Framework for Ethical MER

1. STATEMENT FOR ETHICAL MER

The framework for ethical monitoring, evaluation and research, hereafter referred to as the framework, sits under and expands on Standard 1 in the MERL Standards and the Principles outlined in the MERL Policy. It establishes our commitment to ethical standards in monitoring, evaluation and research initiatives and ensures that the well-being, dignity, rights and safety of children, young people and other participants in data collection are respected and protected. The framework for ethical MER encompasses the following topics:

- Plan International's six ethical principles for monitoring, evaluation and research;
- safeguarding of children and young people in MER initiatives;
- applying ethical standards in MER initiatives;
- further resources to support ethics in MER.

We are there to help

In case you have any questions, are unsure how these guidelines apply to your work, or want to discuss an ethical concern, please get in touch.

The framework applies to:

- all Plan International Offices, including National Offices, Country Offices and Regional Offices.[1]
- all MER initiatives whether they are conducted by Plan International staff, consultants or partners.
- Monitoring, evaluation and research initiatives, real-time reviews and feedback mechanisms in humanitarian and emergency settings.

In cases where MER initiatives are funded by grants from an organisation that has its own ethical framework, the framework which is more protective should be applied.

As a child-rights organisation that adheres to a rights-based approach and to gender equality, Plan International recognises that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach for ethical MER, and we acknowledge that the delivery of ethical MER must be responsive to the diverse perspectives, identities and vulnerabilities of children, young people and adults, as well as prevailing power dynamics. Furthermore, we understand that those conducting MER may be faced with difficult, changing and unclear situations and unexpected ethical dilemmas. While there is no 'one-size-fits-all" model for how to conduct ethical MER in the many different contexts that Plan International is

[1] All Plan International Inc. offices, whether they operate through a branch office or as a subsidiary, and all National Organisations that have signed a Members' Agreement and Licence Agreement with Plan International, Inc. (all of these entities are generally referred to as "Plan International") because the framework is derived from the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning Policy, which is a sub-policy of the Global Programme and Influencing Quality Policy, and supporting MERL Standards.

working in, all MER initiatives should adhere to the ethical principles outlined in this framework and do their utmost to incorporate ethics throughout the whole MER project cycle.

2. ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Plan International commits to six key principles for ethical MER.

1. Respecting and protecting the well-being, dignity, rights and safety of all participants

How does Plan International define participants and data collectors in MER?

Participants are all people, children and adults that we obtain data from, through information gathered directly or indirectly from the individual participating in a MER activity.

Data collectors are those who are hired by Plan International or a partner organization to collect the data (either on a voluntary or paid basis) and/or employed by Plan or a partner organization.

Please note however, that some research methodologies use participants also as data collectors e.g. participatory action research.

MER is conducted with integrity and in a manner which protects the well-being, dignity, rights and safety of all individuals involved and upholds the fundamental principles of non-discrimination, gender equality, inclusion and equal participation. The best interests of all participants, and especially children and young people, is placed at the centre of the MER initiative. It is also important that the research or evaluation has a clear purpose and outlines actions to be taken, establishing trust and increasing accountability to those communities affected by the MER initiative. Overall, you should ensure the research or evaluation makes a positive contribution to the intended communities involved.

2. Assessing harms and benefits

Ethical MER initiatives have an identified purpose and a clear objective on how the data collected will be used to inform Plan International's work. All MER initiatives need to make a contribution to knowledge and should be of high quality.[2] Teams working on MER initiatives must take steps to ensure that benefits outweigh any risk of harm to participants and data collectors. When conceptualising and designing the MER activity, involved teams carefully consider the potential risks of harm to participants and data collectors through risk assessments. The identified risks must be mitigated through robust safeguarding measures and precautions which are responsive to gender equality and inclusion issues and prevailing power dynamics. It is important to also think through environmental harms and benefits, for example making local travel arrangements and choosing train travel where available and carbon offset air travel.

3. Reporting and responding to safeguarding concerns

Teams working on MER initiatives ensure, in line with the Global Policy on Safeguarding, that up-to-date, open and gender-responsive safeguards are in place to prevent any potential risks of harm and to respond to safeguarding concerns if they arise. Where necessary, Plan International makes access to support for participants and/or data collectors available. If medical, psychological or legal issues or questions are raised by a participant, including suspicions or disclosures of child abuse, Plan International ensures timely referrals to appropriate organisations or services that are qualified to deal with the issue.

4. Engaging in ongoing reflection

[2] MER initiatives that do not add value and/or are poorly implemented can be argued to be unethical as they waste respondents' time and expose them to unnecessary risks.

Ethics are an integral part of any MER initiative and its principles must be embedded throughout the whole MER process. Therefore, everyone who works on a MER project must reflect on ethics continually throughout the MER process, adapt where necessary and respond quickly to ethical challenges that arise. This includes paying attention to the assumptions, values and beliefs, including gender related biases and stereotypes, of researchers, evaluators, data collectors, translators and others involved in the research, which might influence the MER initiative and have an impact on participants.

5. Ensuring voluntary, informed participation

Consent for participation is informed and truly voluntary, free from any coercion or undue influence. Participants are given appropriate information about the purpose, methods and intended use of the data collected; what their participation involves; and what the risks and benefits are. These must be communicated in an appropriate way taking account, for example, gender, age and ability. Participants are given the option to withdraw their participation at any stage during the data collection and until an agreed, and clearly communicated, date after the data collection of the MER activity, without facing repercussions or disadvantages. Arrangements should also be in place for participants to withdraw consent after the agreed date in case participation puts the respondent at risk. Where secondary data is used for MER initiatives, investigators have to obtain proper permissions to use such data and ensure it is de-identified prior to analysis.

Generally, where the participant is under 18, Plan International first seeks the appropriate consent of the participants' parent or guardian.[3] Assent is then gained from the child participant. Importantly, both the parent or guardian's consent and the child participant's assent are required, data collection cannot commence without both. For example, if the parent or guardian provides consent, but the child participant does not provide assent then they cannot be involved in the data collection activity, and vice versa. Plan International recognises that there might be exceptions to this rule due to local context or the context of the young person.[4] Exceptional cases must be assessed by local staff and documented in the safeguarding risk assessment. In addition, processes to collect voluntary and informed consent from participants will need to be adapted accordingly to ensure children and young people's safe and ethical participation.

6. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity

Plan International ensures that confidential information obtained through MER initiatives is stored and handled securely to ensure integrity and protect the privacy of participants. Plan International's Global Data Privacy Policy and Document and Data Retention and Deletion Policy apply to MER initiatives. Participants are made aware of who will have access to their personal data and how it will be used. However, participants are also made aware of the boundaries to confidentiality, in line with Plan International's Global Policy on Safeguarding and procedures, including what will happen in the event of a disclosure of abuse.

As a standard, anonymity for participants is ensured. However, where in exceptional cases individuals want to be identified, appropriate permission can be sought in the consent process. Participants are also made aware of the boundaries to confidentiality, in line with safeguarding policies and procedures, including what will happen in the event of a disclosure of abuse.

[3] This principle is set out in Plan International's Data Privacy Policy as well as the MERL Standards.
[4] Exceptions to obtaining the parent's or guardian's consent for participants who are under the age of 18 might include the following situations: where a participant of the age of under 18 is married and lives with their spouse; where minors are living in separation from their parents/guardians due to humanitarian disaster or migration, where the legal age of majority is below 18. This is not a comprehensive list of exceptions given the many contexts within which Plan International operates.

3. SAFEGUARDING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN MER INITIATIVES

Ethical MER considers all potential risks and implications to any MER participant and is therefore broader than the scope of the Global Policy on Safeguarding. However, safeguarding is a critical part of ethics. The following section describes how Plan International's safeguarding commitment, especially towards children and young people, must be incorporated into an ethical MER approach.

As a child-rights organisation, Plan International believes that involving children and young people in MER initiatives is important. Through listening to children's and young people's voices and views on issues that affect them we can better understand their lived realities and can design stronger programmes and influencing interventions. But there are specific risks of harm that arise when conducting MER initiatives with children and young people; their participation in MER initiatives can expose them to risks of various forms of violence before, during and after their engagement. The team conducting a MER initiative must be aware that during data collection there is a heightened chance of being exposed to cases and disclosures of abuse of children and young people. As such, this demands careful consideration of - and establishing measures to address - safeguarding and safety issues.

Plan International's Global Policy on Safeguarding states that Plan International and anyone who represents Plan International – including data collectors, consultants or partners – has a serious responsibility and duty to ensure that they do not in any way harm, abuse or commit any other act of violence against children and young people. It also emphasises that children and young people must not be placed at risk of harm during participation in any Plan International programme or intervention, including any MER initiative.

Below are the key steps for embedding safeguarding into a MER initiative. The lead of the MER initiative is responsible for ensuring that all steps are followed. For further information on how to implement safeguarding in MER initiatives consult the Safeguarding in MER guidance as well as the safeguarding manual on Business Standard 2: Safe Programming, Influencing and Research.

1. All MER initiatives that collect primary data need to complete the mandatory MER Safeguarding Risk Assessment at the start of a MER initiative.
2. Through the Safeguarding in MER Risk Assessment check the sensitivity of the approach and topic of a MER initiative and ensure that appropriate steps are taken in response.[5]
3. Recruit, onboard, train and manage everyone who works on the MER initiative – including consultants, partners and data collectors - in line with the Global Policy on Safeguarding, PII Code of Conduct and Non-Staff Code of Conduct.
4. Make information about local protection mechanisms and sources of support available to the team working on the MER initiative and participants.
5. Obtain voluntary and informed consent from MER adult and child participants and, where required and appropriate, their parents/guardians. When seeking consent from participants and their parents/guardians, be aware of power dynamics between the participant and Plan International staff, volunteers or partners.
6. Conduct MER activities in a setting that is safe and inclusive for participants.

[5] Sensitive topics of a MER initiative could, for example, include: violence in all its forms, SRHR topics and other topics that might be taboo in the specific context of the participants involved in the MER initiative. Sensitive approaches to data collection could, for example, include: prolonged duration of a participant's involvement that leads to the participant missing school or work, interviews where participants are asked to recall experiences that might have been traumatic.

7. Ensure duty of care and implement agreed protocols for responding to and reporting safeguarding concerns or disclosures.
8. Make practical arrangements for securely handling, storing and destroying participants' personal data, including safeguarding disclosures and sensitive information, in line with your data retention policy. [See Plan International's Global Data Privacy Policy and Document and Data Retention and Deletion Policy].

4. APPLYING ETHICAL STANDARDS IN MER INITIATIVES

The MERL Standards state that MER initiatives must adhere to ethical standards in order to ensure that the rights and the well-being of participants are protected. This section provides information on which steps MER initiatives must take in order to meet minimum ethical standards.

By applying a streamlined approach on how to incorporate ethical standards in MER initiatives, Plan International is:

- ensuring that best practice in data collection is followed to make sure that all participants and data collectors are protected
- ensuring that Plan International's MER initiatives meet the minimum standards of ethical principles
- improving the quality of the MER outcomes
- increasing the credibility of Plan International's research and MER work with external actors

4.1 Steps that all MER initiatives must take to adhere to the minimum ethical standards

All Monitoring, Evaluation and Research initiatives must adhere to and implement the following steps:

1. A safeguarding risk assessment must be conducted before participants start to be involved.
2. Voluntary and informed consent from participants must be sought before their involvement in the MER initiative starts. Wherever possible, please use the template information sheets and consent forms to collect consent.
3. Access to support mechanisms or services for participants must be made available when necessary. This includes ensuring timely referrals, in line with your office's safeguarding protocols, to appropriate organisations that are qualified to deal with the issue, whether it might be medical, psychological, legal or a disclosure or suspicion of abuse.
4. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants and their personal data must be guaranteed.

4.2 Ethics approvals as a further step that some MER initiatives must take

The MERL Standards state that research initiatives must apply for ethical approval from a research ethics committee before data collection can start. Obtaining an ethics approval is an industry standard that increases the level of credibility of Plan International's research.

While points 1 to 4 as listed under 4.1 need to be considered and implemented by all MER initiatives, the step to obtain ethical approval from an appropriate ethics review committee before data collection can start only applies to research and evaluation initiatives outlined in the box below. Please see the box below to learn more about which initiatives must get ethics approval.

It is important to note that obtaining an ethical approval for a research or evaluation initiative is only one step in the continuous and reflective approach to ethics that is embedded throughout the lifespan of the initiative. Therefore, obtaining ethical approval from an ethics review committee is not a 'tick-box' exercise but a point for reflection where teams working on MER initiatives can check if

the initiative is on the right track to adhere to the ethical principles or whether adjustments need to be made before data collection can start.

Research & Evaluations Needing Ethical Approval **Research and evaluations that involve primary data collection that meet <u>ANY</u> of the following criteria <u>must seek ethical approval:</u>** ✓	**What Does Not Require Ethical Approval?** **All minimum ethical & safeguarding standards must still be followed.** ✗

• Explores a **sensitive topic**, for example this could include but is not limited to; sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV), trafficking in persons.
(*even if this is only a few questions and not the main focus of the study)
 	
• If the participants are **under 15 years** of age or belong to **vulnerable population** groups.
 	
• If the **methodology or design poses particular risks or complexities**, for example this could include but is not limited to; some Randomised Control Trials (RCTS), some experimental or quasi-experimental designs, some online methods.
 	
• Identifies a **high or very high risk** in the MER Safeguarding Risk Assessment.
	• Monitoring activities collecting primary data.
	
	• MER activities in rapid response/ on-set emergency contexts such as:
	  ○ *Rapid/ Needs Assessments*
	  ○ *Rapid/ Gender Analysis*
	  ○ *Rapid/ Context Analysis*
	
	• Research or Evaluations collecting primary data for studies exploring non-sensitive topics, with participants aged above 15 years, belonging to non-vulnerable population groups, with no high risks identified.
	
	• Initiatives that have already received ethics approval by a recognised university, national ethics committee, or a recognised Institutional Review Board (IRB) with a rigorous ethics review process.
	Please still send the approval letter to research@plan-international.org- if the initiative explores a sensitive topic we may ask for more details.

An ethical approval must be obtained **only from one** of the following entities:

- local ethics review board (ERB), such as a local authority, regional government body or ministry
- a higher education institution, such as a university, college or institute of technology
- Plan International's Ethics Review Team (ERT).

The project manager or principal researcher must choose which ethics approval process is appropriate for their research initiative according to the following guidelines:

Local ERBs

in some countries, it is a mandatory requirement that research initiatives need to obtain ethical approval from local ERBs before commencing with data collection (a summary of national research ethics processes in 133 countries can

be found here). If this is the case, you will have to comply with the ethics application procedure of the respective local ERB. Applications to local ERBs can take up to six months, therefore the process of obtaining ethics approval needs to be factored into the project timeline. The written approval that you have received from a local ERB needs to be forwarded to Plan International's ERT email address research@plan-international.org before data collection starts.

Higher education institutions

in some cases where Plan International works together with consultants or partners from higher education institutions the institution might offer an ethical approval for a research initiative through their ethics review committee or internal review board. If you choose to get an ethical approval from the higher education institution, you will have to comply with the ethics application procedure of the respective higher education institution. Applications to higher education institutions can take up to six months, therefore the process of obtaining ethics approval needs to be factored into the project timeline. The written ethics approval that you have received from a higher education institution needs to be forwarded to Plan International's ERT email address research@plan-international.org before data collection starts.

Plan International's ERT

when an ethical approval from a local ERB or a higher education institution is not required or not available, you must apply for ethical approval from Plan International's Ethics Review Team (ERT). The ERT aims to process all ethical applications within four weeks, depending on the adjustments that might have to be made to the ethics application.

Consult the guideline on how to apply for ethical approval from Plan International's ERT to find more information on the process of applying to Plan International's ERT.

While it is only mandatory to obtain ethical approvals for research initiatives and extraordinary M&E initiatives[6], the ERT will accept voluntary ethics applications for monitoring and evaluation initiatives if the principal investigators see an added value for their project in doing so. You can also contact Plan International's ERT for general guidance on ethics in MER initiatives.

[6] M&E data collection activities that are published externally and are not part of the standard M&E activities that accompany a programme also fall within the framework's definition of research and therefore need to obtain ethical approval.

Regardless of which body you obtain ethical approval for a research initiative from, you always have to consult with and adhere to Plan International's MERL Standards and Policy, the framework including Plan International's ethical principles and Plan International's Global Policy on Safeguarding.

5. RESOURCES TO SUPPORT ETHICAL MER

Ethical MER requires reflection throughout the whole MER process and the consideration of ethical issues in every step of the activity. You can find all the latest resources for ethical MER on the MERL Planet page under MER Ethics and Safeguarding, including:

- How to apply for ethics approval from Plan International's ERT
- MER Ethics Application Form ERT
- MER & Safeguarding Guidance
- MER Safeguarding Risk Assessment
- MER Ethics Briefing for External Consultants and Partners
- MER Ethics – Consent: Adult Information Sheet
- MER Ethics – Consent: Child & Adolescent Information Sheet
- MER Ethics – Consent: Parent & Guardian Information Sheet
- Collecting remote consent

Other useful research guidelines can be found in the MERL library.