

Ethics in Collaborative Research in Developing Countries: Key Lessons from ESPA for Best Practice



Based on a [review commissioned by the Directorate of the UK's Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation \(ESPA\) programme of best practice approaches to collaborative social and natural science research in developing countries](#), this document outlines the key lessons from ESPA in assessing ethics in the research projects it supports. Below is a summary of the key points of the review and ESPA's ethics procedures. It highlights why and how you should consider ethics in your research.

The ESPA research programme is a seven year, £40.5 million interdisciplinary scheme funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of the UK's Living with Environmental Change partnership. It funds high-quality, cutting-edge research which aims to improve understanding of the way ecosystems function, the services they provide and their relationship with the political economy. The programme's goal is to ensure that, in developing countries, ecosystems are being sustainably managed in a way that contributes to poverty reduction as well as to inclusive and sustainable growth.

Why was this review and guidance commissioned?

Researchers may not always be aware of the issues that can arise when working collaboratively in developing countries. Lessons from dealing with these issues have not previously been collated and while there are many Codes of Practice/Conduct and Ethical Guidelines available, guidelines tailored for collaborative research in developing countries can be hard to find. Consequently, many researchers have carried out research activities in developing countries that have not benefited from a formal Ethics Review. ESPA's ethics approach aims to help address this.

What are the benefits of doing an ethics assessment?

Most researchers recognise that research ethics are important. It therefore makes sense to do an ethics assessment to make sure ethics are properly considered. There are some recognised, tangible benefits to it, including:

- Building better working relationships – clarifying ethical issues avoids tensions further down the line and ensures more effective collaborative engagement.
- Ensuring all parties benefit from the research – rather than research findings and benefits going back to the lead institution's country.
- Ensuring clarity on intellectual property rights issues – helps to ensure all collaborators are credited appropriately. This promotes real and effective engagement of local partners and avoids calls of 'academic imperialism'.
- Avoiding research participants being put at risk – allowing them to contribute to research more freely. Risks may relate to financial issues (e.g. making investments without guarantees of returns or compensation), conflict (e.g. when discussing disputed access to resources), or violence (e.g. consequences for local women if they talk to male researchers).
- Avoiding violation of free prior informed consent (FPIC) – offering a framework to ensure it is addressed.

What is especially important is that this all means ***a better research outcome***. The process of doing an ethics assessment can help researchers to consider and understand the cultural specificities and sensitivities they will be working with, build better trust with their partners and better understand their strengths and working culture, and thus get the most out of their research.

What sort of ethical issues might arise in research?

Ethics in collaborative research are about ensuring informed, fair and risk-free participation in the research. Ethical issues arising from collaborative research in developing countries have become increasingly significant in the past decade, and are an issue both for natural and for social science.

Ethical issues may include:

- Exploitation – there is a risk of exploitation as a result of inequalities between developed and developing country partners.
- Cultural differences – these are typically significant and often not highly obvious, but insensitivity can ruin a good research project.
- Reliance on literacy – in many developing countries literacy is low and there is a stronger non-written and informal culture. This makes written consent approaches impractical at best.
- Risks for research staff – the research may include health, safety and security risks to the researchers, for example through working in areas that may be remote, prone to conflict or disease, or have dangerous access. Staff need to know what to do if things go wrong in the field.
- Absence of effective Research Ethics Committees (RECs) – RECs have become commonplace in developed countries and have developed varying ethics principles and sets of guidance for research. But they are often weak or non-existent in developing countries, offering limited locally relevant guidance.

What should the key elements of an ethics assessment be?

1. Make sure your research follows 10 key principles for research ethics:

- **PRINCIPLE 1** Projects need to meet all obligations and legal requirements in the countries of study and those of any researchers. This includes requirements for the approval of research and any institutional or national procedures for ethics review. Where there is doubt, the most comprehensive procedure should be applied.
- **PRINCIPLE 2** In order to ensure that the perspectives, interests and well-being of those directly affected by specific ecosystem services are properly addressed, all projects should have strong leadership and participation from developing countries.
- **PRINCIPLE 3** The potential value and relevance of traditional indigenous knowledge is recognised and should be considered, where appropriate, alongside western scientific approaches and methods.
- **PRINCIPLE 4** Appropriate data collection, analysis, management and storage protocols should be put in place to ensure the integrity of research findings and their subsequent use within the research team, the programme which has funded the research and the eventual wider public domain.
- **PRINCIPLE 5** The rights, privacy, and safety of the people who are the subject of research, whether direct or indirect, are of paramount importance and should be reflected in the research design and execution of all projects.
- **PRINCIPLE 6** Project leaders and their host institutions are responsible for the health and safety of all researchers and other staff working on their project. Project leaders should ensure that the same rigorous standards for assessing health and safety risks are applied to all staff on the project, regardless of origin.
- **PRINCIPLE 7** Funders are committed to the principle of open reporting of research findings and open access to data to all those with an interest in the research outcomes, including local people and communities who may not have been directly or proactively involved in the research itself.
- **PRINCIPLE 8** Intellectual property rights and associated copyright or patent issues will be agreed between all research partners before a project commences. The agreement will be fair, taking into account the respective roles and responsibilities of the partners.
- **PRINCIPLE 9** To uphold the credibility of findings for non-academic stakeholders, researchers should maintain the independence and integrity of the research process and

ensure that they maintain an intellectual detachment from any personal convictions relating to the topic of their research.

- **PRINCIPLE 10** All research conducted within the project should be in the context of environmental sustainability in the medium- to long-term.

2. The Principal Investigator completes one of two simple assessment forms:

- Ethics Self-Assessment – this will be adequate for most research projects, and is the minimum requirement.
- Full Ethics Assessment – this requires a more detailed consideration of the ethical issues raised. This is usually required only for research involving human subjects that addresses vulnerable populations, raises sensitive issues or uses invasive procedures. It may also be relevant for biophysical research that requires extraordinary permission from governments and landowners, involves significant disturbance to vulnerable species or habitats, sampling rare/endangered or harmful taxa/species, and transporting samples/specimens/soil between countries.

3. An ethics committee reviews the assessment within one month, taking a constructive approach to improve the research outcome.

What is best practice in carrying out an ethics assessment?

The ethic review highlights a number of lessons for best practice in ethics assessments. These include:

- Don't assume 'ethics' is someone else's responsibility. If you are leading a research proposal, consider and familiarise yourself with the potential ethical issues.
- Ethics guidelines are not formulaic, but should foster discussion and offer a framework for making decisions that will improve your research.
- If your institution has a REC, use its ethic review process if you need a full ethics assessment (but check the funder's guidance also).
- Context is crucial in ethics, so if possible also get your research reviewed by a robust Ethics Committee in the host country.
- Share the results of the ethics review with all collaborators.

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