TRANSITIONS LAB

TRANSITIONS LAB · FIELD METHOD

Ethics & Consent in the Field

How to do primary research with people, in real contexts, without harming the people it depends on. The Lab's working standard, set out plainly.

v1.0 · 2026 · transitionslab.org

START HERE

How to use this resource

This resource sets out the Lab's working standard for doing primary research with people, informed consent, data protection, power, and the duty of care, and the established frameworks it rests on, including GDPR, the Belmont Report, and the Declaration of Helsinki. It treats ethics as part of the method, not a compliance form.

What this is

A working reference, not a marketing brochure. Read it in order, or jump to the section you need using the contents opposite.

Who it is for

Anyone commissioning or conducting field research: programme teams, researchers, and partners who need people-facing data gathered rigorously and safely. Also funders who need to know their evidence was gathered to a defensible standard.

How to get value from it

01 Start with the principle
Section 1 makes the case that ethical rigour and evidence quality are the same thing, not a trade-off.

02 Learn consent in practice
Sections 2 and 3 cover genuine informed consent and the power dynamics of fieldwork, the parts most often done badly.

03 Understand data protection
Section 4 covers the duty of care to data after the interview, and Section 5 the legal frameworks that set the floor.

04 Hold the standard
Use this as the baseline any field engagement, yours or a partner's, should meet before it begins.

CONTENTS

What is inside

FIELD METHOD

Rigour includes the people you study

Good fieldwork is not only accurate. It is fair to the people who give it their time and their answers. Ethics is not a compliance form filed before the real work begins. It is part of the method, and it shapes the quality of the evidence.

Research that treats respondents as data sources to be extracted from produces worse evidence, not just a worse relationship. People who do not trust the interviewer, or do not understand what they are agreeing to, give guarded or performative answers. The ethical standard and the evidential standard point the same way: treat people with respect, be honest about what you are doing, and the data improves.

4
principles that anchor the standard

1
rule: consent is ongoing, not a signature

0
findings worth harm to a participant

The interview is a relationship

Good fieldwork treats a participant as a person, not a data source. The quality of the conversation, whether it is safe, understood, and freely entered, shapes the quality of the evidence that comes out of it. Ethics and rigour are the same discipline seen from two sides.

THE FOUNDATION

Four principles

Field ethics rests on four principles drawn from the established research-ethics tradition. They are simple to state and demanding to practise.

Respect for persons.
People are participants, not subjects. They decide whether to take part, on the basis of a clear understanding of what participation involves, and they may stop at any time without penalty.

Beneficence.
The research should aim at good and, at minimum, do no harm. Foreseeable risks to participants are identified and minimised before fieldwork begins.

Justice.
The benefits and burdens of research are shared fairly. The people who bear the burden of being studied should not be excluded from its benefits, and the most vulnerable are not the most researched.

Respect for community.
In the field, the individual sits within a community. Research engages local structures with respect, and does not damage the relationships people rely on after the researchers leave.

> The ethical standard and the evidential standard point the same way. Treat people with respect, and the evidence improves.
>
> ETHICS IN THE FIELD

THE CORE PRACTICE

Informed consent, properly done

Consent is the practical heart of research ethics, and it is routinely reduced to a signature on a form nobody read. Done properly, it is a short, honest conversation that a participant genuinely understands.

Informed consent has four components, each of which can fail quietly:

- Information. The participant understands who you are, what the research is for, what taking part involves, how long it takes, and what happens to their answers.
- Comprehension. The information is given in the participant's language, in plain terms, at a literacy level that fits. Comprehension is checked, not assumed.
- Voluntariness. The choice is free of coercion or undue inducement. Payment compensates time; it does not buy consent to something a person would otherwise refuse.
- Ongoing. Consent can be withdrawn at any point, including after the interview. It is a state, not a one-time signature.

KEY POINT

The plain-language test

If a participant cannot explain back to you, in their own words, what the research is for and what will happen to their answers, they have not given informed consent, whatever the form says. The burden is on the researcher to be understood, not on the participant to understand.

THE HARD PART

Power, vulnerability, and context

Most ethical failures in field research are not malice. They are the result of a power difference the researcher did not notice, because it did not affect them.

Power is always present

An outside researcher, often better resourced and connected, carries authority a participant may feel unable to refuse. People may say yes because saying no feels risky, or give the answer they think is wanted. Naming and lowering that gradient is the researcher's job.

Vulnerability is contextual

A participant may be vulnerable through poverty, insecurity, age, gender, disability, or legal status. Vulnerability is not a fixed category; it depends on the topic and the setting. The same question is safe for one person and risky for another.

Three practices lower the risk:

- Interview where the participant is safe and comfortable, not where it is convenient for the researcher. Privacy is part of safety.
- Anticipate distress. Some questions reopen hard experiences. Know when to pause, when to stop, and where to point someone for support if a topic surfaces something serious.
- Do not extract and vanish. Where possible, findings return to the community that produced them, in a form they can use.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Data protection and the duty of care

The duty to a participant does not end when the interview does. The data they gave can still harm them if it is careless handled, and protecting it is an ethical obligation, not only a legal one.

Stage	The standard
Collection	Gather only what the research genuinely needs. Data you do not collect cannot leak.
Identifiers	Separate identifying information from responses; store it separately, or remove it as early as possible.
Storage	Encrypt and access-control personal data. A spreadsheet of named responses on an open laptop is a breach waiting to happen.
Sharing	Report in aggregate or with genuine anonymity. Check that no individual is identifiable by combination, a small group plus a location can identify a person.
Retention	Keep personal data only as long as needed, then delete it. Indefinite retention is indefinite risk.

Where a legal framework applies, the GDPR in Europe, national data-protection law elsewhere, it sets a floor, not a ceiling. The ethical standard is often higher than the legal minimum, particularly where participants are outside the jurisdiction whose law protects them.

THE BACKING FRAMEWORKS

What this standard rests on

The Lab's field-ethics standard is not invented. It rests on established research-ethics instruments and data-protection law. These are the references a serious ethics protocol cites, and the ones the Lab works within.

Framework	What it governs, and why it matters here
The Belmont Report (1979)	The foundational statement of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice in research with human subjects. The source of the principles in this guide.
Declaration of Helsinki	The world medical association's ethical principles for research involving humans; the reference point for informed consent and risk minimisation.
GDPR (EU 2016/679)	The General Data Protection Regulation. Governs lawful basis, consent, data minimisation, and participants' rights over their personal data in the EU and for EU data subjects.
National data-protection law	Local law (for example Kenya's Data Protection Act 2019, Indonesia's PDP Law 2022) sets the applicable floor in each field site.
The Menlo Report (2012)	Extends Belmont to information and communication technology research; relevant to digital and data-heavy fieldwork.
OECD-DAC / ethics review	Where research informs development or public funding, ethical review and the DAC principles apply.

Law sets the floor; ethics sets the standard. Compliance with the GDPR or a national act is necessary but not sufficient. The Lab holds to the higher of the applicable legal minimum and the ethical principles in this guide, particularly where participants are outside the jurisdiction whose law would protect them.

FOR EU-FUNDED RESEARCH

The Horizon Europe ethics requirements

A distinct and demanding regime

Research funded by the European Union carries its own ethics regime. For any project the Lab conducts within a Horizon Europe or ESF+ consortium, these requirements are contractual, not optional, and the Lab is built to meet them.

Ethics is treated by the European Commission as integral to research quality, not a box-ticking exercise. Every project funded under Horizon Europe passes through the Ethics Appraisal Procedure set out in Chapter 13 of the Programme Guide, and the Commission promotes an 'ethics by design' approach in which ethical considerations are built into the research from the proposal stage rather than bolted on afterwards.

FOR PROJECTS FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION

Independent measurement designed to satisfy funder review, survive audit, and tell the project team something true, gathered to the ethical standard the Grant Agreement requires.

Two Commission instruments anchor the regime. The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA) sets the principles of reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability. The Commission's guidance Ethics and data protection and the ethics self-assessment every applicant completes translate those principles into concrete obligations for projects involving human participants.

FOR EU-FUNDED RESEARCH

What the requirements actually demand

For a project involving human participants, fieldwork, interviews, surveys, or observation, the ethics self-assessment and appraisal require the following, each of which the Lab builds into its method.

Requirement	What it means in practice
Informed consent	The Commission calls consent 'the cornerstone of research ethics': participants must understand the research, their role, and any risks before giving express, usually written, permission.
Ethics committee approval	Research is submitted to a recognised ethics committee or institutional review board; approval is secured before fieldwork begins.
Data protection by design	A lawful basis under the GDPR, data minimisation, and, where risk is high, a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA).
Vulnerable participants	Extra safeguards where participants may be vulnerable or where a power imbalance exists, including assent alongside guardian consent for minors.
Non-EU data transfer	Transfer of participants' data outside the EU should rest on their informed consent, or on a clearly stated alternative legal basis.
Ethics advisor / board	For complex cases, an ethics advisor or board may be appointed, with documentation kept on file for audit.

KEY POINT

Why this suits the Lab's work

Much of the Lab's fieldwork happens outside the EU, with EU data subjects or EU funding involved. That is exactly the situation the non-EU-transfer and dual-compliance rules are written for: meeting both EU standards and local frameworks at once. It is a demanding standard, and the Lab's field method is designed around it.

FOR EU-FUNDED RESEARCH

How the Lab delivers against them

The Lab acts as the independent measurement partner on EU-funded projects, and carries the ethics obligations that role implies. In practice, this means the following.

The Lab's commitment	In the engagement
Ethics designed in from the proposal	We build the consent procedure, data-management plan, and risk assessment at proposal stage, aligned with 'ethics by design'.
Consent that travels	Consent instruments adapted to language, literacy, and context, recorded and revocable, meeting the Commission's standard rather than the local minimum.
GDPR-grade data handling	Lawful basis, minimisation, secure storage, and a DPIA where processing is high-risk, with a clear basis for any cross-border transfer.
Audit-ready documentation	Consent declarations, approvals, and protocols kept on file so the consortium can satisfy Commission review and audit.
Independent reporting	Findings reported honestly, including inconvenient ones, which is itself an integrity requirement of the Code of Conduct.

The result is evidence a coordinator can defend. Gathered to the Commission's ethical standard, documented for audit, and independent of the project it measures, it is exactly the assurance an EU consortium needs from its measurement partner.

> › For the Lab's wider European offer, see the European Impact Tracking and ESF+ Social Innovation services at transitionslab.org.

HOW THE LAB WORKS

The standard in practice

The Lab treats ethics as inseparable from method. Consent is recorded and genuine, data is protected by design, local researchers who know the context lead the fieldwork, and findings return to the communities that produced them wherever possible. This is not an overhead on the research; it is part of what makes the evidence trustworthy.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

The bibliography

The Lab's field-ethics standard rests on established instruments and scholarship. The core sources, for those who wish to go to the originals:

Foundational ethics instruments

National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects (1979). The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

World Medical Association (2013). Declaration of Helsinki: Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects. JAMA, 310(20), 2191-2194.

Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (2016). International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans. Geneva: CIOMS.

Dittrich, D., & Kenneally, E. (2012). The Menlo Report: Ethical Principles Guiding Information and Communication Technology Research. US Department of Homeland Security.

Data protection and EU research ethics

European Parliament and Council (2016). Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation). Official Journal of the European Union, L119.

European Commission (2021). Ethics and Data Protection. Horizon Europe guidance note. Directorate-General for Research and Innovation.

European Commission (2021). How to Complete Your Ethics Self-Assessment. Horizon Europe / Digital Europe guidance, v2.0.

European Commission (2024). Horizon Europe Programme Guide, Chapter 13: Ethics Appraisal Procedure.

ALLEA (2023). The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (revised edition). Berlin: All European Academies.

REFERENCES, CONTINUED

Fieldwork, power, and practice

Beyond the formal instruments, the Lab's field standard draws on the qualitative-research and development-practice literatures, which address the realities of consent, power, and vulnerability in the settings where the Lab actually works.

Fieldwork, power, and research practice

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and 'ethically important moments' in research. Qualitative Inquiry, 10(2), 261-280.

Bhattacharya, K. (2007). Consenting to the consent form: What are the fixed and fluid understandings? Qualitative Inquiry, 13(8), 1095-1115.

Chambers, R. (1997). Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C., & Pittaway, E. (2007). Beyond 'do no harm': The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research. Journal of Refugee Studies, 20(2), 299-319.

Fassin, D. (2006). The end of ethnography as collateral damage of ethical regulation? American Ethnologist, 33(4), 522-524.

Marshall, P. A. (2007). Ethical Challenges in Study Design and Informed Consent for Health Research in Resource-Poor Settings. Geneva: World Health Organization (TDR).

National data-protection statutes referenced

Kenya Data Protection Act (2019); Indonesia Personal Data Protection Law (2022). These are illustrative of the local frameworks the Lab works within; the applicable local law governs each field site and should be identified and checked before fieldwork begins, in addition to, not instead of, the standards set out in this guide.

KEY POINT

On using this bibliography

The instruments in the previous list set the floor; the works here inform how the floor is met in practice. Neither replaces qualified legal advice where data-protection law applies, nor institutional ethics review where it is required.

WORKING WITH TRANSITIONS LAB

From standard to protocol

This guide sets out the Lab's working standard for ethical fieldwork. A live study turns that standard into a protocol built for your context.

IN THIS FREE RESOURCE	IN AN ENGAGEMENT, WE GO FURTHER
The four principles and the consent components.	› A written consent process in the right languages, with comprehension checks designed for the setting.
The power and vulnerability practices.	› A context-specific risk assessment, and researchers who know the community and its sensitivities.
The data-protection standard, in general.	› A data-management plan compliant with the applicable law, from collection to deletion.
The duty of care, as a principle.	› Findings returned to participants, and a genuine anonymity review before anything is published.

The standard here is what good fieldwork requires of anyone; an engagement is where it is built into a study designed for your people and place.

If a decision in your work turns on evidence of what a technology or programme actually does to real people, we are glad to talk it through, with no obligation. transitionslab.org