



Unpacking Ethical Dilemmas and Knowledge Production Processes in Conflict and Disaster Research

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Unpacking Ethical Dilemmas And Knowledge Production Processes In Conflict And Disaster Research: Observations From Nepal

Nepal Workshop Summary Report

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1. Background

Growing empirical research in conflict and disaster (C and D) settings increasingly raises ethical concerns about studying vulnerable and impacted communities and the partnerships often involved in doing so. While scholars have developed ethical codes of conduct to protect research participants and field researchers, there is limited understanding of what research ethics mean in practice, how field researchers confront them, and how socio-political and cultural dynamics impact their validity. It is increasingly known, however, that ethics in practice may deviate from expected norms and present challenges not foreseen during the development of procedural codes of conduct (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Lake and Cronin-Furman, 2018; Knott, 2019; Džuverović, 2021; Mac Ginty et al., 2021; Dhungana, 2022). Furthermore, ethics review boards in global Northern academic institutions are shaped by medical understandings of risk and harm, which limits their relevance to the social and cultural dynamics of C and D settings. The formal or procedural ethical frameworks typically aim to prevent individual harm but remain relatively silent about the ethics of knowledge production processes and their consequences.

Ethics on-the-ground may differ significantly in terms of partnerships with local researchers and whether the research is informed by local ethical practices and knowledge (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). Ethical choices to protect research participants in disaster contexts are made and remade before, during and after fieldwork (Browne and Peek, 2014), highlighting the limitations of prescribed ethics review board protocols. In-country researchers, often affected by the crises themselves, face the challenge of navigating ethical and sensitive research practices. They must manage the demands of ethically collecting data while balancing international ethics protocols with country-specific understandings of ethical behaviour. A critical concern is also that knowledge surrounding difficult and disaster-prone settings is shaped by the legacy of colonisation and long-standing inequalities in north-south relations (Sultana, 2022). These concerns require a 'bottom up' focus on data collection processes and a concerted effort to rethink research ethics, their definition, and implementation in practice.

Through three workshops in Nepal, Colombia and the Balkans, we aimed to take a closer look at the practice of research ethics, with attention to the dilemmas and challenges that researchers working in conflict and disaster settings experience. The workshop, "*Unpacking ethical dilemmas in conflict and disaster research*" is part of a two-year research project called "*Re-ordering ethics and knowledge production in conflict and disaster affected contexts*", funded by the British Academy and conducted in partnership with researchers from Colombia (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana University), Nepal (Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University), Serbia (University of Belgrade), and the UK (Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester). This first report focusses on the findings from Nepal.

With a history of 10-year Maoist conflict (1996-2006) and disasters, notably the 2015 earthquakes, Nepal has witnessed a range of research involving collaboration among researchers who transcend local, national and international academic/research institutions. Such research also encompasses a variety of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and methodological efforts, adding complexity to the understanding of research ethics and knowledge production specific to Nepal while also having intellectual and practical bearing for other post-conflict and post-disaster contexts. Nepal, thus, provides an ideal context to explore these issues, drawing on the hands-on, practical knowledge of individuals involved in various research and data-focused endeavours.

The rest of the report is structured as follows. We first provide a summary of the findings from the workshop. This is followed by brief reflections on the workshop methodology, followed by the organisation of key themes based on the workshop discussion. We end with some practical alternatives to overcome ethical challenges in C and D contexts.

2. Workshop Summary

The workshop offered a space for Nepal-based C and D researchers to discuss their dilemmas and challenges in conducting research in difficult settings. They concurred that the meaning of and implementation of research ethics is shaped by a constellation of contextual factors that are often beyond the immediate expertise and control of individual researchers, especially field-level or local researchers. Even basic principles of research ethics, such as avoiding harm to the research participants and ensuring the safety and well-being of research participants and research participants, are difficult to realise owing to inadequate and inconsistent standards and support mechanisms. The workshop emphasised that ethical dilemmas are confronted during different stages of C and D research, not just during data collection but also during the process of setting the research agenda, sharing research authorship and archiving and sharing of sensitive data.

The participants agreed that spaces for discussing and exchanging ideas about research ethics are limited in Nepal. This puts extra pressure on local researchers as they navigate the complex landscape of research ethics in their everyday work. The workshop highlighted the need for a sustained and systemic overhaul to bring ethics to the front and centre of Nepal's research landscape and C and D research in particular. It was emphasised that both formal and informal mechanisms for research ethics should be sensitive to local contexts and provide various layers of protection for the vulnerable communities being investigated. Although the workshop was focused on C and D research, the workshop raised several pressing questions pertaining to power and power inequalities in Nepal's knowledge production scene, more generally, that merit further attention: Who sets the research agenda? Who has control over the research budget and research output? Who has the voice over how to implement the research? Who owns and controls the data? How are local researchers treated in the research collaboration?



3. Workshop structure and methodology

The workshop was organised around three main questions that are relevant to Nepal but also stand to offer lessons to other conflict and disaster-prone societies:

1. How is the ethics of data collection, analysis and reporting understood and considered in Nepal's C and D research?
2. What are Nepal's key political, institutional, and socio-cultural realities or challenges that shape the meaning and mechanisms of data ethics in C and D research?
3. What forms of alternatives exist for a meaningful implementation of ethical research in C and D research?

The workshop followed a participatory and experiential format, providing participants with a unique space to share their experiences, practices, and challenges. Each session was introduced by one or more core research team members. The workshop utilised various techniques, including individual experience-sharing sessions, plenary discussions, and group work. Our focus on participatory and collaborative discussion stems from our collective motivation to challenge the legacy of unequal knowledge production and power inequalities between global North and global South researchers. As such, the workshop was co-designed with the Nepali team and reflects the diverse yet overlapping academic and practical interests of interdisciplinary researchers spanning GN-GS academic institutions.

The first day of the workshop began with an introduction of the research team and the participants. This was followed by a discussion about the meaning and definition of research ethics and how it is shaped by Nepal's unique socio-political context. The session explored meanings, connections and differences between formal or procedural ethics and informal or everyday ethics. The second day of the workshop was focused on exploring practical alternatives to address the common challenges and dilemmas faced by those with hands-on experiences of collecting, analysing, sharing, archiving, and reporting data.

Participants ranged from early-career researchers, senior researchers, development practitioners and NGO activists. It emphasised interdisciplinary exchange among participants from various academic backgrounds (peace and conflict studies, gender studies, environmental studies, physical geography, sociology, and urban and development studies, among others) with a shared experience in conducting hands-on research in disaster and/or conflict contexts. English was the primary medium of discussion, but there was an opportunity to discuss the issues in Nepal during the breakout sessions, mainly facilitated by researchers with Nepali language proficiency.

4. Workshop proceedings and key themes

The following section summarises the key themes that emerged in the workshop, substantiated by quotes from the participants as documented by the core team members. The discussions were not audio recorded, but the core research team took detailed notes of the discussions, which were subsequently organised around key themes. The workshop followed Chatham House rules, to which all participants agreed, allowing the use of insights from the meeting while not attributing comments to individual speakers.

5. Plural meanings of research ethics

The first part of the workshop explored how participants ascribed meanings to the notion of research ethics in C and D studies. It was meant to reflect on the commonalities and differences between principles and practices of research ethics. Participants reflected on a range of issues, from the complexities of engaging with vulnerable populations to the nature of the emotional toll on both researchers and participants. Jointly, participants stressed research ethics ought to be viewed and approached differently in C and D settings, drawing attention to a range of unique challenges in C and D settings, from the complexities of engaging with vulnerable populations to the nature of the emotional toll on both researchers and participants (see the summary box ‘meaning of ethics in C and D research’).

Despite shared understanding around issues related to the protection and well-being of research participants, the session highlighted plurality in the meanings of research ethics, rooted in participants’ disciplinary backgrounds, affiliations and work environment. Several participants viewed research ethics as closely intertwined with their personal values and principles. It is about striking a balance between “research rules and moral compass”, one participant said. “Cultural and political sensitivities” towards the research context and communities were raised as another ethical concern. One participant emphasised the importance of being “attentive to the voices from the ground”. Ethics was also defined in relation to power relationships between researchers and research participants. Going beyond the notion of ‘doing no harm’, workshop participants related ethics to accountability to the research participants. This was expressed as “giving back to the community” or “making a wider contribution to social change”. For another participant, research ethics involved how and to what end the research findings of a sensitive nature are

Meaning of ethics in C and D research

- Thinking through power across the research cycle;
- Equal ownership of the research agenda and findings;
- Thinking about consequences/ outcomes of research, including potential harm to participants;
- Responsibility and accountability towards research participants;
- Being aware of one’s bias and values as a researcher;
- Transparency and discussion.

published. This involved being attentive to the research findings that can pose further harm to the victims of C and D.

6. Inadequacies and inconsistencies in procedural/formal research ethics

The workshop participants generally agreed that there is insufficient attention to formal ethical processes in Nepal's C and D research, noting a gap between the principles and practices of research ethics. The National Health Research Council (NHRC) oversees research on health and related topics in Nepal. However, a similar body of research governance is lacking in C and D research, and there is a corresponding dearth of standards and protocols to support research involving marginalised and at-risk communities. A senior researcher

A senior researcher shared his experience of how research ethics are not taken seriously in Nepal's academic sector. Academic curiosity, or what he called "*research excitement*", often takes precedence over research oversight.

stated that academic curiosity, or what he called "research excitement", often takes precedence over research oversight. He further reflected on how one of their research projects failed to consider the risk of harm to one of Nepal's indigenous communities. Another participant supported this view, suggesting that C and D research ethics are often overlooked and taken for granted. "In peace research, ethics is seen as a minor issue. It

C and D affected individuals who volunteer as research participants may want to be "*seen and heard*". So, the question is: "*who benefits from anonymisation?*", as one participant remarked.

is assumed people (researchers) are ethical." Ethical standards and frameworks are often unclear and inconsistent in certain types of sensitive topics, such as gender-based violence and disability research, and in research methods like action research. Inattention to formal ethics is reflected in the lack of safeguards and support mechanisms for both research participants and researchers. One participant gave an example of how their research on Nepal's conflict

victims resulted in "mass re-traumatisation", which the research participants were unprepared to handle owing to a lack of guidance and training on the part of the researchers.

Likewise, in disaster research, the "rapidity of disasters" means research is implemented quickly, often without thorough undergoing ethical review. In post-disaster context, one participant reflected on the tension between "distributing immediate aid and collecting data for reports". This point led to discussion on the relatively understudied issue of ethics of research findings. One participant questioned the level of independence of research findings due to the donor's influence. "If they (donors) don't like it (findings), you have to tweak it". "They tell you with comments about how it should be" another participant concurred, indicating the power of donors in dictating research findings. This is made further questionable by the lack of a peer review system in donor-commissioned research. One participant shared their experience of having been asked by the funders to

“exaggerate the data”, highlighting the questionable nature of research practice in the aid sector.

Contextual dynamics shaping ethical C and D research

Personal Context: Personal values, professional and economic aspirations/limitations, level of research training.

Organisational Context: Availability of formal ethical standards and protocols; Process of peer review and reporting mechanisms; Data management procedures; Complaint handling mechanisms.

Situational and Socio-Political Context: Difference between researcher’s sociopolitical status and local cultural practices; structural and knowledge-producing inequalities facing researchers from the global South.

The second day of the workshop focused on the ethics of data archiving and sharing, looking at how inadequacies and inconsistencies in formal ethical review mechanisms have undermined meaningful archiving, sharing and re-utilisation of data on C and D. Despite growing research on C and D in Nepal, often involving international researchers, discussions highlighted the lack of clarity and failures to set the standards for ownership and transfers of research archives. Participants generally concurred that data transfer among Nepali researchers and international partners is neither transparent nor guided by formalised standards. Communities from which the data are collected have little to no say over how the data with longer-term ramifications should be protected, held or destroyed, and Nepali researchers mentioned that they often have no access

to research data after the end of a project if stored and managed by international partners.

7. Challenges in operationalising research ethics

Consistent with the workshop's aims, much of the first day focused on exploring the challenges associated with operationalising research ethics. As mentioned above, participants highlighted that the lack of adequate formal guidelines and support mechanisms further complicate field-level dilemmas. Where formal ethical approvals or guidelines exist, they tend to be unclear or conflict with field-level ethics in practice. One participant shared their dilemma in finding a balance between their personal obligation to give recognition to the research participants in the findings while maintaining their privacy and confidentiality as required by the formal ethical approval. Research participants may want to be “seen and heard”. So the question is: “who benefits from anonymisation?”. In another instance, research participants refused to sign a consent form in sharp contrast to what was required by the

The “rapidity of disasters” often means research is also implemented quickly without undergoing thorough ethical review. This tends to result in the violation of the rights and privacy of research participants but also raises questions about the validity and quality of research findings.

formal ethical approval. This was not because research participants refused to consent but thought the formal ethical protocol/paperwork was inappropriate.

Field-level dilemmas commonly involve striking a balance between research objectivity and research relationships. On the one hand, field-level researchers are expected to build rapport with the communities and even “immerse” themselves in the communities they study. On the other hand, they are expected to maintain “research objectivity and distance”. The research protocols surrounding these expectations are often vague or non-existent, leaving the burden of navigating such challenges and risks to field-level, often junior researchers. In engaging with vulnerable communities, field-level researchers face the difficult situation of failing to “give anything in return” to communities, despite their time and contributions to the data collection. Local researchers find this difficult to navigate as the formal ethical process, in general, prevents incentivising research participants. One participant noted that the nature of research is constantly changing, enabled by the use of technologies and media platforms. Although photos and images have long been used as data collection methods, disaster-affected communities are not always made aware of why the photos are being collected, to whom the photos are being shared, and how they are being shared. Another participant noted that intervention research, such as controlled trials, is prominent in Nepal, for which ethical standards are not fully developed and discussed. Such research is often done among vulnerable populations in a manner that raises unnecessary expectations among communities and even fuels community-level conflict over who is selected for the study (intervention group) and who is not (control group).

Research collaboration is a “black box” in Nepal.

8. Contextual dynamics shaping ethical research work

As part of this theme, participants reflected on how ethical challenges are deeply rooted in personal, organisational, situational, and geopolitical contexts, highlighting the multifaceted factors shaping, enabling and undermining the implementation of research ethics. In this way, a researchers’

“There is also a tendency among certain researchers, for example, to see formal ethical requirements as a way to ‘regulate us through formal ethics’, which can, in turn, result in questionable research practices.”

personal values and disciplinary affiliation interact with the larger social and political environment to influence how the research is conducted. One participant argued that in some disciplines, such as anthropology, research ethics, reflexivity, and positionality are given more attention than others. At the same time, there is a tendency among certain researchers, for example, to see formal ethical requirements as a way to “regulate us through formal ethics”, which can, in turn, result in questionable research practices. Participants reflected on how Nepal's research landscape is dictated and driven by international donors. Growing competition for limited research funding means researchers are expected to comply with the donors’ pressures and, as one participant

said, “wear multiple hats”. Many participants provided examples of how local researchers in Nepal face a disproportionate amount of precarity in their work. Limited research funding, along with increased competition, often leads to local researchers working on fixed-term contracts tied to specific research projects, which results in limited longer-term job security and burnout.

9. Power differentials in C and D research (collaboration)

Over the two days, much of the discussion revolved around the unequal nature of international and national research collaboration. Some participants expressed concerns about unethical research practices taking place in Nepal under the guise of collaboration. One participant noted that research collaboration is a “black box” in Nepal, with little to no transparency around, in particular, budgetary issues that international researchers seem to keep confidential. Another participant said, “research agenda is often predefined”, with local researchers barely included in the research conceptualisation or design. Still, they are “expected to act as rescuers when the funding cycle is close to completion”, having to give up on their other commitments to rush to collect and report data to the funder. Local researchers who carry out the difficult work of local mediators, translators and collectors of data are excluded from the opportunity to act as co-investigators or co-authors. One participant with long-standing research experience shared his experience of having to “fight for authorship”. He further noted how there is an expectation from international collaborators of free intellectual or data collection labour. Not only is the difficult labour of the local researchers undervalued, but they are even deprived of basic information about why certain research is conducted. One participant equated this situation to the “invisibilisation of local researchers”. Women researchers, particularly, encounter unique challenges during fieldwork. International research projects often fail to provide sufficient financial and other support for women who must balance fieldwork demands with caregiving responsibilities, as one participant noted.

Power and politics in C and D research:

- Unequal nature of research opportunities and authorship arrangements;
- Lack of transparency and inclusion in research conceptualisation and budgeting;
- Underappreciation of and disproportionate burden facing local researchers;
- Differences in research opportunities along urban and rural lines.

The pattern of inequalities in research collaboration is further entrenched by a lack of formal complaint and redress mechanisms. One participant noted raising a voice against inadequate support unequal research partnerships and research misconduct comes with a price, for example, of “not getting future work”. Research funding in Nepal is scarce and highly competitive, so researchers tend to avoid taking a stance against ethical misconduct to avoid potential backlash.

Inequalities in research collaboration are also apparent in risk assessment and field-level accommodation arrangements. “Foreigners (international researchers) are differently (risk) assessed than local researchers”, one participant said. Participants shared that local researchers are treated differently from foreign researchers when it comes to arrangements for fieldwork and accommodations. During fieldwork, field researchers are often offered inferior accommodations compared to international researchers. “There is

an insurance-based way of looking at research ethics”, as one participant said. During the Maoist insurgency, local researchers were required to conduct riskier fieldwork involving conflict-affected areas, highlighting an unequal distribution of security risk and risk mitigation measures between local researchers and their international counterparts.

Research in Nepal, one participant noted, has received a “bad reputation”. This was particularly the case for donor-funded research. One participant gave an example from a post-disaster setting where people’s deprived situations became manifestly clear. Yet, local researchers or evaluators are expected to collect data in the form of “stories” from

the victims, putting the local researchers in a difficult situation to justify the rationale for and ramifications of collecting such ‘data, when the difficult social realities that they represent are clear and obvious. As the face of the research, front-line data collectors find it hard to intrude on the hardship and privacy of the communities

Certain conflict and disaster-affected communities across Nepal are over-researched, leading to "research fatigue". Local researchers are, in turn, left to deal with the expectations, frustrations and resistance of the local communities long after foreign researchers are gone.

but are expected to do so to secure funding for the relief efforts. The dilemma of having to collect data on and report obvious problems makes their future work with communities more challenging. Questionable research conduct was also referred to as the “unnecessary amount of data” being collected and the “wastage of data”, meaning the burden of collecting data is not justified by the findings. This is made further complicated by the lack of mechanisms for communities to have their say over how data is to be used for future programmatic decisions, making it harder for field researchers to convince the communities about the practical value of collecting data under difficult settings. One participant mentioned that certain disaster and conflict-affected communities across Nepal are over-researched as part of international research collaboration, leading to “research fatigue”. Local researchers are, in turn, left to deal with the expectations, frustrations and even allegations of the local communities long after foreign researchers are gone.

10. Exploring practical alternatives to current practices

The final segment of the workshop centred on exploring practical alternatives to improving the prospects for ethical research among vulnerable populations. Below are some general tips or alternatives that came out for different phases of C and D research:

Research design	Data collection
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Consider ethics not as an afterthought but as front and centre in the research cycle.▪ Create an ethics board that fits everyday research needs.▪ Integrate ethics into university or project-specific research training.▪ Approach ethics as a process of reflection, or as an ongoing conversation, not an event.▪ Plan for community impact in research budgets.▪ Develop a system of peer support and mentoring on ethics and practice.▪ Embed guidance about researchers' well-being and physical security into ethics processes and guidelines.▪ Provide spaces or mechanisms for communities to express their voice and shape decision-making.▪ Develop specific guidelines for research involving the use of digital and audio-visual technologies.▪ Treat and develop guidelines as guidelines, not as law; there should be flexibility in adoption and adaptation of guidelines to the situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Provide information to participants about the research and their right to say no to research – ie, implement effective consent procedures.▪ Include guidelines for not just 'what to ask' but 'what not to ask'.▪ Rethink locally-sensitive incentives and compensation for research participation.▪ Develop mechanisms to manage and respond to research participants' expectations.▪ Approach data collection ethics as a process of ongoing dialogue and reflection.▪ Develop community of support, mentorship and accompaniment to discuss/voice ethical dilemmas/ concerns during fieldwork.▪ Implement mechanisms for complaint and redress that are not limited to calling an international phone number.▪ Develop/ implement guidelines for managing the potential distress among participants and researchers.

Analysis and reporting

- Ensure transparency in the planned nature and number of research outputs.
- Consider different alternatives for research dissemination, beyond academic outputs.
- Set clear guidelines and expectations around authorship and acknowledgements.
- Develop mechanisms to report findings to the research stakeholders, including research participants.
- Ensure local researchers are visible and recognised for their labour.
- Resist/avoid extraction of free research labour (translation, data collection, reporting).

Data archiving and sharing

- Set clear definitions of data ownership, and data custodianship.
- Develop/implement data management plan regarding the use, reuse and disposal of data.
- Develop/ implement clear-cut guidelines for the maintenance of electronic and physical data.

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