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Researching Today for a Better Future



Research and Fieldwork in Ethiopia

A practical guide for international teams

Planning surveys, evaluations, qualitative research and digital fieldwork
with an Ethiopia-based implementation partner

START HERE

Guide at a glance

International teams often have a strong research design before they enter Ethiopia. The implementation challenge is translating that design into a field plan that is locally workable, ethically sound, multilingual, secure and quality-assured without weakening comparability across countries.

This guide focuses on the decisions that most influence field quality: scope definition, sampling, permissions and ethics, language adaptation, digital tools, field-team structure, logistics, quality assurance, qualitative practice, data security, budgeting and partner management.

The central principle

Do not treat Ethiopia fieldwork as an enumerator procurement exercise. Treat it as a managed research-delivery system with explicit technical ownership, quality controls, escalation rules and data-handling responsibilities.

#	Decision	What good planning looks like
1	Define the implementation model	Decide what the international lead retains and what the Ethiopia partner owns.
2	Confirm population and sample logic	Align the sample frame, cluster logic, replacement rules and respondent eligibility before programming.
3	Map approvals and safeguards	Identify ethics, administrative, safeguarding and personal-data requirements before field launch.
4	Plan language deliberately	Translate concepts, not only words; test comprehension and interviewer instructions.
5	Choose a digital workflow	Design for offline collection, version control, secure transfer and daily monitoring.
6	Build a supervisory structure	Set realistic team ratios, quality roles and issue-escalation channels.
7	Pilot under field conditions	Test timing, routing, translations, respondent burden, connectivity and logistics.
8	Monitor quality daily	Review incoming data while teams are still in the field, not after close-out.
9	Protect the dataset	Minimize identifiers, control access, document versions and define handover rules.
10	Cost the real operation	Budget training, supervision, travel, access, callbacks, quality checks and contingencies - not only interviews.

1. IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT

Ethiopia is not one fieldwork context

Study design should remain technically coherent, but implementation assumptions often need to differ by geography, language, settlement pattern and access conditions.

Ethiopia combines large urban centres, densely settled highlands, pastoral and agro-pastoral areas, remote rural communities and locations where travel time can be substantial even when map distances appear modest. A single national productivity assumption can therefore create unrealistic budgets and schedules.

International teams should plan geography at the operational level: region, zone, woreda, kebele or other study unit as relevant. The practical questions are not only where respondents live, but how teams reach them, how long interviews take, whether same-day return is realistic, whether local-language enumerators are available, and what happens when access conditions change.

Language planning is equally important. Amharic may be suitable in some settings, but many assignments require Afaan Oromo, Af-Somali, Afar Af, Sidama, Tigrigna or other languages. The relevant language is the language in which the respondent can understand concepts and consent comfortably - not simply the language the questionnaire was first translated into.

Use official statistics as context, not as a substitute for design

The Ethiopian Statistical Service publishes national statistics, survey reports and data resources that can help teams understand population and sector context. The availability and suitability of any sampling frame should still be confirmed for the specific study design.

Seasonality also matters. Agricultural calendars, rains, mobility, school schedules, religious periods, market days and local administrative activities can affect respondent availability and transport. Security and access conditions are dynamic and should be assessed close to deployment rather than assumed from an old risk note.

Planning implication: ask the Ethiopia partner to provide a location-specific implementation note before finalizing productivity assumptions, team size and transport. A good note should identify language, access, travel, connectivity, respondent-availability and supervision implications for each major study area.

2. DESIGN AND SAMPLING

Protect the study design while making the sample operational

The field plan should translate the statistical or qualitative design into respondent-level rules that enumerators and supervisors can execute consistently.

Before programming starts, agree the target population, unit of analysis, eligibility criteria, sample-selection procedure, cluster definitions, respondent-selection rules and any permitted replacement process. Ambiguity at this stage creates field discretion, and field discretion can become selection bias.

For household surveys, the team should know whether a current listing exists, whether a fresh listing is required, how households will be selected, how one eligible respondent is chosen when several are present, and what constitutes a legitimate non-response. For institutional or facility surveys, the sampling unit and the interview respondent may be different; both need explicit rules.

When a study uses baseline-endline comparison, preserve comparability in indicator definitions, recall periods, respondent categories and field timing where possible. Changes may be justified, but they should be documented rather than introduced quietly.

A sample-size calculation is only one part of sampling quality. Clustering, design effects, subgroup analysis, expected non-response, minimum sample requirements for priority geographies and the feasibility of reaching dispersed respondents can materially affect the final sample plan.

Design question	Decision to document
Who is eligible?	Inclusion/exclusion rules that can be applied consistently in the field.
How is the unit selected?	Listing, randomization, systematic selection, census, purposive selection or another documented method.
What happens after non-response?	Number/timing of callbacks and whether replacement is permitted.
Who answers within a unit?	Respondent-selection rule; do not leave this to enumerator convenience.
What must be comparable over time?	Indicator definitions, tools, recall periods, respondent categories and analysis rules.

A useful field protocol is executable

A field protocol is not complete because it names the sampling method. It is complete when a supervisor can use it to decide what to do in a real village, facility, school, enterprise or household without inventing new rules.

3. ETHICS, PERMISSIONS AND DATA PROTECTION

Build safeguards into the operational design

Ethics should be treated as part of field operations - consent, privacy, referral, safeguarding, data minimization and secure handling all need practical procedures.

Approval requirements depend on the sponsor, topic, population and sector. University-led studies, health research, research involving children or other vulnerable groups, and assignments linked to government institutions may require specific institutional or sector review. Confirm the approval pathway early enough that it does not become a last-minute schedule risk.

Consent scripts should be understandable in the respondent language and should reflect what will actually happen with the data. Enumerators need to know how to handle refusal, partial participation, withdrawal, audio recording, photographs, GPS, sensitive questions and situations where privacy cannot be achieved.

Ethiopia has a national Personal Data Protection Proclamation (Proclamation No. 1321/2024). Study teams processing personal data should assess the obligations relevant to their assignment, including collection purpose, data minimization, security, retention, access and any cross-border transfer. Where interpretation is uncertain, obtain appropriate legal or institutional guidance rather than relying on a generic consent paragraph.

Operational data protection starts with minimization. If names, phone numbers, exact GPS coordinates or identity documents are not needed for the analytical purpose, do not collect them. When identifiers are necessary for callbacks or panel tracking, separate them from analytical data where feasible and define who can access the linkage file.

Safeguard	Operational question
Informed consent	Can respondents explain in their own words what participation involves?
Privacy	Can the interview be conducted without household members, officials or employers listening?
Sensitive topics	Is there a safe skip/refusal protocol and a referral pathway where needed?
Children/vulnerable groups	Are assent, guardian consent, safeguarding and interviewer requirements clear?
Audio/photo/GPS	Is each data type necessary, disclosed and protected?
Retention	Who decides when identifiers, recordings and temporary files are deleted?

Not legal advice

This guide provides professional planning guidance. Legal, ethics and regulatory requirements should be confirmed for the specific assignment and sponsor.

4. LANGUAGE AND TOOL ADAPTATION

Translate meaning, interviewer instructions and response logic

Multilingual quality depends on conceptual equivalence, not word-for-word substitution.

Terms such as resilience, empowerment, wellbeing, accountability, service quality or social cohesion may not have a simple one-to-one equivalent across languages. A literal translation can sound technically accurate while producing a different interpretation for respondents.

A strong workflow separates four tasks: concept clarification, first translation, independent review or reconciliation, and field testing. Back-translation can be useful, but it should not replace cognitive testing or discussion with experienced field staff who understand how the concept is used locally.

Translate interviewer instructions, probes, response options and consent language - not only the question text. Enumerators should know which wording is standardized and where neutral clarification is allowed.

Digital forms should use stable language labels and version numbers. If translation changes after pilot, document the change and make sure all devices receive the correct form before full deployment.

Pilot the difficult concepts

During pilot, note where respondents ask for repeated explanation, where enumerators paraphrase differently, where response categories do not fit natural answers, and where interview duration increases sharply. These are translation-quality signals, not merely training issues.

5. DIGITAL DATA COLLECTION

Design for offline reality, version control and daily quality review

CAPI platforms are most useful when the form itself enforces the protocol and the field-management workflow uses incoming data actively.

KoboToolbox and SurveyCTO both support offline mobile data collection. KoboCollect is designed for enumerator teams using Android devices and can store finalized forms until connectivity is available. SurveyCTO Collect likewise supports data collection online or offline, with additional workflows for secure transfer and advanced offline operations. The practical implication is important: weak connectivity should be planned for, not treated as an exceptional failure.

Programming should include only validation rules that are substantively justified. Hard constraints can prevent impossible values, while soft checks can flag unusual but plausible responses for confirmation. Over-programming can create interviewer workarounds; under-programming shifts preventable errors into data cleaning.

XLSForm is useful for structured form development, translations, skip logic, constraints and version management. Whatever platform is used, maintain one approved source form and a visible version log. Devices should not contain multiple similarly named live versions.

Control	Examples
Eligibility	Automatic termination or routing when respondent/unit is not eligible.
Range/consistency	Age, dates, quantities and related answers checked for impossible combinations.
Required fields	Use selectively; refusal and legitimate "do not know" responses need valid codes.
Metadata	Enumerator ID, timestamps, device/form version, GPS where justified.
Audit fields	Corrections, comments, supervisor review or back-check status where appropriate.
Daily monitoring	Completeness, duration, duplicates, outliers, interviewer patterns and progress.

Offline-capable does not mean quality-assured

A form can work perfectly offline and still generate weak data. The quality system must connect programming, training, supervision, daily review and corrective action.

6. FIELD TEAM STRUCTURE AND TRAINING

Recruit for language, judgement and reliability - then train for the protocol

Enumerator numbers matter, but supervisory structure and training quality matter more.

Recruitment should match the study geography and respondent profile. Language fluency alone is not sufficient; enumerators also need professionalism, comprehension of the research topic, ability to follow selection rules, comfort with digital tools and the judgement to escalate rather than improvise.

Training should combine explanation, demonstration, individual practice, paired role play, mock interviews, field simulation and assessment. The team should practice consent, difficult routing, unusual cases and the exact respondent-selection process. Supervisors need additional training on quality dashboards, observation, spot checks, callbacks and escalation.

Do not assume everyone who attends training should deploy. A short certification process - written, practical or both - helps identify who can apply the protocol consistently. Maintain reserve personnel so quality standards do not have to be lowered when someone drops out.

Training component	Minimum purpose
Study purpose	Enumerators understand what the study is trying to measure without coaching responses.
Sampling/selection	Teams can apply eligibility, household selection and callback rules correctly.
Question-by-question review	Meaning, probes, response categories and skip logic are standardized.
Digital practice	Every enumerator completes and uploads realistic practice cases.
Ethics/safeguarding	Consent, privacy, refusal, distress and escalation are rehearsed.
Assessment	Deployment is based on demonstrated competence, not attendance.

7. LOGISTICS AND ACCESS

Build a field plan that can survive real operating conditions

Transport, accommodation, connectivity and administrative coordination should be part of the methodology schedule, not hidden assumptions in a budget spreadsheet.

Cluster assignments should consider travel routes and supervision, not only sample counts. A geographically balanced sample can still be operationally inefficient if teams are allocated without considering road networks, settlement dispersion and overnight requirements.

Where possible, recruiting qualified staff closer to study locations can improve language fit and reduce travel. However, decentralized teams require stronger training standardization, supervisor communication and data monitoring so that local adaptation does not become methodological variation.

Prepare contingency rules before deployment. Decide who can pause a site, authorize a route change, postpone interviews, replace a team member or escalate a security concern. Do not force field personnel to choose between safety and daily targets.

Budget for quality logistics

Low transport and supervision budgets often reappear later as missed clusters, shortened interviews, weak callbacks or exhausted supervisors. Cost the implementation that the methodology actually requires.

8. QUALITY ASSURANCE

Move quality control from the end of fieldwork to every field day

The strongest QA systems combine prevention, observation, data review, verification and rapid correction.

Quality assurance begins before data collection through clear protocols, tested tools and competent teams. During fieldwork, supervisors should combine direct observation with data-based monitoring. Neither approach is sufficient alone: observation sees interviewer behaviour, while data review sees patterns across many interviews.

A daily quality dashboard does not need to be complicated. It should answer a small number of operational questions: Are teams reaching the planned sample? Are interviews too short or unusually long? Are specific variables missing? Are there duplicate IDs? Are some enumerators producing implausibly uniform responses? Are GPS locations consistent with assigned areas where GPS is justified?

Back-checks should verify selected facts and interviewer conduct without re-administering the entire questionnaire. The back-check sample and questions should be defined before deployment, with a rule for what triggers investigation or corrective action.

QA layer	What it prevents or detects
Tool validation	Broken logic, missing options, inconsistent calculations and translation errors.
Training/certification	Protocol misunderstanding and weak interviewer readiness.
Supervisor observation	Leading, poor probing, consent problems and respondent-selection shortcuts.
Daily data review	Outliers, duplicates, missingness, duration anomalies and enumerator patterns.
Back-check/callback	Fabrication, wrong respondent, skipped visits and selected factual discrepancies.
Issue log	Repeated problems, decisions, corrective action and accountability.

Escalate patterns, not just records

A single unusual interview may be legitimate. Repeated unusual patterns by one interviewer, location or device require investigation. Quality review should distinguish anomalies from systematic risk.

9. QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK

Protect depth, participant selection and interpretive transparency

FGDs, KIs and IDIs require a different quality model from surveys. More interviews do not compensate for weak facilitation or poor documentation.

Participant selection should follow the purpose of the qualitative component. Key informants should be selected because they hold relevant knowledge or roles; focus groups should be composed so participants can speak openly; in-depth interviews should be used where individual experience or sensitive topics require privacy.

Facilitators need topic understanding and neutral probing skills. Translation quality matters during the interview and again during transcription. When transcripts are translated into English, preserve meaning and note terms that require contextual explanation rather than forcing artificial equivalence.

Analysis should document how themes were developed and how contradictory evidence was handled. Strong qualitative reporting does not select quotations only because they support the dominant narrative. It uses variation, negative cases and differences between groups to improve interpretation.

Plan recording and transcription before the first interview

Decide whether audio recording is necessary and permitted, how files will be named, encrypted and transferred, who will transcribe, whether translation occurs during or after transcription, and when audio files will be deleted.

10. DATA MANAGEMENT AND HANDOVER

Make the final dataset reproducible, documented and secure

Data quality is not complete when the last interview is submitted. The client should receive a dataset whose transformations and limitations can be understood later.

Define a data-management plan before fieldwork. At minimum, identify the master dataset, variable naming rules, identifier strategy, access roles, cleaning responsibility, version control, backup, documentation and final handover format.

Cleaning should be rule-based and reproducible. Do not silently overwrite unusual values because they look wrong. Preserve raw submissions, document corrections and retain a clear distinction between source data, cleaned data and analytical datasets.

For international teams, agree the handover package before mobilisation. Depending on the scope, it may include raw exports, cleaned data, codebook, value labels, derived-variable definitions, analysis syntax, fieldwork status, issue log, back-check results, transcripts, translations and a read-me file.

Handover item	Why it matters
Raw/source export	Preserves the original submitted record.
Clean dataset	Provides analysis-ready data with documented corrections.
Codebook/data dictionary	Explains variables, labels, missing codes and units.
Cleaning/analysis syntax	Makes transformations reproducible.
Read-me/version note	Explains file structure, dates, versions and known limitations.
Field/QA documentation	Shows how the sample was achieved and quality issues were handled.

11. RFQ, TOR AND COSTING

Give local partners enough information to price the real assignment

A precise RFQ produces more comparable quotations and reduces the number of assumptions hidden in the budget.

International teams often ask for an Ethiopia quotation before the methodology is fully settled. That is possible, but the quotation should make assumptions visible. A low number without a clear scope is not necessarily a competitive price; it may simply exclude necessary field inputs.

For sufficiently defined scopes, a local partner should be able to convert the research design into a transparent operational budget. The RFQ should specify whether the client supplies the final programmed form, whether translation is required, who owns sampling/listing, whether supervisors travel with teams, what back-check rate is expected and what data handover is required.

Minimum information to include in an RFQ/TOR:

- Study purpose and target population; expected sample by geography and respondent type.
- Locations at the most specific level currently known; expected urban/rural or dispersed coverage.
- Questionnaire or interview length; methods (survey, KII, FGD, IDI, observation, listing, etc.).
- Languages and whether translation/back-translation is included in the local scope.
- Digital platform and responsibility for programming, testing, user accounts and data access.
- Sampling responsibilities, listing requirements, callbacks, replacements and respondent-selection rules.
- Training duration and whether client staff will participate remotely or in person.
- Quality-control requirements: spot checks, observations, back-checks, GPS, audio audits or data dashboards.
- Expected field dates, reporting deadline, working-day assumptions and any fixed milestones.
- Required deliverables, including datasets, codebooks, transcripts, translations, field reports and tax/pricing format.

A fast quote can still be disciplined

If the RFQ is incomplete, ask for an indicative budget with clearly stated assumptions and exclusions. Convert it to a firm quotation only after the critical scope variables are confirmed.

12. FIELD RISK MANAGEMENT

Use a practical risk register that connects triggers to decisions

Risk management is useful when it tells the field team what to monitor, who decides and what action follows.

Risk	Trigger	Planned response
Access/security change	Travel or field activity becomes inadvisable	Pause/relocate/sequence sites; escalate to client; document sample implications.
Low respondent availability	Repeated absence/refusal in a cluster	Use agreed callbacks; review timing; apply replacement only if protocol permits.
Translation misunderstanding	Repeated clarification or inconsistent paraphrasing	Pause affected item; issue standardized clarification; update only through controlled version process.
Form/programming defect	Routing or validation blocks valid interviews	Stop affected form/version; correct, test, redeploy and document impacted records.
Enumerator quality pattern	Short duration, duplicates or inconsistent responses	Supervisor observation, callback/back-check, retraining or removal based on evidence.
Connectivity failure	Submissions cannot sync as planned	Continue offline if safe; protect device data; use planned synchronization point/workflow.
Sample imbalance	Some strata or locations lag	Reallocate teams without violating selection rules; update progress forecast.
Sensitive-data incident	Device loss, unauthorized access or misdirected file	Follow incident protocol; restrict access; preserve facts; inform responsible data/ethics lead.

The risk register should be reviewed during fieldwork, not filed with the inception report. A short daily coordination call can combine progress, quality, access, staffing and data-security decisions in one operational forum.

13. CHOOSING AN ETHIOPIA IMPLEMENTATION PARTNER

Assess technical accountability, not only price and team size

A strong local partner should reduce execution risk for the international lead and make the Ethiopia workstream easier to manage.

Due-diligence area	What to verify
Technical ownership	Who is accountable for methodology, field operations, QA and client communication?
Relevant experience	Can the firm show assignments similar in method, geography, respondent type or sector?
Field network	Can it mobilize appropriate languages and supervisors where the study requires them?
Digital capability	Can it implement KoboToolbox/XLSForm or the client's SurveyCTO workflow and troubleshoot field issues?
Quality system	Are training, observation, daily review, back-checks and issue escalation documented?
Data management	Can it deliver clean, documented datasets and follow secure access/handover protocols?
Commercial readiness	Can it provide legal, tax, policy, reference and CV documents for vendor due diligence?
Communication	Will the international lead receive concise daily/weekly progress and rapid escalation of material issues?

Ask for evidence that matches the scope

A long corporate profile is less useful than a small set of relevant case examples, named technical leads, a sample QA protocol, clear field assumptions and references that match the assignment.

14. WORKING WITH Gesem

An Ethiopia-based research, evaluation and fieldwork partner

Gesem supports international consulting firms, universities, NGOs and development partners that need accountable country-level implementation in Ethiopia.

Gesem can support a defined component - such as fieldwork, qualitative interviewing, digital data collection or data management - or coordinate the Ethiopia workstream within a wider multi-country study. We work with client methodologies and systems while contributing local implementation judgement where adaptation is required.

Gesem capability	Current capacity
Geographic reach	Field capability across Ethiopia's 12 regional states and 2 city administrations.
Field network	250+ enumerators and fieldworkers available through the wider network.
Experience	50+ assignments across research, evaluation, strategy, institutional development and capacity building.
Languages	Afaan Oromo, Af-Somali, Afar Af, Amharic, Sidama, Tigrigna, French and English through the consultant/field network.
Methods	Household/institutional surveys, CAPI, KIIs, FGDs, IDIs, observation, mixed methods, evaluation and strategic advisory work.
Digital systems	KoboToolbox/XLSForm capability and implementation of client-provided SurveyCTO workflows.

Useful starting information for an Ethiopia RFQ: sample, locations, methods, interview length, languages, platform, quality controls, field dates, deliverables and pricing format.

Discuss an Ethiopia assignment

Website: grcplc.com/international-research-fieldwork-partner-ethiopia.php

Email: info@grcplc.com

Rapid RFQ: grcplc.com/rapid-rfq-fieldwork-costing-ethiopia.php

SELECTED OFFICIAL RESOURCES

Sources and further reading

These resources support the regulatory, statistical and digital-data-collection references in this guide. They should be complemented by assignment-specific ethics, sector and sponsor requirements.

Ethiopian Statistical Service. Official statistics, survey reports and data resources.

<https://ess.gov.et/>

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Justice. Personal Data Protection Proclamation, Proclamation No. 1321/2024.

<https://justice.gov.et/en/law/personal-data-protection-proclamation/>

KoboToolbox. Data collection with KoboToolbox; KoboCollect; XLSForm documentation.

<https://support.kobotoolbox.org/data-collection-tools.html>

KoboToolbox. Using XLSForm with KoboToolbox.

https://support.kobotoolbox.org/xlsform_with_kobotoolbox.html

SurveyCTO. Collecting data and mobile/offline fieldwork documentation.

<https://docs.surveycto.com/01-getting-started/01-overview/06.collecting-data.html>

Editorial note. This guide is intended as practical professional guidance for teams planning research and fieldwork in Ethiopia. It does not replace a study protocol, statistical sampling plan, ethics approval, legal advice, security assessment or sponsor-specific standard operating procedure. The cover fieldwork image is illustrative.

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