Ethics Guidelines Document 

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Additional consideration for global development research projects

Research in developing countries often poses unique ethical issues. To facilitate the development of projects for the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and similar schemes, the University of Reading has drawn up these guidelines on ethical practice in, and relating to, developing countries. These guidelines should be read in conjunction with the University’s [guidance on Research Ethics](http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/reas/EthicsGuidance_October_2012.pdf).1

Below is a list of ethical issues that might arise in the context of designing and implementing research projects in developing countries, and that researchers preparing applications to global development funds might need to consider. The list in non-exhaustive, and additional queries should be discussed with Research Division Leaders or [Mike Proven](mailto:vbs05mp@reading.ac.uk) who is the first point of contact for the University’s Research Ethics committee. The document is divided into the following 3 sections.

### Developing the research project

### Implementation of project

### The results of the project

## Developing the Research Project

1. **Stakeholder engagement**: As research in developing countries tends to involve or affect communities distinct from the researchers’, there is generally a strong expectation, and strong ethical grounds, to engage with local stakeholders in the design of a research project.2 Engaging with local stakeholders at this stage can raise important and sometimes difficult questions about who to involve, and it is vital to ensure that such processes do not reinforce potentially discriminatory and unjust social relationships. Gender inclusion continues to be important to funders working in global development and project design should be explicit about how this is addressed.
2. **Participant safety**: In developing countries, particular within fragile states, participants may be put in danger by taking part in a research project, due to a number of reasons including being identified as a particular social group. Therefore precautions should be taken where appropriate to avoid risk of recrimination or unsolicited identification**.** The duty of care guidance that complements this document discusses this in more detail.5
3. **Conflict sensitivity**: Within the context of a fragile state or a conflict situation there is a danger that the research or the findings of a research project may have unintentional consequence on the affected communities. Research processes and outcomes can affect political and social dynamics at the local level, can affect community relations, and the capacity of groups for maintaining peaceful relationships. Each situation is unique but researchers working in these areas may want to analyse potential sources and dynamics of conflict within relevant communities, and how they might interact with envisaged research activities. The [DFID briefing paper on ‘Do no harm’](http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/con77.pdf)3 offers useful examples of situations where such issues have arisen, and how they can be mitigated.
4. **Participant comprehension**: language barriers and limited formal education might mean that traditional ways of seeking consent or informing about the content of the project might be insufficient in some developing country contexts. Therefore researcher may want to consider alternatives to standard consent forms, to ensure that information about data collection and management is fully understood by participants.
5. **Participants consent**: Researchers need to be aware of the ways in which local dynamics and structures, and financial disparities might affect the ability of potential participants to give informed consent, especially if rewards or compensation are provided for participating in the research. Also researcher should consider if the designed informed consent process appropriately explains the alternatives provided to the participants in case they do not wish to enrol in the research. 4

## Implementing research

**1. Are research partners a conflict party?** In fragile and conflict affected states, research partners might be direct or indirect participants in a conflict. While the partnership with them might still be important to successfully conduct the envisaged research, it can also raise challenges of access, and also for the security of researchers.

**2. Support for Researchers**: As outlined in the Support for Researchers conducting Research in Developing Countries guidelines4, there are a number of support mechanisms and processes in place to help researchers conduct research effectively and safely in developing countries. Researchers are required to engage with this policy during project development and the actual conduct of research.

**3. Trauma:** Research relating to violence and conflict can unsettle or traumatise participants. Any research process that might raise such concerns needs to balance the integrity and dignity of trauma survivors against the benefit of the study. What to do when subjects are assessed as distressed and in need of treatment during the course of research brings its own ethical questions. As a minimum standard researchers are ethically obliged to refer those requesting assistance to available sources of care and support. If there are few existing resources, it may be necessary for the research team to arrange its own short term support for participants if appropriate, i.e. provide professional counselling services.

**4.** **Ethics review:** Many localresearch partners will have their own research ethics guidelines and approval processes, and which would be expected to review and approve research activities involving their staff. It might be necessary for the project to include relevant training for researchers and research assistants, produce project specific research ethics guidance, and especially for larger projects establish clear monitoring processes as part of the project’s governance structure to ensure that ethical issues are monitored and addressed effectively.

## Project findings

1. **Sharing and jointly interpreting research findings with local partners:** Official Development Assistance funded research is expected to directly benefit communities in developing countries, and local communities therefore should have a degree of ownership of both the research findings and their interpretation. It may also be important that the interpretation of findings reflects the local understandings and interpretation of results as well as the researcher’s own.
2. **Data Management:** Data generated by research can both entrench and privilege certain actors or perspectives, or can challenge them and empower alternatives. It can reveal inequalities or highlight new concerns, but can also expose vulnerable and marginalized groups and individuals. How data is presented, stored, and made accessible can therefore have significant ethical implications.
3. **Dissemination**: Not everybody speaks English, and both levels of literacy and access to conventional media may vary significantly across potential beneficiaries of a research project. Enabling relevant communities to access research findings and benefit from them might require disseminating them not only in relevant languages, but also in formats which are accessible.
4. **Risk / benefit of research findings**: In some circumstances the publication of research findings might do significant harm to envisaged beneficiaries, e.g. if they fuel violent conflict. In such situations, researchers might need to weigh up the risks of harm arising from publishing research findings (and how they are published/presented) with the benefits arising from their publication.

### Useful links

1 <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/reas/EthicsGuidance_October_2012.pdf>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524635/Ethics-principles-report-2016.pdf>

3 <http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/con77.pdf>

4 <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/reas/Support_for_researchers_conducting_research_in_developing_countries.pdf>

5https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/181176/DFIDResearch-Open-and-Enhanced-Access-Policy.pdf

For any medical research see: <http://nuffieldbioethics.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Ethics-of-research-related-to-healthcare-in-developing-countries-I.pdf>