

UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research

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UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research

1. Introduction

Ethical behaviour is a core organisational value at UNEP-WCMC, and attention to the ethical (and legal) implications of research for researchers, research subjects, sponsors and collaborators is seen as an intrinsic part of good research practice. UNEP-WCMC therefore attaches great importance to addressing ethical considerations in all research activities carried out by its staff, consultants, interns, volunteers and fellows.

Research involving human participants will always require ethical consideration. UNEP-WCMC's approach is based on the UK Economic and Social Research Council's [Framework for Research Ethics](#), and ensuring that the five commitment requirements set out in the [Universities UK 2019 Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#), are met. This is consistent with the practice of most research funding bodies and major universities and research institutions around the world.

UNEP-WCMC's Chief Scientist will oversee the application of the UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research together with a nominated Ethics Panel which will include the UNEP-WCMC Data Manager.

The need for an ethical approach to research applies to all staff of UNEP-WCMC who conduct, contribute to, or oversee research that involves human participants. Typical research methods that trigger the application of the UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research include (but are not limited to):

- Interviews
- Questionnaires
- Participant observation studies
- Workshops
- Focus groups

2. Procedure

In order to ensure that all UNEP-WCMC research projects involving human participants conform to the UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research, the Research Ethics Checklist (attached as Annex 1) should be completed by project leaders responsible for any project that involves human participants. This should be submitted to the email address: ethics@unep-wcmc.org. The Research Ethics Checklist will then be reviewed by the UNEP-WCMC Ethics Panel. The review will have the following possible outcomes:

1. **Approval:** Following which the research can proceed immediately.
2. **Non-approval:** Following which feedback will be provided to the project leader to highlight the ethical safeguards necessary to adhere to the UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research. The proposal should then be re-submitted.

3. Where do ethical considerations arise?

There are two interrelated areas in which ethical considerations arise in research projects:

- The first is in relation to the **personal research ethics** of the researcher in adhering to the general standards of good research practice. This involves demonstrating responsibility, integrity, honesty, respect and fairness in the research process.
- The second is rather broader and relates to **project research ethics** and involves the external relationships of the researcher with the general public, stakeholders in the research activity, individuals and institutions associated directly in and with the research (collaborators and subjects), and the environment.

The guiding principles for each of these areas of ethics are discussed further in the following sections. Together, these guiding principles define UNEP-WCMC's Code of Practice on Ethical Standards.

A key part of this UNEP-WCMC policy for promoting and facilitating ethical research is the need to encourage ethical awareness in all research. Researchers at all levels should therefore always be aware of the personal ethics that characterise professional research, and seek to identify, evaluate, and respond to, any ethical issues that could, or do, arise within their research.

3.1. Personal research ethics

The personal ethical awareness of the researcher should lead them to adhere to the highest general standards of ethical research practice, and to show responsibility, integrity, honesty, respect and fairness in doing so. These standards require that researchers:

- conduct their research as capably as their knowledge permits, and present and review evidence, theory or interpretation honestly and accurately;
- reach conclusions based on the best professional research practices, and having considered all relevant views;
- act with skill and care in executing their research, and maintain their skills, knowledge and expertise, as well as assisting the development of such skills and expertise in others;
- be aware of and conform to the legal and regulatory norms of the area in which the research is undertaken;
- take steps to prevent corrupt practices and professional misconduct, seeking advice where required
- declare all conflicts of interest to the research team and UNEP-WCMC Chief Scientist, and take steps to actively manage these conflicts;
- remain alert to the ways in which research derives from and affects the work of others, and deal fairly in respect of the intellectual property of other researchers (for example offering authorship on outputs for significant data provision), including the handling of third party data obtained from others;
- avoid the poor scholarship implicit in plagiarism (over-dependence on limited and unacknowledged sources, in the worse case taken directly from other documents off the

internet), including self-plagiarism (repetitive and excessive use of the same material in successive outputs). UNEP–WCMC has access to plagiarism checking software;

- recognise appropriately the intellectual, research support and operational contributions of others (for example, partners, and funders; and in the case of senior researchers, the roles of junior staff and interns, graduate students and other research staff);
- avoid knowingly misleading, or allowing others to be misled, about their research findings, and accurately reporting those findings, with a commitment to enabling others to replicate findings where appropriate;
- retain independence and impartiality to the subject of their research; and
- consider ethical challenges which arise from new or possibly risky research at the limits of knowledge, by broadening debate at an early stage and seeking the advice of others.

3.2. Project research ethics

The guiding principles for project research ethics are that the research and its practices should seek to protect the dignity and preserve the well-being of human research participants and should assess and minimise the adverse impacts on the natural environment and on animal welfare. In more detail, these principles require the following.

(a) Respect for Privacy and Confidentiality -

Any requests to access and disseminate private and confidential personal information should ensure that privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are fully respected. If this cannot be guaranteed, participants should be made aware of this before they are asked to participate. This is of importance under the UK's 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All information relating to a living person is covered. In particular, all data that is called special category (or sensitive) requires particular care. All data collection needs to be accompanied by a privacy statement where consent is explicitly given and it is explained what will be done with the data. See [here](#) for information on the sensitive data and [here](#) for advice that relates to UNEP-WCMC. If in doubt please seek advice from the Head of Operations.

(b) Respect for Free Prior and Informed Consent

Where appropriate, participants any human subjects, prior to participation in any research requesting their data or opinions, will be provided with clear information as to the use and storage of any information requested in plain readily understood language. Any research participants must have freely agreed and given explicit consent to contribute to the research on the basis of this well-understood information about its objectives, potential consequences, risks and benefits of participation. They should be made aware that at any time they may withdraw their consent.

(c) Respect for Vulnerable Persons

Children, institutionalised persons or others who are vulnerable are entitled to protection and special procedures to protect their interests. Explicit and freely given consent of a parent or that of any other responsible adult acting as a legal guardian is required for research with children under 18. This is a legal requirement under [GDPR guidance](#). If anyone in UNEP-WCMC is

considering research involving vulnerable persons then they should contact the Chief Scientist for advice in advance.

(d) Maintenance of data protection

Data relating to people that is gathered during research should be handled in a way that complies with agreed procedures for safe storing and archiving of data, and destroying data where appropriate. Data storage and management must comply with the most recent UK [Data Protection legislation](#) (i.e. the GDPR introduced in May 2018), and follow the [WCMC Data Protection Policy and Procedure.pdf](#).

(e) Openness about purpose

Researchers should be open and honest about their status, and where appropriate, the aims and purpose of their research. Note, however, that all ethical assessment involves a balance of considerations, and it may be necessary on occasion to weigh the ethical need for new knowledge against the preference of some institutions to manage information. The requirements of the GDPR will outweigh any institutional preferences, including that of a project funder/donor.

(f) Respect for the environment

Researchers should as far as possible avoid adverse impacts of their research on the environment, and weigh the risks of environmental damage against the benefits of the research where some impact is anticipated. These principles apply to all research regardless of:

- whether funded or unfunded, and whatever the source or form of funding;
- where it is conducted, and whether in the laboratory or the field;
- how it is conducted (in person or by mail, telephone, internet), and whether it involves information collected by direct observation, apparatus, questionnaire, interview, or review of records or other materials not normally available to the public;
- whether it is experimental, quantitative, qualitative, or descriptive;
- whether it is conducted to acquire basic or applied knowledge;
- whether its focus is on humans or an aspect of the environment;
- whether it is a pilot study or a fully developed project;
- whether it is primarily for teaching or demonstration purposes or whether the primary purpose is the acquisition of new knowledge; or
- whether or not it is intended for publication or other public presentation.

Research based on information contained in publicly available materials is not subject to ethics review. Nor is research involving the observation, assessment, or recording of public meetings or similar activities. These criteria are drawn from various sources, including the research ethics guidance of the British Academy, the ESRC, the Natural Environment Research Council, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth, and the Council for Science and Technology.

Annex 1: Research Ethics Checklist

This questionnaire should be completed for all research projects with human participants. The form is hopefully self-explanatory. If not, then please contact the UNEP-WCMC Chief Scientist for further advice.

Section A – Project Details

Your name:	
Team:	
Project code & name:	

Section B – Ethical considerations

1. Who is funding this research (e.g. internal investment, ESRC, NERC)?
2. Brief summary of research topic (approx. 100 words)
3. Have you read and understood the UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research? [Yes / No]
4. Describe the research methods that you intend to use (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, etc).
5. Do you have any personal or professional conflict of interest that is relevant to the research project? **If YES**, please describe the actions taken or planned to manage this conflict of interest. [Yes / No]
6. Does your research involve human participants? **If YES**, describe how you will ensure informed consent (please include precise details of the information you will provide to participants to secure their informed consent). [Yes / No]
7. Does your research involve the use of social media (in terms of accessing and/or disseminating data)? **If YES**, please explain how you will manage the ethical implications and ensure informed consent. [Yes / No]
8. Will any of the proposed research be harmful or intrusive to (a) people (e.g. using biological samples, cause physical or emotional pain), (b) the environment (e.g. damage to paths, vegetation) and/or (c) animals (e.g. risk to animal welfare)? **If YES** to one or more of these, how will you address these issues? [Yes / No]

9. Will your research need the support of a gatekeeper (e.g. Professor or other senior academic, NGO, self-help group, government official, village or community leader) for you to access people/place(s)? **If YES**, describe how you intend to negotiate access to your research participants/place(s) through this gatekeeper and any relevant ethical considerations. [Yes / No]
10. Will you have a formal or informal association with any organisations during your fieldwork (e.g. voluntary work placement, connection to a local organisation/NGO/school, recruitment through any health care provider*)? **If YES**, how have you sought permission to conduct research from those involved? [Yes / No]
11. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable (e.g. children, homeless, refugees, elderly people)? **If YES**, please see the UNEP-WCMC Chief Scientist. [Yes / No]
12. Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, violence, abuse)? **If YES**, describe how you will handle these topics in order to mitigate psychological stress or harm to participants. [Yes / No]
13. Does your research involve data from humans (dead or alive)? **If YES**, please describe what steps you will take to ensure the confidentiality of your respondents (whether or not the research will be published). [Yes / No]
14. Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places)? **If YES**, how will you mitigate the potential negative consequences and ethical concerns of covert research? [Yes / No]
15. Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants? **If YES**, how will you ensure this is handled to ensure integrity in your research? [Yes / No]
16. Will the research be conducted by/alongside anyone other than yourself (e.g. translator, hiring enumerators, teachers)? **If YES**, please describe how you will train them to ensure ethical compliance. [Yes / No]

17. Could your research cause psychological and/or emotional distress to you, the researcher (e.g. due to the topic, group of respondents, methods, location, duration)? **If YES**, please provide details of the strategies you will employ to limit the potential harm to yourself. [Yes / No]
18. Do you plan to undertake research outside the UK? **If YES**, describe any existing links with the country and explain how you intend to manage local cultural and political sensitivities. Please show how you intend to comply with any legal requirements for conducting research in that country. [Yes / No]
19. Please describe how you will ensure that you comply with the General Data Protection Regulation ([GDPR](#)) and what data, if any, will be transferred to a Data Processor.

Confirmation

I agree to report all breaches of the UNEP-WCMC Code of Practice on Ethical Standards in Research that involves people, however trivial they may seem, to the Chief Scientist.

I agree that if an incident occurs during the matters covered by this assessment, I will report this.

Name:

Date: