# Keystone Ethical Framework for CONSTITUENT VOICE – July 2016

## Introduction

Collecting systematic feedback from constituents[1] is a form of social research. It involves asking the intended collaborators, recipients and beneficiaries of social programmes for their views of the quality and impact of implementing agencies' work. It typically involves hearing from organisations and individuals who receive funds, services or advice from development agencies.

The purpose of CONSTITUENT VOICE™ (CV) is to amplify the voices of less powerful actors and so generate more open and respectful dialogue among all stakeholders. In turn, this has the twin goals of enhancing interventions, as stakeholders build relationships based on deeper, shared understandings of the complex systems they engage in and encouraging the least powerful to feel more confident and capable about speaking out and influencing social decisions. In other words, CV aims to be inherently developmental in its intended results and internal processes.

CV exercises however, also bring a number of risks. Inherently, the largest risks are borne by the least powerful actors, for example: being penalised for criticising established interests or more powerful actors, losing access to resources or influence, being materially misrepresented and further entrenching existing inequalities. All of these may have direct practical implications, ranging from loss of resources and opportunities to loss of self-belief and confidence to physical danger. There are also risks that data are misleading because they are not representative of all relevant perspectives, or are distorted by power relations, cultural norms or other interests (such as the desire for future support).

This ethical framework provides guidance for how CV can achieve desired goals in situations that involve working with people who have very different amounts of power within complex social situations and across different cultures. For a separate and in-depth technical note on CV itself, please refer to the CONSTITUENT VOICE technical note.

## Benefits

The ethical framework helps ensure that:
- CV systems are sensitive to different perspectives and power structures within and across constituent groups,
- CV systems contribute to helping less powerful people gain more agency and

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[1] We define "constituents" as all the actors who have a significant influence on the social issues under consideration, both as they are now and as they are envisioned in the future. They are "constituent of" the change process envisioned by an agency. "Primary constituents" are the poor women and men who are intended to benefit from social change.

confidence in their interactions with more powerful people,
- CV systems contribute to building mutual understanding, compassion and respect across all constituents,
- respondents' participation in CV systems are purely voluntary, with no coercion or perception of coercion,
- respondents do not suffer undue harm as a result of participating in CV systems, or as a result of how findings are used,
- CV findings are reliable, for use in designing policies and programmes, including clarity about whose views they represent, and their limitations.

CONSTITUENT VOICE is practiced by Keystone on behalf of, or with our clients, but also directly by organisations themselves. This framework relates primarily to Keystone's work, but is also relevant for any other agency practicing elements of CV.

Keystone aims to work with the respondents in our CV processes, to help them engage more effectively in development activities. We will not be paternalistic, taking decisions on their behalf, nor disengaged observers, reporting what we see but not connecting to it. Instead, we recognize that as actors in our own right, we have a responsibility to engage with people in their efforts to rebalance power relationships and develop their own lives in ways they have reason to value, so long as there is enough overlap between their values and ours.

By building relationships with all constituents, particularly primary constituents, we aim to foster inclusive processes that achieve the goals outlined above: generating data that reasonably represents constituents and their situations, in ways that are inherently developmental.

If constituents choose not to work with us in providing feedback then we will not force ourselves on them and we will not be able to carry out research with them.

**Principles**
Following Kitchener and Kitchener[2] (2009), this framework is based on five ethical principles:
1. *Fidelity* – keep promises, do not lie, be faithful
2. *Justice* – be fair
3. *Beneficence* – do good
4. *Non-maleficence* – do no harm
5. *Respect for persons & cultures*

In our context, the principles involve demonstrating respect for how people think, as well as respect for their right and ability to make their own decisions, and respect for their time and persons.

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[2] Kitchener and Kitchener "Social Science Research Ethics: Historical and Philosophical Isses" in Mertens and Ginsberg (eds) "The Handbook of Social Research Ethics", Sage, 2009

**ADDRESS:** Keystone, 222 Kensal Road, Unit 121, London, W10 5BN, UK
**TEL:** +44 (0) 20 3735 6367 **WEB:** www.KeystoneAccountability.org

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The five principles may conflict with each other at times. Kitchener and Kitchener recommend that "social researchers must be prepared to reason further about [any specific] problem. … [A] decision might be justified on something like the Golden Rule: In other words, act in such a way to others as you would wish them to act towards you or others you love. The decision might also be made from a utilitarian perspective of doing the least amount of avoidable harm."

**Practices**

1. Inclusive design

We include the expected respondents, as well as other constituent groups where relevant in all major decisions about designing and implementing CV systems. These are likely to involve:
- designing questions and methodologies,
- approaches to disaggregation, sampling and representation,
- methods for asking for consent and handling complaints,
- methods for reporting back and engaging in critical dialogue.

2. Informed consent

All respondents are asked for their informed consent before participating in CV activities. Keystone explains the process and the purpose of the feedback exercise, including the intention that it will lead to on-going dialogue with agencies and stakeholders.

People should not suffer any discrimination or harm if they do not choose to participate. We take a culturally appropriate approach to asking for consent, recognising that it may take place at a collective or group level, rather than an individual level.

3. Confidentiality

We guarantee the confidentiality of all individual respondents. We do not reveal the identities of individual respondents to any users of the data without the individual respondent's explicit consent.

We keep the primary data and responses in a secure environment, restricting access to it. Where the sample size is small, it may not be possible to ensure confidentiality. We discuss these situations with stakeholders as they arise, and as a condition of consent with respondents.

For more information on issues of confidentiality, please see our privacy statement.

4. Power and gender analysis

We consider local power structures and design CV systems to involve people who are in

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structurally less powerful positions and often excluded from public deliberations. We disaggregate data in line with these groupings. For instance, when working directly with individuals, we normally expect to engage with women and men separately. We expect to be guided by advisory groups in this area, and take steps to ensure that advisory groups actively consider or represent the least powerful.

We report relevant attributes of respondents (for instance, age or gender or position within organisations), without prejudicing confidentiality, and make it clear whenever one person is speaking on behalf of others. Wherever possible, we seek the views of the specific people and organisations that a programme seeks to assist or influence about their direct experiences, rather than asking people to speak on their behalf.

## 5. Appropriate methods and sampling

We use data collection methods that are appropriate for respondents. They are drawn from a wide variety of established social research methods, ranging from on-line questionnaires and other remote surveys such as SMS to focus groups and other participatory exercises. Activities are scheduled at times and places that are convenient for respondents. They are conducted in languages that are convenient for respondents, by those who are least likely to distort the process.

In many cases, we aim to generate feedback from the majority of constituents. Where appropriate, we select a sample of respondents from a wider population of constituents using statistically valid techniques. We openly publish the process of sample selection.

## 6. Complaints

We inform all participants of their right to make a complaint about the research process, and how they can do it. All complaints are logged, and responded to within a reasonable timeframe (typically two to four weeks, at the longest). Any complains, feedback or queries relating to this framework can be directed to: complaints@keystoneaccountability.org

## 7. Reporting back

We actively encourage clients to report the findings of their CV system back to the respondents and / or their legitimate representatives. Methods of reporting back should be appropriate to the respondents, and make it easy for them to access and understand the data. For instance, feedback should be reported in an appropriate language, format and media. Reports provide aggregate data, respecting the confidentiality of individual respondents.

## 8. Deliberation

We actively encourage clients to discuss feedback with respondents. We can facilitate this dialogue where appropriate. The purpose of discussions of feedback is to encourage critical reflection, including checking and probing the feedback data to develop appropriate actions

to respond to them. Ideally the discussions should result in an action plan, addressing any specific issues identified.

## 9. Publication

We actively encourage clients to publish CV feedback data and any action plans that result from them, unless there is an overwhelming reason not to, such as putting staff at risk.

## 10. Personal attitudes

All stakeholders, including Keystone staff, demonstrate respect for others at all times, as well as a commitment to build stronger mutual understanding and better dialogue. This includes listening actively and carefully to different perspectives, and encouraging people from all situations to say more and be more honest and open (particularly the least powerful). Individuals do not abuse their positions for private benefit.

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**Summary of Ethical Practices for Commissioning Agencies**

This ethical framework has implications for clients and other organisations practicing CONSTITUENT VOICE about how they use feedback data to strengthen dialogue and relationships. For each CV system we actively encourage all agencies to:

A. **Report** the findings of feedback exercises back to respondents, in forms they find easy to access.
B. **Discuss** findings with respondents, reflecting on them together, with a view to identifying improvements for joint action in the future.
C. **Publish** constituent feedback data and any action plans that result from them.
D. Demonstrate **respect** for others at all times and a commitment to build stronger mutual understanding and better dialogue.

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**Applying the practices**
It takes careful consideration to apply the ethical practices outlined above in each specific CV system. In each case, they need to be adapted to local conditions, including different cultural, political, institutional and security conditions. There may sometimes be conflicts between the practices, or between ethical principles. We recognise that working out how to apply the principles, and then applying them, takes time and money. This calls for careful planning and processes that have enough time built in for ethical considerations.

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