

CHAPTER 2

Ethical, Inclusive and Responsible MEAL

Protecting Participants, Ensuring Inclusion and Managing Data Responsibly

Presented by

Dr Abenet Yohannes, Ph.D

Jigjiga University

Dr Abenet Yohannes, Ph.D, JJU



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, participants will be able to:

- Explain the importance of ethics in MEAL
- Apply informed-consent principles
- Protect privacy and confidentiality
- Promote participant safety
- Ensure inclusion and representation
- Apply data-minimization principles
- Manage sensitive data responsibly
- Identify and reduce bias
- Integrate safeguarding and PSEAH into MEAL

Why Ethics Matter in MEAL

MEAL ACTIVITIES INVOLVE

- People
- Personal experiences
- Sensitive information
- Community expectations
- Organizational decisions
- Donor reporting

POORLY MANAGED MEAL CAN

- Harm participants
- Waste resources
- Produce misleading findings
- Damage organizational credibility
- Violate rights and confidentiality

What is Ethical MEAL?

ETHICAL MEAL MEANS

Designing and implementing MEAL activities in ways that respect participants' rights, dignity, safety and privacy.

Ethical MEAL should be:

Voluntary

Respectful

Transparent

Inclusive

Safe

Confidential

Purposeful

Accountable

Core Ethical Principles

Key ethical principles include:

- 1 Representation
- 2 Informed consent
- 3 Privacy and confidentiality
- 4 Participant safety
- 5 Data minimization
- 6 Responsible data use
- 7 Inclusion and non-discrimination
- 8 Transparency and accountability

What is Informed Consent?

Informed consent means that participants:

- Understand the purpose of the activity
- Know what participation involves
- Understand possible risks and benefits
- Know how their data will be used
- Participate voluntarily
- Can refuse or withdraw

Elements of Valid Consent

Informed

Participants receive clear information.

Voluntary

There is no pressure or coercion.

Competent

Participants can understand and decide.

Specific

Consent relates to a defined activity.

Documented

The process is recorded appropriately.

Information Participants Should Receive

Before data collection, explain:

- Who is collecting the data
- Why the data are being collected
- What questions will be asked
- How long participation will take
- Whether participation involves any risks
- How confidentiality will be protected
- Whether data will be shared
- Who to contact with questions or complaints

Consent Is Not Always Written

CONSENT MAY BE

- Written
- Verbal
- Digital
- Audio-recorded
- Witnessed

THE METHOD SHOULD MATCH

- Literacy level
- Cultural context
- Participant safety
- Sensitivity of the data
- Organizational requirements

Children and Persons Requiring Additional Protection

When involving children or adults who cannot legally provide consent:

- Obtain consent from a parent or guardian
- Obtain the participant's assent
- Use age-appropriate language
- Avoid unnecessary sensitive questions
- Ensure safeguarding procedures are in place
- Provide referral options when concerns arise

Privacy versus Confidentiality

PRIVACY

The participant's right to control access to themselves and their personal information.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The organization's responsibility to protect the information provided.

Protecting Confidentiality

Good practices include:

- Collect only necessary identifiers
- Use participant codes
- Store consent forms separately
- Limit staff access
- Encrypt digital data
- Secure physical records
- Avoid sharing identifiable information
- De-identify data before analysis

Anonymity and De-identification

ANONYMOUS DATA

No identifying information is collected.

DE-IDENTIFIED DATA

Identifying information is removed or replaced.

Examples of identifiers:

- Names
- Phone numbers
- Addresses
- Identification numbers
- GPS locations
- Photographs
- Case numbers

Limits of Confidentiality

Confidentiality may have limits when:

- A child is at immediate risk
- There is a serious safeguarding concern
- Someone may harm themselves or others
- Reporting is required by law or policy

Participants should be informed about these limits before data collection.

Do No Harm

MEAL activities should not expose participants to:

- Physical harm
- Psychological distress
- Social stigma
- Retaliation
- Discrimination
- Financial loss
- Legal or security risks

Conducting a Risk Assessment

Before collecting data, assess:

- Sensitivity of questions
- Participant vulnerability
- Interview location
- Who may overhear responses
- Risks from data storage
- Enumerator safety
- Referral needs
- Community expectations

Sensitive Questions

SENSITIVE TOPICS MAY INCLUDE

- Violence
- Sexual exploitation and abuse
- Health conditions
- Disability
- Political affiliation
- Legal status
- Income
- Protection cases
- Migration status
- Ethnicity or religion

GOOD PRACTICE

- Ask only when necessary
- Explain why the information is needed
- Use trained staff
- Provide “prefer not to answer”
- Prepare referral pathways

Managing Distress

If a participant becomes distressed:

- 1 Pause the interview
- 2 Remind them participation is voluntary
- 3 Ask whether they wish to continue
- 4 Avoid counselling unless qualified
- 5 Follow approved referral procedures
- 6 Document the incident safely

What is Inclusive MEAL?

Inclusive MEAL ensures that:

- Different groups are represented
- Barriers to participation are addressed
- Findings reflect diverse experiences
- Vulnerable groups are not invisible
- Data can be disaggregated appropriately

Groups Commonly Underrepresented

These may include:

- Women and girls
- Persons with disabilities
- Older people
- Children and youth
- Refugees and internally displaced people
- Minority groups
- Remote communities
- People with low literacy
- People facing language barriers

Barriers to Participation

Common barriers include:

- Physical inaccessibility
- Language differences
- Low literacy
- Digital exclusion
- Lack of transport
- Care responsibilities
- Security concerns
- Social restrictions
- Fear of authorities
- Inappropriate timing

Making MEAL More Inclusive

Possible adaptations:

- Use local languages
- Provide accessible venues
- Offer visual or oral tools
- Use sign-language interpretation
- Schedule activities at suitable times
- Recruit diverse data collectors
- Separate groups when appropriate
- Provide safe childcare arrangements
- Use purposive outreach to excluded groups

Data Disaggregation

DATA MAY BE DISAGGREGATED BY

- Sex
- Age
- Disability
- Location
- Displacement status
- Vulnerability category
- Socioeconomic status
- Other context-relevant variables

DISAGGREGATION HELPS IDENTIFY

- Who is benefiting
- Who is excluded
- Differences in results
- Inequities in access

Participation in MEAL

Stakeholders can participate in:

- Defining learning questions
- Selecting indicators
- Designing tools
- Collecting data
- Validating findings
- Interpreting results
- Developing recommendations
- Monitoring agreed actions

What is Data Minimization?

DATA MINIMIZATION MEANS

Collecting only the information that is necessary for a clearly defined purpose.

Before adding a question, ask:

- Why do we need this data?
- How will it be used?
- Who will use it?
- What risk does collection create?
- Can the question be removed?

Purpose Limitation

Data should only be used for the purpose communicated to participants.

Avoid:

- Reusing data without authorization
- Sharing with unrelated parties
- Using information for staff performance decisions without notice
- Publishing identifiable stories
- Combining datasets in ways that create new risks

Data Life Cycle

Responsible data management covers:

1

Planning

2

Collection

3

Transfer

4

Storage

5

Access

6

Analysis

7

Sharing

8

Retention

9

Destruction

Data Storage and Access

Good practice includes:

- Password-protected devices
- Encryption
- Restricted user access
- Secure cloud platforms
- Locked filing cabinets
- Regular backups
- Access logs
- Defined retention periods
- Secure deletion

What is Bias?

BIAS IS

A systematic deviation from the true value — or an unfair influence on data and conclusions.

Bias may enter through:

- Sampling
- Question design
- Data collection
- Translation
- Analysis
- Interpretation
- Reporting

Common Types of Bias

Selection bias

Some groups are more likely to participate.

Response bias

Participants give inaccurate or socially acceptable answers.

Enumerator bias

The data collector influences responses.

Confirmation bias

Analysts focus on evidence supporting their expectations.

Reporting bias

Only positive findings are presented.

Reducing Bias

Strategies include:

- Use appropriate sampling
- Pilot data-collection tools
- Train enumerators
- Use neutral questions
- Standardize procedures
- Triangulate data sources
- Include diverse perspectives
- Document limitations
- Conduct peer review
- Report negative findings honestly

Safeguarding in MEAL

PREVENT AND RESPOND TO

- Sexual exploitation
- Sexual abuse
- Sexual harassment
- Child abuse
- Neglect
- Retaliation
- Abuse of power

MEAL STAFF SHOULD KNOW

- Reporting channels
- Referral pathways
- Confidentiality rules
- Mandatory escalation procedures

Safe Feedback and Complaints

FEEDBACK MECHANISMS SHOULD BE

- Accessible
- Confidential
- Safe
- Inclusive
- Timely
- Transparent
- Survivor-centred

SENSITIVE COMPLAINTS SHOULD BE

- Immediately referred
- Shared only on a need-to-know basis
- Recorded securely
- Managed by trained personnel

Ethical Decision-Making Questions

Before conducting a MEAL activity, ask:

- 1 Is the activity necessary?
- 2 Who may benefit?
- 3 Who may be harmed?
- 4 Is participation genuinely voluntary?
- 5 Are all groups represented?
- 6 Is the information secure?
- 7 Is there a referral mechanism?
- 8 Will the findings be used?
- 9 Can we achieve the purpose with less data?

Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Ethical responsibility
Senior management	Approve policies and provide oversight
Project manager	Integrate ethics into implementation
MEAL staff	Design safe and responsible systems
Data collectors	Obtain consent and protect participants
IT staff	Protect systems and access
Safeguarding staff	Manage referrals and sensitive cases
Partners	Follow agreed ethical standards
Participants	Make informed participation decisions

Practical Case Study

SCENARIO

A project wants to collect names, phone numbers, disability status, household income and GPS locations from all participants.

Discuss:

- 1 Which data are necessary?
- 2 What risks exist?
- 3 What consent is required?
- 4 How should the data be protected?
- 5 Which groups may be excluded?
- 6 What information should not be collected?

Ethical MEAL Checklist

Before data collection, confirm:

- Clear purpose
- Ethical approval where required
- Informed-consent process
- Participant-risk assessment
- Inclusive sampling
- Accessible tools
- Trained data collectors
- Secure data systems
- Referral pathways
- Data-use plan
- Retention and destruction plan

Common Ethical Mistakes

Avoid:

- Collecting unnecessary personal data
- Using complicated consent language
- Interviewing people without privacy
- Excluding vulnerable groups
- Promising benefits that cannot be delivered
- Sharing identifiable information
- Uploading sensitive data to unsecured platforms
- Ignoring participant distress
- Failing to respond to complaints
- Keeping data indefinitely

Key Takeaways

- Ethical MEAL protects participants and organizations.
- Consent must be informed and voluntary.
- Privacy and confidentiality require active protection.
- Inclusion improves fairness and data quality.
- Collect only data that are necessary.
- Bias should be identified and reduced.
- Safeguarding must be built into MEAL systems.
- Ethical responsibilities continue throughout the data life cycle.

Knowledge Check

- 1 What makes consent valid?
- 2 What is the difference between privacy and confidentiality?
- 3 What does data minimization mean?
- 4 Name three barriers to inclusive participation.
- 5 What is selection bias?
- 6 When may confidentiality have limits?
- 7 What should happen when a safeguarding concern is disclosed?
- 8 Why should MEAL data have a defined retention period?

Action Planning

Each participant should identify:

- 1 One ethical weakness in an existing MEAL system
- 2 One inclusion barrier
- 3 One data-protection risk
- 4 One safeguarding gap
- 5 One action to address each issue
- 6 Responsible person and completion date



THANK YOU

Questions and Discussion

Dr Abenet Yohannes, Ph.D

abenetyohannes@gmail.com · Jigjiga University

Good MEAL does not only generate reliable evidence. It respects people, protects their information and ensures that no one is excluded or harmed.

Dr Abenet Yohannes, Ph.D, JJU