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Research Ethics and COVID-19: a supplement to the Research Ethics Policy

Prepared by Research Ethics Committee and William Avis, May 2020

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Introduction

In these times of change, uncertainty, anxiety, social isolation, and financial pressure, staff across IIED are rightly re-appraising both the purpose of their research and the ways in which it is conducted in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is challenging to predict the impact of COVID-19 on research, or how long this situation will last, but the safety of participants, researchers and the integrity of research remain paramount. This document is intended to aid IIED staff thinking through some of the complex decisions they face. It is also intended to highlight the importance of IIED's continued support to our partners, our research participants and our funders who now, more than ever, must ensure that policy responses to the pandemic tackle rather than exacerbate inequalities. While COVID-19 has changed the context in which our work is undertaken, it serves as a reminder of the importance of our IIED's mission "to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence, working in partnership with others".

At the same time, conducting research in the midst of a global pandemic presents new ethical issues that require reflection and responses. IIED's policy on Integrity and Ethics in Research, Partnership and Policy Engagement states: "IIED is concerned to protect the rights, dignity, health, safety and privacy of research participants. IIED is also concerned to protect the health, safety, rights and research freedom of its researchers and the reputation of IIED as a centre for high quality research."

This document is a supplement to the Research Ethics Policy and is intended to guide researchers and project managers in navigating the ethical issues that arise as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic[1]. It is not a set of formal rules to be implemented across all projects in all locations – the assessment of risk and the appropriate responses should be done in association with partners who understand the particular context in which work is being undertaken. It includes guidance on research options during the pandemic, advice on research ethics when shifting to digital means of data collection, options for reducing risk in face-to-face data collection, and a process for accountable decision-making if there is a need to postpone or cancel research. It also provides links to additional sources of information and guidance.

Core legal / protection issues for IIED staff

This document does not cover the possible legal, protection or safeguarding issues that may arise from conducting research at this time[2]. Situation reports and updated information relevant to this are available at:

WHO: https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

PHE England: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england

Research options during COVID-19

The following guidance relates to research conducted by IIED staff and partner organisations working on IIED-managed projects that involves human participants and/or their data. It primarily relates to current research, but will also be taken into consideration for any new projects undergoing ethical review during the ongoing crisis.

Working relations with partners

The primary focus of this supplementary guidance is on the process of gathering data. However, IIED's research ethics policy recognises that our ethical responsibilities extend beyond this stage of research,

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[1] This Supplementary Guide was prepared by IIED's Research Ethics Committee, and was drafted by William Avis (external committee member from the University of Birmingham).
[2] This information may be expanded in due course, or links to additional material provided.

and include how we work with partners. Other issues are therefore likely to arise, for example around the risks faced by research partners in working collaboratively at this time (e.g. expectations and facilities for in-person meetings). Decisions about the appropriate level of risk in the working environment need to be made by partners who are fully aware of their local regulations and circumstances. As IIED staff we should raise these issues proactively to ensure that partners do not feel compelled to work in situations that put them or their families at risk, and we should be supportive of the decisions that are made to reduce these risks.

Options for gathering data

The main options that are available for conducting research at this time are as follows:

- Continue with data collection as previously planned.

- Modify data collection methods to take account of the need to protect research staff and research participants, and to comply with local regulations. This could either entail shifting to virtual methods of data collection, or modifying protocols for face-to-face engagement.

- Postpone data collection until the situation changes.

- Cancel data collection.

Researchers are advised to consider carefully how best to proceed with their research on a case-by-case basis, and are encouraged to seek support and advice from colleagues in their group or IIED more broadly. Any changes to the intended scope, milestones delivery and delivery date for projects must also be discussed and agreed with relevant partners, participants and funders through open communication.

Given that many of our projects involve research overseas where partners undertake data collection, these projects must follow the local guidance on COVID-19 (including restrictions on movement or on face-to-face interactions) Where guidance is absent or partners face being placed at risk, researchers should consider our duty of care and what steps can be taken to mitigate unacceptable or unnecessary risk.

It is the responsibility of PIs to assess projects and outline a feasible plan of action. For some projects this will be relatively straightforward, and these decisions can be taken by project managers. For others it may require input from line managers, Group Directors, or SMT.

Process for decision-making

The process for deciding on appropriate actions should include the following steps:

- **Assess** the situation using appropriate evidence (including consultation with partners). This will be the basis for the judgement of whether work can proceed without modification, with modification, or not at all.

- Review options: for **postponing research**; for **shifting to digital methods** of data collection; to **modifying data collection protocols** (see guidance below). What are the pros and cons of each of these? Would digital methods create new ethical risks (and how could these be addressed)? Would modified data collection protocols adequately reduce risk?

- **Discuss** the indicative plan of action for approval with line managers (and Group Directors) and outline additional concerns or additional support. Consider discussing with funders to highlight intentions if appropriate.

- **Decide** on the next steps (using the decision tree [Annex 1]) and **document** these (using the decision form [Annex 2]).

- **Communicate** with partners and donors.

Option 1: "Going digital" and research ethics

There are a number of different options available to effectively support research being conducted online and the following provides advice from an IIED perspective on options available. When choosing the most suitable option, you should think about what suits your methods best, including matters regarding functionality and stability. Most importantly, online data collection must also be secure. When moving to online research, one should also consider potential impacts on research findings i.e. digital exclusion may render invisible the most hard to reach or lead to bias. This may include certain groups having limited access to communications methods (including phones and internet data), or power relations within households shaping who is able to access these means of communication.

Changing to online methods does not mean that you cannot conduct interviews or questionnaires as there are a number of ways this can be accomplished online. When shifting to online methods, it is important to update your recruitment documentation so that it refers to online methods instead. If your data collection is ongoing, contact your participants (where possible) to advise them of the change and check they are happy to continue with the study.

Online or remote data collection can be done via telephone, Microsoft Teams or by using sites such as Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp or Google Hangouts, which all have end-to-end encryption. If you are intending to record the interviews, e.g. via Teams, you must consider how this will be done securely and ensure that the data conforms to data protection guidance[3] (see comments on data management and security). You must also inform participants that you wish to record the interview, explaining how this will be done and seek consent to do so. You should also consider whether participating in studies digitally incurs extra costs for participants (e.g. for pay-as-you-go data) and allocate appropriate resources from project funds where possible to support this.

What should I tell participants before I start data collection?

A version of the following text should be provided to participants:

> *Your participation in this research will be recorded in [Skype/Zoom] and your personal data will be processed by [Microsoft/Zoom]. This may mean that your personal data is transferred to a country outside of the European Economic Area, some of which have not yet been determined by the European Commission to have an adequate level of data protection. Appropriate legal mechanisms to ensure these transfers are compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation are in place. The recordings will be removed from the above third party platform and stored on IIED managed file storage as soon as possible following the completion of data collection.*

Data management and security

When moving to online research it is essential that you use secure methods and that the data is managed in accordance with data protection laws, including GDPR, and that the security arrangements are appropriate to the type of data you are collecting.

Further guidance on research ethics and digital technologies can be found in Annex 3, but the University of Birmingham Guidance on Key Ethical Considerations When Switching to Skype or Telephone Interviews is a helpful source:

https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/documents/public/Guidance-on-key-ethical-considerations-when-switching-to-Skype-or-telephone-interviews.pdf

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[3] For further information on data protection – contact Catherine Baker (catherine.baker@iied.org)

Option 2: Modifying data collection procedures

It is acknowledged that our response to COVID-19 may entail adjustments to data gathering plans and activities. Discretion, responsibility and common sense are necessary in interpreting whether these adjustments represent a significant deviation from the methods originally proposed. Researchers should reflect on what they are doing, its relationship to their original project proposal, and whether any ongoing adjustments represent a significant change to the project or its potential findings.

When considering changes to research methods, the researcher must consider whether these amendments constitute a significant change that could have a potential impact on the welfare, dignity and rights of the participants. Examples may include (this list is indicative, rather than exhaustive):

- Engagement with different participants representing a significant deviation from those originally identified.

- A significantly different method for recruiting participants.

- A significantly different approach to obtaining consent, e.g. major changes in the information given to participants or in the consent form.

- A significant change of method of data gathering that may impact upon findings.

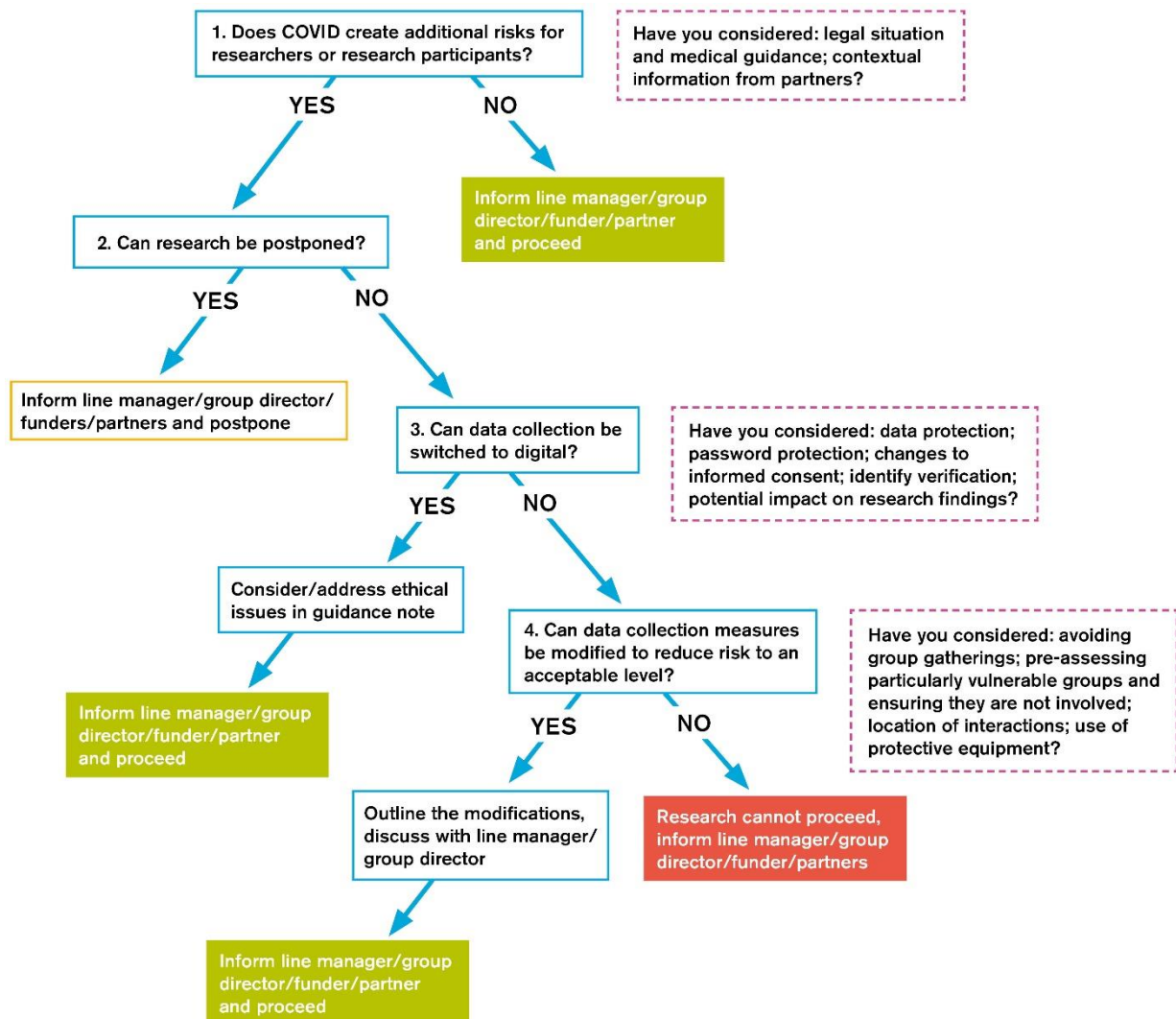Possible options for modifying data collection procedures might include:

- Postponing or cancelling data collection that involves group gatherings (number of people determined by local regulations or advice).

- Pre-assessment of particularly vulnerable groups and ensuring they are not involved in face-to-face data collection.

- Ensuring face-to-face data collection takes place outdoors with suitable physical distancing between researcher and research participants.

- Use of protective equipment (e.g. masks) for both researchers and research participants.

Next Steps

This guidance note was prepared rapidly in response to requests from IIED staff, and has been reviewed by the Research Strategy Team. It is a 'living document' that will be revised or expanded as circumstances around COVID-19 change, or as additional needs are identified by REC, RST or SMT.

REC and RST will also consider opportunities for further learning arising from the implementation of this guidance. Researchers or project managers who have ideas for case studies or other opportunities in this area are encouraged to share these with REC and RST.

Annex 1: Decision Tree

1. Does COVID create additional risks for researchers or research participants?

Have you considered: legal situation and medical guidance; contextual information from partners?

YES — NO

NO → **Inform line manager/group director/funder/partner and proceed**

YES → **2. Can research be postponed?**

YES → **Inform line manager/group director/funders/partners and postpone**

NO → **3. Can data collection be switched to digital?**

Have you considered: data protection; password protection; changes to informed consent; identify verification; potential impact on research findings?

YES → **Consider/address ethical issues in guidance note** → **Inform line manager/group director/funder/partner and proceed**

NO → **4. Can data collection measures be modified to reduce risk to an acceptable level?**

Have you considered: avoiding group gatherings; pre-assessing particularly vulnerable groups and ensuring they are not involved; location of interactions; use of protective equipment?

YES → **Outline the modifications, discuss with line manager/group director** → **Inform line manager/group director/funder/partner and proceed**

NO → **Research cannot proceed, inform line manager/group director/funder/partners**

Annex 2: Decision Form

This form ensures that researchers and project managers have considered the necessary options, and documents the decision made in response to these. This will enable PIs to communicate clearly to partners and funders why decisions have been made, and limits the potential for misunderstanding both inside IIED and externally.

Name of Project / IIED Project Code												
Summary of data collection ethical issues arising from COVID-19												
Proposed changes to data collection (if any)												
Consultations Undertaken	Participants			Partners			Funders			Line Manager		
	y	n	n/a	y	n	n/a	y	n	n/a	y	n	n/a
Decision: proceed unchanged / switch to digital / modify data collection protocols / postpone / cancel												
Authorising signature (usually Group Director) and date												

Annex 3: Additional Resources

Digital Research Ethics
https://www.britsoc.co.uk/ethics

- BSA Statement of Ethical Practice 2017

- Digital Research Ethics Annexe

- Researching Online Forums - Digital Research Ethics Case Study 1

- Using Twitter for Criminology Research - Digital Research Ethics Case Study 2

- Researching Social Machines - Digital Research Ethics Case Study 3

- Ethics Committee Submission for using Twitter - Digital Research Ethics Case Study 4

- Ethics Committee Submission for Mixed Methods Involving Young People - Digital Research Ethics Case Study 5

- Ethics Committee Submission for Open Data and Democratic Governance - Digital Research Ethics Case Study 6

Guidance
WHO guidance on Ethical standards for research during public health emergencies: Distilling existing guidance to support COVID-19 R&D. https://www.who.int/blueprint/priority-diseases/key-action/liverecovery-save-of-ethical-standards-for-research-during-public-health-emergencies.pdf

COVID-19 pandemic: Continuity of Research and Research-Related Activity https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/research-and-consultancy/documents/COVID-19-pandemic-Continuity-of-Research-and-Research-Related-Activities-Approved-by-AB-30-3-20.pdf

Blogs
Carrying out qualitative research under lockdown – Practical and ethical considerations https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/04/20/carrying-out-qualitative-research-under-lockdown-practical-and-ethical-considerations/

Safely conducting essential research in the face of COVID-19 (MEDICAL) https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01027-y