Ethical Research in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts:

Guidelines for Applicants[1]

Rationale and Audience

Ethical considerations arise in all research.[2] They are, however, **amplified in fragile and conflict-affected contexts**. The **power imbalances** between local and international researchers are increased and the **risk of harm is augmented**. The research takes place in a context where appropriate safeguards **are often reduced** and the **probabilities of unethical research are magnified**. Existing explorations of ethics and ethical review processes often focus primarily on the front end of the research cycle. Yet, we know that harm can occur at any stage in the research process. **Ethical research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts therefore requires that researchers and funders reflect even more critically and systematically on every step of the research process** – from defining the research agenda and selecting researchers through to data collection, analysis and dissemination and communication of findings.[3]

These UKRI and UNICEF **applicant guidelines provide a unique tool for applicants to assure themselves that their research projects will give systematic and on-going consideration to the ethics of research** in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The tool provides seven criteria for consideration and a checklist for applicants to use systematically as they write their bid or proposal.

The **audience for these guidelines are all those involved in planning research** in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The equivalent guidelines will be used by review bodies to assure themselves that they are conforming to ethical standards.[4]

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[2] These guidelines apply specifically to research. They are not designed for monitoring and evaluation, although there will be some overlap. They complement existing organisational guidelines for general ethical review.

[3] See the accompanying paper: Groves-Williams, L, Shanks, K and Berman G. 2021 "Defining the Agenda: Key Lessons for Funders and Commissioners of Ethical Research in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts". UNICEF and UKRI

[4] See Groves-Williams, L, Shanks, K and Berman G. 2021 "Ethical Research in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts: Guidelines for Reviewers" UNICEF and UKRI.

Ethical Review Criteria

Before submitting a research bid or proposal, applicants must work through seven criteria to assure themselves, and consequently reviewers/funders/commissioners, that all efforts will be made to ensure that the research – both process and products – are ethical. The seven criteria are highlighted below. Subsequent pages provide a checklist for applicants to use systematically as they write their bid or proposal. You can complete the checklist directly from your computer/device without needing to print it out.

Criteria 1: Clear and robust commitment to creating and maintaining fair and equitable partnerships throughout the research process.

Criteria 2: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics at design phase.

Criteria 3: Comprehensive protection protocol in place.

Criteria 4: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics during implementation phase.

Criteria 5: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics during dissemination phase.

Criteria 6: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics during monitoring and evaluation of the research.

Criteria 7: Flexible, fair and transparent budget and timeline that meets the complex needs of ethical research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Criteria 1: Clear and robust commitment to creating and maintaining fair and equitable partnerships throughout the research process

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Does your application document demonstrate how the research will ensure **local partners will have an equitable role** that values their local knowledge, competence and the potential risks that their involvement brings to them and their families?			
Does your document demonstrate **how power dynamics – often exacerbated in these contexts – between international and national, and national and local community researchers, and between researchers representing different positions in the locality have been mitigated**?			
In recognition of the fact that there has been a widespread erasure of local academics from published studies on conflict and fragility, are mechanisms in place to ensure that the **intellectual property of local community researchers** is honoured in all outputs?			
Has the **local community, in all its diversity and with due attention to differing power relationships within the community, been consulted to determine their interest** in engaging with this research? Note: This is an ongoing question that needs to be systematically explored at different stages of the research process.			
Where research involves partnering between international organisations and research organisations, has consideration been given to how organisational mandates might impact the design and delivery of the research?			
Where research involves partnering between international organisations and research organisations, have local and international power relations and their impact on the research been unpacked and mitigated, where required?			

Criteria 2: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics at design phase

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Engagement of local knowledge			
Does your proposal **engage local knowledge** to understand and minimize risk of harm through choice of topic, methods or research questions?			
Does your proposal explore how **to work with partners to unpack local conflict related or other bias**, including related to social identities and biological characteristics such as age, sex, gender, race, class, sexual orientation and gender identity, religion, ability, country of origin and cultural and economic background, among others?			
If the proposal involves children, have the researchers consulted local experts on appropriate ways and means of engaging with children in these circumstances?[5]			
Impact			
Bearing in mind the complexities of the working environment is the expected **impact realistic** or are over inflated claims being made?			
Are the **benefits of the research equitable**? Note 1: This involves balancing the benefits for the researchers and commissioners with those for the communities involved. For example, the new knowledge will be made accessible as a global public good in the languages of the countries studied or that there will be emotional, psychosocial, financial or other benefits for participants? Note 2: If value is predominantly Northern, the design is not sufficiently ethical. If all products are in English and behind expensive firewalls, then the dissemination is not sufficiently equitable.			

[5] Berman, Gabrielle; Hart, Jason; O'Mathúna, Dónal; Mattellone, Erica; Potts, Alina; O'Kane, Clare; Shusterman, Jeremy; Tanner, Thomas (2016). What We Know about Ethical Research Involving Children in Humanitarian Settings: An overview of principles, the literature and case studies, *Innocenti Working Papers* no. 2016_18 , UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence.

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Research Questions			
Do your research questions demonstrate **conflict sensitivity** with efforts made to engage local stakeholders to understand the potential for harm?			
Are the research questions **relevant and necessary** in this given context? Note: if the research questions could be answered using field work in a different context then the research should not proceed. If the questions are not relevant to the needs of the local context, research should not proceed.			
Are the questions **realistic and achievable** in view of the specificities of the context?			
Do your questions **address existing research gaps**?			
Do your questions **build on existing** research to minimize burden/research fatigue/impact on local populations who are already potentially under stress?			
Research Methods			
Have the **ethical implications of methodological decisions** been sufficiently scrutinized in the light of the potential risks/harms they may invoke? Note: This should include demonstration that efforts have been made to engage local stakeholders to unpack these issues and understand the interpersonal, community, social and economic impacts, including the impact of wages and compensation on local staff and communities.			
Are the **methods justified** in the given context? For example, could less intrusive methods be used to answer the research questions? Could primary research collection be delayed until the context is less acute? Could it be done elsewhere and still answer the research questions? Could secondary data analysis be used? Are there other legitimate grounds for the data collection and has the organization adopted the principles of data minimisation?			

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Research Methods			
Do the methods you have chosen recognize and attempt to **address power imbalances and allow the voices of the most vulnerable to be heard**, especially if those voices are harder to reach? If the research relates to children, for example, are their voices going to be heard? Note: Think about Selection Bias, Positionality, Language, Research fatigue, Flexibility and Adaptability			
Adherence to principles and standards			
Does your design demonstrate **adherence to ethical principles and professional standards of conduct**? Particularly those related to fragile and conflict affected contexts such as the <u>IASC Commitments on Accountability to and Inclusion of Affected People</u>.			
Researchers' competence, background and conflicts of interests:			
Do all researchers have the required qualifications, expertise and experience to ensure the research is conducted in a way that reflects the ethical specificities of conducting research in fragile and conflict affected contexts? For example, working with traumatized populations with different social identities and biological characteristics including age, sex, gender, race, class, sexual orientation and gender identity, religion, ability, country of origin and cultural, economic and physical background, among others. Note: If researchers do not have the skill set and experience to work with traumatized populations with these different social identities and biological characteristics then they should not be engaging directly with these populations. For example, if the research involves children then a non- negotiable requirement is that researchers have experience of working with children from the type of context in question. The project team should ensure regular supervision of less experienced members in order to build up relevant skills and experience.			
Does your team include **appropriate representation with regard to gender and a broad mix of backgrounds, skills and perspectives, including local community, national and international expertise and expertise in working in fragile and conflict-affected contexts** to ensure that different experiences are represented within the team and also to facilitate ethical research with specific groups?			

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Sensitivity to delivery of humanitarian services			
Is there evidence that there has been **consideration of the impact of the research on the delivery of humanitarian services**? Note: This should include- demonstrating knowledge of the humanitarian systems and support on site; assurances that the research will not impede the delivery of critical services and mitigation measures in place where there is the possibility that it might impact on these services; and that consideration has been given as to how to engage humanitarian and relevant local actors and civil society groups.			
Selection of and engagement with participants			
Have you given attention to **participant recruitment and selection**? This includes considering the use of financial rewards or other incentives for participants; the need to reach different groups in the community, bearing in mind differing vulnerabilities, power dynamics and access to participation.			
Have you given attention to how **power dynamics will affect engagement between participants and researchers**? **Have you given consideration to specific approaches required to address power dynamics for persons with intersecting vulnerabilities** e.g. children, women, persons with disabilities etc. in these contexts.			

Criteria 3: Comprehensive protection protocol in place

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Potential Impact on all persons involved in the research and their broader communities			
Have you conducted a harm-benefit analysis of participation? Note: This involves balancing the various risks and benefits against each other before proceeding.			
Have you assessed potential ethical risks regarding the **safety and security of informants and their data** in terms of both potential psychological and physical negative impacts in relation to the evolving specificities of the research context and for all stages of the research process?			
Have you given consideration as to **how risk/harm will be differentiated for different populations within the broader population**? For example, children of differing ages, ethnic minorities, women, older persons or other populations?			
Have you included **mitigation measures** for risks identified? For example, ensuring that interviews cannot be overheard, that data is treated with utmost care. Note: Research should not proceed where mitigation of harm is not possible. The question of whether it is really necessary to collect data from traumatised or people who may be vulnerable as a result of participation in research is central and must be based on the possible benefit for/safety of the participant and not the researcher or epistemic gain.			
Have you assessed potential ethical risks regarding the **safety and security of local, national and international researchers**, analysing both potential psychological and physical negative impacts in relation to the evolving specificities of the research context and for all stages of the research process? Note: This should include assessing the team's experience level, autonomy, understanding of the context and dynamics as well as perceptions towards the team by communities where the research is taking place.			

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Potential Impact on all persons involved in the research and their broader communities			
Have you included **mitigation measures** for risks identified? Note: This should include zero tolerance for sexual harassment, stigmatization, abuse and exploitation. Research should not proceed where mitigation of harm is not possible.			
Have you assessed potential **economic, social and safety impacts for both on the ground staff and the broader community**? What **processes have you put in place to ensure that the team avoids causing injury or discomfort**, both through acts of commission or omission, noting that particular diligence is required when working in sensitive contexts and with vulnerable populations? Note: This includes before, during and after the research.			
Have you made provision for **triggering redress channels where unanticipated harm** is identified?			
Procedures for reporting and redress			
Have you put in place **clear and accessible procedures for participants to report conflict of interest, abuse, misconduct or other serious ethical concerns** that may arise during the research and to seek redress where relevant? Note: This focuses primarily on the conduct of the researchers but it must also consider potential courses of action in case of threats and wrongdoing by authorities that may supersede the research or be enacted after research completion.			

Criteria 4: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics during implementation phase

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Respect			
Have you put a plan in place or have you ensured that all researchers, enumerators and interpreters have been **trained to conduct ethical research** with vulnerable populations? Note: It is expected that all of the team will have basic training. In addition, team leads should ensure additional safeguarding training with the research team that relate to the specificities of the given context or sub population e.g. children, women or ethnic minorities			
Are there mechanisms in place to ensure **that transparency of process** is being ensured, despite potential volatility of the context? For example, ensuring that the teams will be communicating openly and transparently, in accessible forms and languages to keep all stakeholders fully informed about expectations, processes and findings.			
Have you demonstrated, with evidence, how the team will work in a way that is **respectful of the knowledge and experience** of participants and stakeholders who live in challenging contexts? For example, through compensating participants for their time or through selecting participatory and empowering rather than extractive methods.			

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Data Protection and Confidentiality			
Noting the potential for enhanced risks to informants in fragile and conflict affected contexts, is there **sufficient provision for protection of confidentiality and privacy** at each stage of the research? Note: "Sufficient provision" includes compliance with relevant data protection legislation in-country as well as with the standards set by the donor/research institution?			
Have you given attention to **addressing situations where confidentiality may need to be violated**? For example, in the instance of disclosure of child abuse where mandatory child a buse reporting is in place?			
Have you clearly developed/evidenced the data protection protocols that you will adopt to ensure **data confidentiality and mitigation of the risk of sensitive data systems being breached**? Note: This should include taking clear steps to de-identify data as soon as possible and ensuring that data collectors have limited data on their devices and person? Attention should be paid to the locations of data storage in relation to issues pertaining to security, data sovereignty and requests for data sharing and how to prevent sensitive data systems from being breached?			
Have you put in place **measures for ensuring informed consent adequate in view of the additional challenges of obtaining voluntary consent in fragile and conflict-affected contexts**?			
Are there other **legitimate grounds for the data collection and have you adopted the principles of data minimisation**?			

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Inclusion and non-discrimination of participants			
Have you made provision for ensuring that **different voices will be able to influence the research**, including those with least power and highest vulnerability in these contexts? For example, women, persons with disabilities, children and ethnic minorities.			
Have you demonstrated awareness of and ability to **comply with international and national legal codes** governing respecting and protecting the rights of different groups? For example, complying with guidelines on researching and interviewing children and young people.			
Have you made provision for **validating draft findings with participants**?			
Informed consent			
Have you put in place a process to ensure that **participants are clear and realistic as to potential benefits and risks** involved in taking part in the research as well as of any protections for participation? Note: This should include drafting information sheets and consent forms sensitively and realistically and ensuring that informed consent is seen as an on-going process and not a one off tick box exercise. Research positionality may lead to unrealistic expectations that participation will lead to or be tied to additional humanitarian or other service provision. Furthermore, there might be a lack of understanding by participants of potential risk in terms of being re-traumatised through sharing of experiences or of susceptibility to physical harm as retribution for association with the study.			
Where children are involved, do local laws require informed consent from guardians? If yes, will you also seek consent from children?			
Have you evidenced clear measures by which the research team will assure themselves that participants **do not feel undue pressure to participate** in view of the power dynamics at play, exacerbated in fragile and conflict-affected contexts? Note: This could include checking in at intervals that participants are still comfortable to proceed. It also includes being satisfied that the research team have sufficient understanding of community dynamics at the time of the research.			

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Researcher judgement			
Have you put in place support and feedback mechanisms (focal points, regular debriefs etc.) to support researcher judgement in making ethical decisions whilst working in unpredictable environments?			
Have you evidenced how the research team will exemplify ethical conduct in implementation? Note: This includes considering whether the team have the implementation skills and resilience required to conduct the research ethically. This includes being adaptable to the potentially volatile conditions, which can affect security and population dynamics.			

Criteria 5: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics during dissemination phase

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Collaborative dissemination plan			
Have you evidenced a process for developing a **collaborative dissemination plan** with participants/respondents/stakeholders and budgeted for this? Note: Different stakeholders should be able to benefit from research findings relevant to them and need to be involved in discussing the plan to ensure relevance. This will also reduce the risk of findings being used to further particularly divisive agendas, justify structural inequalities, or disregard of the needs of disadvantaged groups.			
Dissemination plan that safeguards participants and local partners and does not create harm			
Have you demonstrated how dissemination activities will be conducted in a way that **safeguards researchers, participants** and local partners and does not create harm?			
Have you demonstrated consideration of how the inclusion of someone's identity – while acceptable at the time of publication – may lead to a **negative impact at a later point due to evolving conflict dynamics**?			

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Value			
Have you demonstrated how outputs be equitably created and accessed in order to create benefit and value at: • **Local** • **Country and** • **International levels?**			
Have you evidenced how you will ensure dissemination in **accessible and relevant formats and for translation** into relevant local languages? Note: In fragile and conflict affected contexts the means of communication might be quite different to those in stable contexts e.g. radio might be more accessible than printed out documents.			
Have you clarified how dissemination activities **will be used to enact positive change** for community members?			

Criteria 6: Research plan demonstrates systematic consideration of ethics during monitoring and evaluation of the research

	Yes	No/Insufficient
Monitoring mechanisms and adaptation provision		
Does your proposal make provision for **ongoing risk/harm assessment and potential mitigation** in relation to potential impact of the research in terms of do no harm and respect of stakeholders?		
Does your proposal carefully consider **situational flux** (safety of researchers, change in government that changes programmes/access things that affect nature of research itself?)? Note: This situational flux is often inherent to the situation under study and can be difficult to appraise. It can be partly managed by tasking an experienced and capable team.		
Does your proposal make provision for the need to **modify design/methodologies in volatile contexts**, for example, the need to go back to the ethical review board?		
Are there **clear points of referral** for safeguarding issues or other ethical breaches that may occur during the research?		
Have you made provision for **assessing unintentional impact/consequences**? For example, where research may be exacerbating community tensions?		
In view of the significant and differing costs to research in fragile and conflict affected settings, have you made plans for **meaningful post- research evaluation** to evaluate how ethics were addressed and to evaluate research impact?		
Have you planned to incorporate feedback loops to update participants and their communities on progress and to cross check research outputs and outcomes?		

Criteria 7: Flexible, fair and transparent budget and timeline that meets the complex needs of ethical research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

	Yes	No/Insufficient	Comments
Budget			
Have you **budgeted appropriately** for the above ethical commitments to be implemented effectively? E.g. equitable and appropriate distribution of funding between local and international collaborators, costs of logistics for hard to reach/ vulnerable groups, risk mitigation measures, relevant psychosocial support for staff and participants, staff time to develop equitable working relationships with participants and meaningful (rather than extractive) community engagement, travel and other compensation for participants, costs of participatory analysis and dissemination etc.			
Does your **budget take into account the potential need for flexibility in expenditure to allow for unanticipated costs** that might arise when working in volatile situations?			
Does your budget allow for an experienced, fully competent gender sensitive and nationality balanced **research team**?			
Timeline			
Is your **timeline realistic** in view of the complexities of working in this context?			
Is your **timeline flexible** enough to allow for unanticipated delays that might arise when working in such contexts?			