



# SUMERNET Ethics Guide

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# SUMERNET Ethics Guide

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Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) is a long running research to policy program that has always enacted the highest ethical standards in its practices and outcomes. This guide provides clarity to what that good ethical practice is and the six principles it includes; Integrity, Respect, Responsibility, Competence, Social Equity, And Ethical Balance. It concludes with references and further readings to learn and know more.

**SUMERNET has a mission** *“to improve the policies and practices in reducing water insecurity by conducting collaborative research, engaging in the policy process, and promoting scientifically sound research and innovation while considering gender and social equality, human rights, conflict sensitivity, environmental integrity and poverty reduction in the Mekong Region”.*

**SUMERNET’s mission can only be achieved if the network maintains the highest ethical standards throughout all aspects of its work.**

## Building a culture of good ethical practice

How we do research, how we engage with each other and all participants of the research, especially boundary partners and communities, how we select the places we work in, how we communicate results, and how we build awareness and capacity is important. Furthermore, does our intervention leave the stakeholders we engaged with and outcomes produced in a better place than before we started? – every action shows the values and ethics of our work. In SUMERNET those values are unified around our mission.

This document articulates principles for good ethical practice that all SUMERNET colleagues should reflect upon in their activities. We acknowledge that ethics theories and principles can vary greatly depending on the field of research, but also on the worldview of the persons developing the guidance. This document is informed by both ‘Western’ and ‘indigenous’ paradigms of research and ethics. While there is a wide variety of perspectives of the exact wording in ethical principles, this guides takes a magnanimous and inclusive approach tying together good practice shared across the network. In addition, the guide discusses the present day, but acknowledges that good ethical practical practice has implications across time and space and these considerations should be part of how SUMERNET operates.



## Ethical Principles for SUMERNET

Good ethical practice and research, no matter the subject, should adhere to the following principles.

1. INTEGRITY
2. RESPECT
3. RESPONSIBILITY
4. COMPETENCE
5. SOCIAL EQUITY
6. ETHICAL BALANCE

### 1. Integrity

A commitment to the genuine search for knowledge and understanding, as shown in honest research conduct and trust in the research outcome. This is particularly important in development work, where organizations may have vested interests in research or assessment findings. Integrity also encompasses the dissemination and communication of results, not only to research participants but more broadly, in ways that permit scrutiny and contribute to knowledge, and that preserve and protect the trust participants place in researchers.

#### Key questions to consider:

**Q1.** Does SUMERNET enable us to do research and engagement to the best of our ability, and do we always show integrity in every activity undertaken?

**Q2.** Does our research add to the search for genuine, real knowledge, and are we prepared to report and communicate findings accurately, and honestly and transparently?

## 2. Respect

A recognition of each human being's intrinsic value – treat people as you would like to be treated; seek to understand others and appreciate how they see things. Respect involves honouring the rights, privacy, dignity, entitlements, autonomy, agency and diversity of those contributing to a research, engagement or communications process. Respect also requires prior knowledge and mindfulness of the culture, values, customs, beliefs and practices, both individual and collective, of those you are engaging in your activities, and how they may be different from your own. Finally, it is important to respect the natural environment, community, and connectivity with each other through knowledge, research, and the environment.

### Key questions to consider:

- Q1.** Do we know enough about the study area and context to show respect to all participants and stakeholders at all times? If not, how can we learn and account for local culture, values, customs, beliefs and practices?
- Q2.** Are we respecting all human rights? If there are human rights limitations imposed, have they been fully explained to all informants and participants?
- Q3.** When we engage with SUMERNET activities do we seek to build trusted relationships across the network, showing respect to all those engaged?

## 3. Responsibility

An acknowledgement of our contribution to expected and observed outcomes, and of our responsibility as researchers to people, teams and wider society. To fulfil this principle, activities must be of value and use to participants, their community, and country, and be designed to minimize risks and harm. Participants must always be duly informed of potential benefits and risks of the activity. In a development context, the research process itself should be viewed as an 'intervention', with its own impacts and consequences, and as such, should carry a commitment to support empowerment and participation and to go beyond the concept of "do no harm" to also "do some good." This means anticipating and mitigating risk and harm in all its forms, as well as promoting social justice and social responsibility through our work. A critical aspect of this principle is being aware of the importance of informed consent and anonymity of participants, protecting confidential communications and ensuring transparency of research methods, findings, and policy implications. Finally, research that involves minors and vulnerable groups demands special application of several ethical principles.

### Key questions to consider:

- Q1.** Will our activities or research process 'harm' participants or research partners? If so, what can we do to deliver 'no harm'?
- Q2.** Could our research findings expose vested interests and potentially jeopardize the team, participants or informants? If so, how can we ensure no harm comes to those involved from the dissemination or communication of findings?
- Q3.** Have we gained and documented informed consent from all of our informants and participants?

## 4. Competence

To undertake work outside your specialization carries the risk that you could fail. A strong relationship exists between competence and ethical behaviour. When you talk or act as if you can do something, then the qualities of honesty and integrity dictate

that you can actually do it. It is dishonest for anyone to say they can do something when they cannot. Most professionals have specialized knowledge, ability, and skills, making them highly competent in a narrow set of areas. Therefore, competence is important to consultation, negotiation and the accumulated mutual understanding continuously developed with experts and stakeholders.

**Key questions to consider:**

**Q1.** Do we have the skills to deliver the tasks in SUMERNET? If not, where can we get them or who can help our team?

**Q2.** When discussing our role and research findings are we competent to address significant matters of water insecurity? If not, how can we clarify our competence and be credible?

## **5. Social equity – procedural and outcome**

A fair process for the recruitment of research participants and boundary partners; no unfair burden of participation on particular groups; and fair distribution of and access to the benefits of participation in the research or activity. Social equity must ensure that there is no exploitation of participants in the conduct of research, and instead, provide active protection of participants' well-being. This principle involves treating all participants with dignity and respect, regardless of gender, age, race, ethnicity, ability, religion and culture. It requires understanding of existing power relations, so that broader principles of human rights and addressing injustice can be upheld. It also involves ensuring that all relevant social groups are actively included in research and that attempts are made to avoid further marginalization, discrimination and exclusion of under-represented social groups. Finally, justice requires making your findings and recommendations accessible to participants in a timely, clear manner, and in a format that is meaningful for participants.

**Key questions to consider:**

**Q1.** Does my research fairly represent the people, community and society that I am studying? Is anyone left out? If so, why and what can I do about it?

**Q2.** How can I disseminate and communication my research findings and recommendations with everyone that participated, and not just with my peers or boundary partners?

**Q3.** How can I ensure that beyond the project life/duration there are no harmful implications of the project?

## **6. Ethical balance**

A commitment to your conception of the 'good society', but without violating the conception of the good society held by those involved in and affected by your work, activities or research outcomes. Acknowledge that our ethical principles may not be the same ethical principles held by others with an involvement or stake in the research.

**Key questions to consider:**

**Q1.** Have we considered how our ethical principles may differ from the principles of those around us, including who we are working with and for?

**Q2.** What steps can be taken to implement these ethical principles in ways that are respectful to all views and values?

## Responsibilities for implementing ethical conduct in SUMERNET

**Each and every one** of us are responsible for implementing and upholding ethical practice in SUMERNET. It is the professional responsibility of all individuals and institutions involved in SUMERNET to uphold the highest ethical standards, and to identify areas of concern. The SUMERNET Steering Committee and Secretariat are available to work with all partners, grantees, researchers and participants to address any concerns – **but it is everybody's responsibility** to enact good ethical practice and research.

Specific roles in the process rest with:

**Project leaders** – responsible for the project and all its team implementing and upholding the highest level of ethics in research.

**SUMERNET Secretariat** – responsible for providing clear guidance, knowledge and training (when appropriate) for S4A to deliver the highest ethical practices. The Secretariat is also in charge of reviewing and approving the clearance of ethics process for the project, in accordance with a decision made by the SUMERNET Steering Committee.

**SUMERNET Steering Committee** – responsible for providing guidance and support in delivering SUMERNET with the highest ethical considerations.

## Ethics context for research in Mekong

SUMERNET is a network owned by its members. Currently its mission guides its activities, however research across the globe has ethical standards. **Any project that is funded by specific bodies may have ethical guidance for consideration. Any research that is undertaken on the ground has national research ethics policy or guidance that must be met.** Below are a set of links to helpful resources that SUMERNET participants must be aware of if receiving or doing funding through the network.

- Funding from OECD countries (e.g. Sweden) should follow the OECD Research Ethics guidelines that can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.1787/23074957>
- Every nation has different and separate 'Research Ethics' rules across the Mekong. You must know and adhere to each country's requirements. An older document that summarises national ethics approaches (2017) is 'Ethics Approval Processes: Asia' by Research for Development Impact Network found at ([https://rdinetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Ethics-Approval-Processes\\_Asia.compressed.pdf](https://rdinetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Ethics-Approval-Processes_Asia.compressed.pdf)). Some direct links to national ethics processes are found below, please help you colleagues and share updated links and processes with each other and the Secretariat to update this guide:

Country	Link	
<b>Cambodia</b>	Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for National Ethics Committee for Health Research (NECHR)	<a href="http://nechr.org.kh/beta/camhrp/public/Cam_IRBs_HR_SOP_eng.pdf">http://nechr.org.kh/beta/camhrp/public/Cam_IRBs_HR_SOP_eng.pdf</a>
<b>Laos</b>	Lao P.D.R. Health Research Ethics Committee	<a href="http://www.laohrp.com/index.php/hrp/about/index/committees">http://www.laohrp.com/index.php/hrp/about/index/committees</a>
<b>Thailand</b>	Thailand ethical guidelines for research on human subjects – 2007	<a href="http://www.fercit.org/file/Guideline_English_version.pdf">http://www.fercit.org/file/Guideline_English_version.pdf</a>
	National policy and guidelines for human research – Thailand 2015	<a href="https://sp.mahidol.ac.th/pdf/ref/National_Policy_Guidelines_for_Human_Research2015.pdf">https://sp.mahidol.ac.th/pdf/ref/National_Policy_Guidelines_for_Human_Research2015.pdf</a>
	Researcher’s Code of Ethics – The National Research Council of Thailand (1998)	<a href="https://www.siit.tu.ac.th/upload_images/file/PDF%20FacultyStaff/F1.4%20(5.18a)Researcher%20Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf">https://www.siit.tu.ac.th/upload_images/file/PDF%20FacultyStaff/F1.4%20(5.18a)Researcher%20Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf</a>
<b>Myanmar</b>	Myanmar National Health Research Policy (2017)	<a href="https://www.dmr.gov.mm/hp.php">https://www.dmr.gov.mm/hp.php</a>
	Myanmar Health Research Registry	<a href="http://www.mhrr-mohs.com/">http://www.mhrr-mohs.com/</a>
<b>Vietnam</b>	Dispatch No. 2865/KHTN-KHCN on 05/05/2016 of VNU-HUS on Comments on the draft guidelines for research ethics in VNU-HUS (in Vietnamese).	<a href="http://www.hus.vnu.edu.vn/en/node/57638">http://www.hus.vnu.edu.vn/en/node/57638</a>
	Promulgation of Regulations on Organization and Operation of Ethical Evaluation Committee in Biomedical Research of the Ministry of Health, Period 2012- 2017, Chapters I-III (2012):	<a href="https://clinregs.niaid.nih.gov/sites/default/files/documents/vietnam/Decision-No460-QD-BYT.pdf">https://clinregs.niaid.nih.gov/sites/default/files/documents/vietnam/Decision-No460-QD-BYT.pdf</a>

- Many universities and research institutes have research ethics procedures that will need to be met to undertake research. Some of these are only for human medical research, others for animal research, human subjects, etc., ensure research teams know their local institutions responsibilities for ethical research. For example Chulalongkorn University's ethics can be found here: <https://www.research.chula.ac.th/home-eng/irb-2/>
- Publishing your research in some international journals requires that you have attained and implemented research ethical standards or principles. Adhering to the ethics principles outlined in these guidelines is a minimum requirement along with meeting, funding, national and institutional requirements. For example see ethics requirements for Nature: <https://www.nature.com/nature-research/editorial-policies/ethics-and-biosecurity>
- Academic work has investigated the issue of ethics from multiple perspectives, some good references include: Mintrom, Michael. 2010. "Doing Ethical Policy Analysis." At: <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p80991/pdf/book.pdf?referer=375>, and 'Research Ethics in the Real World' at: <https://policy.bristol-universitypress.co.uk/resources/kara-ethics/research-ethics-in-the-real-world>
- Indigenous research methods publications offer a post-colonial paradigm different from 'Western' theories. See Chilisa B (2012) Indigenous Research Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/indigenous-research-methodologies/oclc/692291248> , Stark, L. (2012) Behind closed doors: IRBs and the making of ethical research. Chicago: University of Chicago Press., <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/B/bo12182576.html>, and Wilson S and Wilson A (2013) Neyo way in ik issi: a family practice of Indigenist research informed by land. In Mertens D, Cram F, Chilisa B (eds) Indigenous Pathways into Social Research: Voices of a New Generation, 333-352. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315426693>

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