

IIED's Research Ethics Policy

Draft, March 2007 ¹

Background and purpose

The purpose of this policy on research ethics is to inform the design and conduct of research activities by IIED staff, so as to optimise research outcomes and minimise adverse effects on affected stakeholders. The policy draws on IIED's Values Statement.² It takes the form of principles and guidelines to govern the conduct of researchers, so that IIED can pursue these values through its research work. Finally, it outlines the mechanisms that IIED will put in place to implement and review the policy.

Commitment

We strive to make the development and application of IIED's knowledge highly relevant to – and readily accessible in – the public domain, offering the highest standards of research quality. *We subscribe* to ethical principles that emphasise the rights, independence, dignity and safety of participants in research, and their equality within research relationships with IIED.

Principles and guidelines

For each of the following general principles, key (but not comprehensive) guidelines are offered:

1. *Seek views and prior informed consent* from key stakeholders, notably prospective research partners and directly affected communities and authorities, on the purpose and scope of primary research before it is undertaken.
 - Guideline: We aim to offer information on the nature, scope and ultimate purpose of the proposed primary research (including proposed methodologies, data collection, and dissemination and application of results) and seek both views and broad consent to proceed. We aim to respond to comments received by improving the research plan and activities to better meet expressed needs.
2. *Provide for adequate transparency* in declaring sources of research funds.
 - Guideline: We aim to inform research partners, affected communities and authorities and key stakeholders of the organisational sources of funds and in-kind contributions that may be applied to individual

¹ This draft is due for review by March 2008 (see point a., page 3)

² IIED's work is guided by a Values Statement which brings together:

- a) **Organizational values** that guide IIED's internal culture, external relations, and conduct of the research process (e.g. independence, integrity, credibility, transparency, inclusiveness, and respect for rights)
- b) **Constituent values that underpin all work towards sustainable development** (e.g. championing social, economic and environmental justice, through which all living things are able to fulfil their potential; and maintaining the ecological integrity upon which human society and biological diversity depends)

research activities. In addition, an annual summary of funding contributions and their sources will be provided in our Annual Report.

3. *Strive to protect the independence and integrity of our research* from bias attributable to pressures from donors and/or single parties.

- Guideline: We aim to develop or employ research methodologies that are acceptable to the key stakeholders of a given research activity, and make our responses to comments or requests from any one stakeholder known to others. For major research programmes and/or contentious activities, we will consider governance mechanisms that give assurance of our autonomy, such as establishing an independent assurance group to promote and attest to impartiality.

4. *Respect the knowledge, integrity and associated rights of participants in the research process.*

- Guideline: We will strive for joint ownership of the research process, results, and their communication. We aim to accord full credit for the intellectual property of collaborators, contingent on their wishes; comply with national laws concerning data protection; and ensure that the overall research results are fed back in useful forms. We aim in particular to recognise, support and prioritise the efforts of indigenous peoples, traditional societies and local communities to undertake and own their research, collections, databases and publications.

5. *Strive for full disclosure*, offering confidentiality only if disclosed information would directly and negatively affect prospects for sustainable development.

- Guideline: We will seek to make relevant research results publicly available e.g. on our website. We will exclude from publication and/or keep confidential and/or anonymous only that information which is properly and legally understood to be commercially confidential, or which might directly lead to public harm, or which is integral to the best standards of legal practice.

6. *Ensure appropriate competence* is applied to the task in hand, in the choice and application of individual researchers and methodologies, in order to produce research to high quality standards.

- Guideline: We aim to carefully match research staff and methodologies to the challenges associated with the specific research task. We will refrain from falsely claiming competence, or appointing researchers and research partners who may have conflicts of interest with the task at hand. We will exercise caution with methodologies which are unproven and/or liable to bias, such as through 'triangulation' using supplementary methods.

Mechanisms

The application of this policy requires the individual staff member to exercise good judgment and common sense, having spent time to assess the particular context, and being guided by line managers and other relevant colleagues. The following mechanisms are designed to support this:

a. In-house information, discussion and regular review concerning research ethics: A staff ethics group will take the lead. It will ensure regular review of this draft policy and ethical issues connected with other IIED research policies³; scan developments elsewhere; propose further needs; and update an in-house ethics background resource. The first version of this, produced in 2006, takes the form of a paper exploring ethical issues and reviewing other organisations' ethical frameworks.⁴

b. Internal ethical approval system

IIED has adopted an informal 'traffic lights' system to assist internal decision-making on issues that raise questions on research ethics (as well as on IIED's viability, liabilities and reputation). Based on initial self-assessment by IIED researchers, 'amber light' decisions or circumstances are discussed with line managers. 'Red light' decisions or circumstances are notified and/or brought for decision to monthly meetings of IIED's Strategy Team. The above principles and guidelines will be applied in making decisions. In exceptional circumstances, it may be determined that the value of the research may override one or two of these principles. IIED's Director holds final decision-making authority. In occasional cases, the Director may seek feedback from members of IIED's Board of Trustees before a decision is made.

c. Peer reviewing: We recognise that the process of identifying a research problem is key, as it will influence its subsequent direction and control. This demands participation beyond the narrower procedures of scientific peer review. Where appropriate, we participate with stakeholders in an organised process of research project identification, design, role definition, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, according adequate time and resources. Ethical concerns are assessed and where necessary addressed as part of this process by a stakeholders' reference group.

d. Complaints procedure: Early in 2007, we will establish mechanisms for receiving and addressing complaints or expressions of concern about the conduct of research carried out under IIED's auspices.⁵

SB, 8th March 2007

³ IIED's Values Statement, Guidelines on Business Engagement, and Code of Conduct for Collaborative Research, also guide the conduct of research and identify potential ethical issues.

⁴ For example, IIED's work on agriculture and biodiversity has employed a framework developed by the International Society of Ethnobiology, for working in partnership with indigenous peoples, traditional societies and local communities

⁵ For example, to meet requirements under ESRC's Research Ethics Framework, page 4