African Higher Education in Emergencies Network – AHEEN)

## AHEEN RESEARCH ETHICS GUIDELINES

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## Introduction

Studies carried out in fragile contexts require a conflict-sensitive approach that respects the specifics of the humanitarian context. Every individual, whether student or staff, who works in this context has the potential to influence it in a manner that could be judged as positive or negative by local actors. Therefore, a conflict-sensitive approach is crucial not only for the environment where research is undertaken, but also for the security of the researcher. Asking sensitive questions and/or discussing these openly in the field can potentially harm both the researcher and the respondents. It is thus of utmost importance that any kind of research (student projects, full-fledged research projects, etc.) respect not only standard ethics guidelines as laid down by the University members of AHEEN, but also conform to guidelines specifically developed for conflict-sensitive research. As a general imperative all research carried out in conjunction with AHEEN must be community-focused and -sensitive and ensure that research results are shared back with the community. Conflict-affected communities are often politically and

culturally polarised and preparing a sound contextual understanding of the field context is thus essential.

## Understanding the context

Before designing and developing a research project, researchers need to gain as complete an understanding of the context in which the project is situated as possible. For this, the following checklist items should be answered:

- Which conflicts exist in the area in which the research is to be conducted?
- At which levels are these conflicts occurring?
- Which of these conflicts are relevant for the study?
- What is the source of these conflicts? (land, generational, ethnic, community, relationship to INGOs or UN)
- Who are the key actors?

## Rules and administrative procedures

The humanitarian context is governed by a multitude of rules and procedures; the refugee camp context is not transparent when it comes to governance and is characterized by fuzzy boundaries between national laws (host country laws), UNHCR administrative powers (delegation of powers by host country), and community customs and traditions. At the international level we also have IHL and humanitarian principles, especially the Do no/less harm principle, human rights law, etc., which need to be complied with. The following checklist items should be answered:

- Do I have a complete understanding of the legal context (hard and soft law) in which my research project is situated?
- Have I planned for a security assessment? In the camp context – with UNHCR security and/or protection officer; completed it with further insights from the community?

## Research ethics approval

AHEEN university members have a research ethics commission which is mandated to review faculty and student research project proposals and to decide on their compliance with general ethics guidelines. While not all research projects require ethics approval (desk research, literature reviews, etc.), any research involving human subjects must be submitted to the research ethics commission of the AHEEN university member under whose auspices the project will be conducted. In addition, and for Kenya, a NACOSTI application and approval is required.

## Preparing the research project

### Research questions

After having identified the broad domain for research and reviewed the existing literature, a precise set of research questions needs to be defined. Given the fragility of the context in which research is to be carried out, researchers need to focus on feasibility and precision in order to limit data collection and duration

of research. Researchers also need to build flexibility into the projects ("what if Research Question 1 cannot be answered"? "what if data on XYZ cannot be obtained?") and develop contingency plans for emergency situations, especially when carrying out field research.

### Research methods

The type of research as well as corresponding research methods need to be clearly described. Participatory research methods should be given priority over entirely researcher-led studies. Whenever possible, refugees (and/or the community) should be involved in the design and the implementation of the study. This requires special measures in order to build in sufficient safeguards for their protection (see below and also under the heading *Rules and procedures* above). Most frequently used methods are qualitative, mixed methods, and case studies. The chosen method must allow the researcher(s) to answer the research questions within the ethics framework approved for the project.

### Data collection

Not all data that need to be collected should come from human subjects. Background reading (literature, context documents, policy papers, etc.) will already provide considerable data to inform most research studies carried out in fragile contexts. Relevant journals in the field of refugee studies publish a significant number of articles that touch upon most every humanitarian setting. Data analysed in those published studies can also be included in the researcher's current study. The UNHCR data portal provides a wealth of information on every humanitarian setting in which UNHCR operates and on which data are reported by actors. All data that are collected from human subjects either through surveys, interviews, focus groups, or any other form of information gathering, are subject to the respondents' informed consent (see below). All data gathering methods must be piloted with a small sample before being launched in the field. As a general rule, parsimony in data collection is a fundamental principle in research in fragile contexts. No data should be gathered that is not already available, or that is not absolutely necessary for informing the research question. Over-harvesting of data is a common procedure in fragile contexts that does not align with research ethics and responsible research.

### Informed consent

This is a fundamental principle of ethical research. Prior to conducting interviews, inviting refugees to fill in surveys (whether on-line or off-line), or organizing focus groups, researchers are obliged to inform interviewees about the aims and outputs of the study. This is important for managing the expectations of interviewees, who live in a humanitarian context where every outside actor is a potential donor and where participation in research is often associated with obtaining benefits of one kind or another. Respondents will often associate research with aid delivery as an outcome of the interviews. It is therefore important to clarify at the beginning of data collection that the aim is not to collect data for a needs assessment (the term used in humanitarian action to analyse the needs of a community/group of refugees with a view to

defining aid provision). An important element of securing informed consent is for researchers to make it clear to potential participants that they are free to decide whether or not to participate and that they can withdraw at any time without their withdrawal having any negative consequences for themselves. Should visuals be part of the data (photos, videos) a separate consent form needs to be signed by each participant, as some participants may wish to take part in the research but will not want to be photographed (this is often gender-related). Participants also need to be made aware of the limits of confidentiality, in case of harm or illegal activities that are beyond the control of AHEEN. In exceptional circumstances verbal consent, or consent by parents in case minors are research participants, may be authorized; this option will need to be argued appropriately in the Ethics application and appropriate child safeguarding protocols need to be in place (see also The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, an Inter-agency group).

### Language

Researcher and respondents often do not share the same language. Assuming that all research projects can be carried out in only one language (usually English) presents significant risks to the authenticity of the research and tends to perpetuate power imbalances. Assuming that all respondents can work in English (the default language in most humanitarian contexts) is thus not acceptable and represents a disrespect for the respondent community. Every effort should be made to either translate all written material into the language of the community, and/or to train and engage translators/interpreters from the community to ensure smooth communications (for protection of interpreters/translators see below). The University of Nairobi's Diploma in Community Interpreting is offered through AHEEN and advanced students and graduates are well trained to perform the function of interpreter in research settings.

### Sharing research results

It is absolutely vital that research results be shared back with the community. The research project should clearly outline the procedures for this and this should also be mentioned in the consent form.

### Protection of respondents, researchers and data

Providing protection and security for informants and research assistants (refugees or other staff) is a key aspect of conflict-sensitive research. It is of utmost importance for researchers and respondents not to be facing negative consequences because of their engagement in research. Awareness of sensitive topics that could potentially endanger respondents or researchers (pilot interviews and questionnaires!) goes a long way towards preventing trauma and putting participants in harm's way (Do no/less harm principle). This guideline also applies to any equipment or apps that are made available to respondents for the purpose of the research. Utmost care must be exercised in organizing equipment distribution and management. Equipment should not be permanently provided to respondents, but be returned to a pooled site (AHEEN Learning Hub) for use during courses offered by AHEEN members or future research projects. Participating in research should not be linked to

preferential treatment (equipment provision).

Safeguarding also applies to interpreters/translators recruited for the research project as they are often identified as traitors potentially suffering adverse consequences once the research team has left the field. Isolating individuals for interviews can potentially raise suspicion with the community. It is thus best to organize grouped interviews and ensure total transparency. Following up through a focal point in the community regarding any potential negative consequences from the research is important. All researchers should leave the field having closed all items they could potentially have opened. Organising a group discussion before leaving the field, or before closing the research study, ensures trust and allows the community to provide feedback and thoughts about the project. This should then be followed by the sharing back of research results (as discussed above).

All data are to be stored securely during collection in the field and on devices that are password protected (laptops) until such time as data can be uploaded to the secure drive of the AHEEN member institution/organisation. Research collaborators are then requested to permanently delete data from interim storage devices.

## Documents and guidelines

Core humanitarian standards
Sphere handbook
INEE Minimum Standards
International compilation of Human Research Standards (Stanford, 2015 edition)
NACOSTI Research permit

Sample consent forms are available upon request from AHEEN.

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