

# Ethical Issues in Collecting Data from Informant of the Field

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## Abstract

The current paper seeks to analyze ethical challenges that researchers face while conducting data collection activities on the field. Information provided in this paper derives from a 7-months field work in Cameroon (Central Africa) with the aim to collect data necessary to evaluate governmental strategies for public education and capacity building on climate change. One significant element that embodies ethical codes in data collection tool is the use of the Informed Consent Form. The experience described in this paper aims to show that despite its importance for ethical considerations, in some situations, implementing the Inform Concern Form may rather represent a hindrance to the process of data collection.

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## 1 Introduction

Located in Central Africa, Cameroon is considered as the driving force of the sub-region due to its strategic location in the center of the African continent. During the last five years, the country has been under the constant threat of large range of natural disasters. In such a context, the government is implementing a number of strategies for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) through a network of decentralized institutions and international partners (Ayanji, 2004). Despite a high level of deployment, these activities still prove to have a low level of efficiency on the field. The current paper is part of a PhD research that aims to understand DRR strategies' failures and propose an innovative solution using Technology Enhanced Learning. To understand these failures, we rely on results from a 7-months fieldwork spent in the country, interviewing various actors involved in Disaster Risk Management.

## 2 Problem Statement

The Informed Consent Form (ICF) represents an essential prerequisite to the respect of ethics while conducting a research. It provides participants with information about: the aim of the research, what will be required of them, contact details of the investigator as well as supervisor (in case of complaints), assurance of confidentiality, information about potential risks and benefits to participation. Most importantly, the Informed Consent Form informs the respondent about the nature of the research he is participating to, and makes sure he understands that his participation is voluntary, which means he may withdraw from the research at any time. (Weppner, 1977). However, as essential as it may be, in some cases, the implementation of the Informed Consent Form may hinder the process of collecting data, thus slowing down the research process. In his article entitled "Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research", Punch addresses that issue by asking the question "how 'honest' do you actually have to be about your research purpose?" (1994, p. 89).

In the context of our research, informants used during our field work belonged to 4 main groups: (a) Government, (b) Population, (c) Non-Governmental Organizations, and (d) Educational Institutions. Tools used to collect data were selected depending on the category each informant belongs to. We used interviews (McNamara, 1999) with informants (a), (c) and (d), whereas we used direct observation (Bernard, 2011) and household survey (Fowler, 2009) with informants (b). Using these tools, data were collected in 2 phases: the first phase consisted in testing data collection tools in order to make sure

they were efficient in collecting the type and quality of data needed, and making adjustments if necessary. The second phase consisted into the collection of data actually. During phase 1, data collection tools were administered alongside with the Informed Consent Form to all informants. Respondents' attitude raised our attention on the use of the Informed Consent Form. In fact, we realized that answers provided during HH surveys and interviews were highly dependent on the way we administer the ICF. As a result, during phase 2 which refers to data collection itself, the ICF has been administered (1) either completely (2) or partially altered. This was motivated by the need to preserve the continuity and effectiveness of the research.

### 2.1 Phase 1: the Informed Consent Form was administered to all informants

During this phase, the ICF was read to respondents, and the impact of its implementation has been observed differently, depending on the category respondents belong to:

#### a) With population

Here data were collected using household survey with a sample of rural and urban communities in selected areas. Respondents willingly answered questions depending on "what" has been announced in the ICF. For instance, respondents were highly sensitive to whether the ICF announced any kind of "benefits, compensation, etc..".

#### b) Government, NGOs and Educational Institutions

With this category of respondents, we used interviews and they willingly answered questions depending on "if" the ICF was accompanied by an official authorization from the respective administrative hierarchy. However, requesting that official authorization from the administrative authorities is time consuming for the researcher. Besides, some respondents were highly sensitive to words like "confidentiality?". Specific questions like "how confidential is that confidentiality?", or "How can I trust you?" were addressed to the research team.

As result from the pre-testing phase, we decided to administer the ICF partially altered, and sometimes we did not even used the ICF.

a) Partially altered

In this case, we deliberately omitted to read some parts of the ICF to the respondent. Eg: we avoided talking about "benefits", or "compensation" to respondents from rural areas. So that they will not request a remuneration for the answers they provided.

b) Totally altered

Here, we replaced the ICF by the official authorization letter from an administrative authority during the interview, whenever respondents belong to government or Educational Institutions. Whenever we used direct observation to collect data, respondents (mostly students from secondary schools) that were observed have not been aware that they were observed. Only the person in charge of the group (a tutor working at the multimedia center) had been duly informed by the research team and gave his/her consent on behalf of the group.

The above mentioned results show that the use of the Informed Consent Form during data collection could be influenced by the type of respondents one deals with. It could also be triggered by the nature and purpose of the research. In fact, respondents tend to answer questions differently, depending on whether they had been fully or partially informed about the nature and purpose of the research. It therefore makes it difficult for the researcher to tell when and how "honest" to be with informants on the field.

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