

Ethical considerations for remote data collection in times of COVID-19 pandemic¹

Many UNICEF Country Offices are exploring virtual means to gather evidence about the impacts to and responses of the COVID-19 pandemic, given COVID-19 transmission risks related to direct person-to-person data collection. The 'do no harm' principle is priority when collecting data, as confirmed by the [Technical Note by the UNICEF Evaluation Office](#).

Innovation in using remote data collection methods is encouraged and needed. At the same time, this should not let us lose sight of ethical standards in data collection and analysis, especially in times of increased vulnerability. This note presents some ethical considerations for evidence generation when planning remote data collection. The remote data collection methods considered are surveys via phone, sms, web-based (e.g. U-Report/RapidPro) or interactive voice response (IVR). For more information about the use of these technologies see [here](#) and [here](#).

Two initial considerations:

1. [UNICEF's Procedures for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis](#) set the standards, regardless of the methods used, when data collection involves human subjects.
2. Ethics is not just about the procedure but about being reflective about possible ethical issues within the local context, taking a step back, discussing, creating mitigation strategies and adjusting plans before heading into data collection.

Other core ethical issues to consider and some suggested practices for remote data collection:

1. Harms and benefits

- A key ethical principle is for there to be clear benefits likely to arise from the evidence generation, and any harm to be avoided for participants, particularly when contacting vulnerable groups. Therefore, at the outset the question needs to be asked whether the remote survey will actually benefit the respondents and their communities. If not, consideration must be given to the modification (considering secondary data sources) or withdrawal of the data collection.
- This becomes even more critical when contacting people using their personal data, like phone numbers, for reasons that have nothing to do with the intended purpose for which

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these phone numbers were originally provided. For example, if phone numbers of participants in existing programmes are considered as a source of contact information for a remote survey that is unrelated to the programme, the purpose for using it needs to be well justified and consent clearly requested when contacting these persons, respecting any decision not to participate or requests that their numbers not be used for these purposes. Compliance with any legal/privacy conditions related to the use of personal data as stipulated by the terms and conditions of the programme is requisite.

- Every question asked needs to have a clear purpose to contribute to intended benefit and avoid duplication of evidence, particularly given the current stressful situation respondents may be in. Keep surveys short and limit the data collected to what is absolutely necessary.

2. Personal and sensitive information

- Be cautious about asking potentially sensitive personal information or questions without clear purpose of use and benefit, especially since one cannot observe or control privacy conditions when asking questions through remote means, and the COVID-19 response measures may significantly negatively impact privacy.
- Protocols facilitating referral need to be in place when protection issues come up during phone surveys, similar to face-to-face surveys. In the case of sms/online/IVR surveys referral contact details can be mentioned at the end of the survey. Where support services or helplines are not available or unlikely to be reachable given demand, sensitive questions should not be asked.

3. Privacy and confidentiality

- When drawing on lists with contact details of participants in existing programmes, separate, if possible, the phone numbers from other identification data (e.g. names), and sample and conduct the survey based on de-identified data sets.
- If a panel survey would be valuable and more identifiable data is required, explicit consent should then be asked for follow up interviews, with clear indications of the nature, duration and frequency of these.
- Phone/sms/IVR surveys may be based on random selection of phone numbers of publicly available lists (or using a random phone number generator). These will likely be de-identified. Wherever possible and appropriate, avoid collecting personally identifiable information during the data collection process. This also applies for online surveys.²

² U-report data are anonymous in that the phone numbers are hidden from admin users. See [U-Report Key Principles](#).

4. Informed consent

- In respecting people's rights, informed consent must be sought when using remote means similar to any other data collection among human subjects. Practical tips in case of phone surveys can be found [here](#). When using social media for data collection, the [Innocenti Research Brief on Ethical Considerations in Using Social Media for Evidence Generation](#) includes useful ethical guidance.
- Respondents need to be able to opt out of data collection, skip questions they do not want to answer, and have their name removed from the database for any future survey. This needs to be made explicit when conducting phone interviews. SMS/IVR/Online surveys should also include such options.

5. Other

- Remote surveys can be prone to biases because some groups do not have access to the technology used, restricted sample frames or low response rates. Since accurately presenting findings is core to the integrity of the evidence generation, one should acknowledge that bias may be present and be clear about the potential lack of representativeness of the data and all potential limitations.
- Remote data collection via phones may have a financial cost for the respondents. Compensation therefore needs to be considered (e.g. via phone credit or mobile money).

Further resources on ethics in evidence generation are available on [ICON](#). For specific questions, contact Gabrielle Berman, Senior Advisor Ethics in Evidence Generation at the Office of Research (gberman@unicef.org), the ROSA evaluation team with Tom Pellens as contact point (tpellens@unicef.org) or your Research and Evaluation Specialist at the country office.