

Ethics in Social Science Experimentation and Data Collection

Digital Development Dialogue | Oct 28



**Airbel
Impact Lab**





Introduction

- **Growing number of studies** in development and humanitarian field (over 2,500 impact evaluations)
- Need to carefully **consider additional risks** in crisis contexts
- Discussion not about *whether* it's ethical to conduct research in these settings, but *how*
 - Research principles of beneficence, justice, and respect apply
 - **Ethical guidelines should better represent issues inherent to populations living in crisis contexts**

Insights drawn from [The ethical contours of research in crisis settings: five practical considerations for academic institutional review boards and researchers](#), Kathryn Falb, Betsy Laird, Ruwan Ratnayake, Katherine Rodrigues, and Jeannie Annan

And from work by Marie-France Guimond on [IRC's Research Standards](#) and [Humanitarian Research Toolkit](#)

Ethical Issues in Humanitarian Contexts

In implementing over 100 studies across dozens of countries at the International Rescue Committee (IRC), we identified the following issues:

1. **Additional safeguards may be needed** for people exposed to violence and trauma
2. Potential for conflict among groups means participation in research and programming **may increase risks**
3. When NGOs conduct research and implement programs, there is potential for respondents to **feel coerced to participate** in research to access services
4. Some highly insecure settings **do not have a fully functioning local IRBs**
5. **Long ethical review times** at universities and in-country, which can delay programs for people

Given this:

- **Researchers** and organizations need to be **equipped to do research ethically**
- **Ethics boards** need to **adjust** to be responsive



Recommendations for Researchers

Risk Mitigation

- **Work with local implementers** to ensure adherence to study protocol and **assess security risks**
- Risk mitigation strategies:
 - **Psychological risks:** remind of right to withdraw; provide counseling / psychosocial support; thoroughly debrief
 - **Social risks:** protect confidentiality and participation in research
 - **Legal risks:** Ensure local laws are followed (age of consent and mandatory reporting); protect confidentiality of data
 - **Physical risks:** Follow protocols, recruit appropriate populations, provide referrals to clinical care as needed

Recommendations for Researchers

Referrals & Training

- Ensure appropriate referral procedures and training of data collectors according to int'l guidance*
 - Consider **violence/trauma experiences of data collectors** themselves
 - Include **referral pathways** when violence or mental health symptoms questions are asked

Consent Processes

- Develop informed **consent documents that address** risks of participation, including potential **changes in security** situation
- Underscore voluntary nature and that **no impact on ability to receive aid**
- **Consider barriers** to meaningful informed consent (literacy, language, power dynamics, time) and **design for understandability****
- Allow **multiple times for consent** - not a one off

Local Reviews

- Work with **local IRBs or Community Advisory Groups** to identify risks and for local accountability

*[WHO's sexual violence guidance](#)

** See IRC's guidance on [Obtaining Meaningful Consent](#)



Recommendations for IRBs

Incentivize and require the recommendations for researchers

- Offer staged protocol reviews, especially for studies in acute emergencies
- Require the risk assessments, referral procedures, and consent processes described
- Recommend or require submission to local IRBs or Community Advisory Groups knowledgeable of local population needs

To yield more ethically sound research in humanitarian settings and hold researchers accountable

Conclusion

- We **established an IRB** at the IRC:
 - So we could be **responsive to particular needs** in crisis contexts; and
 - Because some highly insecure settings lack fully functioning IRBs to review studies
- Numerous projects collect data to improve program design, but **do not qualify as research** - these **need to follow ethical principles**
 - At the IRC, we introduced a **flexible ethics review** process for these projects, including:
 - **Minimal submission requirements** ([short ethics form](#))
 - **Quick response times** (within 48-72 hours)
 - **Self-assessments** to (i) support in assessing risk levels and triaging projects based on risk level; and (ii) provide specific guidance and resources of relevance
- Resources are available at the [Humanitarian Research Toolkit](#) - with ethics documents found under [Research Standard 4](#)

Thank you

