

**TRAINING PACKAGE FOR USING SOCIAL SCIENCE IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND/OR COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES**

**SESSION 3.2:** Promoting the meaningful translation and application of ethical principles

SESSION CONTENT

**Learning approach:** Real-time presentation, individual and group exercises, case examples

**Delivery mode:** Online and offline, 105 minutes approx.

**Essential sessions to have completed before this session:** 3.1

**Summary:** The session discusses how research teams and practitioners working in community engagement and/or communications during an emergency response, can translate and apply ethical principles to fit local communities and contexts.

**Learning outcomes:**

* Know the common challenges of translating and applying ethical principles in practice, especially in emergency/humanitarian contexts
* Know strategies of how to more successfully apply ethical principles to research activities that inform community engagement and/or communications activities

FACILITATING THE SESSION



**TRAINING PACKAGE FOR USING SOCIAL SCIENCE IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND/OR COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES**

Introduction: (5 minutes total)

Talk through session summary and learning outcomes.

Position this session in the question flow, highlighting that ethical principles are an important consideration   
across the whole process.

1. How to ensure that this information goes back to communities? To inform community-level actions and decision-making of the broader response?
2. What methodology and tools should be used to collect and analyse this information?
3. How to track the information used to ensure that it effectively contributes to operational and strategic priorities?
4. Who can collect this information?
5. Does this information already exist? Is there a related needs assessment or study?
6. What information is needed?

**DATA TO ACTION:**

Key questions in social science research

1. Who needs this information?
2. How to ensure that the information is used to make operational and/or strategic decisions?

When should we apply ethical principles? (10 minutes total))

Practitioners should consider ethical principles in all of their work, whether they are doing research or not.

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|  | Question to participants (5 minutes):  Why might this statement (above) be especially important to practitioners like yourselves who engage with affected communities during emergencies?  Online: Invite the participants to write the answers in the chat function and summarize  Offline: Take four or five answers from participants in the room  Facilitator can add to the ideas generated: |

In community engagement and/or communications work there is sometimes a blurred line of when research starts and stops. Practitioners are often collecting evidence, almost inadvertently, during their daily programme activities.

Practitioners engage particularly closely with vulnerable populations during moments of crisis, meaning their actions can have a magnified impact during an emergency – both positively and negatively. As members of the humanitarian system most explicitly responsible for linking with affected communities, they hold a great deal of power in the eyes of those potentially in desperate need of response services.

Throughout this session we will reflect on the meaningful application of ethical principles in social science research, but we will also encourage you to reflect on your wider activities (e.g. outside of research or specific data collection activities).

Why is the specific context important when considering ethics (15 minutes total)

As a recap of session 3.1, Table 1 shows the key ethical principles for conducting social science research and how they are applied in practice. As we have just discussed, these should also act as important guidance for your wider activities.

**Table 1:** Key ethical principles and what they mean in terms of application

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| Ethical principle | Application |
| **Respect for persons**   * Individuals should be treated as independent individuals, not under the control of others * People with diminished ability to act independently require special protection | **Informed consent**   * The person should have the capacity to give consent  and should have the power of choice without constraint  or coercion – without feeling forced or persuaded * The person should have sufficient knowledge and understanding to enable him or her to make the right decision * Participants must be fully informed about: * The research aims, risks and benefits * The procedure (what will happen, how long will it take) * Their right to refuse participation or to withdraw at any point * How participants were selected (e.g. why me?) * If someone is under the legal age of adulthood, ‘assent’  should be gained from them, and consent should be gained from a caregiver over the legal age of adulthood   **Right to withdraw**   * This should be possible at any time during the research,  without consequence * This includes the right to ask for the tape-recorder to be switched off   **Privacy and Confidentiality**   * Respect confidentiality – participants should be able to choose whether their statements are public and attributable (quoted ‘on record’) or whether their statements are anonymous or not to be quoted (‘off record’) * Respect privacy – participants should be able to speak in a comfortable setting free from onlookers; participants should never be forced to reveal information about themselves that the participant does not wish to reveal. Note: notions of ‘privacy’ and propriety are highly specific; for example, in some environments people may discuss sex and sexuality very publicly, while in other settings these topics may be taboo. Seek local guidance on what is appropriate * Data should be anonymized (where the participant does not request attribution), identifiable information should be removed and data should not be able to be linked to any one person * Data should be stored securely |
| **Do No Harm**   * No harm should be done to participants * Beyond this, benefit should also be gained from participation in research. Common questions researchers ask themselves include: Should this be a social or a personal benefit? Who should decide what the benefit should be? * Research should be necessary and meaningful – the research should be unique and it should contribute to the greater good | **Assessment of risks and benefits**   * The nature of risks and benefits should be assessed in a step-by-step way. This should include speaking with communities who will participate in the research about what the potential risks and benefits could be * ‘Risk’ can be defined as: the probability of harm or injury (physical, psychological, social, or economic) occurring as a result of participation in research * The potential benefit of the work should outweigh the probability and severity of risks. Any possible risks should be minimized * More information on assessing risk can be found [here](https://www.research.uci.edu/compliance/human-research-protections/irb-members/assessing-risks-and-benefits.html). |
| **Justice**   * Treat people equally, fairly and respect  their rights * The risks of research should be negligible | **Selection of participants**   * When selecting participants, wherever you can include  a wide range of people; think about gender, ethnicity,  and marginalized groups |

See the [**Belmont report**](https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html) for more information on ethical principles.

In many emergency/humanitarian settings, a failure to consider ethical questions may risk endangering the livelihoods and even lives of research participants or engaged individuals.

Careful consideration of the specific setting you are working in is critically important when designing a research project. This may have to be revisited and renegotiated throughout the research process to make sure that issues related to the principles of respect for participants, *do no harm* and *justice* are upheld.

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|  | Question to participants (10 minutes):   1. Looking at Table 1, why is it important to consider the specific context of the location/community you are working when applying these ethical principles?   Online: Invite the participants to write answers in the chat function and summarize  Offline: Take four or five answers from participants in the room   1. What specific aspects of the location/community are important to consider?   Online: Invite the participants to write answers in the chat function and summarize  Offline: Take four or five answers from participants in the room  Following the participant responses, or as an example or prompt, consider further discussion  on the following areas: |

* Risks and benefits: It is important to know what these are in in specific circumstances, as they can differ. What is considered a risk/benefit in one context might not be relevant in another – e.g. data collection interfering in seasonal work like harvesting might not be relevant in an urban setting.
* The literacy/educational level of people will influence how they are asked for informed consent.
* The legal age of adulthood in the context will guide whether consent or assent (for a minor) is required. There may also be certain social norms that influence when an individual is considered an adult, which may need to be considered.
* When selecting a wide range of participants it is important to know who makes up that community, who the marginalized groups are, etc.

Additionally, working in a humanitarian/emergency context means that following these principles is challenging,   
as we already discussed in Module 3.1.

Specific challenges with applying ethical principles (50 minutes total)

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|  | Question to participants (10 minutes):  As we have discussed, Table 1 lists ethical principles that are important to all our work –  not only our research activities, but also wider response activities. Reflecting on your own practice (research, or other work), what are some of the challenges you have faced in applying ethical principles? Especially in humanitarian or crisis settings?  Online: Invite the participants to write answers in the chat function and summarize  Offline: Take four or five answers from participants in the room |

**The ‘Do No Harm’ principle**

* At the very foundation of our work is the ‘do no harm’ principle (e.g. physical harm, harm to participants’ development, loss of self-esteem, stress, and other types of harm).
* In some conflict settings, this may involve paying attention to questions concerning the security of research participants who in some cases may risk violence, arrest or torture for speaking with researchers and practitioners.
* It is important to make an ethically informed risk assessment of how to engage with research participants in the safest possible way, and how to ensure their security and confidentiality during and after you have engaged with them.
* Depending on the circumstances, it may not be possible to completely eliminate risks to research participants. In these scenarios it is even more important that research participants have the opportunity make an informed decision about whether or not they want to volunteer their time and expertise.

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|  | Question to participants (5 minutes):  Can anyone share an example of a time they were challenged with applying the principle of Do No Harm in their work?  Online: Invite the participants to write answers in the chat function and summarize  Offline: Take two or three answers from participants in the room |

**Informed consent**

* In discussing informed consent, potential research participants and community members should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision on whether or not they wish to participate.
* Differences in power that may exist between researcher and research participant may be much more amplified in an emergency context, especially in a scenario where the researcher is coming from elsewhere – e.g. the researcher may see themselves as a sort of ‘rescuer’; participants may believe their cooperation is essential to receiving assistance.
* In a humanitarian setting, people might find themselves in the most vulnerable moment of their lives. The idea of informed consent may not be able to be applied in practice as intended. Specifically, ‘the power of choice without constraint or coercion’ may be complicated if people are not used to exercising choice, or if they are in a desperate situation and hope something may come from their involvement in the research.
* It should be made clear that the research is independent of other forms of assistance and that it is not necessary or obligatory for people to participate. Think back to the case example given in session 3.1.
* However, through your actions as practitioners engaged in community engagement/communication, you have a commitment to bring about social change. This means you are often attached to a certain outcome – e.g. increasing people’s use of water treatment tablets or increasing uptake of COVID-19 vaccine boosters – and therefore you cannot be considered completely ‘neutral’.
* Researchers also need to be cautious when dealing with vulnerable populations including, for example, those with intellectual disabilities whose capacity to understand the purpose of a study and their role in it might be limited.
* To ensure and document informed consent processes, some research uses information and informed consent forms, which give participants all the facts they need to know to make a decision.
* However, exactly how this consent is sought is important. Written consent forms may further marginalize those who are unlikely to consent formally in writing due to low literacy levels. Those who feel socially and politically excluded may opt out of research that describes itself as supporting the government.
* In some conflict settings, informed consent forms containing personal information might incriminate a person if they ‘fall into the wrong hands’ and would therefore breach the ‘do no harm’ principle. Therefore, in some places gaining true informed consent of participants, which is in no way coerced or forced, is a challenge that requires substantial planning and in-depth knowledge of the local conditions.

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|  | Question to participants (5 minutes):  Can anyone share an example of a time they were challenged with applying the principle of informed consent in their work?  Online: Invite the participants to write answers in the chat function and summarize  Offline: Take two or three answers from participants in the room |

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|  | Case example (10 minutes):  As part of a research project with community members in a rural part of a South Asian country, researchers had been advised to issue individuals with a research information sheet and an informed consent form for them to sign before beginning the data collection. These documents had been requested and reviewed by a national ethical review board or ERB (for more on ERBs, see session 3.1). There was limited time to conduct the research project so activities were tightly scheduled. A timeframe of 60 minutes and 90 minutes were allocated for explaining the research, obtaining informed consent and conducting the interviews and focus groups respectively.  Data collectors explained the study while issuing individuals with the information and consent forms and provided opportunity for questions. While many participants understood the purpose of the research, they were not familiar with the principle of informed consent and had queries about what it meant. Considering the time pressure and having spent more than 10 minutes explaining the study rationale, the researchers briefly explained informed consent and asked participants to sign. The lead researcher observed that in fact, many of the individuals did not fully understand the details of informed consent, what it meant and how it might influence their participation. Despite this, participants were happy to take part and were therefore encouraged to sign the consent form and, in cases where individuals were not literate, gave thumb prints and/or oral consent. The data collection activities were then conducted as planned.  What are the key ethical challenges of this case? Do you think the researchers acted in line with the principle of informed consent? Where do the limits lie on when this might be coercion? |

**Confidentiality and privacy**

* It is extremely important to ensure that confidentiality and privacy of respondents are protected during as well as after the data collection.
* If community or peer researchers are involved, and wide dissemination is planned within the community, identities of research participants may be hard to conceal.
* Some participants may wish to be named and credited, others may not. Should informants want to be *identified* in the material, researchers should try to respect these wishes if possible.
* There may be matters that some representatives of a community or group wish not to be revealed, such as survival strategies of asylum seekers, sex workers or families in poverty.
* As we described in session 3.1, **privacy** may also be harder to ensure in the reality of a humanitarian emergency. For example, in a refugee camp people may be coming and going from a meeting place, children may be peeking under the flaps of the tent to see what's going on.
* It may also be more difficult to **store data securely** during an acute emergency where there are no fixed office spaces and/or internet connectivity is poor.

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|  | Question to participants (5 minutes):  Can anyone share an example of a time they faced difficulties in following the principles of confidentiality or privacy in their work?  Online: Invite the participants to write answers in the chat function and summarize  Offline: Take two or three answers from participants in the room |

**Key takeaway:** Despite these challenges, it is critically important that we uphold these three key ethical principles in any social science research activities we undertake. Sometimes this means doing things differently and spending more time on actions we wouldn’t usually spend a lot of time on. This can mean explaining your actions to others who may question what you are doing and why. You may find yourself being an ‘Ethics Champion’!

In the next section, we will discuss more concrete strategies for applying ethical principles in challenging settings.

Strategies for successful application of ethical principles (20 minutes total)

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|  | Individual exercise (15 minutes)  How might practitioners and researchers who engage communities during emergencies overcome some of the ethical challenges discussed?  The facilitator should draw on the examples the participants have given above to focus this question and drive the discussion  Face to face: Small working groups of 3 or discussion in pairs to propose solutions  Online: Divide the group into breakout rooms of 3, or map using digital tools solutions to the challenges discussed  Reconvene in plenary. If offline, note down answers on flipchart paper using proposed solutions to generate discussion |

Strategies for applying ethical principles more successfully in our work during emergencies can include:

**Re-thinking research ethics**

* When thinking about and understanding the ethical factors of our work, we need to focus on three core ethical building blocks:
* 1. Building relationships with communities (and research participants coming from them)
* 2. Generating trust with communities (and research participants coming from them)
* 3. Negotiating power (between the institutions who fund and ‘conduct’ the research and the people from communities affected by the crisis who participate in the research)
* These three building blocks, which are considered the core elements of ‘the ethics of care’ – where the focus is on researcher/practitioner responsibilities in relationships – are often as important as principle-based ethics(which focus on individual rights and duties (as outlined in session 3.1).
* To achieve this, it is important that we make sure the community affected by the issue in question is meaningful involved in processes to review and approve the research (session 3.1). This approach not only makes sure that the research is ‘truly ethical’ beyond institutional process, but also places the community at the centre of the activity. It makes sure that the research approach is relevant to their realities.

**Self-awareness**

* As discussed above, through your actions as practitioners working in community engagement/communications activities during an emergency response, you have a commitment to bring about social change. This means you are often attached to a certain outcome – e.g. increasing people’s use of water treatment tablets or increasing uptake of COVID-19 vaccine boosters – and therefore cannot be considered ‘neutral’.
* It is important that researchers and practitioners are aware of the role they play and, despite having a ‘desired outcome’, make sure to be rigorous and demonstrate honesty in the research and engagement process.

**Reflexivity**

* Engaging communities requires a high degree of reflexivity from practitioners – which means being able to reflect critically on your role and on any power dynamics that may be at play in a given situation.
* This requires thinking about who is involved in research, what the dynamics are in research activities between researchers and participants (and between participants themselves), and what are the barriers to participation – which must be continuously considered and addressed.
* Time and space should be built into the research process for teams to think critically about their work. Being able to change your approach also requires some flexibility in how the research is conducted – e.g. if certain marginalized groups are found to be excluded during an initial phase of research, you need to be able to conduct additional data collection.

**Community-led research and longer-term engagements**

* Community engagement and related participatory research approaches prioritize two-way knowledge exchange and community-led activities. This may require practitioners to re-evaluate the way they think about ethics in their routine work, and to acknowledge the more central role played by affected communities.

* Community members may themselves be leading or participating in data collection in their own communities. This will bring about additional ethical considerations including expectations from fellow community members, social pressures and the potential psychological impact of revisiting painful events/memories during the process (see session 4.1 on localized research for more discussion on this).
* As two-way knowledge exchange advances, researchers/practitioners may need to become more embedded in (becoming attached to or existing within) the communities they are working with.
* Relationships might shift in nature from the classic researcher-participant dynamic. Those conducting research will therefore not only be committed to preventing harm over the course of research and engagement, but will also be responsible for developing strong relationships and promoting resilient communities and social justice. In this sense, they might become longer-term investments.

**Responsibility and governance**

* Although we have stated that ethical principles first and foremost are the responsibility of the person(s) conducting the research, there tends to be an assumption that researchers have complete responsibility for ensuring ethical practice. Systems and institutions must have procedures in place to support researchers and practitioners when necessary.
* Institutional codes of ethics and research governance frameworks generally pay little attention to community engagement and participatory and qualitative research.
* ERBs tend to favour predictability rather than flexibility in the research process, tend to be ‘risk averse’ and may categorize community researchers in the same way as research participants who are simply informants.
* Policies, frameworks and information/consent forms need to be re-evaluated to capture these complexities.

Wrap-up/summary (5 minutes)

* Careful consideration of the specific setting you are working in is critically important when designing a research project. This may have to be revisited and renegotiated throughout the research process to make sure that issues related to the principles of *respect* for participants, *do no harm* and *justice* are upheld.
* Directly engaging communities during emergencies can present a number of challenges to the application of key ethical principles. We have discussed a number of those in our session today.
* Despite these challenges, it is critically important that we uphold these principles in any social science research activities we undertake.
* Strategies for applying ethical principles more successfully in our work during emergencies can include:
* Re-thinking research ethics – focusing on building relationships, generating trust and negotiating power.
* Self-awareness – it is important that both researchers and practitioners are aware of the role they play and, despite having a ‘desired outcome’, make sure to be rigorous and demonstrate honesty in the research and engagement process.
* Reflexivity – being able to reflect critically on your role and on any power dynamics that may be at play in a given situation.
* Consider the model of community-led research and longer-term engagements.
* Responsibility and governance – despite research ethics lying first and foremost with the researcher, systems and institutions must have procedures in place to support researchers and practitioners when necessary. Policies, frameworks, and information/consent forms need to be re-evaluated to capture the complexities of social science research relevant to community engagement/communications work in emergencies.

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