

## **Research Ethics at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)**

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# 1 Guidelines on Research Ethics at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability

Our work at IDOS in all its facets – research, policy advice and training – is empirically driven and seeks to contribute to the global common good. It is thus about sustainably improving human welfare. To a major extent, IDOS activities include empirical data collection and field research in partner countries around the globe. To ensure that all our activities, from data collection to dissemination of research results, are to the highest standard of ethically sound research and live up to the principles of do-no-harm, transparency and fairness, IDOS adopts guidelines on research ethics as outlined below.

Ethical standards are an inseparable part of research, training and policy processes. Globally, sound research practices play an increasingly significant role in academic and international development cooperation, third-party funding and publication. An increasing number of research partners expects and academic journals require proof of an ethical clearance, outlining which measures were undertaken to safeguard stakeholders and respondents. IDOS seeks to safeguard the well-being and safety of both participants and research staff (including local partners and locally-hired research assistants) but also other researchers and members of the general public. The guidelines thus apply to all members of staff, namely senior and junior researchers, associated and guest researchers, research assistants as well as administrative staff.

Addressing ethical concerns is undertaken in a way ensuring it does not impede innovative research. High ethical standards rather provide new opportunities and stimulate ethically-conducted projects respecting equitable and fundamental freedoms, values and principles. IDOS researchers understand that ethically-conducted research, policy advice and training create individual and shared benefits, and commit to provide adequate measures to mitigate ethical risks.

IDOS researchers observe all key points for ethically and thoughtful planning throughout the work process: building equitable partnerships with local researchers; data collection; confidentiality and data handling; assessing long-term impacts of our work on participants and researched communities; and the dissemination of results and publications.

## **Equitable research partnerships and researchers' safety and wellbeing**

During all stages of research, IDOS is committed to contributing to equitable research partnerships, this includes North-South relations and facilitating South-South cooperation but also more generally relations between researchers at different stages of their career. IDOS researchers strive to establish fair and equal partnerships with other institutions and researchers.

- Equitable partnerships concern all stages of research, including the development of research questions, selection of research topics and agenda setting, data collection and analysis, and publication processes.

- Research staff as well as respondents are embedded in power relations. IDOS research seeks to take these power relations among local cooperation partners, or between partners/locally-hired research staff and participants into consideration. All research partners as well as local research staff have the opportunity to voice concerns about IDOS ethical research practices to the Research Ethics Committee (REC). To facilitate this, they are informed about the ethical rules and procedures at IDOS and have been provided contact details to REC.

IDOS is committed to safeguard the emotional and physical well-being of all involved research staff. IDOS researchers are offered travel security training courses, to provide researchers with the resources, information and skills they need to keep safe while travelling as foreseen in the institute's travel safety guidelines. While in most cases locally-hired research staff cannot be offered a dedicated safety training, IDOS researchers have a responsibility to ensure suitable safety precaution and provide locally-hired staff with safety information. Working conditions are in line with SDG8 (adequate payment, regulations and compensation for work accidents, security of personal data, etc.).

### **Data collection**

Data include qualitative and quantitative data on all parts of life. Hereby, we have to keep in mind that we interact with people, who voluntarily provide insights into their lives to researchers. We acknowledge that human interaction often comes with (perceived and real) power inequalities, which need to be mitigated, between researcher and respondents as well as amongst different respondents or amongst different collaborating researchers. Also, data collection might entail revisiting certain difficult situations experienced by the respondents. Emotional wellbeing of respondents is here of utmost importance. Data collection relies on human interactions through techniques like interviews, surveys, experiments, participant observation, et cetera and usually involves sampling, establishing contact, briefing and debriefing of participants.

### *Vulnerability*

Research in the context of international development cooperation often involves vulnerable respondents (refugees and migrants, politically or economically marginalized groups, children or other dependants). We enlist the participation of vulnerable populations in a responsible way and only if their participation is indispensable for filling a research gap in the context of achieving the global common good. Particularly when researching these groups, referral possibilities such as services offered by NGOs or governmental institutions should be looked into and offered after interviews.

### *Sampling strategies and access*

- We establish contact to potential respondents in a safe, non-threatening way
- We consider the role of gatekeepers or hierarchical relationships on the ground (so that participation in research remains voluntary and not incentivized by access to funding or other resources)
- The objectives of the research are communicated at the start of any interaction

## *Transparency*

- Briefing/debriefing: Respondents are given all necessary detail to understand the purpose and background of the respective research project and are given the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns. Respondents are informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can refuse to answer or cancel their participation at any time.
- Participants' informed consent: Respondents give their written consent. For underage respondents, also their parents or legal guardians have provided their written consent.  
In exceptional cases, where local culture or safety concerns renders written consent inappropriate, consent can be given orally.

## **Confidentiality, data protection and management of data**

All collected data is to be protected from undue interference.

### *Confidentiality*

- IDOS strives to ensure full confidentiality and – if preferred by the respondents – to preserve anonymity. However, researchers need to make sure their guarantees of anonymity or confidentiality are realistic and will be implemented. If respondents explicitly agree to their names and / or positions to be mentioned as part of their quotes and have signed the consent form accordingly, the data are only anonymised to the degree requested by the respondents.
- If individual respondents (e.g., spokespersons of local initiatives or movements) express their willingness to be named, yet researchers conclude that observing confidentiality rules would avert unnecessary risks, they should voice that concern before respondents make their final decision. Hereby, power relations within communities, particularly in authoritarian contexts, are taken into account as participation may expose and endanger respondents. In such cases, confidentiality and anonymity is handled with particular care and confidentiality strictly applies also to information shared by previous respondents.
- IDOS researchers will try to anticipate ethical dilemmas when exceptions to confidentiality may be required in the interest of the common good (e.g., reporting on crime).

### *Data protection*

- For the protection of individual privacy when IDOS researchers collect personal data they will strictly follow legal requirements, such as the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), national data protection acts and institutional policies (see IDOS "Guideline on Data Protection").
- Data protection and privacy rules also and especially apply to data collected through digital tools (e.g., information gathering via social media, interviews by videoconference) or created as a by-product (e.g., GPS positions). 0

- Loss of data or suspected infringements to privacy rules is immediately disclosed to the affected research partners and respondents.
- To meet these legal requirements on data protection, IDOS researchers will implement appropriate technical and organizational measures to protect data against loss and misuse ( → *Information: Saving data during field work*).

#### *Data management*

- Research data is handled with utmost care following best practices in research data management. Projects cooperating with other researchers and organizations ensure equal diligence and care in data management in accordance with the requirements of the funders and wherever the research mission is conducted.
- In the case of joint data collection, data storage, security, access, ownership and re-use during and after the in-country research will be carried out by documented mutual consent. ( → *Information: Issues to consider in data management and usage within collaborative research*).

#### **Long-term impact on participants, research staff and researched communities**

Research affects the way people think about specific topics, interventions or actors and may contribute to shaping the local power relations, in positive or negative ways. IDOS researchers seek to anticipate these cognitive effects and mitigate potential negative impacts.

#### *Principle of doing no harm*

- Sensitive topics: Costs and benefits of a research are gauged very carefully if research questions touch on sensitive topics in order to not inflict harm on individual participants or on communities' social cohesion. IDOS researchers abstain from conducting or commissioning such research endeavours, if the involved risks cannot be controlled.
- Sustainability: Research missions have as little harmful impact on the environment as possible.

#### *Doing good - potential benefits*

- Compensation for participants: IDOS researchers value the time invested by interviewees and survey respondents in sharing their insights and make sure time for research encounters is allocated as effectively and efficiently as possible. At the same time, allowances or incentives for participation in a research project may bias research findings, influence local power structures or put local researchers at a disadvantage. To prevent such adverse effects, financial compensation over and beyond covering of respondents' direct expenses is not foreseen but may be approved in justified cases. After conclusion of the research, participants are informed about its findings and recommendations, or where to access such information, in an appropriate format.

- Expectation management: IDOS researchers abstain from unrealistic promises about (a) the research findings' potential positive impact on the community and (b) concrete future actions providing benefits, whether material (e.g., employment, procurement of materials) or ideational (e.g., contacts, future cooperation).
- Fairness / leave no one behind: IDOS researchers critically assess in which way the research benefits participants and whether it gives them potentially an undue comparative advantage over their peers (especially in methodologies where respondents receive a treatment while a control group does not). Action will be taken to limit such differential treatment, keeping it to a minimum.
- Impact on access to funding or development cooperation: IDOS research devises policy advice and thus helps to shape sustainable development and global cooperation strategies. IDOS researchers are aware of the potential effects of their research findings on practical development cooperation and funding decisions and assume the corresponding responsibility.

### **Dissemination of results and publication**

Integrity: IDOS commits to diligent and truthful reporting of findings, respecting the above confidentiality guidelines.

Fair representation of all contributing researchers: IDOS seeks to co-author with local partners and to pay credit to contributions by local research assistants.

Open access: IDOS commits to publish its findings open access whenever possible, so that the general public, including in contexts researched, can engage with our research.

Potential misuse of data or findings: IDOS tries to foresee and minimize any potential misuse of data, findings, or recommendations. If brought to their attention, IDOS researchers correct imprecise reporting of their results, regardless of whether it is in a context of positive or negative appraisal.

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To ensure ethically sound research is conducted under the auspices of IDOS, the below sections outline concrete procedures and regulations:

- Section 2 IDOS Research Ethics Committee
- Section 3 Ethical approval for IDOS research activities

The Research Ethics Assessment (REA) form is available here: <https://forms.office.com/r/0tQFC3bJGJ> (please use Microsoft Edge)

Furthermore, the following templates and pieces of information are available to IDOS researchers seeking ethical approval (see separate folder):

- Informed Consent
- Participant Information Sheet
- Saving data during field work
- Issues to consider in data management and usage within collaborative research
- Fieldwork in difficult Environments

## 2 The Research Ethics Committee (REC) <sup>1</sup>

This section describes the authority, role, and procedures of the IDOS Research Ethics Committee (REC).

### 2.1 Purpose

The REC is established to ensure the respect of ethical standards and particularly the protection of human participants in research under the auspices of IDOS. The REC is authorized to:

1. review all research activities overseen and conducted under the auspices of IDOS in accordance with the IDOS's research ethics guidelines at least biannually
2. approve, require modifications to secure approval or else disapprove of these research activities
3. suspend or terminate approval of research not being conducted under the REC's requirements or that has been associated with unexpected serious harm to participants;

If researchers disagree with the decisions of the REC they might approach the Ombud's Office to mediate as a neutral instance.

The REC chair informs on an annual basis the plenary on activities. By request, but at least once a year the REC and IDOS Management Team have a meeting to review activities, policies and identify trends and potential weaknesses to be addressed institutionally.

The REC must be perceived to be fair, impartial, and immune to pressure by the institute's administration, the researchers requesting its approval, and other professional and nonprofessional sources. Concerns about lack of impartiality should be channelled by the REC chair. Should REC members feel pressured this will be also communicated to the REC chair, who will decide the degree to which the Ombud's Office for good scientific practice should be involved.

### 2.2 REC Membership and Composition

The IDOS REC is composed of at least 5 members. The structure and composition of the REC must be appropriate to the volume and nature of the research that is reviewed.

Among themselves REC members will appoint one chairperson by secret vote after voluntary nominations. Should there be more than 5 members, a vice chairperson will be nominated to support the work of the chairperson. In principle, the members are selected for 3 years. Any change in appointment, including reappointment or removal, requires notification in the plenary. Appointments have a specified term of three years with the first year probationary. Alternation is explicitly supported to foster continuity. Should REC members leave the institute while in office, they are encouraged to suggest a successor.

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<sup>1</sup> The regulations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at New York University proved helpful preparing this section (see <https://www.nyu.edu/research/resources-and-support-offices/getting-started-withyourresearch/human-subjects-research/forms-guidance.html>).

Membership is based on voluntary participation. REC members are selected based on appropriate diversity, including consideration of gender, place of origin, as well professional, cultural and academic backgrounds. Every effort is made to have members represent the areas of specialty that encompass the research performed at IDOS. Representation of different programmes, gender and academic background are considered particularly prominent criteria. Should more than 10 persons volunteer, an election will be held in the plenary. In this case, criteria of diversity will be explicitly considered in the plenary before deciding who can be voted for.

### **2.3. REC Process**

The members can distribute the workload among themselves as they decide. Generally, there is the commitment that as far as possible consideration will be given to the inclusion of at least one individual who is particularly knowledgeable about and experienced in working with the respective research participants, topics and environments.

At least two REC members check the ethical appraisal for a research project under review. Generally, REC endeavours to review newly submitted Research Ethics Assessment (REA) forms within 2 weeks; if this is not possible in exceptional cases, REC will notify the submitting researcher as early as possible. If both reviewers individually approve an application, no further action will be necessary. If not, a meeting will be convened to discuss the particular concern. Exchange per email with the researcher or research team is also possible. All committee members can call for meetings discussing individual applications for ethical approval to be convened. The Ombud's Office for good scientific practice is available for inquiries in controversial cases as a consulting instance.

Should there be differing opinions the chairperson will be included. In general, consensus is required to approve a project.

The committee members revising a project can decide:

- Approve: means the determination of the REC that the research has been reviewed and may be conducted
- Revision: means that to approve the project the REC requires further clarifications on points that might be problematic or changes on aspects that violate internal standards or legal regulations more broadly. Researchers are expected to provide revised documents within 6 weeks, or else need to agree with the REC on an alternative deadline. If provided within 6 weeks, the researchers can expect a new decision in no more than 2 weeks.
- Disapproval: means that the research cannot be pursued as envisioned. A disapproval is implicit if the project does not react to a revision. If the nature of the research question or the methodological approach is such that the committee members consider it impossible to revise, the REC will seek to engage with the researcher and find a mutual solution before announcing a disapproval without option of revision. In any case, the committee members disapproving the project must provide a written statement defending their decision. The researcher can call for a revision that will be decided upon by the REC chairperson.



Based on own initiative any REC member can bring evidence to the REC chair to recommend for a termination of research activities. Indication can be also brought to the attention of the committee by any academic and non-academic member of IDOS or any non-affiliated persons. Indications should be documented and need to be discussed with the respective researcher before a decision is reached. The REC chair(wo)man should give a short, written argumentation of the decision. The REC chair can ask for a 48 hours pause to research activities to review the case. If a decision can't be reached within the 48 hours the case should be referred to the Ombud's Office for mediation of conflict.

Researchers have to inform the REC in case of changes in circumstances of an approved research project; REC is obliged to reply to the notification within 2 weeks. REC approval can be suspended and a revision be required. If no solution is reached, research can be asked to be terminated.

Researchers at IDOS have to accept and respect the decisions of the REC. If the decisions of the REC or, more generally, the ethics approval regulations at IDOS are ignored this might have disciplinary consequences for the researcher. The decision on such disciplinary consequences is taken outside the REC and must involve the Management Team of the institute and the worker's council.

All REC members have access to the agenda, ethics applications, minutes and decisions of the committee. REC members will treat all application materials as well as all information received as confidential. REC members will not disclose REC decisions and business outside of the convened meeting. All REC decisions must be communicated to researchers via email. Identically, any reactions of the researchers are required to be documented. There is a specific REC Email address ([ethics@idos-research.de](mailto:ethics@idos-research.de)) as well as an REC-internal folder in the intranet.

## **2.5 Other considerations**

Members of the REC meet at least once a year to discuss perspectives on issues with relevance for research ethics, debate any specific decisions as well as discuss trends in the type of ethics applications submitted. They also discuss messages to be shared and discussed in the plenary and with IDOS management as well as potential areas where they feel the REC needs more support and expertise.

IDOS is committed to providing training for all REC members related to ethical concerns. The REC receives financial support and is encouraged to look for relevant training and propose broader (training) measures for IDOS staff. Membership in REC is considered a component of the responsibilities of researchers at IDOS and correspondingly regarded in the appraisal talks.

### 3 Gaining Ethical Approval for IDOS Research Activities

For all research activities overseen and conducted under the auspices of IDOS, researchers are obliged to assess whether ethical approval is required and, if so, to gain the IDOS Research Ethics Committee's (REC) ethical approval.

#### *Which research requires ethical approval?*

Ethical approval is necessary for all research activities that imply the collection of primary data of any form (surveys, interviews, emailed responses or text- and voice-messages to questions, participant observations, photographs/videos, etc.), or

Since the concrete research design is in the centre of the ethics assessment, this does not include research questions or projects sent to apply for third party funding. (If a third party funding proposal requires ethical clearance, please contact the REC.)

Research activities which involve no collection of primary data and no individually identifiable data do not require ethical approval. This includes also research activities based on secondary data, even if they contain personal or confidential information (e.g., participants lists). In these cases, the main investigator should briefly inform the REC in written form on the research and ask for a waiver from ethical review.

#### *When and by whom should ethical approval be sought?*

Ethical approval applies to the concrete research implementation and is meant to be submitted at the point when IDOS researchers at all stages of their career know precisely how they will methodologically approach a research question.

Submissions should be announced as soon as possible to organise the process, especially if the given research foresees in-country research. Researchers are responsible to provide the REC with a completed Research Ethics Assessment (REA) form and necessary accompanying materials in a timely fashion (i.e., at the latest 4 weeks before intending to begin the research to allow sufficient time for correspondence and clarification of follow-up questions). The REC responds within 2 weeks after REA submission. If REC is, in exceptional cases, unable to fully process the submission, it will notify the principal investigator as early as possible.

Responsibility for seeking ethical approval rests with the principal investigator and the research project, with which the principal investigator is affiliated and which administers the respective research activity. If the research forms part of a cooperation with another institution and the principal investigator is not based at IDOS, the REC needs to be informed about the cooperation partner's ethical approval, in order to ensure comparable research ethics standards.

#### *What information needs to be submitted to gain ethical approval?*

IDOS researchers are required to complete the Research Ethics Assessment (REA) form, accessible here <https://forms.office.com/r/0tQFC3bJGJ> (please use Microsoft Edge, "offline preview" on V:\Informationen\_Information\15\_ethical clearance). It includes mandatory parts 1 (General Project Information) and 2 (General Ethical Concerns), as well as parts 3.-6. as applicable and indicated in the form.

The REA form also guides through further documents to be submitted (e.g. participant information sheet, informed consent form, data management agreement, external permissions), further information in separate folder “Information and Templates”.

Further questions can be directed to the Research Ethics Committee ([ethics@idos-research.de](mailto:ethics@idos-research.de)).