
Commentary: A Framework for Ethics and Equity in Education in Emergencies Research

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A FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICS AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES RESEARCH

FRANCINE MENASHY

ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I reflect on the ethical dimensions of education in emergencies (EiE) research, drawing from a keynote address I delivered at the INEE Data and Evidence Summit in Geneva in June 2023. While longstanding gaps in research standards, production, sharing, analysis, and uptake in EiE are well recognized, I suggest a fundamental shift in how the sector conceptualizes research. I argue that ethics—which relates to power dynamics and issues of equity—must be considered as a starting point for improving EiE data ecosystems and propose a four-question framework that may guide future research. Drawing from scholarship and stakeholders' perspectives, I highlight donor dominance, extractive research practices, Global North epistemic authority, and the marginalization of racialized and crisis-affected communities in agenda-setting and knowledge production. I further critique the privileging of quantitative evidence and the ethical risks of datafication, privacy breaches, and restricted dissemination. I propose that more participatory and equitable approaches that elevate local expertise, broaden methodological rigor, and conceptualize data as a public good will foster a more contextually grounded, just, and ethical EiE field.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a keynote address delivered at the Education in Emergencies Data and Evidence Summit in Geneva on June 6, 2023.

Education in emergencies (EiE) policymakers, practitioners, and academics have long sought high-quality research to strengthen the sector. In response, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) established an EiE Data Working Group in 2019 that focused on many key areas of the EiE research ecosystem, including data standards, production, sharing, analysis, and use, as well as joint monitoring, evaluation, and learning. The Working Group identified enormous gaps in the data on displaced populations, and it criticized the fragmented nature of data collection, poor monitoring, limited research funding, and the poor uptake of evidence in policies and programming in EiE (INEE 2026a).

I agree that these gaps and limitations ought to elicit serious concern, and that adequate support for EiE must address many if not all of them. However, I urge the EiE community to refocus the conversation and to rethink its approach to research by centering on ethics—and, by extension, equity—as the necessary starting point. I propose that, even before attempting to fill the gaps and address the limitations, EiE actors consider the ethical dimensions of data collection and production, its use, and the deep-seated inequities and power dynamics in the research ecosystem.

Two main groups of researchers conduct EiE-related studies: those working within humanitarian organizations, such as international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), donors, and foundations, and academics within universities. While scholars at times conduct research in collaboration with or on behalf of organizations, their academic goals, systems, and outputs often align with different sets of principles and governance structures than those of humanitarian agencies. While acknowledging the distinction between these groups, the arguments I propose below can apply to all those conducting EiE research.

For humanitarian organizations, the ethos of “do no harm”—ensuring that any intervention in a humanitarian context does not worsen a situation for people experiencing crisis—represents a key principle (INEE 2026b). This tenet has acted as a normative obligation (OCHA 2022) across major United Nations agencies and NGOs engaged in humanitarian work. However, this ethos does not obligate humanitarian organizations to follow particular research practices. As a study into the ethics of humanitarian research found, “even positively seeking to ‘do no harm’ can become a well-meant but empty aspiration if refugees are put at further risk by the very process of the research” (Hugman, Pittaway, and Bartolomei 2011, 1272).

Most academics are familiar with standard institutional ethical protocols. Universities require ethical reviews before any research is conducted that involves human subjects, including listing conflicts of interest, confidentiality, compensation, and so forth. While these protocols are necessary and certainly have benefits—for example, they can be applied to diverse research contexts and offer concrete guidance—they are limited. Critics have noted that universities’ ethical standards for research have been developed using a Global North paradigm, through which the expertise and values of those within higher-income countries drive processes and decisionmaking without consideration for the complex histories of crisis-affected settings and power dynamics in humanitarian contexts. For example, ethical review processes and principles “assume regulatory structures and sociopolitical norms that quickly lose relevance outside of Europe and North America” (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018, 607; Tuck and Guishard 2013).

But even within the Global North, such standards have been criticized for seeking to protect institutions from liability rather than protecting participants from harm. As Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, “Research ethics is often seen as being much more about institutional and professional regulations and codes of conduct than it is about the needs, aspirations or world views of ‘marginalised and vulnerable’ communities” (2006, 10). Research processes in both the academic and humanitarian arenas often fail to address many ethical risks. Moreover, no single body governs the research ethics of both organizations and academics in EiE, leading to fragmented oversight. In light of these shortcomings of formal ethical requirements, I suggest that researchers need additional guidance.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICS IN EIE RESEARCH: FOUR QUESTIONS

In order to encourage all those who engage in EiE research to think more deeply about the ethical dimensions of their work, I offer four key questions that might serve as a framework. I do so by drawing from my own research and from studies I’ve conducted with colleagues that have examined relationships and power dynamics in EiE. I also draw from the work of scholars in both EiE and humanitarian studies, as well as civil society actors and activists who have commented on and critiqued the ethical shortcomings of research in the sector.

WHO DETERMINES RESEARCH AGENDAS IN EIE?

Who determines what EiE researchers seek to understand and prioritize? While humanitarian organizations often state that they require “policy-relevant” data, few ask who determined the policies in the first place. Who is in the room, at the table, on the Zoom screen when decisions are made? And, more importantly, whose voices carry weight? Which actors and organizations have most influence? This first question tackles power asymmetries, which can extend throughout the lifecycle of a research project: “These asymmetries may manifest in who decides which questions are studied, how projects are designed, when and when not to conduct research in fragile settings, and how and with whom knowledge is shared” (Bandara et al. 2024, 496).

Of the more than 300 EiE stakeholders I have interviewed over the past decade—people who represent governments, INGOs, multilateral agencies, and foundations who have participated in policy spaces—a vast majority have shared the perspective that donors from the Global North hold most power in EiE because, as a study participant once said, “money talks and people who hold the purse strings are able to influence” (Menashy and Zakharia 2022b, 15). Indeed, institutional funders of

research from the Global North tend to set agendas that align most with their organizational self-interest (Menashy 2019). Because of these priorities, many within the humanitarian sector have questioned the role of donors as leaders in research. Moreover, as a result, donor policies and priorities in EiE have not adequately included the perspectives of those affected by crisis—many of whom have a more accurate and nuanced knowledge of context, history, and political and cultural dynamics.

Recognizing this shortcoming, the humanitarian sector has called for increased participation and localization in decisionmaking. While INEE defines localization as “a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by local and national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations” (INEE 2026c), in many cases, localization has become merely a buzzword, with only “symbolic participation” in practice (Maglio 2025). As one study participant stated, “I think the sector preaches about localization but I haven’t seen much action yet” (Menashy and Zakharia 2022b, 14).

Truly participatory and localized agenda-setting in EiE research would mean that affected communities and local researchers define the core questions and priorities from the outset, with external actors playing a supporting role rather than steering inquiry. Free from this genuine participation, EiE evidence risks decontextualization, informing policies and actions based on only narrow or incorrect understandings of the contexts and needs of affected communities. However, few organizational researchers engage in participatory processes. And while some academics have embraced more participatory methodologies, many of these remain small scale and, as discussed below, have had limited policy impact.

Furthermore, the perspectives and priorities of racialized people, particularly those from the Global South, are also often excluded from agenda-setting. Discussions of racism in EiE have often been silenced, and several humanitarian actors over recent years have drawn attention to this absence (Brooks 2020; Menashy and Zakharia 2022a; Oddy 2024). The silencing of race as an area of concern in EiE spaces, including in research agendas, results from entrenched power asymmetries in EiE decisionmaking, where non-White people from the Global South hold limited influence (Menashy and Zakharia 2022a; Oddy and Adinsa 2025; Shah and Dalrymple 2025). This extends to decisionmaking in the research ecosystem, where organizations and actors in the Global North drive the agenda.

WHAT AND WHOSE KNOWLEDGE IS VALUED?

What kinds of research methodologies are valued in the EiE space? International organizations overwhelmingly value quantitative evidence. Policies most frequently reference large-scale datasets in order to generalize for wide populations; these are derived from, for example, standardized testing, surveys, or findings from randomized control trials (RCTs) (Chupein and Glennerster 2018; Cook-Lundgren and Girei 2025). Quantitative data and analyses are of course vitally important, but this unproblematized drive for and privileging of quantitative studies ignores the fact that the evidence gathered represents only part of the story.

For example, researchers have questioned the “meteoric rise” in RCTs, drawing attention to the methodological and application limitations: “The RCT movement has managed to label the method as the only technique able to rigorously identify causal impacts, when RCTs actually only provide evidence of effectiveness in limited settings...[and] display specific biases and political uses when implemented in the real world” (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2019, 735). Many critics have noted that quantitative methods generally struggle to capture the nuances of the social process that shape inequities: “Quantitative methods cannot match qualitative approaches in terms of their suitability for understanding the nuances of the numerous social processes that shape and legitimate...inequity” (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2018, 160). While some quantitative researchers have addressed such issues using mixed methods approaches (see Burde 2012), many apply a limited scope and, as a result, hide issues of power.

The privileging of certain types of data aligns with what is commonly described as Western knowledge, which, I’d argue, holds most value in the humanitarian and development sectors because of its characterization as scientific and rational. As one study showed, “programme and research design are rooted in Western values and knowledge systems meaning that many programmes inadvertently create a standard based on the West that communities in the Global South are required to meet. Local knowledge is, by default, devalued” (Peace Direct et al. 2021, 5).

I argue that, in order to truly understand and answer pressing questions in EiE, the sector ought to embrace alternatives to the dominant quantitative methodologies in humanitarian research. Particularly valuable are in-depth studies that include participatory elements, which currently are more common in academic research than in organizational studies. These research practices are of course challenging, and bring up their own set of ethical questions, but I believe they should be elevated in terms of value and perceptions of rigor. We need to unpack our assumptions around what knowledge is valued, expand what are considered “rigorous” data and evidence, and embrace—meaning fund, cite, and include in decisionmaking—more nontraditional research methodologies. By doing so, we might “ensure reciprocal

benefit for refugee participants. By advocating for reciprocity, scholars hope to avoid scenarios in which stories are simply extracted from participants, and instead produce community-based research practices, participatory research projects, and relational ethics” (Fritzsche 2024, 606) that prioritize refugee agency.

HOW ARE DATA COLLECTED AND BY WHOM?

The act of gathering data elicits ethical questions in any context; in the EiE space, additional factors require consideration. In academia, researchers generally determine their own methodological approaches that are aligned with ethical protocols. However, when carried out by humanitarian organizations, data-gathering procedures are often dictated by those who fund projects, with limited oversight. Those physically carrying out the data collection are often those living and working directly in crisis-affected contexts; this means they are the ones taking on the major risks, including potential threats to their safety and security.

Research subjects’ emotional and psychological risks may include re-traumatization from recounting distressing memories. Participating in research may also bring legal risks for forcibly displaced people, who often have precarious legal status that could be affected by research participation. And issues related to their financial and security dependency complicate the notion of consent to participate in data collection (Clark-Kazak 2017, 2021).

The act of gathering data in humanitarian settings also carries risks of extraction. Data collected about and from people affected by crisis are mainly used to inform the work of those in the Global North. Even if the intended ends are meant to help those in crisis settings, the evidence is often only used by, and therefore disproportionately benefits, actors within international funding organizations and universities. For example, a Congolese researcher who was discussing participation in an international organization’s impact evaluation said, “You know, we are like gold diggers. The data is gold, and we are the gold-diggers” (Quoted in Marchais, Bazuzi, and Lameke 2020, 377). Research relationships in humanitarian spaces have been described as parasitic: “They come get our data, then waste our time. There is no mutual benefit, the benefit is on one side...So that’s why I say it’s kind of a parasitic relationship” (Quoted in Bilotta 2019, 134). As Shanks and Paulson explain, “the practice of excluding, or extracting from, local actors has been endemic in fragile environments. This domination of knowledge production has resulted in cycles of ‘parachute’ or ‘hit and run’ research in both commissioned and academic projects” (2022, 175).

In response to such practices, some EiE and humanitarian academics and practitioners have begun the challenging process of reflecting on such hierarchical and extractive research relationships and arrangements. For example, Shah and colleagues (2024) reflect on the historical and ongoing colonial legacies of EiE

research using collaborative auto-ethnography. Shuayb and Brun (2021) also argue that research in EiE can benefit from reflective practice that focuses on the relational aspects of North-South collaborative research. Other EiE researchers have provided further critique and pedagogical tools to assist in prompting such reflective practices (Maglio and Pherali 2020; Mendenhall, Chopra, and Bazlen 2022; Shivakoti and Milner 2021). Their work can help us to think through more ethical, nonextractive practices, with sensitivity to power hierarchies between the funders, researchers, those gathering data, and the research subjects.

HOW WILL EIE RESEARCH BE USED AND DISSEMINATED?

Humanitarian contexts present unique issues of data privacy and protection. In recent years, humanitarian organizations have begun to collect biometric data from people experiencing forced displacement (Holloway, Al Masri, and Abu Yahia 2021; Haberkorn 2023). This includes biometric fingerprinting and the extraction of metadata from mobile phones and social media profiles—what some have described as the “datafication of forced migrants”: “Humanitarian organizations have increasingly collected data about forced migrants to improve their efficiency in providing help in crisis situations [but] migration processes are increasingly datafied because of the security concerns of nation states... Migrants do not have control over how these data practices function” (Witteborn 2021, 639). Even if collected with only the most humane aims, these data may be taken out of context or used to support xenophobic, racist, antirefugee, or anti-immigrant policies. For example, as Clark-Kazak (2021, 127) explains, “discussions and policies about migration are heavily politicized...consequently, research findings can be coopted for particular political agendas.”

The dissemination of data after collection and analysis further presents an ethical challenge, such as when findings are not shared with research participants. While member checking—a practice whereby researchers return findings or interpretations to participants for verification—has become more commonplace in academic work, it is not a requirement. And local researchers are often not included in the intellectual ownership of outputs, or credited in publications: “You get your data, you go—maybe use it for your own benefit and you leave us hanging” (Quoted in Bilotta 2019, 134). Unless translation is supported via grant funding, results of studies are often solely disseminated in English. Most work published in academic journals is held behind a paywall, which allows publishers to “hide the knowledge generated by projects behind expensive paywalls rarely accessible to those living in fragile contexts...The prevalence of these mediums of dissemination reflect the extractive nature of research in fragile contexts” (Shanks and Paulson 2022, 184). Authors sometimes pay high fees to academic journals, even after their work is accepted, in order to secure publication, leaving researchers without resources less able to widely disseminate their work. This speaks to the need to consider research outputs

as global public goods that are accessible to all. In response, researcher networks, such as the Open Access Movement, have endeavored to address such barriers by providing publications free from subscription or access costs and by eliminating article submission fees (Open Access Network 2026).

In considering this fourth question—how will research will be used and disseminated—those working with EiE data must prioritize privacy and protection and consider any potential for exploitation. Even when institutional ethics boards approve studies, it is up to researchers to ensure such guidance informs all aspects of projects. As well, those from whom data is collected should understand the limitations of confidentiality in EiE contexts. Credit ought to be given to all those who contributed to the research. And finally, findings ought to be shared back with those from whom the evidence was collected.

CLOSING REFLECTION

I view these four questions as interconnected, all with equal importance and with implications for each other. These questions, moreover, reflect many recent calls to decolonize humanitarianism, including from the INEE Secretariat: “We recognize and acknowledge that we are a part of a global humanitarian system that, while holding good intentions for the world’s most vulnerable, is implicitly colonial in nature” (Brooks 2020). We can take steps toward a more equitable and just EiE community by recognizing and addressing the many ways in which power asymmetries impact research, including data production, gathering, analysis, and use.

I believe that all within the EiE field share a common goal: to ensure access to quality education for everyone experiencing crisis, throughout the world. I hope these four questions will remind us to reflect on our own preconceptions and assumptions and foster further dialogue. With more participatory and equitable approaches that elevate local expertise, broaden methodological rigor, and conceptualize research outputs as public goods, we can foster a more just, ethical, and contextually grounded EiE field.

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