The TRUST CODE SUPPLEMENT

A Global Code of Conduct for Research in Fragile Settings

PREPARED

RAPID. EFFECTIVE. ETHICAL.

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Research has the potential to help address humanity's challenges. This is especially vital in fragile settings such as disaster-affected areas, conflict or post-conflict zones, or high-crime informal settlements. In these contexts, where people often face threats, severe deprivation and limited access to basic services, their immediate focus is on survival, safety and wellbeing, rather than contributing to research.

While *The TRUST Code – A Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Partnerships in Research (2018)* supports efforts to overcome the systemic legacies of exclusion and unfairness in international research, fragile settings pose unique and complex challenges that require additional care and consideration. Accordingly, the TRUST Code forms the foundation for research in fragile settings, while this Supplement furthers its applicability in these contexts.

This *TRUST Code Supplement – A Global Code of Conduct for Research in Fragile Settings* (2025) is based on literature reviews, scoping reviews in English and German, and a survey study. The results were refined through extensive consultations with stakeholders.

The code:
- presumes adherence to the TRUST Code.
- provides support across all research disciplines.
- presents concise statements in clear language to encourage access.
- combines guidance on research ethics and research integrity.
- links each guidance article to the value of care, respect, fairness and honesty.

CARE

Article 1
The **physical integrity, mental health and safety** of people in fragile settings should not be worsened through their involvement in research.

Article 2
Researchers must familiarise themselves with ongoing **rescue and relief operations** at the research site to ensure that their activities do not hamper or disrupt these efforts.

Article 3
Researchers must anticipate the risk of **retraumatising** research participants and local support teams (e.g., interpreters). Where retraumatisation is a possibility, trauma- informed practices (such as the appropriate training of researchers) should be implemented.

Article 4
Prior to the start of any field activities, researchers should be supported by their institution, wherever possible, to develop **risk management plans** to protect the physical integrity, mental wellbeing and safety of researchers, research participants and support teams. These plans should be tailored to the specific environment and, where feasible, include input from local collaborators.

Article 5
Research ethics committees should engage supportively with researchers in seeking ways to facilitate responsible research in fragile settings.

CARE(cont)

Article 6
It is the researchers' obligation to ensure that potential research participants understand that research activities are separate from humanitarian work ('**humanitarian misconception**'). Where members of the research team have roles in both areas, they must clearly explain the distinction to potential research participants.

Article 7
Conducting research in unstable environments can present ongoing challenges. Researchers must ensure that **adjustments to the research protocol** – in response to changing conditions – are locally appropriate and maintain the integrity of the research.

Article 8
The potential for **misuse of research *data*** can be high for research undertaken in fragile settings, especially in areas of conflict. Additional data security measures must be implemented including, wherever possible, methods that avoid the processing of personal data.

Article 9
The potential for **misuse of research *findings*** can be high for research undertaken in fragile settings, especially in areas of conflict. Dissemination should prioritise the needs and safety of local communities by, for instance, avoiding the release of information that might escalate local conflict.

RESPECT

Article 10
Where **local ethics review**, i.e., review within the host country, is not possible, justification for undertaking research without local ethics approval must be provided to the research ethics committee that approves the research.

Article 11
To avoid **cultural misunderstandings**, researchers working in fragile settings should collaborate with others who are familiar with the cultural context (e.g., senior researchers, mentors or community researchers) and liaise as closely as possible with local actors.

Article 12
Where standard **informed consent processes** are impractical or too risky, **reasonable adaptations** should be discussed and agreed with the relevant research ethics committee(s) and local collaborators.

Article 13
Local knowledge and community acceptance are essential to conducting research that is respectful and not patronising. Researchers should ensure that research participants and local communities have opportunities to contribute local knowledge and perspectives meaningfully.

FAIRNESS

Article 14
Wherever possible, and in particular in internationally funded research, **local stakeholders** should be included in **research decision-making** to ensure that the focus and implementation of research are not driven solely by external research actors.

Article 15
Communication between research teams is essential to avoid the **unnecessary duplication of studies**, which can lead to a waste of resources and excessive burdens on some participants and communities and the underrepresentation of others.

Article 16
Research participants' time is precious when sustaining life and health takes priority. It is therefore important that the envisaged research promises to be of good enough quality to lead to meaningful results. If the **integrity of the research** is likely to be compromised, people must not be burdened with participation.

Article 17
In extremely fragile situations, payments or other benefits for participation in research can pose a significant risk of **undue inducement**. A balance must be achieved between avoiding undue inducement and preventing the exploitation of research participants and local members of the research team (e.g., gatekeepers, interpreters and drivers).

FAIRNESS(cont)

Article 18
Where local members of the research team e.g., gatekeepers, interpreters and field researchers lack adequate **protection mechanisms such as insurance**, researchers from high-income settings should urge their institution to extend the protections they enjoy to the whole team.

Article 19
Providing feedback to participants is good participatory practice but can be challenging in unstable environments. Researchers should plan for this in advance by, for instance, informing participants where they will be able to access results (e.g., via a website).

HONESTY

Article 20
Where research would require **collusion** with non-research actors through **corruption**, the research must not take place.

Article 21
Researchers must be wary of raising **unrealistic expectations** among all local stakeholders. Managing expectations is a critical aspect of conducting research in fragile settings.

Article 22
Ahead of any research, researchers must clarify their options for handling **unexpected findings or human rights abuses** encountered during fieldwork. These options must be adapted to each local situation.

Article 23
Researchers who work in fragile settings may encounter **conflicts of interest** between, for instance, a research aim set by external funders (e.g., the aim of understanding the causes of migration from conflict areas, where the funder is a government that wants to reduce immigration) and the prime research needs of research participants. Researchers must ensure full transparency about potential conflicts of interest to avoid the exploitation of research participants.

The code was drafted as part of the PREPARED project under the lead author Prof. Doris Schroeder.
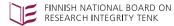
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