FFI Socio-economic Research Ethics

BACKGROUND

The collection, analysis, use and dissemination of socio-economic data is a key aspect of effective and inclusive conservation. Socio-economic research is a powerful tool that can be used throughout the project lifecycle to better understand the often-diverse values, interests, concerns, power and practices of different groups within and between communities, and other local stakeholders. Understanding local context helps us design projects to achieve conservation goals while minimising negative social impacts and maximising benefits for local people. In project development and implementation, socio-economic data can be used to test the assumptions that underlie our theory of change. Its use in monitoring and evaluation helps us to see how the risks, costs and benefits from conservation are distributed and enables us to adapt our strategies to ensure this distribution is fair.

As socio-economic research involves human subjects, it is fundamental that ethical considerations and principles are embedded so that any moral issues that arise are properly considered and addressed. This guideline is intended to provide teams with a basic understanding of ethical principles and best practices in research. Ethical principles and mechanisms are also embedded in FFI's Social Safeguards position papers[1] and processes.

PRINCIPLES

Integrity, transparency and accountability

Research should be designed and undertaken to ensure **integrity** and **transparency** at all stages of the process. At the research planning stage, it is important to have **clearly-defined aims and uses for the research**, and appropriate methods to achieve these. **Data should only be used for the intended aims and uses**. FFI makes a distinction between data collection to understand trends (research for monitoring, evaluation, learning, and project design purposes) and data collection to inform law enforcement.[2]

Roles and responsibilities should be clearly outlined and documented to ensure **accountability**. Accountability is key for the integrity of research, e.g. in instances of plagiarism or falsifying of information.

Partnerships – with rural communities, government, civil society, and the private sector – are at the heart of FFI's approach[3]. Wherever FFI conducts or otherwise supports research, it is important that **context-specific ethical considerations** are discussed with partners (e.g. local customs or political sensitivities), and any local research guidelines or practices are followed. When local partners are involved, FFI should ensure that partners have the knowledge and capacity to follow ethical research principles.

Research should strive to be **independent** in order to avoid any bias or vested interests. Any unavoidable **conflicts of interest** (e.g. financial or other personal advantage or benefit as a result of a specific research outcome) should be explicitly declared and attempts made to mitigate this. **Sources of funding should always be disclosed** to all participants, unless doing so could pose significant risks to researchers or research participants.

Informed consent

Participants in any research must be **informed and free to take part without coercion or threat of punishment**, and **able to withdraw their consent to participate** at any point during the data collection process. Time should be taken to carefully explain this to participants as there are often unequal power dynamics between participants and project/research teams. Participants should receive enough information about the purpose of the research and use of data collected to be able to decide whether to participate or not. Informed consent must also be secured for the use of photos, video or audio recordings, and participants must be informed of the purpose and use of these.

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[1] See Livelihoods & Governance page on FFI website for FFI's positions on Social Safeguards.
[2] See FFI Position on using informants to tackle wildlife crime
[3] See FFI approach to partnerships

Rights to confidentiality and anonymity

FFI respects **peoples' needs and rights to confidentiality and anonymity**, especially when research involves the collection of sensitive personal data. **Personal information and identifiers should be removed wherever possible**, and **procedures to anonymise data put in place.** The exact procedures will depend on the type of data collected (quantitative or qualitative). Additional procedures for anonymisation could be required in instances where photos, audio or video are used. If any personal data or participant identifiers are retained, these should be **stored securely** (e.g. on OneDrive) to avoid theft or loss, and **destroyed when no longer needed**[4]. This can ideally only be accessed by one staff member designated as a data handler, and any raw data from which a participant can be identified will not be shared with others. In some instances, confidentiality can be waived, for example if a participant specifically requests this. NB sex-disaggregated participants' lists and notes on other socio-economic characteristics of stakeholder groups present (e.g. female members of fisher households, male farmers) still need to be made in order to document good stakeholder engagement practice and compliance with Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) where applicable[5].

Protecting participants and vulnerable peoples

FFI is committed to **protecting the rights, dignity, autonomy, health and safety of research participants**. This is especially important when FFI engages with **vulnerable groups** that may face **social exclusion or stigmatisation**, or have reduced capacity for informed decision-making, including but not limited to: children; and adults with learning difficulties, physical disabilities or mental health problems. Other complex forms of social vulnerability must be considered: social differences (race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class or caste); social status; level of education; access to social networks; proximity to degraded environments; and resource dependence.

Efforts should be made to identify and mitigate any risks to vulnerable groups, for example by ensuring data collection activities are held at safe times and places, and undertaken by people who don't pose a risk to respondents.

Equity and participation

FFI-supported socio-economic research should be used to design conservation projects that minimise negative social impacts and maximise social benefits in terms of **local well-being and equity**. Research should enable the **meaningful participation** of all relevant stakeholder groups, including the most vulnerable and marginalised. FFI endeavours to ensure that **women have equal access to project resources and information, equal participation, and equal opportunities** to benefit from FFI-supported activities[6].

Respect and recognition of diverse knowledge systems

FFI recognises that **local, indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge** – the understandings, practices, skills and philosophies of societies about their natural surroundings – are important facets of conservation to be **respected and recognised**. When this knowledge is **collected, used and disseminated**, indigenous peoples and local communities must **retain inherent and intellectual property rights**. If research is to be published in peer-reviewed journals, additional ethical guidelines should be consulted[7].

Grievance mechanism

All projects undertaking research – and other activities that affect local stakeholders – should put in place **easily accessible complaints procedures**.

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[4] See FFI Data Management Guidelines and Data Management Framework for more details
[5] See FFI Position on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)
[6] See FFI Position on Gender in Conservation
[7] See Oryx's ethical standards and guidelines for authors