Defining the Agenda:
Key Lessons for Funders and Commissioners of Ethical Research in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts[1]

Introduction

The ethical issues that affect all research are **amplified significantly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.[2]** The power imbalances between local and international researchers are increased and the **risk of harm is augmented** within a context where safeguards are often reduced and the **probabilities of unethical research** that would be prohibited elsewhere **are magnified**. Funders and commissioners need to be confident that careful ethical scrutiny of the research process is conducted to mitigate risk, avoid potential harm and maximize the benefit of the commissioned research for affected populations, including through improving the quality and accuracy of data collected. The *UKRI and UNICEF Ethical Research in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts: Guidelines for Reviewers* can support you to ensure that appropriate ethical scrutiny is taking place at review phase. But, **what about mitigating for risks at the funding and commissioning phases?** These phases are often not subject to ethical review yet carry strong ethical risks and opportunities. As a commissioner or a funder designing a call for research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, **how confident are you that you are commissioning the research in the most ethical way?**

This document brings together some key lessons learned that provide guidance for funders and commissioners of research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to ensure that ethical standards are applied, not just at the review stage, but also in formulating the research agenda. These lessons fall into four clusters:

1. Ethical Agenda Setting

2. Ethical Partnerships

3. Ethical Review

4. Ethical Resourcing.

In addition to highlighting the lessons, this paper provides mitigation strategies for funders and commissioners to explore as they seek to avoid the ethical risks highlighted.

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[2] This paper applies specifically to research. It does not target monitoring and evaluation, although there will be some overlap. The paper uses the World Bank definition of fragile and conflict-affected contexts which refers to high levels of institutional and social fragility leading to insecurity and contexts affected by violent conflict. See http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/333071582771136385/Classification-of-Fragile-and-Conflict-Affected-Situations.pdf

1. Ethical Agenda Setting

Existing Ethical Issues:

- **Lack of consultation with actors from the fragile and conflict-affected country/ region when defining the call topic** leads to the risk that:

  - *the agenda is pre-determined* by the mandates/ availability of funding of international organisations or commissioning bodies based elsewhere rather than the value/ need/ realities at the site of the research. This affects both the relevance of the research topic and the implementation of the research project. It also affects how the issue is framed, what questions are asked and who is assumed to have authoritative knowledge or the right to create authoritative knowledge.

  - a call for proposals is issued from headquarters even though local knowledge would indicate that the risks will outweigh potential benefits

    - the research *places undue strain on people* already experiencing trauma and/or stress, including those with additional and intersecting vulnerabilities

  - the research is of *minimal, if any, benefit* to local community needs.

  - the research *misses critical, mutually beneficial opportunities to engage local actors optimally and effectively*.

Mitigation Strategies to Address Ethical Issues:

- **Clearly justifying the need** for the research in terms of needs and realities at the site of the research

- Ensuring that the **call topic is sufficiently broad to allow the local research community** to respond in ways that align with local need

- **Bringing different local voices to inform your agenda setting and problem definition**, noting that these voices will have different perspectives and may themselves come with their own agenda.

- **Understanding the potential harms and benefits** for local communities, including different groups within these communities, on the basis of a rigorous harm-benefit analysis and do not proceed where harms will outweigh potential benefits.

- **Fairly allocating resources between local and outside researchers**.

2. Ethical Partnerships

Existing Ethical Issues:

- **Power is most often held by research grant holder/primary investigators** as a result of

  - *Securing the grant* in the first instance and consequently the finances and management

  - *Career incentive structures* that reward being the "lead", "The expert" or the "single author" rather than power sharing amongst a team of colleagues with different expertise and backgrounds.

Mitigation Strategies to Address Ethical Issues:

- **Commit to fair and equitable International-National-Local partnerships** or research led by those closest to the site of research, wherever possible, and prioritise proposals that exhibit this commitment:

  - *Require bidding research teams to include representation from those closest to the site of research at a minimum*. This could include coalitions of researchers and institutions.

  - *Consider having a shared role of "principal investigator" or "lead researcher"*: This would include one international and one national researcher. This will build ownership, local capacity and challenge the status quo whereby power is retained by the partner holding the research funding.

  - *Where the grant is held externally to the site of research, request clear evidence of plans to co-create with national/local research partners*, noting that fragility/conflict settings provide ripe territory for exploitative power relations in research. This should include explicit consideration and reflections noted within proposals of the impact of likely power inequalities resulting from nationality, donor relationships, language, class, age and gender.

  - *Ensure support for local/national capacity and knowledge building*.

  - *Encourage co-design and co-production of research*: not only to prevent the imposition of Northern narratives but also to improve scientific outcomes

  - *Seek to improve inequitable research burdens* i.e. where local researchers carry the bulk of the risk but take the minimum of the benefit (financial and career building).

- **Require and enable ethical commissioning processes**

  - *Require that ethical considerations are embedded in all research frameworks and all calls for proposals and that ethical research is consistent with commitments* to humanitarian accountability principles, the realization of human rights, gender equality and achievement of the SDGs, for example. These principles should be enshrined in respective research policies.

  - *Ensure that those involved in the commissioning process have mastery of research ethics*. Ethics must be embedded in induction programmes, regular professional training and development of all staff. Due attention must be given to the specificities of ethical research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

3. Ethical Review

Existing Ethical Issues:

- **Lack of clarity by funders** as to a) the field specific considerations, including the complexities of both the context and the humanitarian systems in which researchers will find themselves and b) the ethical knowledge base required of reviewers to be able to recognise and judge compliance with ethical standards.

- **Lack of follow up by funders/ provision of systems to ensure** that the review process is sufficiently rigorous to capture the complexities of ethical research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

- Ethical review has sometimes been seen as **an organizational risk management exercise** as opposed to a rigorous exploration of potential harms and benefits that the research may produce.

- **Reviewers may have no experience of conducting research in** fragile and conflict affected contexts.

Mitigation Strategies to Address Ethical Issues:

- **Define clearly the ethical criteria** by which the research proposal/ tender will be reviewed (e.g. evidence of equal partnerships, clear protection protocols etc.)

- Request and **ensure that reviewers systematically use "Ethical Research in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts: Guidelines for Reviewers"** to inform their review process

- Request and **ensure that proposals are systematic in addressing ethical issues** and mitigation proposed at each stage of the research cycle through requiring analysis of the "Ethical Research in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts: Guidelines for Reviewers" and requiring alignment with humanitarian principles, codes of conduct, operational ground-rules and best practice.

- Put in place **monitoring mechanisms of the review process** to ensure that the guidelines are being followed and ensure that reviewers are clear when ethical standards are not met that this is grounds for the exclusion of a proposal being considered for funding.

- Ensure that **reviewers have the relevant competence, background, experience and knowledge** to conduct rigorous review of the ethical aspects of the conducting research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This includes understanding of potential social and economic impacts of research on stakeholder dynamics and local economies or, at the very least, ensuring a reviewer with expertise on ethical engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts on each review panel.

- Ensure that **review processes are quality assured by or complemented by local reviewers with experience of conducting research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts**. This could be through Country Office staff, setting up an International Peer Review College or informal list of reviewers with specific expertise on ethics and research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

4. Ethical Resourcing

Existing Ethical Issues:

- **Commitments to ethical commissioning are often not translated into the additional budgetary and time allocations required** for working ethically in the complex environments presented by fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

- **Lack of accommodation in budget and timelines** for the complex needs of ethical research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts **can hinder an appropriately ethical approach**.

Mitigation Strategies to Address Ethical Issues:

- **Allocate sufficient resources and time to ensure ethical research processes and conduct** e.g. the time required for accessing hard to reach groups, the need for safeguarding measures to be put in place, mechanisms for co-creation/two way feedback, for working in a way that respects human rights, gender equality, equity and social justice, for including capacity building activities, including training, debriefs, co-authorship as well as for ensuring the ethical treatment of sensitive data and sufficient data protection systems etc. This expectation should be explicitly stated in call guidance.

- **Clarify responsibilities** for ensuring physical, psychological and medical support are available for international or local stakeholders, researchers and data collectors during the course of the research.

- **Carbon neutrality:** Reflect on carbon footprint and methods to minimize this. This would include minimizing travel by shifting ownership of knowledge production and research towards partners in the Global South. Experience from research during the COVID pandemic provides good examples of the feasibility of this approach.

- **Allow for budgets to be adapted where ethical review boards** may require additional tasks to satisfy the do no harm principles and other ethical imperatives.