

# UNDERTAKING RESEARCH WITH ETHICS

Any research must follow ethical principles and particular care must be taken when it involves people as participants or is likely to impact directly upon them. This section sets out the minimum ethical standards required in all research conducted or commissioned by Oxfam GB. When context-specific and/or more detailed guidance is provided by Oxfam or its partners, researchers must adhere to the relevant protocols and demonstrate that they have done so.

## THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF RESEARCH ETHICS

- **Respect:** The researcher must recognise the capacity and rights of all individuals to make their own choices and decisions, and their right to be treated with dignity;
- **Beneficence:** The researcher's primary goal must be to improve the lives of participants and protect their physical, mental and social well-being;
- **Justice:** The researcher must ensure that the benefits for participants are at least as great as the risks.

## PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

These principles need to be reflected in each stage of research including: designing research; selecting participants; gaining their consent; conducting the research; and using the research findings.

### 1. Designing research

- The research must be designed to reduce risks for participants and increase their possible benefits from its outcome.
- The research must be designed especially to protect vulnerable participants – for example, children or women workers in a garment factory.
- Questions for surveys and interviews should be respectful and phrased in culturally-appropriate language.

### 2. Selecting participants

- Participants should only be involved in research that has potentially some benefit for themselves. Possible outcomes, such as a safer society or better working conditions in the long-run, may be benefits if the individual participants consider them to be so. Some participants may feel a benefit simply from having the chance to tell their story. But it is up to them to decide whether or not this is so.
- No individual or group of participants should face more risks than benefits from participating. If the research has a higher risk than benefit for participants, then it should be redesigned to reduce those risks.

### 3. Gaining the consent of participants

- Researchers must gain informed and voluntary consent before conducting research with participants. This means that the participants must:
  - have the relevant information about what the research is;
  - understand it, including the possible risks and benefits to themselves;
  - be free to choose whether or not to participate, without inducement;
  - give their consent, either written or verbal;
  - have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.
- The depth of this consent-taking process will depend on the topic of research and the extent to which it could impact on the participants' lives.
- If research involves children (as defined by national law, or those under 18) then their parents or guardians must also give consent. It is best to get their written consent, in (the rare) case of disputes later.
- Special care must be taken when seeking consent from vulnerable groups, for example prisoners.
- Researchers must ensure that no participants are forced to take part, for example by their employer, their parents, or by village elders.

### 4. Conducting the research

- Researchers should be qualified and/or trained for the task. They need to have good self-awareness and strong listening skills.
- Research should be conducted in places that are socially comfortable for the participant and where they are able to speak freely.
- If the participant has incurred direct financial costs for participating then they can be reimbursed, but they should not be paid to participate.
- The participants must be able to contact the researchers, either directly or through local partners.
- If a participant reports any serious adverse effects as a result of participating – such as losing their job, or being physically abused – then this must be reported to the Oxfam project manager by the researcher.

### 5. Using the research findings

Participants in research should be told how Oxfam would like to use the research findings (for example as part of a campaign). They must then be asked, and must be free to choose, whether or not:

- they can be quoted in Oxfam materials;
- their real name can be used in Oxfam materials;
- their photographic image and/or film of them (if taken) can be used in Oxfam materials.

Their choices must be clearly recorded and always kept with their testimony and/or the relevant media.

If it is agreed that all or any part of a participant's testimony should be confidential then that commitment must be clearly recorded and respected. If the testimony is to be made anonymous, or used with a false name, make sure that any other identifying details are also changed.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON RESEARCH ETHICS

The standards in this guideline are based on the materials produced by FHI 360 (formerly Family Health International) for its Research Ethics Training Curriculum, which includes a free, online self-study course that takes 2-3 hours to complete. Although this focuses on health-related research, it is highly recommended for any social science researcher (see: <http://www.fhi360.org/en/RH/Training/trainmat/ethicscurr/index.htm>).

The Framework for Research Ethics (FRE), produced by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), provides the basic standards for UK-funded social science research (for further information and a copy of the FRE see: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx>).

## FURTHER ADVICE

If you have concerns or queries about particular ethical issues in Oxfam's research, please contact [research@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:research@oxfam.org.uk) for further advice.

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