

## **Report on Oak Foundation Workshop on 'Research Ethics and Child Protection and Well-Being', Sep 26-27, 2016, Kolkata.**

The workshop began with laying out of a scenario portraying an ethical dilemma of child violation that any organisation commissioning or conducting research involving children might face (eg sexual violation by the researcher of a child in the project area), followed by reflection and critique of how to handle the situation after it has occurred , as well as how to preempt it and take preventive and redressal measures. Another situation was then discussed in which now the researcher faces an ethical dilemma on how to proceed when an instance of violation is confided to her/him as an intended or unintended consequence of the research (eg

questioning on education levels reveals violence faced by a child)



It was discussed that a protocol on child safety in research needs to be established by every organisation. By laying down standards and principles of safe child research, these can be applied in all contexts and situations as the guide on how to proceed. Thus, a collective child safety audit was conducted by participants; it aimed at strengthening child safeguarding

policies in organisations with a focus on research on children.

The following risks to the child and ethical dilemmas in conducting research on children were identified through group work, followed by a management plan and identification of guiding principles:

### **Assessment of Risks to Child and Dilemmas faced by Researcher:**

- Breach of confidentiality
- Consent from parents and assent from children – sometimes there can be one without the other (eg families objected to research on SRHR needs among girls of 15 years and above though girls willing to talk)
- Unintended consequences from the research on the child (for eg, survivors of child rape became exposed in the community after research exercise ended up revealing their identity)
- Child relives trauma in retelling
- Dilemma faced by researcher/organisation on maintaining confidentiality (eg research reveals incest)

- Dilemma of researcher integrity - whether to maintain integrity only towards research or accept obligation towards child by responding to child violation through initiating direct action with help of legal framework.
- Ensuring that issues identified by the research are addressed subsequently through programmatic or other interventions
- Researcher/organisation dealing with laws like POCSO where non-disclosure is deemed abetment of violation
- Difficulty in determining 'best interests of child' (eg reporting a child violation to family/authorities could lead to stigma and further violations against child)
- Inability to frame personal and sensitive questions in a manner that elicits information without being harmful to the child
- Research not in consonance with cultural, social and economic context of the community
- Researcher misusing power and position/ Inappropriate behaviour by researcher
- Research is not inclusive, non discriminatory and non judgemental
- Child safety protocols of organisation are not in synch with research agency's protocols in the matter

### **Management of Risks & Dilemmas**

- A framework of practices, principles and actions should be developed by every organisation to ensure child security in their work
- Instead of a reactive approach, advisable that organisation takes a proactive approach of establishing mechanisms and an ethical framework
- Proactive approach needed at organisational and ground level - discussing in advance among organisation, local partner, implementing research agency/researcher and community possible risks/harm to children due to the research activity
- Putting in place a referral mechanism to deal with potential violations
- With regard to dilemma on researcher integrity, avoid 'either' 'or' situation by ensuring research is conducted within the community in a responsible, consent-based and sustainable manner
- Research should be a bottom up process led by the community, rather than top down approach
- In addition to an ethics review board in the organisation, a review board at the level of the community is also needed
- Must consider how to engage children too in designing the research
- Informed consent and confidentiality, though important, are not the only principles in ethical research with children; equally important is involvement with the community and setting in place ethically guided processes that range from the preparatory stage to implementation to an exit strategy.
- Children should be viewed not only as subjects 'on' whom research is being conducted but as persons having their own agency
- The same ethics and principles should be carried forward into monitoring and documentation of the project too in order to ensure that the final research report adheres to and reflects these ethics, and the challenges become a learning experience

- Corrective action/Mitigation plan for potential violations and also disclosures must be planned in advance comprising redressal mechanisms and involvement of community level stakeholders – creating a registry of referral support services at the local level (eg counselling support, legal services, child welfare/shelter homes, childline, information on CWC etc); referring to appropriate service; followup with support services on action taken as well as ensuring that organisation's code on child safety is being adhered to by the referral service

## **Principles of Ethical Research on Children**

**\*Child-Centric approach - Maintaining Integrity of Research by acting in Best interest of child:** This is at the centre of research - it is non-negotiable that every decision/step/action is taken keeping this in mind.

This principle translates into:

-Respect for the child (of child's views/opinions/desire to withdraw or participate or not answer everything), Dignity, Acceptance and Empathy

-Maintaining Confidentiality (of identity, facts, views etc for reasons of safety and trust)

-Not harming the child's safety, well being, mental and physical health

-Ensuring Trust, Confidentiality and Informed Consent (eg sharing research objectives, purpose etc with all participants/community)

-In case of conflict of interest the child's welfare should be paramount

-Research to be age-appropriate/as per child's maturity; should be relevant to their contexts and capacities (levels of literacy, understanding, skills, economic background)

### **\* Research should be inclusive**

-Must take into account different communities, contexts, cultures, diversity of children without viewing them as homogenous

-Inclusivity must be implemented in the process of preparation and in implementation

-Should be non-discriminatory, unbiased and non-judgemental

### **\*Research should fit into the larger context of the organisation's programming**

-Not to be conducted in isolation/parachuted

-Will ensure services can be provided as required and the loop can be closed

-An exit plan should be devised from the beginning

### **\*Research must be Participatory and Transparent**

-This approach to be maintained in conceptualisation, design, implementation and dissemination

-Research objectives should be determined with the help of all stakeholders (local NGO, community, service providers etc) and communicated to them properly

-Preparation through field exposure to researchers, proper orientation of researchers, conducting shadow research, rapport building with target community through discussion,

dialogue and obtaining support of key stakeholders, weighing objectives of research against risks and benefits to stakeholders

**\*Involvement of Multiple Stakeholders at every stage of research**

- This will ensure safety and security of children, increase acceptance of the research and will ensure a network of support systems for the child/community in case child safety issues arise;
- it will also address demand for information and other needs that may be identified by the research
- Identifying and involving service providers (govt and non-govt), PRIs, key community leaders and stakeholders will build a safety net

**\*Giving the agency to the child - child becomes the active agent/changemaker**

**\*Monitoring and supervision**

- Should be included from the beginning in order to track the learning (eg pilot/pre-testing should match the actual research)
- Ensure compliance of the protocol
- Receive feedback

**\*Respect the core values and contexts of the community/family**

- Creating research modules and child safety protocols which are relevant and respectful to communities
- Proper training of researcher

The workshop ended with representatives of every organisation drawing up their own organisation's draft risk management plan based on risk assessment of their work and identification of the main principles of child safety that the organisation would adhere to. Also listed were the resources and support required to actually bring about such a plan.