

Achieving No Net Loss for communities and biodiversity in Uganda: Ethics and data management

Ethical review

All protocols and procedures used for the social data collection went through a rigorous ethical review by bodies at both Oxford University and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. The committees provided valuable feedback on our protocols and procedures, ensuring that they were in compliance with relevant ethical standards. Ethical clearance was received from the Research and Ethics Committee at Oxford University (Ref No: R43209/RE001) as well as from the National HIV/AIDS Research Committee at the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (ARC 179). In addition, a research permit was received from the Ugandan National Research Council of Science and Technology (NS 558).

Procedures followed

Before research commenced, the main project researcher (Victoria Griffiths; VG) read the following professional guidelines on ethics in order to ensure that the research was compliant:

- Academy of Management's Code of Ethics
- Association of American Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics
- Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines
- Political Studies Association Guide to Good Professional Conduct
- British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct
- Ethics Guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth
- Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines
- Royal Geographic Society: Research Ethics and Code of Practice
- The British Psychological Society: Code of Human Research Ethics

All participants were over 18 years old, none of them had a diminished autonomy and best practice guidelines (such as those listed above) as well as Ugandan guidelines were applied during all interviews and discussions. Prior to conducting interviews with project partners and other key informants in Kampala, VG gave every participant an information sheet describing the background and aims of the research, why they have been invited to take part, that they only have to participate if they would like to, whether there are any risks associated with participating, what will happen to the information provided and where it will be published. There were also contact details at the end of the sheet should the participant have a concern about the study or wish to complain. Once the participant agreed to participate in the interview, VG gave then a written consent form to sign.

Before each household interview and Focus Group Discussion in the villages, the aims and potential implications of the research were explained to participants and their consent sought. Given that many participants were illiterate, VG was not able to use a consent form and participant sheet. Instead, she recorded the interviews with participants' permission, which gives a recorded verbal consent. Participants' privacy was respected and surveys were stopped if a participant wished. As the research collected personal data of a sensitive nature (e.g. ethnicity, resource use), data protection was of the highest priority. No disclosure of any data that could place participants at risk of criminal or civil liability occurred and all data is being treated in the strictest confidence.

Potential ethical issues that could be connected with the research, include collecting data of a sensitive nature. For example, VG asked respondents in the villages about their religion, ethnicity, cultural heritage (including beliefs in spirits) and their use of natural resources in the project area. When asked these questions, all respondents were offered the opportunity to decline to answer if they wished or withdraw from the survey altogether if they wished. No respondents withdrew from participating in the household survey. All the respondents except for one were happy to answer the questionnaire (n = 1304 / 1305), but this individual was still willing to take part in the survey despite not giving a reason for his unhappiness. Most respondents had a good understanding of the questions (moderate and above; 92%, n = 1197) and most appeared to be honest in answering (87%, n = 1132). The only comments received at the end were that the questionnaire was too long and several questions pertained to the selection of the attributes in the choice experiment.

Four research assistants from the study area were appointed to carry out the household interviews, as they speak the local languages (Lusoga and Luganda) and are familiar with the cultural traditions in the villages. Project specific training was provided to make sure that they were familiar with the approved interview protocols and knew how to administer questionnaires in a culturally sensitive manner. The use of local field workers was also aimed at making participants feel more comfortable when answering questionnaires. At the end of the questionnaire or Focus Group Discussion, all participants were given a culturally acceptable gift (such as soap and salt, as advised by the in-country project partners) as a reimbursement for their time.

Before the research commenced, VG also followed the correct protocol and procedures for obtaining permission to work in the villages in the study area. Local authorities (District Environmental Officers) were contacted first to notify them of the research and to get their permission to work in the area. The DEO's then took her to the selected villages, providing an introduction to the village Local Council Chairman (LC1s). She introduced herself and her research to the LC1s and obtained their permission to work in the village. The LC1 or a representative assisted with selecting participants for the Focus Group Discussions. Surveyed households were randomly selected from the Village Health Team's and LC1's household lists and before interviews commenced, the LC1 (or his representative) introduced herself and the research assistants to the household head and other members present.

Data management

Household survey data were collected electronically (with the use of tablets) and Focus Group Discussion data collected with the use of field notes. Some interviews were recorded to assist with translations as well as to triangulate with the hand-written notes. Data were transferred and stored in password protected excel spreadsheets that only the main researcher (VG) has access to. At the end of her PhD, VG will hand the data over to the project lead, E.J. Milner-Gulland, making sure that all participant names have been removed and that the data is anonymised. According to Oxford University, the minimum retention period for research data is three years after publication or public release of the work. No individuals will be named in research outputs and publications, only village names. The dataset will not be passed on to third parties or re-used for other purposes which are not covered by the original ethical permissions.