RC3
science connected
for humanity

RC3 Guidelines #1

GUIDELINES
Engaging RCRC Volunteers in Data Collection and Research by Partner Organizations

ICRC

IFRC

RED CROSS RED CRESCENT RESEARCH CONSORTIUM (RC3) GUIDELINES

Guidelines for Engaging RCRC Volunteers in Data Collection and Research by Partner Organizations.

1st edition, March 2024

About the Red Cross Red Crescent Research Consortium (RC3)

This publication was made in collaboration of RC3 members. RC3 is the Red Cross and Red Crescent Research Consortium. It is an open, collaborative, and coordinated network of entities and initiatives created within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement that are entirely or partially dedicated to conducting and promoting evidence-based research in the humanitarian field. Besides connecting their specific expertise, RC3 members join forces to improve the quality of research across the Movement and to support it to better utilize research to achieve its community-driven goals and missions aligned with the strategic frameworks of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

http://rc3.ifrc.org/

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

WHY ARE THE GUIDELINES NEEDED?

Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) volunteers worldwide are often asked to engage in data gathering activities. Often, this involvement means implementing the fieldwork component of research studies commissioned by partners within the Movement, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but also by numerous other humanitarian and academic institutions. No reliable data are available to accurately quantify these practices. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that requesting RCRC volunteers to contribute to research studies is common.

Besides adding to the regular workload of RCRC volunteers, this increased involvement in data collection activities has, at times, happened without adequate training or any systematization accompanying it. National Societies (NS) are not always properly equipped to protect volunteers against risks that might emerge from conducting research, which may include risks for participants, for volunteers themselves and for the reputation of the Movement. This presents both capacity and ethical challenges. The aim of this document is to provide guidance and reflection for both researchers and NS on how to engage NS volunteers in research field work.

INTRODUCTION

WHERE DID THE GUIDELINES COME FROM?

In 2022, the ICRC Centre for Operational Research (CORE) conducted a research project to 1) better understand the scale of RCRC volunteers engagement in research on behalf of partner organizations, 2) identify benefits and challenges associated with this practice for both NS and their volunteers, and 3) co-create minimum standards for engagement with partners in research and data collection. This was done through a desk review of available guidelines, a quantitative survey with representatives from NS[1], key informant interviews (KIIs) and a case study with the Cote D'Ivoire Red Cross.

Although the scale of this phenomenon remains unclear; the survey conducted in 2022 for this research provided some initial insights. The majority (63%) of respondents said volunteers of their NS had been asked to conduct data collection or research on behalf of partner organizations. Most of those regularly asked to conduct research had been involved in 2 to 6 projects. Some NS reported their volunteers had been involved in data collection more than 10 times the past year. Half NS said between 10-20 volunteers were engaged at any time in some sort of data collection project. The overwhelming majority (86%) of survey respondents said they were planning on accepting more partnerships in the future for the same reasons they had been accepting them to date (i.e. to build volunteers' capacity, provide visibility for the NS, network, and build partnerships). All survey respondents said their volunteers expressed a desire to be involved in data collection projects, primarily because of the experience they will gain and to assist those in need.

Given how widespread this practice is and will continue to be, it is important to have the necessary safeguards in place to protect volunteers and NS from various forms of risks that may be associated to this practice. The RCRC Movement has developed a number of important tools and guidelines to ensure the safety and security of volunteers during their work (see e.g. Safer Access Framework) as well as guidelines for partnering with external actors, specifically to ensure adherence to the Fundamental Principles (see e.g. Movement component's relations with external humanitarian actors). These guidelines highlight the importance of assessing reputational risks prior to embarking on partnerships and ensuring the partnership is of strategic interest to the NS.

In parallel, various teams have developed trainings, including e-learning platforms, on data collection and research methods. These pre-existing guidelines and tools are all extremely relevant for volunteers engaged in data collection with partner organizations. However, in addition to concerns over the physical safety and security of volunteers, proper training, and reputational risks and benefits, additional research-specific concerns have been identified through this study. These concerns, primarily of ethical nature, will be enumerated below and mitigation measures will be proposed.

The Guidelines address the following points:

- Strategic importance of the research and reputational risk
- Collaborative design process
- Training
- Ethics, data protection and analysis
- Outputs of research

---

[1] The survey was circulated widely with the aim of reaching a large number of NS, globally. However, the CORE received only 21 responses and did not include responses from any NS in the global north, nor any from the MENA region. As only 20 NS completed the survey, the results cannot be said to be representative of the whole Movement.

© V-P-UG-E-00482, DRC, Uganda, 2-05-2022, ICRC

1

Decision to participate: assessing strategic importance and reputational risks

NS are often asked by partner organizations to collect data for research projects because of their geographical reach and grassroots nature which give them greater access across communities. The decision to embark on new partnerships is usually made in terms of how 'useful' this partnership is for NS (i.e. financial gain, networking, visibility, and capacity-building for volunteers). Volunteers implementing data collection often do not have insight into how the decision to enter partnership is made as these decisions are generally made at the managerial level and devolved to the relevant NS branch. In parallel, partner organizations engaging NS volunteers in research transfer all research-related risks - physical, psychological, and reputational - onto the volunteers and NS. A study without a clear purpose or concrete beneficial outcomes for target communities is likely to serve no strategic interest for the NS and may be damaging to its reputation.

In practice, a large number of assessments and data collection activities can be overwhelming for communities where NS tend to operate, especially in fragile environments. The subject matter being treated by the research may be taboo or particularly sensitive, which may make communities suspicious of the research or cause psychological stress, discomfort or anxiety to the respondents or volunteers themselves. The potential negative impact of the research may continue to follow them, even after completion of the project, as volunteers interface directly with community members through the research as well as during their routine work. This can pose both security and reputational risk for volunteers and the NS who might bear the brunt of antagonized communities whose expectations have been unmet.

Ethical consideration should be given as to the impact of such research on the physical and psychological safety and well-being of volunteers, research participants and communities (see also section 5). NS leadership should carefully assess the purpose of the research, the planned outcomes, the topic being researched and the reputation of the partner before embarking in such partnerships. In addition, volunteers themselves must clearly understand the purpose of the research and the planned outcomes. They ought to be confident in what they are doing, certain the information will not be misused, and must be equipped to transparently convey research/project information to participating communities.

Things to consider:

- What is the purpose of this research?
- What is the strategic relevance of the partnership for the NS and its volunteers?
- How will the research benefit the local community?
- Are risks for participants minimized?
- Are volunteers equipped with the relevant resources or information about services to address any risks or harm that may arise?
- How will participants and volunteers' welfare be taken care of during and after data collection?
- Will data or results from this study provide the NS with evidence for decision-making in its programming and/or advocacy?
- Are there security or reputation risks associated with being involved in collecting data on this particular subject matter or with this particular organization?

2 Preparatory stage: a collaborative design process

Volunteers usually have little to no involvement in the research design phase of research projects. Methodologies are often pre-set by the partner and include fully developed methodologies and pre-selected target communities/populations. As a result, research tools (e.g. questionnaires, interview guides…) may be contextually or culturally inappropriate and, for example, include concepts and jargon not easily translatable into local dialects. Volunteers are usually given a set timeframe and budget with which to carry out the study. More often than not, these are not well adapted to local conditions and reality of field work and data collection. The extractive, top-down approach to these research partnerships is ethically questionable and is not conducive to successfully implementing research findings.

Partnership agreements and Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) negotiated at the onset of the process ought to include provisions for the inclusion of NS volunteers in the entirety of the research process – from design to dissemination, including strategies to support the meaningful participation of volunteers. In addition, NS internal operational strategy on research and data collection for partners ought to ensure minimum standards for working conditions. The strategy may include standardized per diem amounts (if applicable), necessary equipment (e.g. rain gear during the rainy season), standard list of expenses that must be covered (meals and transportation), and access to ongoing training and support during data collection. This will ensure that work conditions for volunteers are acceptable and that their time is respected.

Things to consider:

- How will volunteers be involved in the research design (i.e. location selection, questionnaire design…)?
- On questionnaire design, will there be time and opportunity to make substantial changes to questionnaires if volunteers find the language, content, or length problematic (including on cultural perspectives)?
- Will volunteers be provided with adequate support (ongoing supervision and debriefing opportunities) during the research?
- Will volunteers be provided with appropriate travel and meal stipends?

© V-P-IN-E-00376, India, 07.2020

3 Training: Taking the time

As there is often urgency to get projects to the field, not much time is taken upfront to properly train volunteers and build their capacity. Existing research-training materials available from within the Movement are rarely accessible to non-English speakers. When trained, a significant portion of the training is spent going over a pre-developed survey tool while very little time is spent practicing and troubleshooting it, let alone piloting the tool in the field or, when applicable, discussing the translation of concepts into local dialects and accounting for cultural sensitivity. In addition, very few volunteers are trained in informed consent and ethical risks and mitigation measures. Location-specific risk assessments or briefings are rarely conducted during training.

Given the fact that volunteer capacity building is one of the key reasons why NS agree to participate in research on behalf of partner organizations, enough time ought to be built into the process to ensure the capacity of the data collectors/researcher has been sufficiently built. Volunteers must be trained prior to being deployed to the field, including on data collection methods, survey techniques, and the use of devices or survey software. Time must be spent practicing these data collection methods. Volunteers must also be trained on informed consent, ethical risks, the Minimum Protection Approach, data management and mitigation measures. Finally, they must have sufficient information about the research objectives, process and expected outcomes so that this can be communicated to research interlocutors in the field.

Things to consider:

- Is there sufficient time and resources allocated to training?
    - Are the learning objectives clear?
    - Will ethics, informed consent, minimum protection standards and data management be sufficiently covered?
    - Will the project background and expected outcomes be clearly explained to volunteers?
    - Will training, information and resources be shared in a language that is accessible to volunteers?
- Will volunteers be provided with all the materials they need to carry out their work (i.e. access to data collection instruments like tablets and mobile/internet data)?

Ethics, Data protection and Analysis

4

Data protection and analysis are often exclusively left to the partner organization and not included in training. This reflects a traditional hierarchy of research and knowledge production, that unfortunately reinforces the exclusion of humanitarian practitioners, volunteers and research participants with lived experience from key stages of the research process.

Before agreeing to engage in the fieldwork for research, the management of the NS is advised to clarify with the lead research organization what Ethics procedures have been undertaken. These include the preparation of a clear research protocol, the submission to and validation by a competent Ethics Review Board[2] and the minimization of risks for both volunteers and research participants. In this way, the NS can ensure that the research is of merit, that minimum standards of data protection are in place, that local privacy and data protection laws are being followed, and that mitigation strategies are established. This information must also be clearly explained to volunteer researchers who, in turn, will be in charge of relaying this information to research participants - including how the research will benefit them, how their identities will be protected and what safeguards are in terms of data storage - through informed consent forms.

Regardless of NS' capacity to conduct analysis on the data collected, partners ought to involve volunteers in the data analysis portion, at the minimum through debriefs and analysis workshops. Volunteers have knowledge that must be recognized and valued: they have first-hand experiences of collecting data and may have in-depth understanding by virtue of being part of the communities being researched. This insight is invaluable and can be captured through end of mission debriefs or analysis workshops, in which analysts from the partner organization can discuss initial research findings with volunteers and ask questions that will enable them to evaluate the reliability of the findings.

Things to consider:

- Has the research been approved by a competent Ethics Review Board including in the country where the research is taking place (consider that ethics regulations are different depending on the country)?
- What legal requirements need to be adhered too?
- Do volunteers and participants have a clear understanding of the risks and benefits of the research?
- Who will anonymize (or pseudonymize) the data, how, and at what point in the process?
- How will the data be stored and for how long?
- How will the data be used (analyzed) and disposed of?
- Who has access to the data? Is there a data-sharing agreement between the research institution and the NS?
- Will volunteers be involved in the analysis process, at least in the form of post-mission debriefs or analysis workshops?

---

[2] A competent ERB according to the WMA Declaration of Helsinki (1964) is "transparent in its functioning, (...) independent of the researcher, the sponsor and any other undue influence and must be duly qualified. It must take into consideration the laws and regulations of the country or countries in which the research is to be performed as well as applicable international norms and standards. The committee must have the right to monitor ongoing studies."

5

Outputs of Research

Volunteers rarely have access to final reports, let alone data. Research cycles are, at times, so long that by the time the research is released, it has been forgotten or has become irrelevant to the work of practitioners on the ground. There seems to be little effort made to provide the NS with accessible, relevant, and timely findings or information that may be useful for their own programming or advocacy. Even if a final report is shared, it is not necessarily accessible to non-English-speaking volunteers. Issues with post-research community follow-up is also problematic, as there often is none. This means that volunteers are asked by community members about outcomes of research; questions that volunteers are not always able to answer.

As part of any Partnership agreements and MoUs, there must be clear guidelines for sharing the outcomes of the research with the NS, its volunteers and research participants. This can include, but is not limited to, providing volunteers with opportunities to provide feedback to draft reports and the framing of recommendations, and providing NS and volunteers with accessible and timely resources (i.e. key messages, pamphlets, short videos) to communicate findings to research participants. While it may not be feasible to translate all outputs into the local language, NS and volunteers should have access - at the very least - to a summary of findings and recommendations in the local language to support their own programming and advocacy. In addition, and whenever possible, NS and volunteers should be acknowledged in any research outputs (including academic publications).

Things to consider:

- Will the expected outputs of the research be accessible to the NS and volunteers in an accessible, relevant, and timely manner?
- What strategies are in place to communicate the findings to research participants and volunteers?
- How will volunteers be involved in dissemination of findings?
- Will key outputs of the research be translated into local languages?
- Will NS and volunteers be acknowledged as partner organizations/researchers in any research outputs?

V-P-PE-E-01004, Peru, 1-05-2018, ICRC

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As NS continue to engage in data collection and research with partner organizations, more safeguards ought to be put in place to ensure capacity and ethical challenges of this practice are minimized and addressed. These guidelines enumerate some of the key aspects to consider prior to engaging with a partner organization, what potential challenges could arise during research, and key things to consider to minimize these challenges.

1

Strategic importance of the research to the NS and potential reputational risk

- What is the purpose of this research?
- What is the strategic relevance of the partnership for the NS and its volunteers?
- How will the research benefit the local community?
- Are risks for participants minimized?
- Are volunteers equipped with the relevant resources or information about services to address any risks or harm that may arise?
- How will participants and volunteers' welfare be taken care of during and after data collection?
- Will data or results from this study provide the NS with evidence for decision-making in its programming and/or advocacy?
- Are there security or reputation risks associated with being involved in collecting data on this particular subject matter or with this particular organization?

2

Expected level of collaboration between the NS and partner in the research design

- How will volunteers be involved in the research design (i.e. location selection, questionnaire design...)?
- On questionnaire design, will there be time and opportunity to make substantial changes to questionnaires if volunteers find the language, content or length problematic (including on cultural perspectives)?
- Will volunteers be provided with adequate support (ongoing supervision and debriefing opportunities) during the research?
- Will volunteers be provided with appropriate travel and meal stipends?

3

Training and pre-field preparations

- Is there sufficient time and resources allocated to training?
  - Are the learning objectives clear?
  - Will ethics, informed consent, minimum protection standards and data management be sufficiently covered?
  - Will the project background and expected outcomes be clearly explained to volunteers?
  - Will training, information and resources be shared in a language that is accessible to volunteers?
- Will volunteers be provided with all the materials they need to carry out their work (i.e. access to data collection instruments like tablets and mobile/internet data)?

4

Data protection, ethics procedures and analysis

- Has the research been approved by a competent Ethics Review Board including in the country where the research is taking place (consider that ethics regulations are different depending on the country)?
- What legal requirements need to be adhered too?
- Do volunteers and participants have a clear understanding of the risks and benefits of the research?
- Who will anonymize (or pseudonymize) the data, how, and at what point in the process?
- How will the data be stored and for how long?
- How will the data be used (analyzed) and disposed of?
- Who has access to the data? Is there a data-sharing agreement between the research institution and the NS?
- Will volunteers be involved in the analysis process, at least in the form of post-mission debriefs or analysis workshops?

5

Research outputs

- Will the expected outputs of the research be accessible to the NS and volunteers in an accessible, relevant, and timely manner?
- What strategies are in place to communicate the findings to research participants and volunteers ?
- How will volunteers be involved in dissemination of findings?
- Will key outputs of the research be translated into local languages?
- Will NS and volunteers be acknowledged as partner organizations/researchers in any research outputs?

ABOUT THE RC3

RC3 is the Red Cross and Red Crescent Research Consortium. It is an open, collaborative, and coordinated network of entities and initiatives created within the International Movement that are entirely or partially dedicated to conducting and promoting research in the humanitarian field based on scientific methods. Besides connecting their specific expertise, RC3 members join forces to improve the quality of research across the International Movement and to support the Movement to better utilize research to achieve its community-driven goals and missions aligned with the strategic frameworks of the IFRC International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Our Vision: Research Connected to Humanity

The added value of RC3 collective efforts resides in integrating and making more accessible the academic communities, scientific results, and expertise to help alleviate human suffering through building safe, resilient, and sustainable communities. Through the notion of knowledge as a common good, it aims at improving the quality and impact of humanitarian services based on quality research conducted across the International Movement. RC3 supports National Societies, the IFRC, and the ICRC in their transformation process, analysing their environments and operations to be better prepared to address and respond to global humanitarian challenges.

Our approach: Bridging evidence-based humanitarian practices and policies (at local, national, regional, and international levels).

RC3 means of action are using primary and secondary data, collaborations with the academic sector, editorial tools, scientific research events, and training development. RC3 promotes and supports Movement- wide research collaborations and the development of a strong scientific and evidence-based research culture rooted in a people-centred approach. It establishes resources and expertise synergies between its members and the Movement entities.

Our strategy: achieve a greater humanitarian impact based on an evidence-based culture with optimized resources.

The RC3 is continuously working on developing innovative and engaging tools to achieve its objective of making academic knowledge more accessible and of bridging research and humanitarian practices and policies. These Guidelines are one of them.

Active Members of the RC3:

- Argentine Red Cross Humanitarian Observatory (Argentina)
- French Red Cross Foundation (France)
- German Red Cross Research Department (Germany)
- Health in Emergencies – Canadian Red Cross (Canada)
- Humanitarian needs and analysis department - Norwegian Red Cross (Norway)
- International Centre for Humanitarian Affairs (Kenya)
- ICRC Centre for Operational Research and Experience (Switzerland)
- ICRC Review (Switzerland)
- IFRC Asia Pacific Disaster Resilience Centre (South Korea)
- IFRC Caribbean Disaster Risk Management Reference Centre (Barbados)
- IFRC Climate Reference Centre (Netherlands)
- IFRC Global Disaster Preparedness Center (USA)
- IFRC Global First Aid Reference Centre (France)
- IFRC Global Psychosocial Centre (Denmark)
- IFRC Livelihoods Resource Centre (Spain)
- IFRC National Society, Policy and Knowledge development (Switzerland)
- Interamerican Centre for Volunteering Development (Costa Rica)
- PIROI (France – Indian Ocean)
- RCRC Global Migration Lab (Australia)
- Turkish Red Crescent Academy (Turkey)
- 510 Initiative (Netherlands)

Associate Members of the RC3:

- Health and Integration Department - Swiss Red Cross (Switzerland)
- IFRC Regional Reference Center for Disaster Preparedness (El Salvador)

For more information
about the RC3:
http://rc3.ifrc.org/

RC3 science connected for humanity

https://rc3.ifrc.org/