

INFORMATION SHEET: ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR POST-DISASTER RESEARCH

Research activity in disaster-impacted regions incurs ethical risk

After disasters, people converge into the impacted area, in order to support response and recovery, and to conduct research. Their presence and activities, however, risk putting pressure on scarce resources and interfering with response operations. Interactions with community members can exacerbate stress (IAVCEI 1999; Citraningtyas 2010).

Researcher convergence, and the effects of the disaster, mean that all research activity in disaster zones, irrespective of discipline, carries heightened ethical risk. The field of ethics concerns the way people relate to others, and the identification of ethical 'bottom lines.' Decisions and actions, for example, should not benefit the decider/actor at the expense of others, increase harm to others, or violate human rights (Werhane 1999).

After disasters, defer data-gathering, unless in support of the response operation

As a rule, data gathering should be deferred during response. Researchers should refrain from entering or engaging with impacted communities, unless required to do so in support of the response. Researchers supporting the response should take measures to minimise pressure on scarce resources, demands on local officials, and stress among locals as a result of their research activities.

Guidelines for human interaction when conducting research

The Belmont Report provides ethical bottom lines designed to minimise the risk of harm to human research subjects. This makes them useful for researchers from all disciplines gathering data in disaster zones, where research activity has the potential to increase harm to disaster-affected individuals and communities.

(Belmont Report 1979)

The RESPECT FOR PERSONS/INFORMED CONSENT principle: Requires that people are considered capable of making informed decisions. People have the fundamental human right to be fully informed about research that carries any risk to them, and they have the right to refuse to be involved.

After disasters, respect and prioritise the needs of locals and the response operation

- **Inform response agencies** about data gathering activity
- **Wear and carry clear identification** – include name, organisation and contact details
- **Before gathering data** on private property
- **Contact the owner, inform them** (what data, how will it be gathered, what will it be used for, potential risks to owner)
- **Request consent to gather data**
- **Respect and defer to the wishes of officials and owners** – 'take no for an answer.'
- **Record interactions** with officials/owners, including written consent to gather data

The BENEFICENCE principle Requires that research does no harm and also provides benefits to those it directly impacts.

After disasters, ensure human interactions do not inadvertently increase harm

- **Clearly communicate identified sources of risk to officials**
- **Ensure interactions do not undermine the response;** refer locals seeking information to relevant officials
- **Ensure interactions do not increase stress;** be sensitive to local emotions and needs
- **Restrain enthusiasm for data;** it can be interpreted as insensitivity
- **Avoid creating unnecessary anxiety by speculating** to locals

After disasters, provide research benefits to officials and impacted communities

- **Make data available for response purposes**
- **Support officials with advice,** if they request it
- **Ensure that data gathered on private property remains available to the owner** (it belongs to them under NZ law)

The DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE principle Requires that research burdens and benefits are fairly distributed. 'Unjust' social patterns should not be exacerbated by additional research burdens. One social group should not carry the burden of research that benefits another group. Populations should not incur a research burden just because of their situation.

After disasters, minimise the footprint & impact of data gathering

- **Coordinate research activity, and share data,** to minimise researcher numbers/activities in the disaster impacted area
- **Ensure research teams are resource-independent** (food/water/tents/fuel etc); do not increase the pressure on scarce local resources

References

- Werhane, P. H. (1991). Engineers and management: The challenge of the challenger incident. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 10(8), 605–616
- The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*. (1979). Washington, D.C.
- Citranningtyas, T., MacDonald, E., & Herrman, H. (2010). A Second Tsunami ? The Ethics of Coming into Communities following Disaster. *Asian Bioethics Review*, 2(2), 108–123.
- IAVCEI Subcommittee for Crisis Protocols (Newhall C, Aramaki S, Barberi F, Blong R, Calvache M, Cheminee J-L, Punongbayan R, Siebe C, Simkin T, Sparks RSJ, Tjetjep W) (1999) Professional conduct of scientists during volcanic crises. *Bull Volcanol* 60:323– 334

Other relevant ethical guidelines

- IPENZ Code of Ethical Conduct: <https://www.ipenz.nz/home/professional-standards/ethical-conduct/code-of-ethical-conduct>
- GEER ethics protocol: http://www.geerassociation.org/media/files/Important%20Docs/GEER_Ethics_Protocol.pdf
- IAVCEI Task Group (2016) Toward IAVCEI guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of scientists involved in volcanic hazard evaluation, risk mitigation, and crisis response. *Bull Volcanol* (2016) 78: 31
- Royal Society of New Zealand guidelines for ethical research conduct: <http://www.royalsociety.org.nz/organisation/about/code>
- Royal Society of New Zealand guidelines for public engagement. <http://www.royalsociety.org.nz/research-practice/public-engagement-guidelines>
- The Human Rights Commission Te Ara Tika / Māori Research Ethics Framework: www.hrc.govt.nz/news-and-publications/publications/te-ara-tika-guidelines-māori-research-ethics-framework-researcher

Contact: sarah.beaven@canterbury.ac.nz



National
SCIENCE
Challenges

