminology see: CBM (2012). Inclusion Made Easy: A quick program guide to disability in development. CBM. Available at: https://www.cbm.org/fileadmin/user\_upload/Publications/cbm\_inclusion\_made\_easy\_a\_quick\_guide\_to\_disability\_in\_development.pdf, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Additional valuable information related to informed consent for people with disabilities can be found in Dalton & McVilly (2004). ‘Ethics Guidelines for International Multicenter Research Involving People with Intellectual Disabilities’, Journal in Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities. 1(2), pp. 57–70. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-1130.2004.04010.x, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. RDI Network, Practical Guide: Making Research Inclusive of People with Disabilities (2020), available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/inclusive-research-and-evaluation/>, accessed July 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Australian Code recommends retaining research data for five years. See NHMRC (2018). Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For instance, development of ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders identified six cultural values as underpinning ethical conduct: Reciprocity, Respect, Equality, Responsibility, Survival and protection, Spirit and integrity. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For more on this point, see Honan, E, Obaidul HM, Alhamdan, B, Phommalangsy, P & Lingard, B (2012). ‘Ethical issues in cross-cultural research’, International Journal of Research & Method in Education. 36(4). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For further discussion see Gune, E & Manuel, S (2007). Doing Research on Sexuality in Africa: Ethical Dilemmas and the Positioning of the Researcher. OSSREA Bulletin. Available at: http://www.arsrc.org/downloads/features/manuelgune.pdf, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For a helpful summary on this point see Leduc, Brigitte (2009). Guidelines for Gender Sensitive Research. ICIMOD. Available at: http://www.icimod.org/resources/446, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For further discussion and examples of gender-sensitive research characteristics see UN-INSTRAW. Gender Research: A How-to Guide, and for discussion of a participatory approach see Gurung, Min Bdr & Leduc, B (2009). Guidelines for a Gender Sensitive Participatory Approach. ICIMOD. Available at: https://genderaveda.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/gender-research-a-how-to-guide.pdf, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. RDI Network, Ethics Requirements for Research Publication (2018), available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/ethical-practices-in-the-pacific-and-asia/>, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. RDI Network, Ethics Approval Processes in Asia (2017) and Ethics Approval Processes in the Pacific (2017), available at: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/ethical-practices-in-the-pacific-and-asia/>, accessed July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)