Ethical issues arising in research into health and climate change

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The ethical challenges of researching the exposure of informal outdoor workers to the health impacts of climate change in urban Vietnam

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Brief description of context

Launched in February 2024, this 30-month project investigates the health risks and adaptive capacities of informal outdoor workers under conditions of climate change in major urban cities in Vietnam, namely Hanoi, Danang, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho. The project focuses on street vendors, construction workers, porters, and motorbike taxi riders, who play pivotal roles in sustaining urban economies but often experience multiple marginalisations due to their employment status and socio-economic backgrounds. Taking a mixed methods and co-constructed approach, the project assesses exposure levels, health vulnerabilities, and adaptive capacities and strategies of workers as they experience climate-related hazards such as tropical cyclones, heatwaves and extreme rainfall events. To date (November 2024) we have undertaken systematic evidence reviews of the English and Vietnamese language literatures; a scoping study of existing Vietnamese policies at the nexus of outdoor work, health and climate change; and a survey of 400 outdoor workers (100 each of street vendors, construction workers, porters, and motorbike taxi riders). We have also developed the initial architecture and content for a mobile application that functions as an early warning system for health risks among outdoor workers. The findings from this research are intended to inform climate change response policies, with an emphasis on protecting vulnerable workers' health. These insights are expected to support a shift towards a health-centric approach to climate adaptation and mitigation.

Discussion of ethical issues

The project raises a series of ethical concerns; here we focus attention on three: (i) the hidden risks of empowerment and consciousness-raising through co-creation and the way that this may expose workers to reprisals, whether from employers or the state; (ii) the need to acknowledge that climate change is not the only show in town, and that climate change vulnerability reflected in elevated health risks is only one element in a nexus of marginalisations; and (iii) the challenge of translating that research into policy.

(i) Hidden risks of empowerment and consciousness-raising through co-creation

The project engages the workers directly in research design, data collection and analysis through participatory vulnerability analysis (PVA) methods, as well as research outreach. By co-constructing our evidence base, the project more directly – and responsively – connects the experiences of outdoor workers with the policies that seek to enhance climate resilience and promote health protection and health equity for outdoor workers. This approach facilitates collective action through engendering a sense of ownership and agency, raising awareness of climate-related health risks, encouraging workers to organise and collaborate, and equipping them with practical tools to better adapt to climate risks. A key component of this effort is the co-development of Vietnam's first non-profit mobile application which will deliver real-time information on climate-related health risks, health protection strategies, and essential support locations (e.g. free water stations, shaded areas and shelters and medical facilities). Training will be provided to improve digital literacy and to ensure workers can effectively use the app and other resources.

This desire to raise awareness, train and empower outdoor workers to ameliorate their vulnerability to the health risks of climate change has potential ethical challenges. It may demonstrate the inadequacies of existing policies and highlight those employers who are not meeting their statutory obligations. Workers may face sanctions, even lose their jobs when these matters are revealed. As informal workers they do not have the guarantees or protections that shield those in formal employment. And as some of the poorest workers in urban areas, they literally cannot afford to be out of work. There is a Catch 22 here: informal, precarious workers are poor and routinely exploited; but addressing such structural marginalisation may raise the risk of further marginalisation.

Ensuring confidentiality and protecting workers from increased occupational risks is, therefore, a key concern, especially in a context where workers may fear reprisal or exposure. We are committed to safeguarding participants' anonymity, ensuring that their involvement in the research does not compromise their livelihoods or increase their risks. This involves using carefully anonymised data, securing informed consent using accessible language and offering flexible participation that respects their working conditions and time constraints.

(ii) Climate change is not the only show in town: acknowledging intersecting vulnerabilities

Normatively, there is a need to understand the intersecting vulnerabilities of precarious outdoor workers – chronic job insecurity, exclusion from health and social protections. At the same time, official agencies need to bring outdoor workers into view and broaden policies to include informal sector workers in health coverage, many of whom may not even be officially recorded as resident in their city of residency: they are denizens rather than citizens. Addressing their needs is not only a matter of climate justice but also a human rights issue, where ensuring access to health care, social security, and basic protection is paramount.

How, then, are workers' voices elevated in discussions about climate-related risks without overshadowing their more immediate concerns, such as poverty, job insecurity, and social protection. Many outdoor workers struggle with day-to-day survival, and climate risks may seem secondary to issues of formality, income instability, and lack of access to basic services. The project, therefore, takes a holistic approach that integrates climate resilience into broader efforts to address their socio-economic conditions. By framing climate change not as a separate issue but as one that exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, we ensure that workers are not forced to choose between advocating for climate resilience and addressing more 'pressing' concerns like poverty and social security.

(iii) 'It's academic': turning research into policy

A significant challenge in this research is translating findings into actionable policy recommendations that benefit informal workers. The project seeks to bridge the gap between academic research and practical policy interventions by working closely with community partners and local partners such as Social Life Research Institute, Vietnam Medical Association, and Community Health NGO, to ensure that research outcomes are realistic and communicated effectively to government agencies. The evidence gathered from the research will be used to advocate for policy changes that protect workers' health and improve their adaptive capacity to climate change while also addressing their social and economic vulnerabilities. This includes pushing for the inclusion of informal workers in health coverage, social protections, and adaptation policies.

There is a three-fold practical challenge here: first, how to undertake research that 'frames' the issue in a way that is not reductionist; second, how to ensure that research is translated into policy recommendations that are attuned to local governance realities; and third, how to ensure that these recommendations are communicated, taken seriously and, where appropriate, acted upon.

Even the most interdisciplinary of research teams struggle to speak and act across disciplinary boundaries. This encompasses technical languages, methodological choices, and theoretical framings. Our project includes scholars and practitioners from public health, human geography, anthropology, psychology, nutrition, development studies, digitalisation, and community development, and we have worked closely to develop research protocols that are open rather than closed, expansive rather than narrow. But recognising the partiality of our research remains essential. Second, we need to recognise that in devising policy recommendations, the 'good enough' should not be held hostage by the 'best'. Translating findings into actionable policy recommendations that benefit informal workers is key. We bridge the gap between research and policy by working closely with local partners and experts, worker communities, and grassroots organisations to ensure that research outcomes are communicated effectively to government agencies.

Conclusions and recommendations
Prioritising participatory research is an ethical obligation grounded in the principles of respect, justice, and transparency. Ethically valuing workers' lived experiences alongside scientific data is essential to avoid tokenism and exploitation. Meaningful participation requires us to navigate the extent of involvement, ensuring that it empowers rather than burdens them. We must reconcile potentially conflicting perspectives between scientific data and workers' experiences, carefully navigating these differences without privileging one form of knowledge over another. Our team must strengthen cultural competence to engage respectfully with diverse worker communities, which presents ethical challenges in researcher training and equitable interaction and speaks to the need for interdisciplinary research teams.

By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, researchers can better navigate the ethical complexities of studying climate change and health, ensuring that the research advances both scientific knowledge and social justice. In our experience, interdisciplinary collaboration has been instrumental in enriching our research, but it also presents unique challenges. Key obstacles include differing methodological preferences, the use of specialised language that can hinder mutual understanding, and variations in how evidence is valued (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative). Additionally, working across both languages and professional cultures intensifies these challenges, intertwining cross-cultural and interdisciplinary complexities. Differences in theoretical and conceptual frameworks often lead to varied approaches in framing research questions and interpreting results. Moreover, each discipline brings distinct interaction styles and norms of inquiry, which can create friction but also potential for growth.

To address these challenges, we recommend a co-constructed approach that begins with the early establishment of shared definitions, project objectives, and a unified conceptual framework. Initiating regular knowledge-sharing sessions encourages mutual understanding and builds a culture of openness that respects and integrates diverse disciplinary perspectives.