

The Ethics of Research Collaborations in Conflict and Disaster Settings

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Introduction

Scholars and researchers in humanitarian, peacebuilding, and disaster-focused organisations all conduct research in conflict and disaster (C&D) settings, whether to better understand conflict or humanitarian causes and dynamics, to improve programming, and to more effectively respond to crisis. Much of this research depends on partnerships with locally based individuals or organisations and participation from communities in these settings, raising questions about the ethics of these collaborations. While scholars and organisations have developed ethical codes of conduct to protect research participants and field researchers, there is limited understanding of what research ethics mean in practice, how researchers confront them, and how socio-political and cultural dynamics impact the validity of such codes of conduct. In many cases, these questions and practices extend beyond the procedural ethics (e.g. institutional review required to conduct scholarly research) developed to govern academic research. These formal or procedural ethical frameworks typically aim to prevent individual harm but remain relatively silent about the ethics of knowledge production processes, including research partnerships.

Ethical choices to protect research participants in disaster contexts are made and remade before, during, and after fieldwork (Browne and Peek, 2014), highlighting the limitations of prescribed ethics review board protocols. Locally based researchers, often affected by the crises themselves, face the challenge of navigating sensitive research practices. They must manage the demands of collecting data while balancing national and international ethics protocols with country-specific understandings of ethical behaviour. A critical concern is also that knowledge surrounding C&D-prone settings is shaped by the legacy of colonisation and long-standing inequalities in north-south relations (Sultana, 2022). These concerns require a renewed focus on data processes (from collection through to publication) in a concerted effort to rethink research ethics, their definition, and implementation in knowledge production practice.

¹ We thank participants of our London workshop, co-hosted by the Humanitarian Policy Group of ODI Global (John Bryant and Megan Daigle) in April 2025, for their feedback and insights.

This policy brief draws upon and synthesises reports from three workshops in C&D settings: Nepal (Dhungana et al 2024), Colombia (Zapata Cancelado et al 2025) and the Balkans (Džuverović et al 2025). As part of a collaborative research project on ethics and knowledge production, each workshop examined the practice of research ethics, with attention to the dilemmas and challenges that researchers working in C&D settings experience. In this policy brief we summarise the cross-cutting findings from these workshops and examine the gap between existing policy and process in relation to the lived experiences of researchers in C&D settings, with the aim of influencing the (ethical) practice of scholarly and policy or practitioner research in these contexts.

INSIGHTS

Each workshop identified a series of dilemmas or concerns that locally based researchers face, some unique to a particular context (or at least explicitly acknowledged only in that workshop) but many that transcended context, and even C&D-specific concerns. For instance, participants in the Balkans workshop mentioned feeling caught between being 'too academic' for policymakers and 'too practical' for academia (Džuverović et al 2025, 13) while in Nepal, participants emphasised a tension between expectations to 'immerse themselves' in and 'give back to' communities yet also maintain 'research objectivity' (Dhungana et al 2024, 11). In Colombia, participants highlighted the assumption of foreigners that researchers are either practitioners or academics, when, in reality, Colombians tend to see these roles as combined (Zapata Cancelado et al 2025, 13).

Many dilemmas and concerns, however, surfaced in multiple and sometimes all three workshops. In each place, conducting ethical research was connected to principled or values-based research, such as the principle of 'do no harm', to values of transparency and openness and to human rights and social justice. In this way, the ethics of research in C&D settings, specifically focused on C&D-related topics, are both inherently contextual and oriented toward improving the human condition.

Participants in all contexts identified gaps between the 'theory' of ethical research and institutional review and its application in reality. In all three places, formal

understandings of what constitutes ethical research in general is either lacking or dominated by a biomedical or health sciences approach. Likewise, existing guidance does not necessarily match the actual dilemmas of conducting research, particularly C&D-related research. For instance, in all three contexts, and particularly in the Balkans and Colombia, participants highlighted foreign researchers' lack of knowledge of the local (conflict) context, even when coming to conduct 'field research' on that context. This created dilemmas for locally based researchers who are asked to supplement this knowledge and then, as described below, not given full recognition for their contributions. Instead, they are seen as 'fixers', gatekeepers, or research assistants, and not as qualified and experienced researchers in their own right. Similarly, the concept of 'research fatigue' (also referred to as 'participant fatigue' and extractivism) surfaced in all three contexts, highlighting the phenomenon of 'over-researched communities' in some C&D settings. This generates dilemmas for locally based researchers who often return to these communities for new projects or who are left to explain or disseminate research findings for which they may not be ultimately involved or responsible.

Of particular concern for researchers in all three contexts were power dynamics, especially practices that often fall outside the remit of formal ethical review processes. In all three contexts, participants shared examples of what could clearly be considered unethical practice, particularly those related to research conceptualisation, co-authorship, acknowledgement, and data sharing. This included limited engagement of local researchers in project design, despite claims of co-production, and incomplete recognition – or complete lack thereof – of the contributions of locally based researchers, some of which could constitute serious academic misconduct. Participants in all three places gave examples of foreign or senior researchers taking credit for the work of national or junior researchers. Others shared stories of being hired as assistants or fixers, then recognised only in publication acknowledgements (or not at all), despite having collected, translated, and even analysed data central to the research and corresponding publications. This goes against academic convention to fully acknowledge the work of research contributors and constitutes the 'invisibilisation of local researchers' (Dhungana et al 2024, 13). In other instances,

participants highlighted issues of double standards, such as by putting locally based researchers in lesser accommodation, not helping to adequately prepare (junior) researchers, or inadvertently putting locally based researchers in harm's way as part of the research, or even worse, doing so deliberately. Structural constraints, such as limited funding, further heightened these disparities. As highlighted in our Balkans report, these practices are part of a 'broader pattern in which decision-making power and intellectual credit are concentrated in the hands of researchers or institutions from the [global North], perpetuating a hierarchical system of knowledge production' (Džuverović et al 2025, 12). This is especially problematic in academic contexts where intellectual credit is a powerful currency.

While co-authorship constituted an oft-mentioned ethical concern for workshop participants, they also identified a tendency within C&D research to pay more attention to donor expectations and priorities over those of C&D-affected communities in all three contexts. Moreover, the ability to push back and demand credit is constrained in places where the political economy of research matters more, meaning places where locally based researchers' livelihoods depend on future contracts. The reputational damage of unethical research also disproportionately affects locally based researchers, who remain behind and may return to communities as part of future research work. Challenging bad practice or inappropriate conduct can result in blacklisting and backlash, which 'entrenches subordination' of locally based researchers (Džuverović et al 2025, 12).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Each report explores a series of policy-practice gaps and alternatives to encourage better conduct and more ethical research. We recognise that many of the constraints above are institutional and structural, reflecting global power dynamics related to funding, contracts, and intellectual property (see e.g. HPG and Neem Foundation 2025). Nevertheless, in the absence of better institutional frameworks we suggest a series of recommendations that individuals can pursue to promote good practice and more equitable knowledge production among researchers and their institutional sponsors.

In general, C&D researchers should:

- Approach research **ethics as a process of reflection**, as an ongoing conversation or a retrospective review (Dawson et al, 2019), and not an event or mere bureaucratic compliance. Ideally this process should delink risk and ethics issues. Such conversations could encourage more transparency about expectations on all sides of collaborative research and promote accountability to ensure findings are not censored or manipulated to align with donor expectations. This also means being open to and reflecting on the 'failures' of (ethical) research engagement.
- Wherever possible, push to include 'inception phases' in projects that allow for **codesigning research** with local partners, and that involve **discussing expectations in advance**, particularly about team functioning, project implementation (eg data collection and analysis (see Zriek et al, 2022)), and outputs. This could include internal institutional funding pots that provide seed funding, where these exist.
- Set **clear guidelines and expectations** around authorship and acknowledgements at the beginning of a partnership or collaboration. This should be an open discussion involving all relevant project partners, as some may have valid reasons for opting out of co-authorship.
- Promote **value-based research**, where organisations and researchers commit in advance to aspirational principles such as transparency, respect, appropriateness, honesty, and minimising harm, while maintaining flexibility to adapt to local context. This could take the form of 'statements of research principles' to govern decisions about how and with whom to partner as well as roundtables to promote discussion of values-based research. Such statements should include rights and responsibilities for all researchers.
- Promote the development of **context-specific ethical structures and guidelines**, including culturally-informed consent forms that are tailored to C&D research and sociopolitical sensitivities.

- Whenever possible, pursue (or demand) **longer-term research engagements** that can build on and strengthen established relationships and trust, and help to address the precarity that often faces locally based researchers.

Locally based C&D researchers should:

- Resist or decline **extractive or exploitative research labour practices** in relation to translation, data collection, reporting or analysis, wherever possible. Reconsider participation in projects that do not involve discussions in advance about intellectual property, authorship, or ethical data collection.
- Negotiate and insist on the **right to use project data** for your own research and publications after collecting it for international and joint projects. This could help reduce the burden of repetitive data collection on local communities and connects to broader questions of ethical data sharing.
- Encourage a **‘study with us first’ approach**, where external researchers spend time at a local university, CSOs or community, to immerse themselves in local knowledge and cultural practices before conducting studies.

Externally-based C&D researchers should:

- Ensure **visibility, recognition, and appropriate compensation** for the labour and intellectual contributions of locally based researchers. especially for those who rely on short-term research engagements.
- Consider **immersive study** in the context to learn more about local knowledge, language, and cultural practices before conducting the research.
- Where possible, encourage and support **communities of learning and practice** within countries and transnationally, to promote reflection on ethical practice and encourage forums for knowledge exchange between C&D researchers. Such fora could be places to discuss the challenges of doing ethical research when the systems and structures are not always supportive.

- Create **publishing models** where a project generates outputs in both English and the local language(s), with funding specifically allocated for translation and dual dissemination.

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