

From Ethics Guidelines to REC Practice: Promoting Research Integrity in Forced Migration Research in Germany

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Background

Forced migration research poses specific ethical challenges. To address these, dedicated guidelines for ethical research practice have been developed both internationally (e.g. Clark-Kazak et al. 2017; IASFM 2018; Refugee Studies Centre 2007) and in Germany (Krause et al. 2024). Yet, their use in Research Ethics Committees (RECs) remains limited.

Aim

Translating guidelines and experiences into recommendations for ethics review practice to support RECs to adequately address the realities of this field.

Methods

The German Network of RECs in the Social Sciences (neks) convened a 2-day event in July 2025 in Munich with around 50 researchers and REC members.

Results

The discussion generated insights and implications to support researchers and RECs in assessing ethical dimensions of research in contexts of forced migration:

1. Recognizing Complexity and Diversity

Power asymmetries, human suffering, and precarity require heightened ethical sensitivity. At the same time, refugees must be recognized as diverse, capable agents.

- Forced migration often entails dependency, trauma, and poverty
- Forced migrants are diverse, resourceful actors and survivors

2. Rethinking “Vulnerability”

Critically examine the use of “vulnerability” as a label and safeguard participants’ self-determination.

- The label “vulnerability” may obscure diversity and undermine autonomy
- Who is (made) vulnerable in a specific context?
- How can participants act in their own interests?
- Acknowledge constraints while avoiding paternalistic assumptions

3. Considering Risks for (Co-) Researchers, too

Research in this field may entail significant risks and emotional strain for researchers, too.

- Assess researchers’ vulnerability, including peer researchers’
- Consider precautions and support structures (transnationally)

4. Establishing Epistemic Partnerships

Existing inequalities and postcolonial legacies shape knowledge production and require careful attention to structural and epistemic injustice.

- Engage in meaningful partnerships with refugee communities
- Avoid reproducing stereotypical representations (“othering”)
- Decolonial approaches emphasize:
 - respect and partnership, relational ethics
 - reciprocity and community benefit

Conclusions

Many ethical challenges arise during or after fieldwork and extend beyond the scope of ex ante reviews. Research ethics and integrity therefore require ongoing reflexivity and peer support. RECs should foster critical reflection and sustained dialogue, enabling researchers to respond responsibly to emerging issues.

- Dialogue is crucial—both between researchers and RECs, and between researchers and partners in the field
- Strengthen “ethics in practice”, dialogue and continuous ethical reflexivity



Fig. 1 A satellite facility of a large asylum reception centre in Ingolstadt, Germany, built from modular containers (Photo: Anna Huber)

“ I chose this image because it reflects how bleak this place seemed to me when I worked there as a volunteer legal counsellor. We were not permitted to enter the facility unless we had explicit authorisation from one of the residents. However, many residents were unaware of our work or the legal support we could offer. As a result, establishing contact was extremely difficult, which made it harder for them to access their rights. The centralized reception centers in Bavaria are officially designed to accelerate asylum procedures and facilitate deportations or returns. In reality, however, people often remain there for many months or even years. Sometimes entire families with children.” (Anna Huber)



Fig. 2 Accommodation for Refugees in Hannover, Germany (Photo: Hella von Unger)

“ We organized a first-aid training session in this refugee accommodation. I was struck, on the one hand, by the fact that there was no fence around the facility and that it was completely open. At the same time, I was dismayed to hear that the management had instructed residents not to call emergency services in the event of an accident or similar incident. This was justified by saying that in the past, emergency medical services had been called for ‘minor issues’ and had complained. Access to healthcare is a major problem, which we sought to improve through peer-based approaches in the participatory EMPOW project (funded by the DFG).” (Hella von Unger)



Fig. 3 Follow-up Accommodation in Hamburg, Germany (Photo: Olaf Tietje)

“ This is a follow-up accommodation facility in Hamburg. Although built for refugees and offering high-quality housing, the city gradually stopped assigning refugees to live there. Refugees were relocated to poorer accommodation elsewhere in order to use the better housing for other purposes. This led to protests. But in fact, few people were willing to rent there as long as refugees were still living in the facility. In the end, the housing was used for other temporary purposes.” (Olaf Tietje)

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