Guiding Principles

Preparation is key – so make sure you build in enough time for this!

Develop a good understanding of the local context - culture, economy, society, politics...

Aim to engage a broad range of relevant stakeholders to participate in the research

Involve these stakeholders in the project’s governance and decision-making

Aim to develop a shared understanding of risks and responsibilities with stakeholders

Try to anticipate & manage potential risks and pitfalls

Credit the input of all contributors to the research fairly and transparently

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International Research Collaborations

Make sure you do your homework!

Maximise the quality, relevance and benefits of your research, and avoid pitfalls, by following these principles and checks

International collaborative research, particularly when it involves income-poor countries, can present a range of additional risks: to the people and communities involved, to the project partners, and to the integrity of the project itself.

Research funders are increasingly expecting grant applicants to demonstrate that they have considered the risks, their responsibilities as a researcher, and how the management of these risks has fed into the research approach.

Feedback from peer reviewers indicates that this is one key area which can result in applicants being unsuccessful in securing some type of funding (e.g. Global Challenges Research Fund).

This leaflet aims to provide a starting point for researchers in thinking through these issues...
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Things to think about as early as possible before applying for a grant...

Involving a broad group of partners/collaborators with an interest in the project
They will help you to understand the local context and culture, and ensure the research remains aligned to the values, needs and expectations of the country/community concerned

Building honest, open and equitable relationships with local collaborators, underpinned by written agreements
Aim to discuss and agree on:
- methods for internal project communication
- an inclusive, fair, transparent and reflexive process to distribute the project’s resources, to apportion and recognise credit, and to attribute intellectual property appropriately
- the professional, legal and regulatory standards that each project stakeholder must uphold
- an understanding about collective and individual accountability for the project

A good starting point is to discuss the following international codes:
Principles and responsibilities for research world-wide: www.singaporestatement.org/statement.html

Cross-boundary collaborations: www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.453209!/file/MontrealStatement.pdf

Things to consider during project implementation...

Checking whether any additional legal, regulatory or governance requirements apply nationally or locally
This could include regulatory requirements for clinical trials, human tissue or animal studies.

Speaking to your department’s Finance Manager to agree how to manage financial transactions

Don’t fall foul of the UK’s Anti-Bribery Act: www.sheffield.ac.uk/hr/guidance/eamp/1.78033. Large-scale projects, those involving significant use of third parties and agencies as intermediaries, and those involving dealings and negotiations with government officials or representatives of overseas partners are deemed higher risk

Informing the British Embassy in the relevant country about the research
This is particularly relevant if the research may be highly sensitive/controversial/where there may be safety risks

Reflecting on who is the most appropriate person to collect the data ‘on the ground’, and how they will be supported and trained
The data collector should be an individual who is familiar with local customs and social norms (or should be accompanied by such a person)

Thinking about how you will manage the research data
The Library provides useful guidance on how to collect, organise, manage, store, backup, preserve and, where appropriate, share your data: www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/rdm/index

Thinking about how you will communicate the project’s findings
You may need to prepare for heightened media attention, including on social media. Be aware that local collaborators may feel under pressure to present findings that are politically acceptable

Considering ongoing care for local individuals and communities after the project’s completion
How will affected individuals or communities be told what they can and cannot expect by way of further support and/or guidance after the end of the project? The offer of post-project support, if any, needs to be realistic given the fact that local infrastructure may be very limited and underdeveloped in some countries

Where can I get more help on these issues?

- Refer to the University’s Global Challenge Research Fund website: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/gcrf
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Does your research involve human participants, personal data or human tissue?
(For guidance on handling specific ethical issues when researching with human participants please go to: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ethics

Apply for ethics approval in the country you are researching, wherever possible
Your department’s ethics reviewers may not sufficiently understand the ethical implications of the research in the local context. Where a formal local ethics review procedure exists it is good practice to apply for local approval as well as TUoS approval. If there is no formal procedure, involve local stakeholders in dialogue about ethics arrangements – people with an understanding of the local economy, environment, culture, politics and societal norms may provide invaluable advice that can strengthen the project design

Consider how the project will communicate and engage with the researched community
Avoid overstating the project aims or potential impact, and be aware of the possibility that the researcher’s presence may cause tension (e.g. the researcher’s perceived level of power, as viewed by participants, may create a sense of obligation to participate). Consider what might be appropriate locally in terms of compensation for time, if there will be no direct benefit to individuals or the community as a whole from participation

Take care with respect to the communication methods used to ensure accessibility to the research
Consider which languages or dialects are used locally, the literacy levels of the target population, and draw on local knowledge in establishing communication methods. It is worth noting that social media is often widely used in income-poor countries

Remain sensitive to local cultures, customs and traditions
Take care with how potential participants are approached and recruited. If working in less developed countries, Western norms (e.g. seeking written informed consent) may not be always appropriate or desirable. Participatory methods may be helpful

Remain sensitive to power relationships in local hierarchies
You may need to consult or involve local leaders or officials; however, be aware of the potential for marginalised groups to be unrepresented by the traditional leadership

Be aware of how familiar your proposed research community is with being researched
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**Photo by Ehmir Bautista (Unsplash)***
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