

RESEARCH ETHICS

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE



OXFAM

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.

- ? 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.

- ? 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 it 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.

- ? 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?

Reference: Way, E. (2008) '[Understanding Research Fatigue in the Context of Community-University Relations](#)'. Clark University Digital Commons.

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 \(GDPR\) \(Oxfam GB\)](#) | [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](#)