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Research ethics

Putting our principles into practice


our thinking...

This booklet reviews some of the main ethical considerations when undertaking research, and explores how these apply to our work with partners to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world.

Keeping an eye on our ethics

Growing awareness and critical thinking on the ethical dimensions of research is increasingly leading universities, research institutes and aid agencies to adopt formal ethical guidelines. Most universities now have committees to monitor the ethical standards of research conducted by staff and students. And there is continued academic debate within development studies, geography and other disciplines on what constitutes ethical research in practice.[1]

This booklet reviews some of the main ethical concerns that we think need to be considered when undertaking research, and explores how these apply to the work we do with partners to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world.

Our guidelines on business engagement state that IIED "respects the prerogative of its members of staff to make individual ethical choices about which projects or partners they work with". This document also respects that prerogative, but seeks to provide a general framework that can help to inform choices and decisions.

We will continue to reflect on the ethics of our research, and will examine ways of integrating this ongoing process with others, including proposal development and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

[1] *Valentine, I (2005). Geography and ethics: Moral geographies? Progress in Human Geography; Desai, V and Potter, R (2006). Doing development research. SAGE, New Delhi; Routledge, P and Cumbers, A (2009). Global justice networks: Geographies of transnational solidarity. Manchester University Press.*

Thinking on ethics

Many guidelines for ethical research stem from the Belmont Report (1979),[1] which identifies three key principles for research with human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence and justice.

Three ethical principles for research

Respect: for people's autonomy, and protection from harm when that autonomy is compromised, including free, prior and informed consent, and openness and transparency.

Beneficence: going beyond avoiding harm to actually improving wellbeing.

Justice: a fair distribution of research benefits and burdens.

Respect for persons means treating people as autonomous agents, and protecting them from harm in situations that explicitly limit their autonomy (for example illness, disability, lack of liberty). For development research, maintaining respect includes obtaining the **free, prior and informed consent** (FPIC) for research activities from both partners and local people, and responding meaningfully to doubts, suggestions or alternative visions of how a project should proceed. IIED has a tradition of going beyond FPIC and giving people involved in research (for example in indigenous and local communities) significant roles in producing and validating knowledge and in establishing the research agenda. Ensuring that IIED, research partners and researched groups all share both the learning process and the outputs can help equalise power relations, as well as

[1] *www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html*

generating research that is richer and more dynamic than conventional research activities. This sharing requires researchers to accept their own fallibility, and give full respect to local forms of knowledge.

Another key part of respect is transparency and openness. In a respectful relationship, partners and researched groups should have access to information on things like funding sources and potential conflicts of interest. Openness regarding research techniques and data is also crucial to ensuring a high degree of objectivity in research.

Beneficence entails not just protecting people from harm, but actively striving to secure their wellbeing. For example research that offers participants only indirect, uncertain and long-term benefits, while not harming them, may do little to secure them tangible benefits.

Questions of **justice** are central to research efforts, particularly when it comes to distributing possible benefits and burdens. The Belmont Report was particularly concerned that vulnerable minorities might be unfairly targeted for medical tests. Development research often involves poorer communities so that their voices are heard. But this can create problems of fairness if, for example, researchers require people to contribute large amounts of time without any tangible rewards. Participation in research activities can mean time spent away from livelihood activities, and may imply costs that are not apparent to outsiders. Equally, working only with people who are available and enthusiastic may mean that highly vulnerable groups become even more marginalised. Compensating people for their time can be one way of ensuring that a broad range of people participate without making large sacrifices.

Organisations such as the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) have also applied these principles to the social sciences. The ESRC has set up a framework for research ethics that defines a checklist set of **minimum conditions** for the research that it funds[3]. Its six principles of ethical research are that:

- Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency
- Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, about what their participation in the research entails and about any risks
- Research must protect the anonymity of participants and respect the confidentiality of information they supply
- Participants must take part voluntarily, free from coercion
- Harm to research participants and researchers must be avoided in all instances
- The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

[3] *www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Framework-for-Research-Ethics_tcm8-4586.pdf*

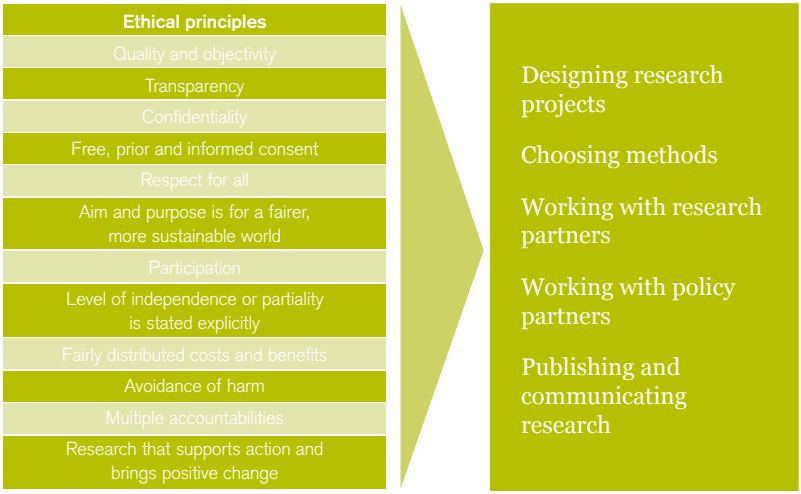
Ethics in IIED's work

IIED's mission — to work for a "fairer, more sustainable world" — means that we must go beyond a 'checklist' approach to research ethics, and must apply ethics not only to our research, but also to how we work with policy partners, and how we publish and communicate our findings.

IIED uses various overarching terms to describe what we understand by an ethical approach to research. These include **working through partnership; collaborating** with a range of actors and seeking to **be accountable** not only to our funders but to those with whom and for whom we work. These terms are important ones for research ethics. We need to apply them critically to ensure that what we understand to be ethical research partnerships do indeed adhere fully to ethical principles. Figure 1 (overleaf) lists our ethical principles and links them to elements of our research process.

Ethics is an inherently subjective and fluid concept. Notions of what is ethically appropriate have changed — and are likely to change — over time. All this warns against the temptation to set ethical standards 'in stone', but rather to maintain a flexible approach that is underpinned by key principles, while being open for renegotiation with partners and local people.

Figure 1: Ethical principles to be applied across the IIED research process when appropriate



Ethics in designing research

Debates on the ethics of research methods in academia often focus on the importance of participation and free, prior and informed consent in any methodology. Such consent is crucial for IIED research, which seeks knowledge and outcomes that serve the needs and priorities of the people we work with. IIED uses participatory methodologies and iterative research processes that are continually adjusted to local circumstances and to changing local and national issues. These methodologies are a key proactive element of ethical approaches.

But while identifying ethical principles and approaches may be straightforward, implementing them can be a challenge. In part this is because they are open to interpretation. For people involved in research, this can create difficult situations.

For example:

- It is easy to affirm a desire to 'respect local customs' through participation, but local customs may themselves be exclusionary. Local research partners may object, on the grounds of 'tradition', to particular groups (for example landless people or women) taking part. If researchers try to force issues, they may inspire local cynicism.
- Some methodologies (such as quantitative ones) may have more traction with policymakers and research partners, but impose heavy burdens on survey participants. Documenting prior and informed consent, for example, may be extremely time consuming and lead to unrealistic expectations of what the project might offer in return.

- The risk of excessively raising expectations about where a research project might lead is a real concern. Our research often responds to real-world issues, and this commitment to positive change is one way we strive to ensure that communities benefit. Even so, researched communities may be disillusioned that findings are only expected to influence debates and policymakers at some indeterminate point in the future.

In response to such situations, IIED researchers should strive to ensure that research does not inordinately burden participants' time, and should be aware of the risks of engaging in frequently studied locations — even if applying a different type of research process or analysis. The need to deliver outputs can pressure researchers and local partners to rush participatory processes, use particular methodologies, or overlook concerns. In some cases contradictions can be creatively resolved, but in others, compromises will be needed that manage, rather than comprehensively resolve, ethical dilemmas.

Where research is not linked to an immediate benefit for the research subjects, we need to clearly communicate this at the outset. This is part of our commitment to principles of transparency, avoidance of harm and to the fair distribution of costs and benefits.

Ethics in research partnerships

Research partners collect much of our data, and it is they who will be putting research ethics into practice. We do not claim a monopoly on ethics, and in some cases, our partners have very different ideas about what constitutes 'ethical research'. Not only that, capacities to carry out particular kinds of research could vary significantly. This diversity of opinions and capacities may defy efforts to insist on formal checklists and guidelines that researchers must follow. Rather, it underlines the need for a flexible approach based on shared principles that is open to ongoing dialogue.

One way to facilitate long-term understanding on ethical issues is to build on a foundation of meaningful, long-term relationships with our partners. We seek out partners who broadly share our objectives, but we still have a responsibility to ensure that ethical standards are considered seriously in each project. Commitment to these standards requires a process of co-learning between IIED, partners and local people.

Distinct from the ethics of how partners work on our behalf, there is also an ethical dimension to how we work with research partners. Despite our commitment to partnership, accountability and collaboration, IIED may have significant power in some of these relationships, through our direct access to donors and funding streams and where we have the final say on how we report and communicate the research. These unequal power balances make research partnerships highly sensitive ethical relationships.

We must emphasise transparency, justice, independence and respect in these relationships. This can entail being transparent about the selection of research partners, being open about future prospects for the partnership, involving partners in the funding proposals and being clear when the partnership is not delivering as expected.

As well as supporting research partners, IIED has an ethical commitment to work with highly capable researchers and do the best research possible for/with the beneficiaries.

Ethics with policy partners

IIED works with policy partners in various ways. We may engage government officials in designing and implementing research, work with learning groups of policy stakeholders, or form coalitions of groups. These interactions should be shaped by the same principles as those influencing our work with individuals and communities — ensuring transparency about the research goals and outputs, providing ample opportunities for fully informed consent, and avoiding raising false expectations about the likely impacts of the work at national or global scales.

Sometimes, IIED may work with national governments or other stakeholders who are accused of acting unethically in areas outside our partnership. This raises issues about legitimising unethical actors and supporting potentially unsustainable approaches in the long term, even if our work in partnership contributes to our goal of a "fairer, more sustainable world". This ethical risk requires us to monitor and reflect carefully on our partnerships.

One approach is to support work behind the scenes that improves government planning in a particular target area, without legitimising the government's wider policies through attending high-profile events in the country. Individual IIED staff have an ethical responsibility to remain informed and up to date on the politics of such issues in the countries where we work.

Ethics in publishing and communicating research

To be ethical, research must be rigorous and reliable. To ensure rigour, researchers should submit their outputs to peer review and also reflect on them critically. A good peer review process may involve a broader range of groups than just other researchers (see the IIED booklet *Our thinking…towards excellence* for more detail). In particular, the 'researched' people — whether communities or national policymakers — may have critical insights or comments on the way the research output presents their livelihoods or policy processes.

IIED needs to be clear about how each research output has been reviewed. This will vary, according to whether we aspire to the quality of citable academic research, or whether the work is more for advocacy or to illustrate emerging issues. We are working towards more clear and consistent systems for reviewing our knowledge products. This recognises the ethical responsibility we hold for using project funds wisely, and takes into account the fact that our recommendations are frequently used as the basis for making decisions that may have substantial implications for people and the environment.

Communicating research with transparency

There are strong ethical reasons for objectivity and transparency in communicating research. Interpretations of data that are biased towards a particular agenda can mislead understanding and may contribute to policies that ultimately harm the research participants. In cases where there are alternative valid ways of understanding and presenting data, these need to be made clear. Similarly, interpretations based on just a few interviews are valid, but their limitations also need to be communicated.

Methods, data, forms of analysis, and even alternative interpretations may all need to be clearly presented to our audiences. When we produce several forms of the research for different audiences we must be transparent about where the policy recommendations come from. For example, our shorter publications should clearly point to the longer reports they are drawn from.

Authorship and accessibility

IIED has a strong commitment to recognise the authors who contribute to our work either through writing, sharing ideas or conducting practical research. This is part of ethical commitments of respect for all, participation and transparency. IIED carefully considers how to reflect co-authorship in social media, blogs and conference presentations as well as in traditional publications.

We are demonstrating our commitment to public engagement by developing public channels through which anyone can comment on our work, particularly blog posts and press releases. It is important that our research is widely accessible and we play an active role in disseminating it within the countries where we work — including through the media. This may involve printing local language versions and giving seminars for local universities.

We actively make our publications freely available. We recognise the benefits of peer-reviewed publications and commercially published books that certify rigour and disseminate our work to different audiences. But we also realise that such outputs are often inaccessible or unaffordable. So we retain copyright of these research outputs where possible in order to make them freely available. Many of our publications are free to download from the internet, and we send printed copies to resource centres around the world through our free distribution scheme.


our thinking...

About this booklet

This booklet reviews some of the main ethical considerations when undertaking research, and explores how these apply to our work with partners to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world.

IIED's work on research quality is guided by a cross-institute team that strives to enhance the research skills of our staff, develop agreed frameworks and standards for conducting research, and document the institute's research methods and strength.

For more information about research quality at IIED please contact **info@iied.org**.

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