Annex C: Coram International Ethical Guidelines for Field Research – (Updated September 2020)

Each research project carried out by Coram International at Coram Children's Legal Centre is ethically reviewed and an ethical protocol is developed that is tailored and relevant to each piece of research. The reason for this is that different types of research will raise unique, context-specific ethical issues and it will be necessary to identify and address these issues on a project-specific basis. However, the Guidelines below should be applied when carrying out all project-specific ethical reviews and when tailoring project-specific guidance.

1. Application of Ethical Guidelines

Child: For the purposes of these Guidelines, a child will be considered to be a person below the age of 18 years, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 1).

The Ethical Guidelines apply to all field research carried out by Coram International and organisations and individuals carrying out research on behalf of Coram International. The Guidelines do not apply to the consideration and selection of research projects.[1] They apply to: methodology selection and design; risk assessment and risk mitigation measures and the development of ethical protocols and tools; the design of data collection tools; the collection, storage, collation and analysis of data; and the publication of research.

Note on research in light of Covid19: These ethical guidelines continue to apply during the Covid19 pandemic, but all field research must take into account the particular ethical risks and considerations posed by the Covid19 pandemic. This includes the risks and ethical implications of travel and of different forms of data collection. Primary concerns include the risks of transmission, the ability to protect children during virtual interviewing, the mental health and wellbeing of researchers and research participants and the consequent impact on the reliability of the data (which can undermine the justification for research in the first place).

Information and advice have been compiled by several agencies, including UNICEF and academic institutions:

UNICEF, *Ethical Considerations for Evidence Generation Involving Children on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, April 2020, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/DP%202020-01%20CL.pdf.

UCL, *Guidance for research and ethical approval in light of the COVID-19 pandemic*, March 2020, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/integrity/ethics/research-human-participants/guidance-research-and-ethical-approval-light-covid-19-pandemic.

The research project lead/team should consult the documents linked above, as well as guidance provided by our local partners on the situation and context when finalising the research protocols for each study.

[1] The reason for this is that, as consultants, Coram International's involvement in a research project typically starts at the point at which the research project, including its scope, focus and basic methods, have already been reviewed and necessary approvals received by the commissioning client. For projects initiated by Coram International, however, it is suggested that a harm / benefit analysis be carried out as part of the ethical review process.

2. Ethics review

All research project methodologies and data collection, collation and analysis tools must be approved by the Director of Coram International, the Research Manager or another senior researcher, before they are deployed. The Director, Research Manager or senior researcher will review research methodologies and tools in light of these Guidelines and best practice, and make revisions accordingly, which will then be incorporated into revised methodologies and tools.

In addition, ethical review may be carried out where required by the client and / or the particular research project.

3. Selecting researchers

Coram International takes steps to ensure that all external researchers have the necessary experience to carry out the research required. Where necessary, training will be provided to external researchers by Coram International staff on the rationale and methods for the data collection, good practice guidance on data collection methods and on the application and administration of the ethical protocol and tools.

4. Guiding principles

All research projects will be subject to the following ethical principles.

4.1 *Do no harm and best interests of the child*

It is of paramount importance that Researchers protect the physical, social and psychological wellbeing, and the rights, interests and privacy of research participants. The welfare and best interests of the participants are the primary consideration in methodology design and data collection. This applies to adult and child research participants.

In relation to child participants, all research is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 3.1 which states: "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

The 'do no harm' principal applies throughout the research process, including in the selection and recruitment of research participants, the development of the research methodology and tools and in the analysis, reporting and publication of data and findings.

It is the obligation of the Researcher to identify and avoid harmful effects. If Researchers identify that they are causing harm to a participant/s, the research will be stopped and the appropriate manager or designated lead informed.

Particular care will be taken to ensure that questions are asked sensitively and in a child-friendly, manner that is appropriate to the age, gender, ethnicity and social background of the participants. Clear language will be used which avoids victimisation, blame and judgement. Where it is clear that the interview is having a negative effect on a participant, the interview will be stopped. Any child protection or other safeguarding concerns are identified and dealt with appropriately (see 4.8, below).

Children will be provided with the opportunity to participate in data collection with a trusted adult or friend if this would make them feel more at ease. Researchers should identify staff at institutions (e.g. schools, community groups, detention centre staff) that are available to accompany participants, if requested.

Interviews may cover particularly sensitive or traumatic material, and it is important to ensure that participants feel empowered and not solely like victims. Interviews should finish on a 'positive or empowering note' (e.g. through asking questions about what would improve the situation of children in the relevant study sample). This helps to ensure that children do not leave the interview focusing on past experiences of abuse. Where children reveal past experiences of violence or abuse, researchers will convey empathy, but will not show shock or anger, as this can be harmful to children who have experienced violence. The disclosure should be discussed with the designated manager/ lead for the project.

Special measures may be needed when carrying out data collection remotely or virtually (e.g. through Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype etc.). In these cases, particularly where research participants are children, it may be necessary to ensure interactions take place in the physical presence of an adult with which the child has a good rapport (e.g. a parent, where appropriate, or a social worker) in order to mitigate potential trauma caused by the interaction and provide immediate support to the participant where required.

4.2 ***Inclusion and non-discrimination***

The research design and process will adhere to the principle of non-discrimination, as required by article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means that all children have an equal right to participate in the research without discrimination or bias. Specific groups of children will often be targeted for inclusion in a research project; however, this will only be done where and to the extent required for the purposes of the research.

The selection and recruitment of research participants will be done in an inclusive way and a manner which avoids entrenching existing vulnerability, inequality or marginalisation of particular groups. Research methods and tools must enable the participation by diverse groups of persons.

4.3 ***Data collection must be necessary***

It is important to ensure that unnecessary intrusion into the lives of participants is avoided. Researchers must ensure that the data being collected is necessary to address the research questions specific to each project. Data collection for extraneous purposes must be avoided.

4.4 ***Researchers must not raise participants' expectations***

Researchers must carefully explain the nature and purpose of the study to participants, and the role that the data will play in the research project. Participants should also be informed that the purpose of the Researcher's visit is not to offer any direct assistance. This is necessary to avoid raising expectations of participants that the Researcher will be unable to meet.

4.5 ***Ensuring cultural appropriateness***

Researchers must ensure that data collection methods and tools are culturally appropriate to the particular country, ethnic, gender and religious context in which they are used. Researchers should ensure, where possible, that data collection tools are reviewed by a researcher living in the country context in which research is taking place. Where possible, data collection tools should be piloted on a small sample of participants to identify content that lacks cultural appropriateness and adjustments should be made accordingly.

4.6 ***Voluntary participation***

Researchers must ensure that participation in research is on a voluntary basis. This extends to particular questions, and researchers must ensure that participants understand that they are not required to answer questions should they not wish to do so. Researchers will explain to participants in clear, age-appropriate language that participants are not required to participate in the study, that

they do not need to answer all the questions they are asked, and that they may stop participating in the research at any time. Researchers will carefully explain that refusal to participate will not result in any negative consequences.

Where possible and appropriate, participants may be provided with material reimbursement, and / or compensation for time spent contributing to the research. However, the use of material reimbursement / compensation (whether and how it should be given and what form it will take) will be dependent on the cultural context in which research is being carried out. This should be informed by consultation with stakeholders and consideration of what is appropriate in a given context. Researchers must be careful to ensure that compensation / reimbursement does not unduly influence, pressure or coerce children to participate in the research, and that their consent is freely given.

4.7 *Informed consent*

Researchers must ensure that all participants consent to their involvement in the research. Consent must be informed, given voluntarily and is renegotiable throughout the research activity. In the case of children, whether consent can be given independently (i.e. without a consenting adult) will depend on the context and the child's capacity (see next paragraph).

At the start of all data collection, research participants will be informed of the purpose and nature of the study, their contribution, and how the data collected from them will be used in the study. Special care must be taken to ensure that especially vulnerable children give informed consent or that it is sought. In this context, vulnerable children may include children with disabilities or children with learning difficulties or mental health issues. Informed consent could be obtained through the use of alternative, tailored communication tools and / or with the help of adults that work with the participants.

Consent must be indicated through an explicit act – either verbally and recorded by researchers or through an information and consent form. The form that the act of consent takes will be dependent on the context and informed by consultation with stakeholders. Information and consent forms will be used where this would be appropriate and not intimidating for participants. The information and consent form should explain, in clear, accessible, age appropriate language, the nature of the study, the participant's expected contribution and the fact that participation is entirely voluntary. Researchers should talk participants though the consent form and ensure that they understand it.

However, in some cultural contexts written consent may be inappropriate, intimidating or highly problematic, if written practices are different or hold other meanings, for example, related to deception, domination or abuse. Flexible means of providing information and signifying consent are essential for participants who are not able or willing to use written methods. Signing consent forms can be problematic and/or intimidating for those who are not physically able to, and populations who are not literate or are particularly vulnerable. In situations where children or parents do not provide written consent, it is important to have a process for recording and, where possible, witnessing / verifying that the child appears to have given their consent freely.Researchers will explain the nature and purpose of the study, the participant's expected contribution, and the way the data they contribute will be used, and request the verbal consent of the participants to conduct research and then record that permission has been granted. Special effort must be made to explain the nature and purpose of the study and the participant's contribution in clear, age-appropriate language. Researchers will request the participant to relay the key information back to them to ensure that they have understood it. Participants will also be advised that the information they provide will be held in strict confidence (see below, 4.7).

In relation to child participants, **whether consent is also given by a parent or guardian** will be a matter to be decided in relation to the context of the research and the child's capacity. Ability for children to consent independently may be regulated by law which may require the consent of a parent or carer for a child under a certain age. In contexts or situations not guided by law, the decision on whether consent from parents / carers is needed will be made on a case-by-case basis, depending on the nature and context of the research and the age and capacity of participants, and depending on the relevant legal provisions in the country in which research is being conducted.

4.8 *Anonymity and confidentiality*

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity is of the upmost importance. The identity of all research participants will be kept confidential throughout the process of data collection as well as in the analysis and writing up study findings. The following measures will be used to ensure anonymity:

- Interviews will take place in a secure, private location (such as a separate room or corner or outside space) which ensures that the participant's answers are not overheard;
- Researchers will not record the name of participants and will ensure that names are not recorded on any documents containing collected data, including on transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions;
- Where use of personal computers is necessary, researchers will delete electronic records of data once transferred to CCLC for storage;
- CCLC will store all data on a secure, locked server, to which persons who are not employed by the Centre cannot gain access; and
- Research findings will be presented in such a way so as to ensure that individuals are not able to be identified.

All participants will be informed of their rights to anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process. Participants should be informed where it is possible that their confidentiality will be compromised. This may occur where, in a particular, named setting, the background information relating to a participant may make it possible for them to be identified even where they are not named.

Researchers will ensure that research methodologies and approaches comply with the General Data Protection Regulations and will complete Data Protection Impact Assessments as appropriate. Researchers can seek guidance from Coram's GDPR managers if needed.

4.9 *Addressing safeguarding/ child protection concerns*

During the data collection process (e.g. in individual interviews and also possibly group interviews), participants may disclose information that raises safeguarding or child protections concerns (i.e. information indicating that they are currently at risk of or are experiencing violence, exploitation or abuse). This will require preparation and consultation and an immediate and sensitive response from researchers and follow up to appropriate support and referral services.

Prior to the data collection taking place, researchers should be provided with copies of the child protection policies and procedures of each institution from which participants are recruited (i.e. schools, community groups, detention facilities) and should familiarise themselves with child protection referral mechanisms and child protection focal points.[2]This should be discussed with a

[2]In the case of UK research, the team will consult the Coram Group Safeguarding policy and the Impact and Evaluation research governance and ethics policies while developing project-specific child protection policies and procedures.

manager or designated safeguarding lead and a decision made whether to raise an alert. At this point, the safeguarding policy and procedures must be followed.

In the event that the child interviewee reveals that they are at high risk of ongoing or immediate harm, or discloses that other children are at high risk of ongoing or immediate harm, the researcher will prioritise obtaining the child's informed consent to report this information to the appropriate professional as set out in the child protection policy, or, in the absence of such a policy, the person with authority and professional capacity to respond. If the child declines, the researcher should consult with an appropriate designated focal point, as well as the lead researcher and other key persons in the research team (on a need to know basis), concerning the appropriate course of action in line with the child's best interests. If a decision is made to report this information to the designated professional, the child interviewee is carefully informed of this decision and kept informed of any other key stages in the reporting and response process.

In some cases, it will be more likely that child safeguarding concerns may arise. Where this is the case, Researchers should ensure that a risk assessment is completed and/or research is carried out with a social or support worker who is able to give assistance and advice to the participant where necessary.

4.10 *Ensuring the safety and well-being of researchers and participants*

Steps must be taken to ensure that data collection takes place in a safe environment. Risks must be assessed as part of the development of the ethical protocol and review, along with steps taken to mitigate these risks. Participants should, where possible, be interviewed with at least two persons present (two researchers; one researcher and one interpreter; one researcher and a social worker; or one researcher and a note taker), or, if interviewed with only one researcher, all reasonable steps must be taken to conduct the research in a safe space that allows for private conversation that cannot be overheard, but where the child and researcher is not placed at risk by, for example, being interviewed in a closed room.

Researchers will sign a Code of Conduct as part of the consultancy agreement or employment with Coram International.

Coram International will take measures to support the mental wellbeing of Researchers. Field researchers will be provided with the opportunity to de-brief with the manager of the research project or member of staff responsible for supervising data collection. As part of the development of the ethical protocol, Coram will consult with its client and other key stakeholders in order to identify service providers (e.g. counsellors) who are able to provide support to Researchers should this be required.