COVID-19 IRC
Research and Learning Ethics Guidance

With a focus on remote data collection

June 2020

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, teams across IRC country programs and units have conducted, are currently implementing, or are planning to implement various needs assessments, research studies and other learning exercises intended to inform immediate response, support program development and advocacy efforts to grapple with challenges from COVID-19.

The purpose of this Research and Learning Ethics Guidance is to help ensure all these research and non-research learning efforts undertaken by the IRC in response to COVID-19 **adhere to research ethics standards to minimize risks and potential harms** that may arise for participants. Particular attention is dedicated to challenges related to **remote data collection**.

Consideration #1: Determine whether a new research or learning question is essential and necessary during a global health emergency.

Undertaking research and learning can be an integral and necessary part of response to a global health emergency and continuing to deliver essential services within a global health emergency. Research and learning can help us to prevent transmission of COVID-19 and ensure that our program adaptations and innovations for essential service delivery across IRC outcomes are responsive to client needs, reaching people, being used, and having impact.

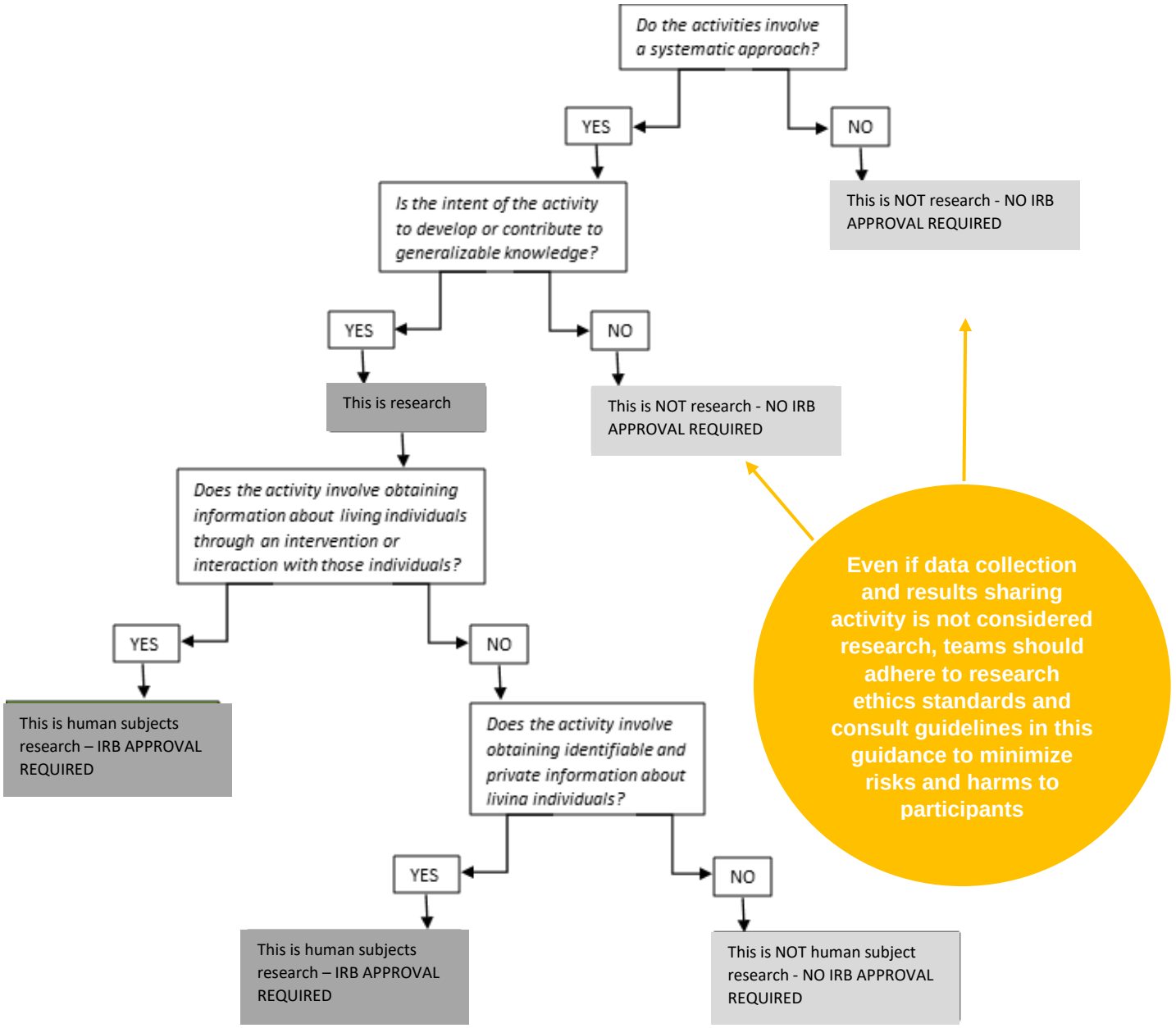
Additional considerations should include minimizing burden on country programs, prioritizing topics relevant to country programs that will directly improve understanding or ability to prevent and respond COVID-19 or continue delivery of essential services during the pandemic. All learning should be shared across the organization, and where possible, externally to fill evidence gaps in the sector. *For more information on broader ethical principles, see the Nuffield Ethical Compass for research in global health emergencies and report Research in Global Health Emergencies: Ethical Issues.*

- ✓ To help you think through the risks and benefits of data collection during COVID-19, consult the VPRU Data Collection Benefit-Risk Assessment.

Consideration #2: Determine whether your new research or learning project meets the definition of human subjects research and requires formal ethical approval.

Once you have determined that your research or learning question should be answered during this pandemic, the second step in this process is to determine whether your efforts meet the definition of human subject research which must be reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to being implemented. If your learning effort does not meet this definition per the flow chart below, please still adhere to guidance within this document in developing your protocol. For more information on whether your project is considered human subject research and additional guidance on research ethics contact the IRC IRB administrator at humansubjects@rescue.org.

All hyperlinks to IRC's internal guidance and policies have been removed from the document but are available upon request at humansubjects@rescue.org.



Examples of Research and Learning Efforts

Human Subjects Research ***Requires IRB review & approval***	**NOT Human Subjects Research** ***Does not require IRB review***
Robust qualitative studies (with in-depth interviews/FGDs) and wide dissemination	Regular M&E for internal purposes; Using existing monitoring data for secondary analysis for a donor
Experimental studies	Data collected without intent for external dissemination
Hypothesis or theory generation	Needs assessments for internal use/response programming
Operational research for external dissemination	Prototyping to develop the next iteration of a tool or intervention
	Real time evaluations for internal learning

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Consideration #3: If your research or learning project is NOT new, but an ongoing effort may need to be paused or remote methods are needed given IRC country response categorization and public health guidelines, consider additional ethical challenges and mitigation steps.

- ✓ If you had to pause research because of COVID-19, consult the IRC Risk Communication and Community Engagement guidelines on how to communicate this with the participants
- ✓ Transitioning to remote data collection poses specific challenges to data collection and the protection of clients, including the need for additional considerations about inclusiveness of remote adaptations, additional considerations to ensure privacy, loss of rapport and the importance of ensuring truly informed consent while also managing the length of remote interactions. Please refer to the below sections.
- ✓ Given these differences in in-person versus remote data collection ethical considerations, if your project was considered research, an **IRB modification will be needed that captures all methodological changes.**

Consideration #4: Regardless of whether you need to receive ethical approval to conduct your research or learning project, please review and take into account the following ethical considerations for remote data collection efforts.

Sampling

Representativeness & Biases

When shifting to use technology to support remote data collection, understanding differences in access to technology is crucial. It is important to acknowledge the massive digital gender gap, urban and rural divide, and not make assumptions about access. Plan for remote adaptations that are inclusive of and not harmful to women and girls and other groups at risk in humanitarian settings. Learning assessments should explicitly and transparently address potential bias due differences in access to technology within their sampling approach and discussion of results.

- ✓ Consider using the ICT Assessment developed by VPRU
- ✓ Learn more about the mobile gender gap (GSMA, 2020).

Adapting surveys and questionnaires for remote data collection

As you transition to remote data collection you will likely need to adapt your data collection tools, such as shortening questionnaires to limit the length of the interview to 30 minutes. You might also want to simplify or eliminate questions that require a lot of probing.

- ✓ For general guidance on remote data collection, consult the IRC Remote Monitoring Tip Sheet, the Remote Survey Toolkit prepared in response to Covid-19, and the J-PAL Best practices for conducting phone surveys.
- ✓ For innovative approaches to remote data collection and alternatives to in-person qualitative data collection, consult Doing fieldwork during a pandemic

Remote consenting

Ideally, consent over the phone would be confirmed by a text / Whatsapp or voice message that would follow normal consenting procedures. If this is not possible, there should be a very clear script and pause to ensure clarity around oral consent. See below example from a consent script adapted for remote data collection:

Are you ok with me signing my name on your behalf in order to have a record that you have had the details of this study explained to you and agree to participate?

[if yes]: Have the details of this study been explained to you and all of your questions been answered? Do you agree to participate in this study?

By signing here I assert that the participant is unable to text or send a voicenote confirming consent but re-confirmed it verbally with me and approved my signing as to his/her consent on his/her behalf"

- ✓ Additionally, for research studies, consult the following consent guidance: Obtaining meaningful informed consent, Consent form guidance and template and Informed consent checklist

The use of client's stories, quotes and photos in public reports

Obtaining informed consent is necessary for publicly sharing non-research content too. Please refer to the guidelines and templates developed by the IRC Communications team (you can use the remote consenting guidance to adapt these for remote consenting):

- ✓ IRC Image consent and release guidelines
- ✓ IRC Image consent forms
- ✓ IRC Informed consent guidelines for storytelling

If your report includes data about children, you must comply with the IRC Child Safeguarding Policy and **Standard 5** of the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Settings

Digital data security

Using client's personal data for sampling frames

When collecting the phone numbers of community representatives, committees and clients, you need to ensure you build a safe and confidential dataset.

Data protection

Protecting the personal data of our beneficiaries (e.g., telephone numbers) is part of our commitment to protecting their life, integrity and dignity.

- ✓ Consult Data Protection Checklist
- ✓ Review the ICRC Rules on Personal Data Protection
- ✓ An exhaustive list of sources on digital rights during Covid-19 can be found at the EDRi COVID-19 & Digital Rights Document Pool
- ✓ Review guidance on the use of WhatsApp for IRC staff

Research on experiences of violence and trauma

Data should only be collected on violence or other traumatic experiences if needed for Covid-19 programming adaptations or advocacy in the immediate term and must involve a VPRU technical advisor and WPE or CP coordinators to appropriately undertake a risk/benefit analyses. Particular attention to privacy, confidentiality, prompts, 'safe words', digital tracking, and active referral networks are needed to undertake this work safely.

Whenever possible, only validated measures should be used for experiences of violence, regardless of whether it is delivered in person or remotely. Less direct questioning or less valid measures could yield underreporting of violence outcomes, so we would recommend against this at present time given 'bad data is worse than no data'.

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- ✓ Violence research guidance during COVID-19
- ✓ Remote data collection on violence against women and children during COVID-19 Part 1and Part 2

In-person data collection recommendations during COVID-19 pandemic

When considering in-person data collection, make sure:

- ✓ This is allowed under the IRC Coronavirus Risk Categorization and Response Plan
- ✓ Follow all recommended hygiene and social distancing practices listed in Section 4 of the Plan
- ✓ As per the Plan, implement strict staff sickness policy – staff do not attend work if sick