

Research and Ethics Protocol

General conduct during fieldwork and ethical considerations

This section sets out some general norms of behaviour when working in a research area. Much of this is obvious, but it is very important to ensure that our research is both ethical and accurate.

- Be clear about your role. Seek Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Answer questions openly. Ensure confidentiality.
- Community members and research participants must not feel offended or demeaned by anything we do, say or ask, or by our behaviour in their community. We are in their community and must respect them accordingly.
- Expectations of community members and research participants must not be raised without good reason by anything we do or say during the research.
- Potential respondents must also feel under no explicit or implicit pressure to participate, either from the research team or from those we ask to help us gather participants (e.g. village heads,, community elders or leaders, etc).
- The research will be more accurate if participants see no reason or pressure to adjust their responses in a particular way and if they feel comfortable during the interview.

We may be engaged in research that might appear very strange to many members of the community. We may ask personal questions, and select many respondents at random. Even if this type of research has been conducted in the community before, it is likely that we will ask questions about what community members are doing. It is important to explain very clearly what we do, and to answer questions about the research patiently, clearly and honestly to each individual that asks.

Ethical considerations.

The below points set out some key ethical considerations to be made in carrying out participatory research with vulnerable groups:

- Enable inclusivity and equality. Avoid any deliberate exclusion on the basis of gender, sex, age, religion, ethnicity, cast, social class, disability, sexual preference, political conviction, and any other distinction there could be.
- Ensure that permission is sought for the focus groups to go ahead, through consultation with the local community.
- Set and communicate clear parameters for the focus group – this means clearly stating the purpose, the limits and what the follow up will entail. It also means ensuring that demands on participants' time are not excessive and that they are aware of their right to not participate or to withdraw at any time.
- Set up FGDs and interviews at a time and in places that are convenient to respondents (e.g. after labouring hours)
- Ensure the safety and protection of participants – this means ensuring the environment is physically safe, that there are at least two facilitators present at all times and, if possible, that a local stakeholder group is involved in monitoring activities.
- Ensure that people understand what is happening at all time. Is appropriate language being used (language, dialect, community terminology, etc)? This needs to be carefully planned.

- Ensure the right to privacy – this includes ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, in record keeping and report writing and making sure participants have the choice to remain anonymous. In addition, respondents should be made to feel at ease and encouraged to equally ask the researcher questions.
- Recognise that participants are possibly vulnerable and that the fieldwork is carried out with full respect – power differentials will exist between community members and researchers and these need to be purposefully mitigated* in planning and implementation

Mitigating power imbalances in research between researchers and the communities they engage with is crucial for ethical, inclusive, and equitable research. Below are concrete strategies to address these imbalances:

1. Participatory Research Methods

- **Involve the Community Early:** Involve community members from the very beginning—during the research design phase, not just in data collection. This ensures that the research is relevant to the community's needs.
- **Co-creation of Knowledge:** Treat the community as co-researchers rather than subjects. Participatory action research (PAR) allows the community to influence the research questions, methods, and outcomes.
- **Shared Decision-Making:** Enable shared decision-making throughout the process, including determining what gets published and how the data is interpreted.
- **2. Transparent Communication Clear, Open Communication:** Avoid academic jargon and use clear, accessible language when engaging with the community. Ensure that research goals, methods, risks, and benefits are understood.
- **Feedback Loops:** Establish regular feedback loops where community members can voice concerns or provide input on the research as it progresses.
- **Informed Consent Beyond Forms:** Go beyond just formal consent forms by ensuring community members truly understand the research's purpose and potential impacts.

2. Respect for Local Knowledge

- **Acknowledge and Value Local Expertise:** Recognize that community members possess valuable knowledge about their own context, culture, and environment. Treat their insights with the same respect as academic expertise.
- **Culturally Sensitive Practices:** Be mindful of cultural dynamics, beliefs, and social norms, and adapt research practices accordingly.

3. Capacity Building and Compensation

- **Build Local Capacity:** Invest in training or education programs that help community members develop research skills. This can help shift power by enabling the community to take a more active role.
- **Fair Compensation:** Ensure that community members are fairly compensated for their time, knowledge, and participation in the research process.

4. Ethical Reflexivity

- **Be Aware of Positionality:** Researchers should reflect on their own position of power and privilege. This includes understanding how their background (e.g., race, class, gender) may affect their relationship with the community.
- **Collaborative Ethical Review:** Engage the community in ethical review processes to ensure that potential harm is minimized and community values are upheld.

5. Redistribution of Benefits

- **Share Research Benefits:** Ensure that the benefits of research are shared with the community. This could be in the form of access to data, tangible outcomes (e.g., policy changes), or capacity-building resources.

- **Accessible Results:** Make sure that research findings are presented in ways that are accessible to the community, whether through non-academic reports, workshops, or community presentations.
6. **Long-term Relationship Building**
- **Build Trust Over Time:** Focus on building long-term, trusting relationships with the community rather than transactional, project-specific interactions.
 - **Commit to Reciprocity:** Ensure that the research relationship benefits the community, not just the researchers. This could include ongoing support after the research is completed or being involved in addressing local issues.
7. **Decolonizing Methodologies**
- **Critically Engage with Colonial Power Dynamics:** Reflect on the history of research in marginalized communities, particularly in post-colonial contexts. Consider decolonizing approaches that challenge traditional research hierarchies and center indigenous or local ways of knowing.
 - **Local Leadership in Research:** come to an understanding with leadership and authority from the community, this might entail shifting the research agenda towards their priorities.

By incorporating these approaches, researchers can reduce power imbalances and conduct research in a way that respects and uplifts the community they are working with.