



Improving development practice through strengthened research ethics: Learning from child and youth focused research

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1. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND PARTNERS

The aim of the research project is to provide evidence, through field based consultations, pertaining to the link between child and youth participation and development effectiveness. The research is intended to generate knowledge that will benefit in-country partners, Australian NGOs (ANGOs) and the broader international development community, and ultimately promote improved development practice and outcomes.

A key component of all research is to ensure that ethical procedures are instituted and adhered to. This case study focuses on the processes undertaken to develop a comprehensive ethics procedure. It outlines the ethical and contextual challenges that were addressed during the development phase of the Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development (referred to as 'Ethics Guidelines').

Three ANGOs, ChildFund Australia, Live and Learn Australia, and Transform Aid International (formerly Baptist World Aid Australia) have joined together for a three-year research project (July 2013–July 2016) in order to explore this link. In-country offices and/or in-country partner organisations of each ANGO (referred to as 'in-country partners') are key stakeholders in this research and learning project. The research university partner is the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) of the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). InSIGHT Sustainability, an Associate of ISF, also provides consulting support to the ANGOs and in-country partners. A voluntary Peer Review Group provides technical advice. This group comprises experts in development academia, research and child rights, and representatives from the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID).

The research is funded through ChildFund Australia ANCP funding, Transform Aid International Child Centred Community Development program (private donor funding) and Plan International Australia. The Ethics Guidelines provide a framework to ensure that social inclusion and participation opportunities are provided for girls, boys, women, men and marginalised groups. Across the three case study sites, age appropriate Learning Circle activities were developed to provide a safe space for boys, girls, caregivers, local leaders, government authorities, service providers and in-country and ANGO staff to voice their opinions regarding the links between child and youth participation and development effectiveness.



Members of a Child Club, Nepal: Transform Aid International and United Mission to Nepal

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2. RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

In 2010 and 2011, ChildFund Australia facilitated formal and informal discussions via the ACFID Child Rights Working Group regarding research gaps in the topic of child and youth participation. Additionally, ChildFund Australia held consultations with (then) AusAID's research staff and independent consultants and academics to identify potential areas of research that would be of benefit to the ANGO sector. The consultations concluded that there was a real need within the International Aid and Development sector to explore child and youth participation further, in particular its link with development effectiveness.

The research objective is to better understand the link between child and youth participation and development effectiveness. For more information regarding rationale of the research and the learning focus, please refer to the case study 'Exploring the links between child and youth participation and development effectiveness: a joint-research and learning partnership'.²

Working with in-country partners, the research includes multiple data collection techniques to capture information regarding 'how' and 'why' child and youth participation contributes to development effectiveness. Ethical considerations were central to the tool development phase. As the research involves women, men, boys and girls it was critical that the design phases adhered to the principles of respect, benefit, justice, merit and integrity. Furthermore, the cultural context and skills of the staff playing a research role were taken into account.

Another key ethical consideration was the design of a process that enabled fairness in participation. Tools were designed to create a space where boys and girls, women and men have equal opportunity to reveal views, opinions and reflection on child and youth participation in a community's development.

3. ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Ethical challenges associated with this research stem from children being considered a vulnerable group and, as such, requiring specific processes and procedures to protect them from potential harm. It can be difficult to directly attain consent from children; appropriate complaint procedures are needed, and ensuring confidentiality and privacy is all the more challenging when working with children. The use of a university ethics procedure was considered by the partners, namely to use UTS's ethics review committee, since ISF is a research partner. However, as the role of ISF researchers was not planned to include participation in data collection, it was not deemed possible or appropriate for ISF/UTS to take responsibility for adherence to ethical protocols.

Instead, two lines of action were followed to ensure that ethical issues were addressed.

- 1. Consulting with several experts within the ANGO and academic sector on the issue of ethics for this project.** Relevant representatives from the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), ACFID, the Australian National University (ANU), Southern Cross University (SCU), ISF, the University of Melbourne and independent child rights consultants were consulted to ensure ethical practices and compliance within the research project. A Peer Review Group consisting of members from the consultation process was formed to provide guidance and support on the research projects, with a specific focus on ethical considerations.

² A part of the ACFID University Network Case Study Series: Academic and NGO Research Partnerships.



2. ISF synthesised relevant literature on ethics relating to children’s participation in research, incorporating relevant components of best practice into a set of Ethics Guidelines. These Guidelines were developed to ensure a uniformed and appropriate approach to ethics between and by the research partners and were developed with support of the Peer Review Group to ensure that they were appropriate and met research standards. The guidelines include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key principles (informed by the ‘ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development’) • Informed consent procedures (including those that were specifically child-friendly) • Complaints handling procedures (including those that were specifically child-friendly) • Data storage requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child protection • Risk mitigation • Confidentiality and anonymity • Selecting research partners • Explaining research to partners |
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On finalisation of the Ethics Guidelines, the ANGOs organised comprehensive training for the in-country research teams. The objective of the training was to provide a detailed explanation of the guidelines, including the centrality of ethics to the research process. Furthermore, research teams have been provided with the opportunity to practise the application of the guidelines and develop an ethics implementation plan prior to data collection within communities. Experienced researchers and development practitioners with expertise in the area of ethical research facilitated the trainings.



Data Collection Training Workshops held in April/May 2014: ChildFund Laos and the United Mission to Nepal

4. RESPONSE AND APPROACH

Undertaking research with children

The involvement of children in the joint agency research and learning collaboration significantly shaped the Ethics Guidelines. For example, the guidelines and in-country implementation strategies aimed to limit written information due to the low literacy levels in the case study locations. Instead, the guidelines included options to document verbal consent, developing child-friendly consent and complaints tools, and working with in-country partners to develop implementation strategies that allow time for children and a caregiver to consider their involvement in the research project. Moreover, the ANGOs invested considerable resources





into the ethics and data collection training to ensure that the research team had the necessary technical skills to facilitate the ethics procedures and data collection process.

The concept of ethics and informed consent

Throughout the development of the research tools and protocols, the research partners continually asked the question, 'Is this process and/or tool child-friendly?' As such, a key purpose of the Ethics Guidelines is to ensure that children's participation in research is well understood and approached in conjunction with their rights to protection. The guidelines aim to assist the researchers in thinking through the ethical considerations, including seeking informed consent from research participants, providing a complaints handling procedure, and ensuring that all ethics processes are followed through the research and learning collaboration. Furthermore, the guidelines are intended to promote standardised procedures across all case study sites. In addition to the research Ethics Guidelines, in-country partners reviewed country ethics requirements to ensure that the research activities adhered to local requirements.



United Mission to Nepal conducting the consent process with children participating in the research project

The ANGOs and in-country partners are fully aware of the DFAT child protection requirements. However, technical support and guidance provided by the Peer Review Group and ISF increased the ANGOs' and in-country partners' knowledge regarding ethical research practice. Time is imperative to creating and maintaining ethical research in practice, and, as such, the planning process must include significant time to gain informed consent. Common practice among the ANGOs when working with children is to gain consent for their participation when commencing a project and/or activity. This does not differ when conducting research; however, the research requires that time be provided for children to discuss their participation with caregivers which may require additional community visits. Moreover, in addition to gaining informed consent, in order to deal with child-adult power dynamics that might arise if a child declines to participate, culturally appropriate systems must be developed to enable children to discreetly withdraw from the research. These systems have to be developed by the in-country partners to align with project and community communication structures.

Developing child-friendly complaints handling procedures

The research ethics complaints handling procedure is based on child protection complaints handling principles. Development of a context and age appropriate reporting tool was a challenging task; however, it was an essential element, given the focus of the research project. Technological options were not feasible in the case study sites, so a simple form that could be used by children or adults was developed. The form provides individuals with the option to draw or write about their concerns. Several options are available for submitting the form including directly submitting to project staff, a selected community member, or in a complaints handling box. The form can be completed with assistance from a peer, a trusted adult or a project staff member. For this approach to be effective, in-country staff will need to continually remind and encourage research participants that it is their right to voice concerns.

Support tools



Ensuring the respect and safety of all research participants was also a key driver throughout the development of the Ethics Guidelines. The guidelines aim to provide more than a list of do's and don'ts for in-country partners. Drawing on resources provided through ISF, the Peer Review Group and ANGOs networks, an Ethics Checklist was developed to help guide in-country partners throughout the research. Key elements of this checklist were highlighted to show the importance of identifying potential risks and developing strategies to assess and minimise risk. Furthermore, as a part of the ethics training, the ANGOs supported in-country partners to develop and document risk management strategies. A key role of the ANGOs moving forward will be to monitor and support in-country partners to review strategies on an on-going basis.

5. OUTCOME AND ONGOING CONSIDERATIONS

Still at the early stage in the overall project, there have been a number of lessons learned regarding the development of guidelines and training in research ethics.

- Throughout the development phase, the potential disconnect between ethical practices for the research project and standard practices with the ANGOs for routine community consultations needed to be acknowledged and addressed.
- The support, advice and resources provided by the Peer Review Group and university partner ISF assisted significantly with the development of the Guidelines for Ethical Research.
- The sharing of useful, practice-based insights and internal resources and policies between ANGOs assisted in creating a community of practice.
- The development of the Guidelines for Ethical Research has the potential to assist in strengthening child protection policies and practices.
- A collaborative approach to the development phase (ANGOs and in-country partners) would assist in ensuring that procedures are contextually relevant and feasible.
- The development phase must be completed well in advance of the implementation phase, as in-country partners require training and support to contextualise procedures and tools.
- Implementation of the research ethics procedures is an on-going process. All parties involved in the research (ANGOs, in-country partners and ISF) must continue to monitor and support the implementation of the guidelines.
- Due to changes in local situations and logistical challenges of working in remote areas, what occurs in the field may not always be in accordance with the predetermined plan.



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