

# A Values-Driven Code to Restore Trust in Post-Pandemic Research: The Impact of PREPARED Code

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The COVID-19 pandemic exposed major vulnerabilities in the global research landscape. The rush for rapid results, while essential, often came at the cost of research coordination, study quality, and public trust. The pandemic highlighted critical shortcomings in ethical governance and research organization, despite the speed of scientific innovation, underscoring the need for more structured and ethically robust research frameworks. These challenges were not limited to high-income settings. Researchers in low- and middle-income countries often faced additional ethical and logistical barriers, including inadequate infrastructure for rapid ethics review and limited access to emergency research funding [1]. In many cases, these inequities exacerbated the exclusion of vulnerable communities from research benefits, while exposing them to disproportionate risks.

In response, the PREPARED Code [2] was launched as a values-based ethical framework tailored to guide research during pandemics. Developed through multilingual empirical research and broad international consultation, this concise code is centered on fairness, respect, care, and honesty, moral values that transcend disciplinary and cultural boundaries. The code's accessibility is one of its greatest strengths. By integrating both normative principles and practical guidance, it offers researchers, institutions, and review boards a flexible yet principled tool that can be rapidly deployed when new emergencies arise. Notably, the code merges with the domains of research ethics and research integrity, offering a unified structure that helps prevent the siloed thinking that often undermines responsible science [2].

The code calls for transparent data sharing, genuine informed consent, equitable inclusion of vulnerable populations, and protection of research participants and staff<sup>2</sup>. Its emphasis on respectful media communication and acknowledgment of researcher safety is particularly timely, given the rise in online harassment faced by scientists during COVID-19. As the World Health Assembly adopts the first global pandemic agreement, ethical preparedness must be viewed as a core component of pandemic response. The PREPARED Code [2] offers more than guidance; it proposes a mindset shift. In a geopolitical landscape increasingly affected by scientific nationalism, a shared code built on universal values can serve as a bridge, promoting global solidarity in science.

We encourage international community to engage with the PREPARED Code and explore its potential as a standard-setting tool, not just during future pandemics, but in all public health emergencies. Ethics must not be an afterthought. Preparedness is not

only about vaccines, culture and vaccines; it is also about having the moral compass ready when the next crisis hits.

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