

Ethical Guidelines for Implementing Impact Evaluations in WFP

Impact Evaluation Guidance Note



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1.Introduction

1. Ethical considerations are a key component in the implementation of all WFP impact evaluations. This document outlines the considerations at each phase of implementation, their corresponding ethical commitments and other efforts practiced by the (IEU) of the Office of Evaluation (OEV) in order to maintain high ethical standards.

2. WFP's [Impact Evaluation Strategy](#) was launched in 2019 with the aim of using rigorous evidence to inform policy and programme decisions, optimize interventions, and provide thought leadership to global efforts to end hunger and achieve the SDGs. It defines *impact evaluation* as assessments of the positive and negative, direct or indirect, intended or unintended changes in the lives of affected populations in receipt of WFP interventions. Impact evaluations measure changes in development outcomes of interest for a target population that can be attributed to a specific programme or policy through a credible counterfactual. After its pilot phase, the Strategy was finally incorporated into the [WFP Evaluation Policy \(2022\)](#), listing impact evaluation as one of the three evaluation categories in WFP, complementing the centralized and decentralized evaluation function.

3. Ethical considerations are a key component in the implementation of all WFP evaluations for a number of reasons. First, to ensure that none of the practices create any harm or risk to the people we work with. Second, to ensure greater quality and credibility: respondents who feel treated well and with respect are less likely to respond in ways that would compromise the validity of the information collected. Cooperating partners are also more likely to cooperate and not withhold important information. And finally, to minimize reputational risks which might affect WFP if evaluations and studies are not conducted in a way that is ethical.

4. In line with the [2020 Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation](#) practiced across the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), the IEU has developed ethical guidelines for each phase of an impact evaluation. The responsibility to uphold these guidelines falls not only to the IEU, but also to WFP colleagues across headquarters, regional and country offices, as well as our cooperating partners. This brief builds upon the [Impact Evaluation Quality Assurance System \(IEQAS\)](#), elaborating on the ethical considerations identified in each phase. It also clarifies the roles and responsibilities for acting with integrity, accountability, respect, and beneficence during the conduct of all WFP impact evaluations.

2. Planning Phase

5. Several key activities must take place to assess the feasibility and properly plan for an impact evaluation before it begins.

6. First, the IEU establishes a team for the evaluation. Each member of the evaluation team must be **certified in the ethical conduct of human subjects research** by an internationally recognized body; either the [Protecting Human Research Participants](#) (PHRP) training, [CITI Program](#), or [MicroDor](#) certification.. This ensures that team members are already well-versed in the potential ethical issues that often arise in evaluation and research settings, and are equipped to handle them appropriately and with integrity.

7. A **feasibility assessment** is conducted which includes careful consideration of the context, and in particular, the security of the area in which the impact evaluation will take place. Risk mitigation strategies must be outlined to ensure that the evaluation does no harm to evaluation subjects (beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, or other evaluation participants), nor to those who carry it out – the evaluation team, enumerators, and implementers.

Table 1: Roles in Upholding Ethical Principles during an IE Planning Phase

Task	Responsible
Feasibility assessment	OEV IEU
Certification in PHRP	OEV IEU, technical partners

3. Preparation and Inception Phases

8. During the preparation and inception phases, several considerations are taken when designing the impact evaluations. The initial IE design is guided by the principle of **equipoise** – that is, there must be genuine doubt as to whether an intervention (or which intervention) is the most effective use of resources¹. Only evaluations which lack evidence for that intervention, context, or scope should be considered for impact evaluation. Further, the principle of beneficence – ensuring no harm and maximizing benefits while minimizing risk – is maintained in each design decision.

9. Ethical considerations during the preparation and inception phase include:

- i. **Determining the appropriateness of a comparison group.** Assistance should be given to the most vulnerable. Unfortunately, in most cases, WFP is unable to support all the most vulnerable households in a given area. In contexts of limited resources and high vulnerability, **randomly allocating assistance may be the fairest way** to choose who is served first, as it avoids (real or perceived) favouritism or discrimination. However, collecting data from vulnerable people that are not receiving any support is not always easy or possible (they may not agree to participate in surveys). In some cases, a more appropriate impact evaluation design focuses on *which type* of assistance works best. These evaluation questions lend themselves to **A/B testing** – where all evaluation respondents are participating in some type of assistance, and modalities of assistance are compared against each other – rather than a design using a control group.
- ii. **Determining the level of randomisation.** Tensions that may occur because of randomization of assistance, irrespective of whether they receive different types of support. For example, randomly assigning two different cash modalities within the same village may cause tensions between households who have certain preferences for one modality over another. In these cases, **changing the level of randomization** (e.g. levels can be individual, household, community, geographic area, etc.) can help avoid tensions. In this example, randomizing different modalities across villages, rather than households, may help avoid uncomfortable interactions between neighbors.
- iii. **Determining the best measurement strategy.** Vulnerable populations are particularly at risk, and it may therefore not be appropriate to collect certain types of data (e.g., directly interviewing children in schools). In addition, local laws and customs may determine if data collection will cause unrest (e.g. fear over blood sampling). Before finalising an IE design, it is therefore important to ensure that the outcomes can be measured in an ethical manner during the timeframe of the evaluation. The sample size needed for an impact evaluation also depends on the expected outcomes and size of impact expected (small changes need much larger populations to detect).

10. Importantly, all impact evaluation designs and data collection tools must be reviewed and approved by an **independent ethical review board** (called an Institutional Review Board, or IRB) before the impact evaluation

¹ For a detailed discussion of equipoise in impact evaluations, see Evans, David K. (2023). [Towards improved and more transparent ethics in randomized controlled trials in development social science](#). *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 1-11.

begins. This allows for an impartial opinion on each ethical consideration of the design, including the randomisation, survey tools, and data security, among other aspects. The IEU commonly uses [Solutions IRB](#), a private IRB provider, for ethical approval; alternatively, evaluations may be approved by IRBs that exist in local governance structures where the evaluation takes place, or in the universities which host the principal evaluators for the impact evaluation.

Table 2: Roles in Upholding Ethical Principles during an IE Preparation and Inception

Task	Responsible
Consideration of design	OEI IEU, CO, technical partners
Ethical approval of design	Independent Review Board

4. Implementation and Endline Phases

11. During these phases, country offices implement their programming and monitor its adherence to the evaluation design. The impact evaluation team coordinates data collection over multiple rounds, most commonly at baseline, midline and endline. The design and implementation of the survey includes several considerations. In this phase, the evaluation team is responsible for ensuring that both respondents and enumerators are treated with respect.

12. Surveys must include a script so that the respondent is fully informed of the evaluation's purpose and how their data will be used before consenting to the survey. **Informed consent** in local language(s) is required for every survey; further, consent may be withdrawn at any point during the survey or any time after. The script should therefore include contact information so the respondents can follow-up with the IE team after the surveys. Consent forms are collected digitally at the beginning of the survey and stored with the dataset. In all cases the consent script is read verbally by enumerators and shared in print. However, for respondents who are unable to read or write, enumerators are trained to document verbal consent (or denial) in the survey tool. Exemptions from written consent must be well justified and approved by the IRB in advance of data collection.

13. In the rare case where surveys take place with children under 18 years of age, such as for evaluations on school-based programming, permission is secured from relevant local authorities; the parent, guardian, or primary caregiver of each participating child; and via agreement (assent) from each child to the extent of the child's capabilities. Similar rules apply for people with disabilities, where consent is needed from their legal guardian or authorised representatives.

14. When collecting **data on sensitive subjects**, such as gender-based or intimate partner violence, or illnesses or practices which may be particularly stigmatized in the context, additional measures are put in place according to the [IEU guidance](#). This includes having context-appropriate referral systems in place, as well as providing specialized training.

15. In evaluation designs which make use of a 'pure' control group (i.e. groups which are not receiving any type of assistance), the IEU encourages compensation to account for the value of the time that households lose in answering the survey. To avoid bias in the evaluation design, this compensation must be provided to both the treatment and control groups.

16. In addition to ensuring adequate protection for respondents, care is also taken to **ensure the safety of enumerators**; particularly in contexts of fragility. Enumerators are provided visibility items and adequate forms of transport. Gender-balanced enumerator teams are constructed in cases where both men and women will be participating in interviews, so that enumerators and respondents are gender-matched in private interviews when

needed. Under the advisement of the CO security officers, evaluation teams consistently monitor the safety of survey locations and survey samples may be dropped in cases that the circumstances are deemed too unsafe for enumerators.

17. Finally, **data management** during and after the impact evaluation is carefully coordinated to ensure that data with personal identifying information (PII) is encrypted when uploading, storing or sharing data. Access to data with PII is only available for those with the necessary PHRP training described in paragraph 8.

Table 3: Roles in Upholding Ethical Principles during an IE Implementation and Endline

Task	Responsible
Ensuring informed consent	OEV IEU, CO, technical partners, enumerator teams
Ensuring protection protocols are in place when collecting data on sensitive subjects	OEV IEU, CO including the Gender and Protection advisors, technical partners, enumerator teams
Providing compensation to control groups	Enumerator teams, supported through data collection funders (most often the CO)
Ensuring enumerator safety	OEV IEU, CO including security officers and protection officers, enumerator team management
Data management	OEV IEU, technical partners, enumerator teams

5. Analysis and Reporting, Dissemination and Learning Phases

18. Responsible and ethical evaluation practices include **providing timely and actionable evaluation results** to teams so that the evidence can be used to improve ongoing and imminent programming. In addition, the evaluation design, data, and findings has uses outside of the requesting country office for which some ethical considerations are made.

19. In partnership with the wider development community, the OEV aims to share the outputs of its impact evaluations as **global public goods** used to inform programming and build cultures of evidence across the development and humanitarian sector. To do this, we share the data, designs, and results publicly to external audiences. Data is first anonymized and deposited on WFP's secure [Data Library](#). Those seeking to use the data must sign a Data Access Form, where the proposed purpose for the anonymized data is clearly outlined. Sharing data not only ensures that we are making the most of our resources by supporting its secondary uses, but it also holds OEV accountable to ensure that our designs and results are replicable.

20. Data with PII may be **stored securely for later use** by WFP and its authorized partners for a maximum of ten years, after which the PII data is destroyed. Keeping PII during that period allows WFP to follow up with respondents and measure longer-term impact of our projects, again maximizing the resources used for the evaluation and ensuring that evaluation recommendations are thorough, trustworthy, and capture multiple potential impacts on those that WFP serves.

Table 4: Roles in Upholding Ethical Principles during an IE Analysis and Reporting

Task	Responsible
Providing timely and actionable results	OEV IEU, technical partners
Sharing global public goods	OEV IEU, technical partners
Securely storing and destroying PII data	OEV IEU

6. For Further Guidance

21. WFP colleagues are encouraged to consult the [Impact Evaluation Guidance](#) page on WFPgo for more resources. For any further questions or consultations, please contact oev.impactevaluation@wfp.org.

Useful References

Evans, David K. (2023). [Towards improved and more transparent ethics in randomized controlled trials in development social science](#). *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 1-11.

Feeney, L., Kopper, S., and Sautmann, A. [Ethical conduct of randomized evaluations](#). Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, accessed 4 September 2024 <<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/resource/ethical-conduct-randomized-evaluations>>

Glennerster, R. (2017). [Chapter 5 – The Practicalities of Running Randomized Evaluations: Partnerships, Measurement, Ethics, and Transparency](#). *Handbook of Economic Field Experiments* 1:175-243.