# RESEARCH ETHICS

**A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE**

The flowchart highlights, for each stage of the research process, (1) the core conventions researchers should take into account and adhere to; (2) a checklist of questions researchers should consider; and (3) official documents/guidelines researchers can refer to. This tool summarises, and should be used in conjunction with Research Ethics: A practical guide.

## 1. DESIGNING ETHICAL RESEARCH

- Research must be aimed at benefiting participants. Benefits must always outweigh potential risks.
- Participants must be informed about the objectives and methods of the research, and how they will be able to access findings.
- All staff involved must be qualified and trained to carry out the research.
- Research methods, tools and approaches must be context-specific as well as gender- and socio-culturally sensitive.

**Questions:**

- Is the research necessary, and by whose criteria?
- Is the research well-planned as a project, and integrated into a programme of practical work?
- What systems are in place to ensure that you learn from this research project experience?
- Are you familiar with and ready to apply all of the relevant organizational policies and procedures, including data protection, safeguarding, and ethics review?

**References:** UK Economic and Social Research Council’s Framework for Research Ethics | Oxfam’s guidelines on Writing Terms of Reference for Research; Terms of Reference for Research Template; Integrating Gender in Research Planning; Doing Research with Enumerators | Oxfam GB’s Data Protection and Responsible Data Policies.

## 2. CONDUCTING AND SIGNING OFF A RISK ANALYSIS (RA)

- The RA must be conducted and signed off by all relevant central and local team members before the research starts.
- The aim is to reduce the potential for unintended harm. All potential risks and related mitigation strategies must be identified, and the RA should be regularly reviewed.
- The RA must consider short- and long-term risks; risks to both participants and researchers; and potential need to breach participant confidentiality for legal and safety reasons.
- Names/contact details of research and safeguarding focal points must be included.

**Questions:**

- Have you compiled the specific ethical issues raised by your project in a risk assessment, and set mitigation strategies for each?
- Has the risk assessment been signed off, including by local staff who know the context of the research well?
- How are you planning to monitor the safety of both researchers and respondents?
- How are you going to monitor researchers’ adherence to Oxfam’s Code of Conduct? What will happen if is not upheld?
- Are you familiar with and ready to apply all of the relevant organizational policies and procedures, including data protection, safeguarding, and ethics review?

**References:** Oxfam’s Staff Code of Conduct | Oxfam’s guidelines on Doing Research with Enumerators | Oxfam GB’s safeguarding policies; and Reporting Misconduct Standard Operating Procedures.

## 3. SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

- Participants should only be involved in research that has potentially some benefit for themselves.
- Participants need to properly understand the purpose of the research to be able to make an informed judgement about its potential benefits.
- Researchers should be aware of any risks of research fatigue, i.e. multiple pieces of research conducted in parallel with little tangible gain for communities.

**Questions:**

- Have you considered the special needs of children and other especially vulnerable groups?
- Are you providing accessible information about the project, including how to access the research and safeguarding focal points?
- Are you providing accessible and clear information on the research’s benefits and potential risks for participants?
- Have you explored the context of the research to identify any specific barriers, including research fatigue?

4. GAINING THE CONSENT OF PARTICIPANTS

- Informed and voluntary consent must be gained from participants before conducting research.
- Participants must be informed about and understand the research, their rights (not to take part/withdraw), and how to express concerns.
- Special care must be taken when seeking consent from vulnerable groups, including children.
- Participants must not be forced to take part by researchers or others in their community.
- Participants must agree on how Oxfam would like to use research findings.
- How will informed consent be obtained from respondents, recorded for later reference and monitored throughout the research process?
- Are you providing accessible information about the project, including how to access the research and safeguarding focal points?
- Do participants understand how their data will be used?
- If you provide an information sheet to respondents, will it be safe for them to take these sheets away?
- What level of confidentiality and anonymity can you offer to participants, and how can they be effectively informed of this?
- Do respondents understand they can get back in touch to complain, object, or withdraw from the research at any point?
- Have you considered the special needs of children and other especially vulnerable groups?

Further guidance and templates for recording informed consent: Oxfam’s Ethical Content Guidelines | University of Michigan | University of Manchester | UK Data Service | World Health Organization

5. CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

- All researchers must be trained on Oxfam’s Code of Conduct as well as on their role as first point of contact for community members in difficult contexts.
- Safe research practices must be monitored.
- Research should be conducted in safe and comfortable places.
- Financial compensation is not generally recommended, but decisions are context-dependent.
- Participants must be able to contact researchers directly or indirectly at any point.
- Any adverse effect reported by participants must be reported to the research/safeguarding focal points, and any staff misconduct investigated as appropriate.
- Are you offering compensation to participants?
- Do respondents understand they can get back in touch to complain, object, or withdraw from the research at any point?
- How are you planning to monitor both researchers’ and respondents’ safety?
- How are you going to monitor researchers’ adherence to Oxfam’s Code of Conduct? What will happen if it is not upheld?

References: Oxfam’s Staff Code of Conduct | Oxfam GB’s safeguarding policies | Oxfam’s guidelines on Doing Research with Enumerators

6. USING RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Data must be treated confidentially and stored safely, following relevant local/regional/national privacy and information rights laws.
- Participants in projects managed by Oxfam must be able to inquire about outcomes or retract participation, even after research is concluded.
- Participants’ testimonies can be used publicly by Oxfam without anonymisation only if participants have clearly agreed to this. Children must never be identified.
- What level of confidentiality and anonymity can you offer to participants, and how can they be effectively informed of this?
- Which tools do you plan to use to store and process information? Are they supported and safe?
- How will you ensure that information is appropriately fed back to those who participated in the research?
- Do respondents understand they can get back in touch to complain, object, or withdraw from the research at any point?
- Have you considered the implications – including informing participants and any necessary agreements or contracts – of any sharing of data or survey results between affiliates or with external partners?

References: UK Data Service offers helpful anonymization protocols | Reference to the Right to Privacy can be found in the UN Declaration of Human Rights; EU Charter of Fundamental Rights | Data Protection and Privacy obligations: EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) | UNCTAD’s Data Protection and Privacy Legislation Worldwide | Oxfam GB’s Data Protection Policy and Responsible Data in Program Policy | Using images/video recordings: Oxfam’s Ethical Content Guidelines | Oxfam’s Digital Safeguarding Policy | Oxfam’s Youth Safeguarding Policy

*The checklist was adapted from Oxfam Australia’s Research Ethics Guidelines (August 2009)*