



The TRUST CODE SUPPLEMENT

A Global Code of Conduct for Research in Fragile Settings



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Draft



Research has the potential to help address humanity's challenges. This is especially vital in fragile settings such as disaster or post-disaster areas, conflict or post-conflict zones, or high-crime informal settlements. In these contexts, where people often face threats, severe deprivation and limited access to basic services, their immediate focus is on survival, safety and wellbeing, rather than contributing to research.

Whilst *The TRUST Code – A Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Partnerships in Research* (2018) supports efforts to overcome the systemic legacies of exclusion and unfairness in international research, fragile settings pose unique and complex challenges that require additional care and consideration.

This TRUST Code **Supplement** - A Global Code of Conduct for Research in Fragile Settings (2025) is based on literature reviews, scoping reviews in English and German, as well as a survey study. The results were refined through extensive consultations with stakeholders.

The code:

- presumes adherence to the TRUST Code.
- provides support across all research disciplines.
- presents concise statements in clear language to encourage access.
- combines guidance on research ethics and research integrity.
- links each guidance article to the values of care, respect, fairness and honesty.

CARE

Article 1

The **physical integrity, mental health and safety** of people in fragile settings must not be further worsened through their involvement in research.

Article 2

Researchers must familiarise themselves with ongoing **rescue and relief operations** to ensure that their activities do not hamper or disrupt these efforts.

Article 3

Researchers must anticipate the potential **retraumatisation** of research participants and local support teams. Where retraumatisation is a possibility, the implementation of trauma-informed practices (such as the appropriate training of researchers) is essential.

Article 4

In collaboration with their institution, and prior to the start of any field activities, researchers should develop **risk management plans** to protect the physical integrity, mental wellbeing and safety of researchers, research participants and support teams. These plans should be tailored to the specific environment and, where feasible, include input from local collaborators on the research team.

Article 5

Research ethics committees should engage supportively with researchers to find ways to facilitate responsible research in fragile settings.

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CARE(cont)

Article 6

Conducting research in unstable environments can present ongoing challenges. Researchers must ensure that **adjustments to the research protocol** - in response to changing conditions - are locally appropriate and maintain the integrity of the research.

Article 7

The potential for **misuse of research data** can be high for research undertaken in fragile settings, especially in areas of conflict. Additional data security measures must be implemented including, wherever possible, methods that do not involve the processing of personal data.

Article 8

The potential for **misuse of research findings** can be high for research undertaken in fragile settings, especially in areas of armed conflict. Dissemination should prioritize the needs and safety of local communities, for instance, by avoiding the release of information that might escalate local conflict.

RESPECT

Article 9

Where **local ethics review**, i.e. review within the host country, is not possible, justification for undertaking research without local ethics approval must be provided to the research ethics committee that approves the research.

Article 10

To avoid **cultural misunderstandings**, researchers who work in fragile settings should collaborate with others who are familiar with the cultural setting (e.g. senior researchers / mentors / community researchers) and liaise as closely as possible with local actors.

Article 11

Where standard **informed consent processes** are unfeasible and/or too risky, **reasonable adaptations** should be discussed and agreed with the relevant research ethics committee(s) and local collaborators.

Article 12

Local knowledge and community acceptance are essential to conducting research that is respectful and not patronising. Researchers should ensure that research participants and local communities have opportunities to input local knowledge and perspectives meaningfully.

FAIRNESS

Article 13

Wherever possible, and in particular in internationally funded research, **local stakeholders** should be included in **research decision-making** to ensure that the focus and implementation of research is not driven solely by external research actors.

Article 14

Communication between research teams is essential to avoid the **unnecessary duplication of studies**, which can lead to a waste of resources and excessive burdens for some participants and communities versus an underrepresentation of others.

Article 15

Where people in fragile settings donate their time, it is important that the resulting research is likely to be of good enough quality to lead to meaningful results. If the **integrity of the research** is likely to be compromised, people must not be burdened with participation.

Article 16

Due to the extremity of the situation, payments or other advantages for participation in research pose a significant risk of **undue inducement**. A balance must be achieved between avoiding undue inducement and preventing the exploitation of research participants and local members of the research team (e.g. gatekeepers, interpreters and drivers).

FAIRNESS(cont)

Article 17

Where local members of the research team (e.g. gate keepers, interpreters, or field researchers) lack adequate **protection mechanisms like insurance**, incoming researchers should advocate to their host institution for extending the protections they receive to the whole team.

Article 18

Providing feedback to participants is good participatory practice but can be challenging in unstable environments. Researchers should plan for this in advance, for instance, by informing participants where they will be able to access results (e.g., via a website).

HONESTY

Article 19

Where research would require **collusion** with non-research actors through **corruption**, the research must not take place.

Article 22

In advance of research, researchers must clarify their options for **handling unexpected findings or human rights abuses** encountered during fieldwork. Options must be tailored to the local situation.

Article 20

Researchers must remain mindful of the likelihood of raising **unrealistic expectations** among all local stakeholders. Managing expectations is a critical aspect of conducting research in fragile settings.

Article 21

It is the researchers' obligation to ensure that potential research participants understand that research activities are not part of humanitarian efforts. Where members of the research team have dual roles, they must clearly explain the distinction to potential research participants (**'humanitarian misconception'**).

Article 23

Researchers who work in fragile settings may encounter **conflicts of interest**, for instance, between a research aim set by external funders (e.g. understanding the causes of migration from conflict areas, funded by a government that tries to reduce immigration) and the prime research needs of research participants. Researchers must ensure full transparency about potential conflicts of interest to avoid the exploitation of research participants.

The code was drafted as part of the PREPARED project under the lead author Prof. Doris Schroeder.

PREPARED CONSORTIUM MEMBERS



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