

Ethics in MEAL for Health and Rights Programming: A Short Guide

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CanWaCH

Canadian Partnership for
Women and Children's Health



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ABOUT

The [Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health](#) (CanWaCH) is a membership of about 100 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), academic institutions, health professional associations and private companies committed to advancing the health and rights of women, children and adolescents globally. Learn more at [CanWaCH.ca](#).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DISCLAIMER

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CanWaCH gratefully acknowledges the primary authorship and research of Dr. Elizabeth Dyke, as well as the contributions of the CanWaCH Secretariat, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and the CanWaCH Metrics Working Group.¹

Ethical standards and competencies are most often developed by experts in the respective profession. As such, this document has been developed by a group of leading Canadian experts in the fields of M&E and global health.

A Few Words about the Process: it's in the Journey: The decision to develop this guidance note is rooted in CanWaCH's goal to provide the global health sector with key, relevant technical guidance based on needs identified through interactions with colleagues from CanWaCH member and partner organizations. The collaborative efforts have included an extensive literature review. Selected additional resources are available in Section 6. This note has been enriched with real-life examples provided through conversations with contributing individuals, most which have been anonymized. Finally, as you read and refer to this note, please keep in mind that it is an “evergreen” document with potential to continue improving and evolving from our collective learning. As such, this note is under active review and consultation, and recommendations are encouraged. Please contact CanWaCH at info@CanWaCH.ca to participate in this process.



¹This guidance was developed in conjunction with many members of the CanWaCH Metrics Working Group (MWG). An ad hoc group was convened in November 2022 and again in February 2023 to discuss priority content and focus for the guidance note. Members were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the initial outline and drafts, and provide examples and applicable resources based on their knowledge and experience. Insights have also been gathered from the current projects supported by CanWaCH under its Canadian Collaborative for Global Health program.

MAIN ACRONYMS USED

CanWaCH

Canadian Partnership for Women
and Children's Health

NGO

Non-governmental Organization

GAC

Global Affairs Canada

OCAP®

Ownership, control, access,
and possession

GBV

Gender-based violence

REB

Research Ethics Board

M&E

Monitoring and Evaluation

SGBV

Sexual and gender-based
violence

MEAL

Monitoring, Evaluation,
Accountability and Learning

2SLGBTQI+

Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual,
transgender, queer, intersex, and
additional sexually and gender
diverse people

MWG

Merics Working Group

1 INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS GUIDE AND WHO IS IT FOR?

1.1 WHY A GUIDANCE NOTE ON ETHICS IN MEAL?

The purpose of this guidance note on Ethics in Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) is to address a recognized and widening gap in the integration of ethics within MEAL practice for global health and rights programming. While ethical standards have long been embedded in research and clinic care, their systematic application within MEAL systems remains inconsistent, underdeveloped, and often overlooked in practice. In the evolving global health landscape—marked by digital transformation, data proliferation, climate crises, and the decolonization of global health and development—the ethical dimensions of MEAL have become increasingly critical. Practitioners, partners, and donors are confronted with growing ethical challenges related to data ownership, consent, inclusion, artificial intelligence (AI) and automation in data collection, and the power imbalances inherent in evidence generation and use.

Ethical considerations are no longer optional—they are now an operational, regulatory, and moral necessity:

- Donors and institutional policies increasingly require ethical clearance for MEAL activities, particularly those involving primary data collection, vulnerable populations, or sensitive health information.
- Partner country frameworks and data protection laws, such as the African Union Data Policy Framework (2022), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and emerging national ethics standards, establish clear expectations for responsible and equitable data governance.
- Global frameworks, including the WHO Health Data Governance Principles (2023) and the UNDP Data Responsibility Guidelines (2023), emphasize ethical, inclusive, and rights-based approaches to data for decision-making.
- Journals, funders, and academic partners require evidence of ethical approval for program evaluations, operational research, and participatory studies prior to dissemination or publication

However, despite this momentum, there remains limited MEAL-specific guidance on ethical implementation, especially in relation to rights-based, gender transformative, inclusive, and community-led approaches. Existing ethical frameworks often emphasize research ethics rather than iterative, participatory, and accountability-oriented nature of MEAL. Ethical reflection is too often reduced to a procedural “box-ticking” exercise rather than an integral, continuous process guiding every phase of the MEAL cycle from indicator design to data use and feedback.

In addition, in MEAL contexts most often embedded in donor-funded projects, limited resources, such as lack of funding, time, and capacity to undertake critical programming, can hinder consideration of ethics.

Building on previous CanWaCH guidance such as the [Technical Guidance Note on Developing Monitoring and Evaluation Plans for Global Health & Rights Programs \[2\]](#), and the [Technical Guidance Note on Measuring Women’s Empowerment in the Global Health Sector \[3\]](#), this document deepens the focus on ethics as a core competency within MEAL. It seeks to move beyond awareness to action, offering practical tools and reflections for MEAL practitioners to embed ethics in everyday decision-making.

Specifically, this document aims to:

- Promote a shared understanding of core ethical principles relevant to MEAL in health and rights programming;
- Offer practical guidance and tools to apply these principles across all stages of the MEAL cycle;
- Strengthen awareness and capacity to navigate ethical dilemmas, including those linked to gender, power, data justice, and decolonization; and
- Encourage ethical leadership and accountability among organizations, funders, and country partners in the pursuit of equitable, sustainable health outcomes.
- Ultimately, the Guidance Note contributes to a broader agenda of ethical, rights-based, and inclusive MEAL practice, supporting the realization of the right to health for all and reinforcing trust, integrity, and justice in global cooperation.

1.2 INTENDED AUDIENCE

The primary audience for this Guidance Note includes MEAL practitioners, program and project managers, and technical advisors working in health and rights programs at global, regional, and national levels.

A secondary audience includes donor agencies, funding partners, policymakers, and research institutions seeking to strengthen the ethical dimensions of evidence generation, data use, and accountability in health programming.

2 WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT: FRAMING ETHICS FOR MEAL IN GLOBAL HEALTH AND RIGHTS

2.1 DEFINITIONS

WHAT? Before entering specific considerations, let's clarify a few key concepts.

- **Ethics:** In an evaluation context, ethics has been defined as: *“the right or agreed principles and values that govern the behaviour of an individual within the specific, culturally defined context within which an evaluation is commissioned or undertaken”*. [4, p.2] The behaviours of the individual are inherently linked to the organizational values. While this definition focuses on evaluation, similar ethical considerations are equally important in monitoring, accountability and learning as part of MEAL, ensuring that all steps of the process consider ethics in a systematic way.
- **Research versus MEAL:** While there is no clear agreement on the differences between research and MEAL, and definitions differ [5], one description of the differences by Michael Quinn-Patton is that *“Scientific research is undertaken to discover knowledge, test theories, and generalize across time and space. Program evaluation is undertaken to inform decisions, clarify options, identify improvements, and provide information about programs and policies within contextual boundaries of time, place, values, and politics. Research informs science. Useful evaluation supports action”* [6, chapter 5]. The definition of evaluation is also applicable for monitoring, accountability and learning.
- **Rights-based approach:** As defined by UNFPA, *“a rights-based approach develops the capacity of duty-bearers to meet their obligations and encourages rights holders to claim their rights”* [7]. This approach is critical in considering ethics in MEAL in health and rights.

WHEN? (See also [Section 3](#))

- **Do you need formal ethical approval?** Many people seem to think that ethical considerations apply mainly to research and more specifically the need to obtain formal Research Ethics Board (REB) approval for a research study. If you read [Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#), you will see that *“quality assurance and quality improvement studies, program evaluation activities, and performance reviews...do not constitute research for the purposes of this policy, and do not fall within the scope of REB review”* [8, Article 2.5, p. 21]. Formal ethical approval is typically not required if your MEAL work is not intended to generalize knowledge [9][10].
- **Why ethical considerations remain key, even if you do not use a formal process:** Even if you do not pursue formal ethical approval for your MEAL work, these ethical considerations remain critical. Even if they do not seek or receive formal ethical approval, most organizations working in health and rights either informally or more formally identify ethical issues throughout their MEAL work by documenting the approach to ethics at all stages, discussing ethics with staff, the community and any consultants involved, and by putting in place processes to address any issues that arise. There are many reasons to consider ethics in a systematic way, including, for example: a focus on a **principle-guided approach** (e.g., feminist MEAL); organizational values; potentially sensitive topic areas; recognition of power differences between the organization and program participants; increased efforts to focus on decolonization and localization; ensuring participants' rights are protected; wanting to increase ownership by partner countries and communities; and, being transparent and accountable.²

² Note that how ethics is viewed in research (and MEAL) can vary depending on the paradigm to which you subscribe (e.g., positivist, constructivist). This discussion is out of scope for this guidance, but please see for example Table 1.2 in Mertens, D.M. *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods* for more information.

- **Ethical reflection is especially critical when:**

- Designing and implementing MEAL activities that generate evidence, including baseline studies, evaluations, and learning reviews.
- Involving human participants in your MEAL activities (including surveillance data, surveys, monitoring, observation, focus groups, interviews, case studies, storytelling); and,
- Using secondary data that is not available publicly, not anonymous, or when data is merged between sources that could make information identifiable or could potentially cause people harm [11] [12].

WHO? It is important to consider whose job it is to initiate, lead, and monitor ethical considerations throughout your MEAL process. This may include the MEAL staff, as well as staff involved with safeguarding and protection.

2.2 ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND CONSIDERATIONS

As a **set of principles**, ethics and ethical considerations are outlined in various documentation for MEAL and research. In the table below, key principles of ethics are outlined with corresponding general considerations for MEAL in health and rights.

TABLE 1: ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND CONSIDERATIONS IN MEAL³

PRINCIPLE	KEY CONSIDERATIONS
RESPECT	<p>Following a rights-based approach, people should be able to make their own informed choice about participating in MEAL activities. To that end, participants in evaluations and studies, or involved in monitoring, should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be provided with complete, accurate information on the objective of the MEAL activity, what they are being asked to do, how long it will take, potential risks (including discomfort), potential benefits, how confidentiality will be addressed, how data will be used and who will have access to the data, and how long data will be kept. This information should be easy to understand. • be able to ask questions and take the time they need to make their decision about whether or not they wish to participate. • understand clearly what they are being asked, have the ability (cognitively) to provide consent, and voluntarily give free and informed consent to participate, without coercion. • have the opportunity to give explicit consent (either written or verbal). Consent is also given in an ongoing manner, as applicable, over the course of the data collection, and participants can withdraw this consent at any time. • know they will not be penalized (e.g., lose out on participating in the program) if they decide not to take part or withdraw their participation in MEAL activities at any point. <p>Organizations should also consider how contributions are valued and how people will be compensated for their time and contributions.</p> <p>Please see Table 2 for more details on consent and additional information.</p>

³Additional references used to develop this table: [4], [8], [10], [11], [12] and [14].

CONCERN FOR WELFARE/ BENEFICENCE/ NON-MALEFICENCE/ SAFEGUARDING OF PERSONS

It is imperative to ensure no harm or to minimize any potential harm. The benefits that the data being collected will bring to participants should outweigh any potential harm.

- A risk assessment can be conducted to understand the potential risks (e.g., physical, psychological, social, economic, legal, loss of confidentiality [13, p. 45], and outline how these risks can be mitigated.⁴
- Participants need to be informed about potential harms so they can decide whether or not they want to take part.
- Consider the welfare of the community as well as the individuals (e.g., potential impact if some people are involved in the MEAL activities and some are not).

JUSTICE, FAIRNESS, EQUITY

Participants need to be treated in a fair and equitable way throughout the MEAL process.

- Select participants in an inclusive, non-discriminatory way.
- Treat all participants fairly.
- Ensure a human-rights based approach.
- Establish reporting mechanisms and provide participants with a contact person to report any issues that arise.

OWNERSHIP OF DATA

- Address who owns the data and the resulting products (e.g., the community, the NGO, the country) and ensure the participants understand who owns the data.

ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY

- Ensure staff and consultants have the competencies to undertake the MEAL activities.
- Ensure transparency throughout the MEAL process, including identifying any ethical issues as they arise.
- Follow ethical guidance and professional codes of conduct.
- Outline any conflicts of interest as they arise.
- Clear communication of how data is collected, used, and shared

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Ensure active engagement of the community from the start and throughout the process.
- Validate the processes you are undertaking with the community to align with the values of the community.

Do no harm + conflict sensitivity


Anticipate and mitigate risks in fragile or rights-sensitive environments

⁴ See the [resource section](#) for a reference to an ethics risk assessment template.

3 WHEN AND HOW TO CONSIDER ETHICS IN M&E/MEAL

Ethics in MEAL should not be treated as a single step or administrative requirement. Instead, it is a continuous and integrated process that informs all stages of the MEAL cycle, from design to data use, ensuring that evidence generation respects rights, minimizes harm, and promotes inclusion and accountability. This table outlines more specific considerations by stage of the MEAL process. It is important to reflect on each of these to determine how you will address each, as applicable.

TABLE 2: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS BY STAGE OF MEAL (PROCESS)⁵

STAGE OF MEAL	CONSIDERATIONS
<p>Developing project/ project design</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Is the Theory of Change grounded in current literature, consultations with relevant stakeholders or experience? <input type="checkbox"/> Have the program and the MEAL components been co-designed, co-managed and/or developed in a participatory way throughout the entire process as outlined in this table? How will the community be meaningfully consulted on the MEAL activities? <p style="text-align: center;"> TIP: <i>This may include an advisory committee of community members for your MEAL activities.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have you developed a document outlining the various ethical considerations and how you have addressed them? This can be an informal document or a more formal ethical protocol. <input type="checkbox"/> As part of this overall ethics document has a risk and mitigation plan been developed to identify and address any potential ethical considerations (including for vulnerable populations, safety and security issues including public health emergencies and conflict, and remote data collection)? <input type="checkbox"/> <u>Have you reflected on your positioning within global health programming and MEAL in particular (e.g., power, influence), and what you will do to address this and any potential inequities?</u>
<p>Deciding if you need formal ethics approval</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What are the specific requirements for formal ethical approval from your organization, the funder, local partners and the country where you are doing work? (e.g., Does your host/partner country require formal ethical approval and/or data transfer agreements if data is leaving the country?) <input type="checkbox"/> What is the nature and type of data that you are collecting? (e.g., Undertaking a study that includes household surveys with a statistically significant population size may require formal ethical approval.) <input type="checkbox"/> Do you plan to publish peer reviewed journals (typically requiring formal ethical approval)?

⁵ Additional references used to develop this table: [2], [3], [4], [8], [10], [11], [12] and [14].

- What formal ethical boards should be consulted in the country where you are conducting MEAL activities? Each country has its own standards and ethical approval processes, some with multiple steps. You should inquire with your local partners about the most up-to-date information for obtaining ethical approval in a given country.
- If you do not seek formal REB approval through a university or government process, what approval or authorization will you require and/or seek, if any?



TIP: *Alternatives to your organization seeking a formal ethical review may include: establishing your own ethical review panel (see for example [15]; [12]) or seeking local government approval.*



EXAMPLE: *The University of Ottawa and partners received formal approval from the uOttawa Research Ethics Board (REB), including for analyses using secondary data. In addition, they consult local partners/agencies to ensure that the research conforms to local standards. They also apply to relevant government agencies for authorization to conduct the research.*

Determining budget and timelines

- Have you ensured sufficient timelines and budget for formal ethical approval if needed? Formal approval for ethics may take many months, require additional paperwork, require local staff who are familiar with processes and procedures, and may have fees for submission. Reviewing each country's requirements is needed to ensure that you have budgeted as appropriate and ensured sufficient time for approval. **See also below for more information on compensation.**
- Based on other aspects of the MEAL process, are other budget line items needed? (e.g., see below for more information on **compensation** and consider other costs such as oversampling).
- Have you adjusted timelines and budget for community engagement from the start and throughout the process?

Developing indicators, data sources, methods, data collection tools; Sampling

- Have you tried to reduce the burden on the community by using existing data (e.g., secondary data from the government or from the community/local NGOs), not collecting more data than you are going to use, and developing a learning plan for all the data that you are collecting?
- Have you considered language, literacy levels, local context, sensitivity of the topic, and other considerations when deciding on methods and tools?
- In developing the tools, have you consulted with community leaders or other stakeholders?

- Have you pilot-tested the tools or ensured that the tools you are using are validated for the particular context where you are working?
- Do you have a large enough sample to disaggregate by the variables that you need (e.g., in household surveys), while also ensuring confidentiality of participants?
- Does your sampling plan ensure you are reaching the participants you need to reach, even if they are more difficult to reach?

Training for data collection

- Have you adequately trained your data collectors in ethical procedures, including the principles of ethics and how to collect informed, voluntary consent without coercion? Do they understand the importance of ethical considerations in MEAL and do they understand how to follow the protocols?
- Have all parties involved (e.g., staff, consultants, data collectors) signed confidentiality agreements?
- Have all parties involved signed a pledge regarding ethics? (See [resources for more details.](#))

Consent

- Have you considered what is culturally appropriate and acceptable in gathering consent from participants and communities, including talking to local stakeholders?
- Have you determined what is legally required in the country where you are working with regard to consent?
- Have you ensured the consent process takes into account language and literacy levels?
- In the consent form and information sheet, have you included the purpose of the MEAL activity, what participants are being asked to do, potential risks (including discomfort), potential benefits, and that they can revoke consent at any time?
- Have you considered who is asking participants for consent to ensure that power dynamics are minimized?
- Have potential participants been given time after they hear about the MEAL activity to decide if they want to take part? Have they been given the opportunity to ask questions? Is the consent truly free, informed and voluntary?
- Do participants understand that they can revoke consent at any time in the process?



EXAMPLE: *At the University of Calgary ([Indigenous, Local & Global Health Office, Cummings School of Medicine](#)), in the Collaborative project, ethical considerations are focused on storyteller wellbeing. Sharing digital stories requires ongoing consent from the storyteller. Stories belong to the storyteller and are only shared with select audiences based on consent provided.*

Data collection
(interviews, focus groups,
observation, surveys,
monitoring forms/reports)

- Have you ensured that sex, age, language and other important characteristics are reasonably equivalent between the data collectors and participants?



EXAMPLE: *In two sexual and reproductive health and rights projects, young women were trained to conduct surveys and focus groups with women and adolescent girls while young men were also trained to conduct focus groups with men and adolescent boys.*

- Have you ensured the space where the data collection is taking place offers privacy, and is safe and secure for the data collectors and participants?



TIP: *In community-based projects where staff meet people who are involved in the project for monitoring visits, assessments or evaluations, etc., there is a need to be aware of the importance of confidentiality for stigmatized diseases/illnesses (such as HIV, leprosy, etc.). This can mean meeting with people in a safe space and not wearing branded clothing or driving branded vehicles that can compromise the person's privacy or result in stigma and discrimination.*

- Have you developed a referral or resource form, with contact names and information, to give participants during or after data collection if needed (e.g., referral for family planning if questions arise)?
- Have you considered when data collection will take place to respect participants' time and activities (e.g., not booking during farming time or religious activities)?
- How will you ensure confidentiality between the data collected and the list of participants (e.g., using numbers to identify participants, keeping the list of participants and signed consent forms in a separate locked cabinet from the data)?
- Do you have a system in place to receive and respond to disclosures of ethical or safeguarding breaches?
- Have you ensured that you do not collect more data than is needed?

For more on principles of data collection, see Intrac's 2017 [Principles of Data Collection](#).

Compensation

- Have you consulted with the local community and/or other local stakeholders to understand what the expectations and history are for compensation for participants (and local leaders if needed)?
- Have you considered that paying compensation could be construed as coercion to take part in the MEAL activity?
- Have you assessed the costs to participants to take part and how you can cover their costs (e.g., transportation, child care) to ensure they are not out of pocket?
- Have you considered providing goods (e.g., snacks, soap) to offer appreciation and thanks for taking part in the MEAL activity?

Managing data/ data ownership/ data storage

An entire guide could be written on managing data, and Section 6 (**Additional Resources**) includes a reference for a data management template. The following outlines some basic points:

- Do you have a plan in place for (responsible) data management?
- Where will data be stored during data collection and following data collection?
- How will data be transferred between sites or when moving from paper to electronic?
- How long will the data be stored? How will it be destroyed, and by whom, once this time period is over (e.g., shredding of paper copies, software cleaner to delete files, delete recordings)?
- How will data be kept secured (e.g., locked file cabinets for paper; passwords and encryption for electronic)?
- How will ethical considerations be addressed during translation and transcription of the data (interviews, focus groups) or data entry (surveys)?
- How will data be analyzed to ensure anonymity (e.g., consider challenges with small cell sizes)?
- How will data be anonymized to protect participants (e.g., removing identifying details, etc.)? Who will do this anonymizing? At what point in the process will this be done?
- Who will have access to what data (including data ownership by the community and country)? How will you restrict access for those who do not need access? How will you determine who needs access, and who will control this? How will you anonymize data to protect participants as you outlined in your consent process?



TIP: *In your guidelines to the people conducting the transcriptions of interviews and focus groups, you can state that pseudonyms should be used, and specific locations and other identifying information removed.*

Analyzing and interpreting data/ Sensemaking of the results

- How will you engage local stakeholders for co-analysis, co-interpretation, validation of findings, and use and uptake of findings?

Reporting

- How will you present data in reports or other products to ensure confidentiality of participants (e.g., pseudonyms)? Permission for use of direct quotes and care in their use may also be needed. Ensuring that you will not (even inadvertently) breach confidentiality is key.
- Who will get credit for the report and any publications?

Dissemination of findings/feedback loops with the community

- What feedback loops will you use to ensure input from key stakeholders including participants and the community?⁶ And are you ensuring that these feedback loops/spaces are safe for people who have shared their data and can support sufficient confidentiality?
- Has a dissemination plan been developed for timely and transparent reporting of results? To whom will data be reported?
- Have targeted communication strategies been identified to reduce potential barriers to accessing evaluation results? Are evaluation results available in different formats (e.g., infographics, reports, presentations) and available to stakeholders at all levels?
- Who is defining learning activities? How will the community be involved in developing and leading these?
- Have you considered what role MEAL can play in sustainability, including ensuring lasting change?

4 SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPECIFIC POPULATION GROUPS

There are certain population groups for which there will be additional ethical considerations as the level of risk for the participants is higher and power differentials are even larger. Some examples are outlined below along with additional ethical considerations. This is not meant to be exhaustive but to provide some further ideas and resources for your work.⁷

TABLE 3: POPULATION GROUPS REQUIRING ADDITIONAL ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

POPULATION GROUPS	ADDITIONAL ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ETHICS WITH SPECIFIC POPULATION GROUPS
<p>Children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have you checked legal requirements, including age of consent, for conducting MEAL activities with children in the country you are in? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you developed consent forms (for the parent) and assent forms (for the child)? Have you considered the capacity of the child to understand the assent form (depending on age of the child), and potential additional risks given the age of the child? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you considered when confidentiality might be broken (including based on legal requirements), and is this clearly outlined in consent and assent forms? (e.g., disclosure of abuse/child protection issues) <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have mechanisms in place for dealing with abuse/child protection issues if disclosed? Have you clearly outlined in the consent form for parents that you will not disclose what the child says to you in the MEAL activity?

⁶ For more information on feedback, see Groves, L. [Beneficiary Feedback in Evaluation](#). 2015

⁷ The scope of this Guidance note does not allow to get into detail in all the areas in this table, as each could require its own guidance.

- Where and when will data be collected to ensure the safety of the child, and that you do not interfere with their school or other activities?
- Who will collect the data so that the child feels safe and able to freely discuss their opinions?

For more information, see [16].

Adolescents who are Under the Age of Majority in the Country

- In addition to the considerations above, adolescents may be able to give consent (versus assent) depending on the legal requirements of the country, their age, and the adolescent's status (e.g., if not living at home; if married). If this is not the case in the country you are working in, considerations for who is a guardian for the adolescent may also need to be made.
- If a female adolescent is married, yet underage, is it ethical to seek consent from her husband? If an adolescent is living on the street, is it ethical to seek consent from one of their parents? What are the legal implications of these decisions? These considerations should be discussed before determining a way forward, based on the principles outlined in Table 1.

People experiencing GBV/SGBV

- Data should not be collected about experiences of trauma or violence unless undertaking research.
- Do not use performance indicators that could incentivize limiting a survivor's choice (e.g., reporting within 72 hours). These measures can be used by the project, but not as a measure of project performance (as from a feminist perspective, we want to incentivize choice).

Other questions include:

- Have you considered if *"gathering data (will) harm or re-traumatize GBV survivors?"* or if *"data collection (will) increase or create new risks for GBV survivors or community members?"* [13]
- What considerations have you made to collect data in a sensitive way? (e.g., ensure appropriate data methods, ensure data collectors are trained in responding to trauma [13], ensure data collectors have experience and expertise in GBV)

Please see Section 6 (Additional Resources) for additional information.

Indigenous groups

There are no set guidelines for ethical considerations with Indigenous groups given the diversity and number of Indigenous groups. Some principles, such as ensuring **community consent** as well as participant consent, are important [17], as is working with each community on data protection as a key principle. In Canada there are variations of ethical principles by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups.⁸

- First Nations: OCAP® principles (ownership, control, access and possession) [18]
- Inuit: National Inuit Strategy on Research [19]
- Métis: Six principles of ethical research [20]

2SLGBTQI+

- To collect data on 2SLGBTQI+ there needs to be a) a partnership with a 2SLGBTQI+ organization and b) the project's interventions need to specifically target 2SLGBTQI+ organizations.

Other questions to consider include:

- Do data collection tools use inclusive language?
- Has the evaluation team undertaken specific training on conducting MEAL activities with 2SLGBTQI+ populations?
- Have you considered the legal status of 2SLGBTQI+ participants in the country where you are collecting data?



EXAMPLE: *When planning an HIV project to collect baseline data in a country with strict laws against homosexuality, a decision was made to not include men who have sex with men in the sample (survey and focus groups), given the safety risks for men who have sex with men if a confidentiality breach occurred. **The benefits of the evaluation did not outweigh the potential harm.***

- Have you considered the implications of a confidentiality breach, for example, including greater risks to the participants?

See also the [Government of Canada's work in the area of 2SLGBTQI+](#) [21].

Other vulnerable populations that may need additional considerations

- People with mental illnesses
- People with cognitive impairments
- People with dementia
- People with disabilities [22, p. 16]
- People with substance use disorders
- People in conflict and humanitarian situations (including refugees and internally displaced people)

⁸ Chapter 9 of *Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* focuses on Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022).

5 CONCLUSION

The application of ethical considerations is a journey. It is important to continue to ensure they are integrated in the ways that we can as we continue to be “[challenged to improve the continuous reflection on our monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning \(MEAL\) practice](#)”.⁹

6 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Below are additional resources, checklists and templates for further details, organized by various categories. Some resources are identified in multiple categories, if applicable across different areas.

6.1 UNITED NATIONS RESOURCES ON ETHICAL GUIDELINES IN MEAL

- **United Nations Evaluation Group.** [UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation](#) (2020).
- **UNICEF.** [UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection, and Analysis](#) (2021).
- **World Health Organization (2021).** [Ethics and Governance of Artificial Intelligence for Health. Geneva: WHO.](#)
- **UNESCO (2023).** [Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.](#)

6.2 EXAMPLES OF OTHER DONOR COUNTRIES' ETHICAL GUIDELINES IN MEAL

- **Australia:** Australian Council for International Development and Research for Development Impact Network. [Principles and Guidelines for ethical research and evaluation in development](#) (2017).
- **United Kingdom:** Thorley, L. and E. Henrion. [DFID ethical guidance for research, evaluation and monitoring activities](#) (2019).

6.3 PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS' GUIDANCE ON ETHICS

- **Canadian Evaluation Society (CES).** [Guidance for Ethical Evaluation Practice.](#) (2020).
- **American Evaluation Association (AEA).** [Guiding Principles for Evaluators.](#) (2018).

6.4 EXAMPLE OF OTHER NGOS' ETHICAL GUIDANCE IN MEAL

- **Christian Aid and TearFund.** [Doing research ethically: Principles and practices for international development practitioners and evaluators: A guide and toolkit for doing research and evaluation in an ethical way.](#) (2021).
- **Oxfam International.** [Research Ethics: A Practical Guide.](#) (2020).
- **American Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services (CRS).** [Short-cuts M&E Ethics](#) (2008).

6.5 TEMPLATES, SAMPLES, AND TOOLS

CHECKLIST FOR DECIDING IF YOU NEED TO GO TO A FORMAL REB:

- **St. Thomas University.** [Research vs. Program Evaluation.](#) n.d.

⁹ David Amaya. Decolonizing monitoring, evaluation and research in global health: Lessons from the Canadian Conference on Global Health 2022 (Blog)

CHECKLIST FOR ETHICS ACROSS THE STAGES OF MEAL

- **Mager, F.** [Research Ethics: A Practical Guide - flowchart.](#) (2020).
- **United Nations Evaluation Group.** [UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.](#) (2020) (pp. 25-34).

ETHICS RISK ASSESSMENT TEMPLATE AND DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN TEMPLATE:

- **Christian Aid and TearFund.** [Doing research ethically: Principles and practices for international development practitioners and evaluators: A guide and toolkit for doing research and evaluation in an ethical way.](#) (2021). (See menu for templates in Word)

PLEDGE FOR STAFF/CONTRACTORS TO SIGN ON ETHICS IN EVIDENCE GENERATION AND EVALUATION:

- **UNICEF.** [UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection, and Analysis \(2021\).](#) Annex III (p. 23-24) (based on the principles of ethics).
- **United Nations Evaluation Group.** [UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.](#) (2020). (p. 24)

SAMPLE CONSENT FORMS:

- **War Child Canada.** [A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluation of Gender-Based Violence Programming in Restricted Environments.](#) (2020). (See Section 1.9A for a sample information, consent and assent form).
- **Christian Aid and TearFund.** [Doing research ethically: Principles and practices for international development practitioners and evaluators: A guide and toolkit for doing research and evaluation in an ethical way.](#) (2021). (See p. 48 for a sample information sheet and consent form, or see menu for template in Word).

6.6 RESOURCES FOR ETHICS IN GBV (INCLUDING WITH CHILDREN AND IN CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENTS)

- **Technical Working Group on Data Collection on Violence against Children: Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group.** [Ethical Principles, Dilemmas and Risks in Collecting Data on Violence against Children: A review of available literature.](#) (2012).
- **War Child Canada.** [A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluation of Gender-Based Violence Programming in Restricted Environments.](#) (2020).
- **Partners for Prevention.** [Ethical and safety guidelines for research on gender-based violence.](#) (n.d.).
- **Christian Aid and TearFund.** [Doing research ethically: Principles and practices for international development practitioners and evaluators: A guide and toolkit for doing research and evaluation in an ethical way.](#) (2021) (See p. 31-32 for information on SGBV).
- **Sikweyiya, Y. and R. Jewkes.** [Perceptions and Experiences of Research Participants on Gender-Based Violence Community Based Survey: Implications for Ethical Guidelines.](#) PLOS ONE, 2012. 7(4): p. e35495.

6.7 RESOURCES FOR ETHICS AND FEMINIST MEAL

- **Barakat, S., A. Pretari, and J. Vonk.** [Centering Gender and Power in Evaluation and Research: Sharing experiences from Oxfam GB's quantitative impact evaluations.](#) (2021).
- **Oxfam Canada.** [Guidance Note on Feminist MEAL.](#) (2020).
- **Wyatt, Alyna, et al.** [Feminist Approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning: Overview of Current Practices.](#) Equality Fund & Genesis Analytics. (2021).

6.8 TRAINING IN ETHICS

- [UNICEF's Introduction to Ethics in Evidence Generation \(Basic\)](#) (You can sign up as a guest and access this module, which includes examples and quizzes to learn more about ethics in evidence generation).
- **Hastie, R. and A. O'Donnell.** [Training materials for ethically managing data.](#) (2017).

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