

Essential Principles & Practices for GPP Compliance:

Engaging stakeholders in biomedical research during the era of COVID-19

Good Participatory Practice (GPP) requires the meaningful engagement of trial stakeholders in the design and conduct of the research in which they are invested and ensures that ethical and scientific endpoints and public health outcomes will be better served by their participation. In developing biomedical prevention and therapeutic responses for COVID-19, speed is important, but not at the expense of safety, ethics, robust engagement of affected communities, equitable access and scientific rigor. Given the urgent need and expedited timelines for COVID-19 research, advancing GPP implementation can be challenging but is always possible and has ultimately led to more innovative and acceptable research outcomes and should be prioritized by researchers, sponsors, ethicists and drug developers across the globe.

About this toolkit

This toolkit complements the **GPP Guidelines for Biomedical HIV Prevention Trials (2011)** and aims to support research teams, sponsors, advocates, ethicists and drug developers the strategic involvement of stakeholders in key aspects of the clinical research process as listed below and in the guidelines. Each tool offers a simplified explanation of how GPP principles and practices can be applied to collectively shape research in diverse socio-cultural contexts and accelerate COVID-19 trials as part of the international response.



TRIAL PLANNING

1. Stakeholder Engagement Planning and Advisory Mechanisms
2. Protocol Development



TRIAL CONDUCT

3. Informed Consent Process
4. Standard of Prevention
5. Standards of Treatment & Care
6. Policies on Trial Related Harm and Issues Management



POST-TRIAL

7. Trial Closure and Results Dissemination
8. Post-trial access to trial products or procedures

Principles of GPP



Each tool corresponds to one of the eight topic areas listed above and contains the following sections:

	Key Message Highlights the relevance and critical importance of GPP to the topic area
	GPP in Action A distillation of essential participatory practices from select areas of the research process
	For Advocates Suggestions aimed at civil society, ethicists and affected communities
	Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response Considerations for the evolving pandemic



1. Stakeholder Engagement Plans & Advisory Mechanisms

Key Message

Early identification and sustained support of partnerships at the local, national and international level—underpinned by clear objectives, joint planning and monitoring—are essential for achieving effective and equitable research outcomes. Assessing the needs and priorities of stakeholders can maximize the impact of engagement and strengthen local capacities. Stakeholder advisory mechanisms facilitate meaningful dialogue between research teams and stakeholders and provide opportunities for sharing expertise and perspectives about the design, implementation and results dissemination of trials, via bidirectional and transparent communication about research goals, processes, results and plans for product access.

GPP in Action

- Informal advisory mechanisms include one-time events or forums where research teams and stakeholders discuss views on proposed or ongoing research. Formal stakeholder advisory mechanisms typically involve established groups that develop an ongoing relationship with the research team at a particular site.
- Researchers can seek the advice of groups that may not have traditionally been included in research (labor unions, population-specific advocacy organizations, vulnerable/marginalized groups) but can share insights on the populations of interest, ensure speedy but meaningful engagement, and play a critical role in communicating results and driving product demand.
- Regardless of the mechanism used, researchers should ensure engagement plans are in place and include relevant training and adequate budget. Creating a plan ensures stakeholder advisory mechanisms respond to the needs and preferences of the community and ensures a broader set of stakeholders are included in education and communication.



For Advocates

Advocates can proactively reach out to trial sites and sponsors to understand their approach to community engagement, lobby for adequate engagement budgets, and provide ongoing feedback. Advocates can utilize their networks to provide input on trial designs, communication strategies and ethical issues and also provide comprehensive feedback and recommendations to researchers in real time.

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

R&D for COVID-19 is coordinated by a number of newly developed global research collaborations, (e.g., ACT-A, ACTIV, COVID-19 Clinical Research Coalition), around the world. These alliances can provide an accessible platform for comprehensive community engagement and opportunities for receiving high-level input. However, it is critical for research sites to develop both formal and informal mechanisms for community engagement and expand opportunities for learning beyond the CAB model.

AVAC and partners have developed a COVID Advocates Advisory Board as a global resource for researcher coalitions and sponsors to readily engage with a broad collection of research-literate global stakeholders who are already up-to-speed on COVID research. **Learn more at www.covidadvocates.org**



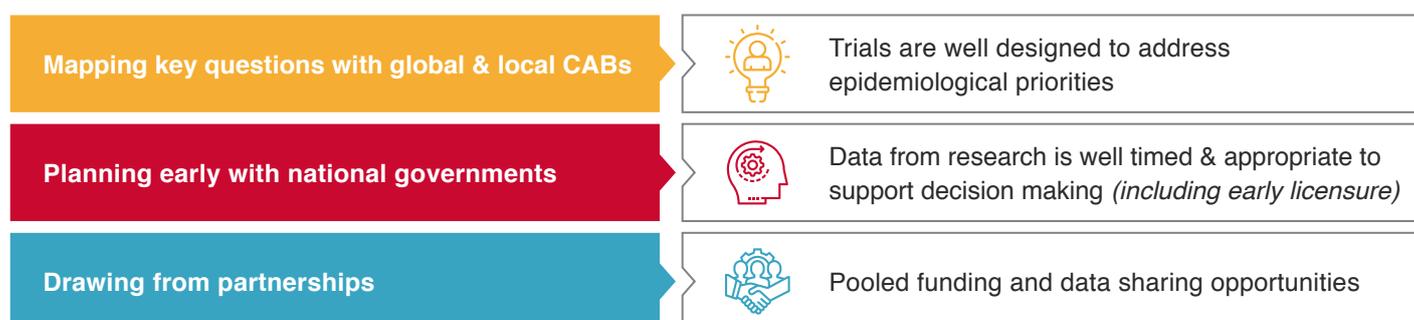
2. Protocol Development

Key Message

Stakeholders can provide meaningful input into many aspects of trial design. In particular, community stakeholders bring expertise that can assist research teams in ensuring that trial protocol designs and procedures are locally and ethically appropriate, are acceptable to the trial population and help ensure successful implementation of the trial.

GPP in Action

- Discuss key topics with community stakeholders during the development of the protocol, including inclusion/exclusion criteria, trial endpoints, and target populations.
- Ensure sufficient funding for community and stakeholder engagement and education are included as part of trial planning.
- Consider the most appropriate engagement mechanisms for obtaining meaningful input on topics such as inclusion/exclusion criteria, trial endpoints, and target populations.



For Advocates

Advocates can proactively reach out to research collaborations and product developers with requests to review protocols. Ideally, this will take place in advance of the start of trials, but as seen with the below case-study, there is still an opportunity to influence issues even after trials have begun. Advocates can learn more about how innovative trial design has impacted timelines in **AVAC's Vaccine Advocates' Toolkit: The Risks and Benefits of Expedited Vaccine Research**. Each of these strategies should be weighed against its relative risks and potential to speed COVID vaccine research.

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

Developing COVID-19 vaccines at “pandemic speed” has resulted in a number of innovative strategies to accelerate development and testing of vaccine candidates. The initial investigational vaccines provide opportunities to interrogate pivotal data and improve regulatory and public health decision-making. Specific aspects of trial design may be non-negotiable for sponsors or product manufacturers, but belated documentation of key questions and comments from stakeholders can still be applied to future protocols, communication and plans.

Exclusion Criteria in COVID Vaccine Trials

Moderna's original Phase 3 COVID vaccine protocol indicated that people living with HIV (PLHIV) were not eligible for trial participation. Advocates recognized that without data on PLHIV, regulators would be reluctant to approve a vaccine for use in people with HIV, further aggravating existing disparities. Concerted outreach and advocacy secured a change in the protocol, setting an important example of how community input can be swiftly incorporated into clinical trials and why it is critical. Had Moderna engaged advocates from the start, delays to trial implementation due to resolving this issue could have been avoided.



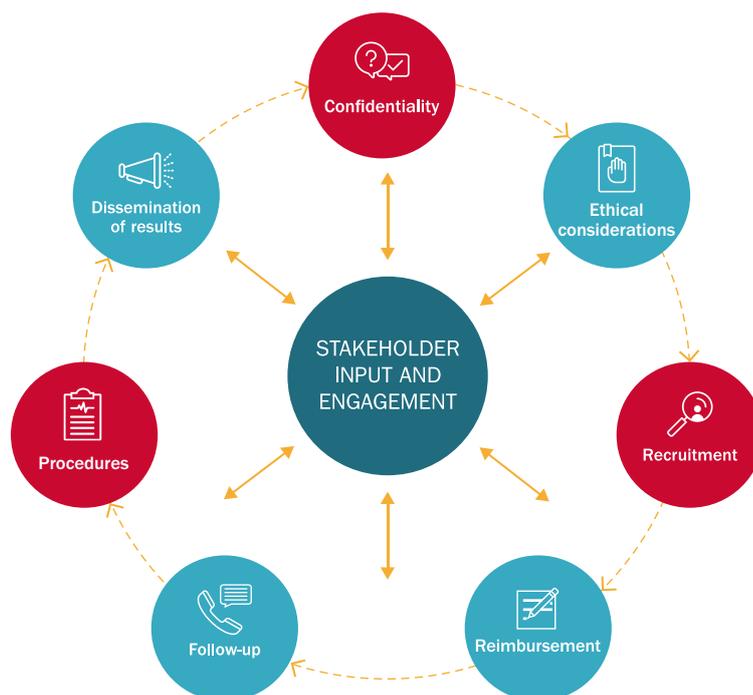
3. Informed Consent Process

Key Message

The informed consent process is the cornerstone of ethically conducted research. A wide range of stakeholders can and should help research teams develop locally acceptable and effective informed consent procedures and materials.

GPP in Action

- Discuss key cultural practices, literacy, language, decision-making norms and factors that may affect access and uptake of interventions with community stakeholders and trial participant working.
- Maintain clear written records of consultations, discussions and agreements, including recommendations from communities, any actions taken by the research team and any resolution (and the rationale). Consider reporting key outcomes of these engagements and learning to IRBs/IECs.
- Population-specific materials should be developed in partnership with relevant community representatives and with early input from members of ethical review board, to ensure they are appropriate, accessible, user-friendly, and relevant. Consider utilizing Community-Based Participatory Research principles.
- Ensure early and sufficient funding to allow informed consent materials to be appropriately developed, piloted, translated and implemented, including an assessment of participants' understanding and ongoing consent.



For Advocates

Advocates can request to review informed consent forms and informational materials being used by research sites.

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

Where possible, communities should be involved in the entire protocol development process. However, given the speed at which research is taking place, recognize that will not always be possible. In those instances, encourage researchers to, at a minimum, include community input into the informed consent form and its review process

Informed Consent in a Public Health Emergency

In COVID-19 treatment trials, “next of kin” may be asked to give consent for participation when a patient is too ill and unable to do so. Given the ethical issues and the public concern that may result from this practice, it is imperative that local communities, healthcare workers and ethicists are involved in the decision-making processes by which a non-responsive individual can be consented into a research protocol.



4. Standard of Prevention

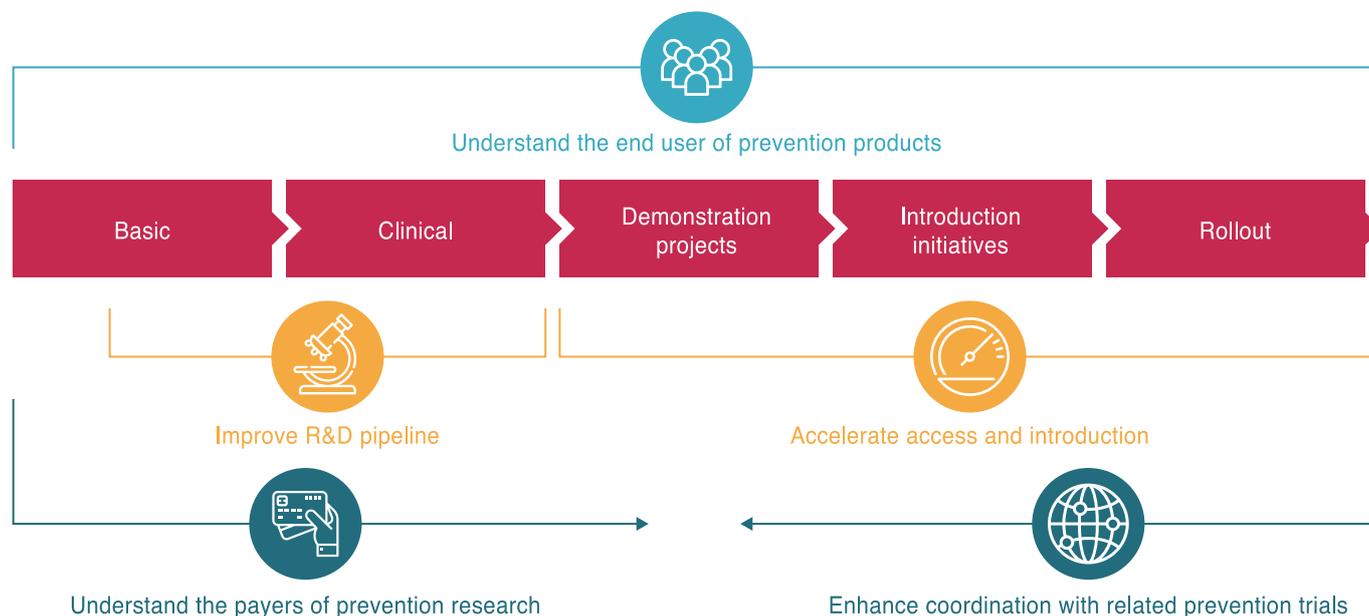
Key Message

Determining the components of a prevention package is a joint effort between research teams and stakeholders. Helping trial participants reduce their risk of acquiring SARS-CoV-2 is a key ethical obligation of research teams. It is often at the forefront of community stakeholder concerns and may have a considerable influence on community perceptions of a trial. Determining the components of the prevention package must be a joint and ongoing effort between research teams and stakeholders.

GPP in Action

- Trial sponsors should ensure early and sufficient funding for engagement of civil society, health authorities, ethicists and research teams and allocate funds and staff time to ensure provision of the agreed prevention package.
- Research teams and relevant stakeholders should negotiate the prevention package during the protocol development phase of the trial. This includes the duration of services, roles & responsibilities of all parties and referral systems if needed.
- Research teams should maintain clear written records of discussions and agreements. This includes recommendations, actions taken by the research team, and any unresolved issues that require follow-up.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN BIOMEDICAL PREVENTION RESEARCH



For Advocates

Advocates can ensure the agreed prevention package is appropriate and accessible to all trial participants, research staff and affected community.

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

How researchers approach infection control and prevention of COVID-19 may vary across multi-site studies and will be based on national guidelines and accessibility of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other commodities. Standard prevention package should include locally tailored counseling and public health messaging on how to minimize risk and the best ways to avoid transmission to others.



5. Standards of Treatment and Care

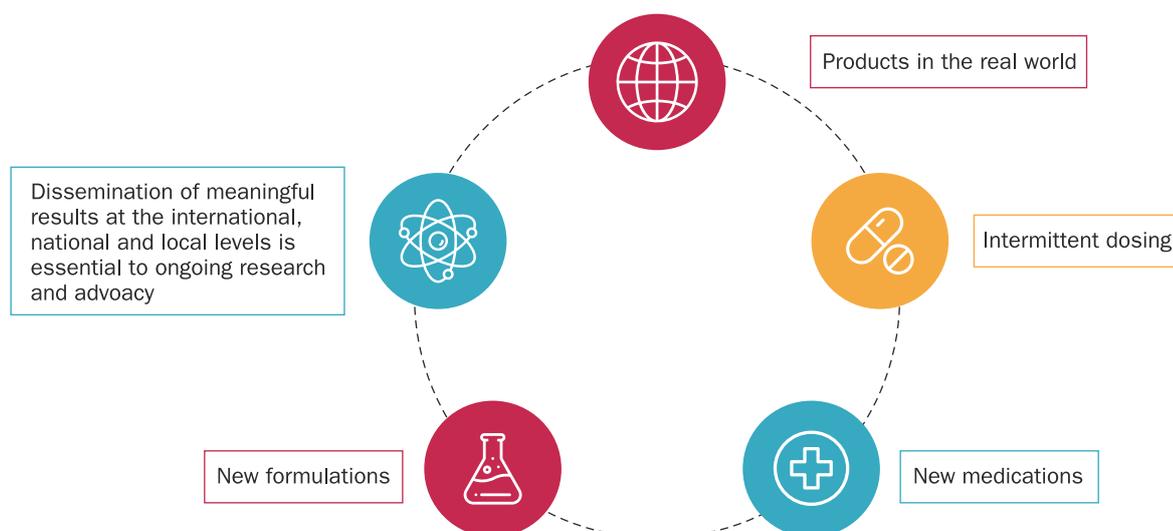
Key Message

Helping trial participants receive the best standards of medical care is a key ethical obligation of research teams. This includes referrals to COVID-19 treatment and care services for individuals who test positive at screening and who may acquire COVID-19 during the trial.

GPP in Action

- Like HIV and TB, research teams and relevant stakeholders should negotiate the standards of care and treatment packages for COVID-19 during protocol development, and continue throughout the trial life cycle, as new treatment options are approved.
- Possible management strategies for long-term COVID-19 illness should be discussed with community advisory groups, health care providers and government authorities.
- Research teams should identify and discuss the capacity thresholds for local treatment and care service points, to enable optimal referral mechanisms and outcomes for trial participants, even in the midst of surging infection rates during the pandemic.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN PLANNING FOR TREATMENT AND CARE



For Advocates

Advocates can verify that referral linkages to medical care and other essential services are robust and that both volunteers, and those whom are excluded from trials due to a positive COVID-19 test, have access to appropriate treatment and care.

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

Standards of care for COVID-19 may be highly dynamic as new treatments are authorized and/or approved. Researchers should ensure a process where volunteers have access to the latest options, aligned with national guidance and including information about the best ways to minimize transmission. Potential risks and benefits of unproven, unregistered and “off-label” use of therapies (Ivermectin) should be rapidly and transparently reviewed with community and scientific advisory boards, medical ethicists and regulatory authorities. Trial stakeholders can interrogate the evolving evidence base and advocate strongly for large, generalisable randomized trials — and adequate data — that enable informed and unbiased decision-making which are central to the product development and approval processes.



6. Policies on Trial Related Harm and Issues Management

Key Message

Protection of trial is a key ethical obligation of research teams which underscores maximizing benefits and minimizing harms for trial participants. Stakeholders can provide valuable input about possible social harms of trial participation, particularly individuals or groups who may be vulnerable, marginalized, stigmatized, or who have less power in society.

GPP in Action

- Sponsors should allocate funds to help identify, monitor and resolve adverse events, including social harms that may arise from participation.
- Sponsors typically give specific and binding guidance regarding physical harms, known as adverse events. It is best practice to define similarly stringent procedures for the determination, documentation, reporting and management of social harms that trial participants may experience, including stigma, discrimination, and verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.
- Research teams can collaborate with local advocacy and women's groups and relevant health and social service providers to jointly discuss and identify potential harms that might occur due to trial participation and develop a mitigation plan to address them. Stakeholders can provide advice about local expectations of research team obligations to address trial-related physical and social harms.
- Research teams and relevant stakeholders should determine strategies for prevention and management of the anticipated physical and social harms over the course of the trial. For example, sponsors and research teams can allocate resources for staff training and utilize best practices for gender transformative approaches, such as robust screening, counselling and supportive referrals for intimate partner violence (IPV) as COVID-19 has contributed to increased rates of IPV in many communities worldwide.

For Advocates

Advocates can make sure that appropriate funding for harms due to trial participation is allocated and utilized accordingly. Advocates can ensure that proper referral and follow-up mechanisms for the mitigation of social harms and issues management are rendered and adhered to equitably for all trial participants.

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that people are not at equal risk. Differences in geography, political response, race, gender, class and occupation result in massive disparities in risks of infection, severe disease, and death. These risk disparities, along with social, economic and cultural factors which may exacerbate these vulnerabilities, should be considered during the trial planning stage and integrated into protection strategies of trial participants.



7. Trial Closure and Results Dissemination

Key Message

Effectively engaging relevant stakeholders about trial closure and results dissemination is essential for building trust and lays a positive foundation for future uptake. In the event that a trial is stopped early or unexpectedly, early dialogue and planning between researchers and relevant stakeholders will minimize the risk of misinformation and mistrust. Given the rapid pace of research, having a communication plan that reflects the buy-in and objectives of internal staff is important.



GPP in Action

- Research teams should consult with stakeholders to develop clear, transparent communication plans that address open science and communication of trial/interim results/data as well as a range of possible closure scenarios, including stopping early due to a clear protective effect, evidence of harm, or evidence of futility.
- Research teams should consult with relevant stakeholders to develop a results dissemination plan, including strategies to manage expectations about trial results for all possible outcomes.
- Research teams should ensure that trial participants are provided opportunities to learn trial results before they are announced publicly.

For Advocates

Some scientists have raised concerns that approvals of COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics may be expedited for political gain and before adequate safety and efficacy data is gathered or shared. Health advocates have a key role to play to ensure that global pressure for a vaccine, and the current politicization of science, do not interfere with safety standards, approval processes and trial results dissemination and outcomes. **See AVAC's Regulatory Approval Primer for Vaccine Advocates for more information.**

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

Traditionally, the results of scientific studies are published in peer-reviewed academic journals or presented at research conferences, following months of preparation. Because COVID-19 science is progressing so rapidly, some journals are shortening or eliminating the review process and publishing data in an initial "preprint" form that makes data available rapidly. Researchers should ensure that interim and final results are communicated to primary stakeholders (with priority given to trial participants and CABs) in parallel to publication, whether in peer-reviewed journal, pre-print or via press release formats. Ensuring social media management strategies and training of community networks can help disseminate balanced information and reduce stigma and misperceptions about the research.



8. Post-trial access to trial products or procedures

Key Message

Research ethics call for maximizing benefits to research participants. Demand for safe and effective COVID-19 prevention and treatment options is likely to outpace supply. Thus, trial participants and community stakeholders should be among the first to gain access to new products once they are found safe and effective. How trial sites communicate about issues of access is likely to have a major influence on community stakeholder perceptions of a trial.

GPP in Action

- Research teams should discuss with relevant stakeholders' issues affecting future availability, including early approval and licensure criteria, manufacturing rights (and pre-purchasing agreements) and post-licensure research.
- Trial sponsors and research teams should develop a clear strategy and funding mechanisms for how the product will be made available to participants (at a minimum) rapidly, affordably and sustainably, should the product be shown to be safe and effective. Sponsors and research teams can collaborate with multiple stakeholders, including governments and NGOs, to design and support the access strategy.
- Research teams inform community stakeholders of their rights, the access plan, and the factors that could postpone or prevent their gaining access to the new prevention product, such as the need to secure regulatory approvals or parameters related to the product manufacturer. Research teams should optimally provide community stakeholders updates as they are available and facilitate opportunities for two-way dialogue about the trial and its results in order to ensure bidirectional and rapid application of learning.

For Advocates

Advocates, together with trial participants, should be in the forefront of discussions and decision-making processes related to access and distribution of approved products – and can help mobilize commitment and resources for a rational, equitable and global distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 preventive and treatment products, including vaccines. This will help ensure that production is not limited to wealthier nations and that access of countries with less manufacturing capacity and purchasing power is not reduced as a result. **See AVAC's COVID-19 Vaccine Pipeline Cheatsheet for more information.**

Applying GPP to the COVID-19 Response

Access for trial participants and communities will be an important topic for community engagement and can be amplified as part of the broader conversation of how to ensure long-term safety, global and equitable access and sustainability.

Learn more about GPP implementation on **AVAC's website**, including the GPP Online Training Course and various adaptations of the guidelines.

 [GPP Guidelines for TB Vaccine Research](#)

 [GPP Guidelines for Trials of Emerging Pathogens](#)

 [GPP guidelines for TB Drug Trials](#)

AVAC's Resource Database contains a wide range of materials covering the spectrum of issues related to biomedical research and the **COVID-19 response**.