Informal Interviews
- Guidelines

1 Key informant interviews

1.1 When to use key informant interviews

By “interview”, we refer here to semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions that allow interviewers to pursue particular points in more depth as the interview develops. For interviews with closed questions and structured questionnaires, see the ICRA learning resource on “formal surveys”.

Interviews are used to:

- Describe, explore a situation or problem area
- Understand the perspectives of different actors
- Generate hypotheses

To verify hypotheses, or gather data that will be extrapolated to a larger population, formal surveys may be a more appropriate tool.

1.2 Selecting interviewees

Informal methods for information gathering are not used for purposes that require the information to be statistically representative, but rather to explore situations, or find explanations. Therefore, sampling of persons or households who will be asked to provide or generate the needed information is not based on random criteria, but rather on the needs of the investigation and the questions that the team asks itself. Interviewees can be chosen as representing a certain group (e.g. of stakeholders, or a household type), alternatively, because they *do not* represent what is "normal" (e.g. to learn from exceptional cases). The advantage with this type of purposive or non-random sampling is that criteria for selecting persons to interview can be adapted during the research process as new information becomes available.

1.3 Conducting the interview

Conducting informal interviews is an art that comes from experience. Nevertheless, some general guidelines are given here – although they are little more than good manners and common sense.

Define the objectives. It is important to agree with members of the research team on the objectives of the interview, the main points to be discussed. What particular information or perspective is this key informant likely to have? What stakeholder or interest group does he/she represent? It is useful to make a guide for the interview, a list of points or main questions to cover during the interview, so that these are not overlooked during the conversation.

Keep to protocol and local custom. In many countries, it is essential to arrange or approve an interview through the local authorities, the village leader, party chief, etc. Avoiding this protocol can lead to more problems later. If possible, arrange the interview beforehand so that the interviewee is forewarned and not occupied doing something else.

Agree on the roles of the team members present. It is not helpful to have all members of a team present at an interview with a key informant; apart from it being an inefficient use of team time and resources, it can reduce the informality of the interview. Agree who will ask questions, and who will take notes.

Decide on how and when to take notes. Taking notes during an interview can create a more "official" atmosphere where the interviewee might be less likely to volunteer information, or even give different information. It may be better in some circumstances to wait until afterwards to make notes, even at a cost of forgetting some of the detail.

Establish confidence. It is important to remember that people being interviewed are often more sensitive to the personality of the interviewer than the questions themselves. The art of an informal interview lies in establishing a rapport with the person being interviewed.

The interviewer should**:**

- Dress appropriately for the interview – neither very elegant nor in rags
- Learn at least a few words of greeting in the local language
- Explain who he/she is, and who he/she works for (in particular mentioning any local agency who is collaborating in the study). He should explain why

this person was selected for interview, and stress that replies will be treated in confidence.

- Be aware of how the institution you are representing might be perceived by the interviewee; many respondents will be unwilling to criticise.
- State truthfully that there will be no direct benefit for the interviewee (if this is the case – as it usually is) , but that the study objective is to benefit all the local producers (of the target group) through better research planning, etc.
- Be sensitive to the time and work load of the interviewee.

The interviewer should not**:**

- Intimidate the interviewee, give the impression that he or she is being judged for the answers given – or that there is a “right” or “wrong” answer.
- Carry on if the interviewee shows signs of being tired, or irritated. In any case, an interview should not normally last more than about 40 minutes.

Ask systematically. To allow the interview to develop smoothly, the interviewer should:

- Define the objectives to the interviewee; follow the guide developed beforehand so as not to get distracted from the objective.
- Structure the interview so that the interviewee does not get lost or confused; saying for example “and now I would like to ask a few questions about livestock management, if that is OK”
- Avoid interrupting the interviewee when speaking, or changing the subject abruptly. Also avoid looking bored – if you are not interested, why should the interviewee be?
- Use simple language that the interviewee understands. Do not make formal or abstract questions. Learn the names of important concepts or (crop, animal) names in the local language.
- Leave sensitive questions until last. Ask somebody local beforehand which issues (e.g. income levels, relations with other stakeholders) are likely to be sensitive.
- Probe the issues. Remember the reporter’s code: What? Where? When? Who? How? Why?
- Be alert for answers that are vague, inconsistent, irrelevant, incomplete, and improbable. But probe with tact. It could be that the question was not understood – rephrase and clarify. Remember, it is the perspective of the interviewee that is important – not some absolute truth.

Record the information. The information gathered during the interview should be recorded or it will be forgotten:

Whether to take notes during the interview will depend on the confidence established. Normally, there will not be a problem. However, in some circumstances, it is better not to take written notes during the interview, particularly if the subject or theme of the interview is sensitive; in this case, the interviewer should make notes as soon as possible after the interview.

If the interviewee is alone, he/she should try to avoid long periods between questions when notes are being written down. It is best to have 2 people present – one to ask questions, the other taking notes. If alone, try to take short notes and then elaborate after the interview.

A good way to take notes is in the form of a mental map or spray diagram on poster size paper, so that the interviewee can see the diagram: this helps keep the conversation on track.

It is also good for the note taker to go over the main conclusions and points written down, at the end of the interview, so that the interviewee can correct any misunderstandings or errors, and perhaps add other details missed out.

2 Group interviews

2.1 When to use group interviews

Group interviews are used for:

- Gathering information quickly and economically.
- Promoting discussion and obtaining the general opinion of a community about a specific proposal
- Exploring a topic (in a focus group).

2.2 Conducting the interview

Interviewing in groups requires the same abilities as interviewing key informants. In addition, there are additional factors to consider:

Group Selection

There are two types of group interview: community groups and focus groups.

Community interviews are normally convened by the authorities of that community, often at short notice, and can involve a large group (more than 15 people). Where possible, efforts should be made to get a diverse group (including women, the poorer sections, indigenous peoples, etc). With large groups, it is advisable to split into sub groups, separating out those who would usually keep quiet (women, for example).

Focus groups are normally carried out with a smaller number of people (6 to 10), who have specific knowledge of a certain subject or who represent a particular stakeholder or type of farmer, etc.

Managing the group

In group interviews, the interviewer normally takes the role of moderator (see unit on group moderation). It is important to:

- Control the tendency for particular participants (e.g. the local authorities) to dominate the discussion. In these cases, the moderator should direct the questions to other participants of the group, or even arrange for one of the team to take the authority away from the meeting place for a separate interview.

- Use simple language that is understandable by the least educated and informed.
- Avoid questions that offend cultural sensitivities that create tension, that cause arguments between different participants in the meeting or that lessen the willingness of a particular subgroup or individual to stay in the meeting.
- Avoid discussion, contradictions or interruptions between members of the research team.

3 Precautions during interviewing

3.1 With quantitative data

Interviews with key informants do not generate data that is amenable to statistical manipulation (i.e. calculating means, variation, significant differences, etc). The use of numerical data collected in interviews should be treated with care, if these are to be used to verify or reject hypotheses. When numerical data are used, these should at least always be checked or compared with other interviews or data sources.

3.2 With interviewer bias

It is very easy in interviews to collect information that confirms the preconceived ideas or hypotheses of the interviewer or the research team, and not hear answers that contradict such ideas. Try to be objective and weigh all answers carefully.

3.3 With selection of interviewees

It is very easy to select interviewees who may not represent the target group of beneficiaries or interest group in question. Be aware of typical sources of bias:

- **Roadside bias** – talking only/mainly to people who have time, or those near to towns
- **Wealth bias** – talking only/mainly to the relatively rich and influential, who tend to have more time to talk
- **Gender bias** – talking only/mainly to men, the “household head”
- **Ethnic bias** – talking only/mainly to those who can speak English
- **Seasonal bias** – only seeing the situation at one point of the year
- **Project bias** – talking only/mainly to those identified by project personnel

3.4 Reliability of replies

In a key informant interview there is no firm test you can give to check the data given. Nevertheless, there are various indicators of the reliability of the information obtained:

Knowledge. An interviewee can be well informed on certain topics, and relatively ignorant of others. Does the interviewee answer from direct experience, or from original sources, or is the evidence “hearsay”? Does the interviewee feel he/she has to give the “correct” answer? If the interviewee refers to other data – is the source of this data reliable?

Credibility. Some people have a tendency to be careful and exact, others exaggerate or have a fertile imagination. Does the interviewee seem anxious to give authoritative answers? Does he/she think about the answer before replying, and perceptive about the questions?

Disposition. Some interviewees find it difficult to express their ideas, judgement or opinions to strangers, especially if the stranger is from a different social class. On the other hand, important officials may lack time to express themselves well, although they may have the information.

Hidden motives. Interviewees may have their own motive to hide or withhold accurate information. For example, the project employee may have an interest in giving a good impression of his/her work, and hiding any deficiencies. Is the interviewee trying to paint a particularly positive or negative picture? Is he/she trying to justify something that has gone wrong? Is the interviewee focussing excessively on problems and difficulties in an attempt to gain sympathy or future help?

Spontaneity. The social context of the interview will affect the expression of ideas and opinions. Are there persons present who could affect the answers given by the interviewee? Is the interviewee anxious not to be overheard? Is the place sufficiently private to assure confidentiality of replies?

Desire to please. Many people tend to give – consciously or unconsciously - an answer that they think the interviewer wants to hear. Did the interviewee seem particularly deferent? Did he/she ask the opinion of the interviewer before answering the question? Did the questioner say something that made the interviewee keep quiet or change his answers during the course of the interview?

3.5 Facilitation in group interviews

In groups, it is also important to allow different interest groups or perspectives to be expressed. Care should be taken not to allow a few voices to dominate the discussion.

3.6 Working with interpreters

Where members of the team do not speak the local language used by interviewees, interpreters are necessary. This adds an extra communication filter or layer of mediation between the interviewer and interviewer, and shades of meaning may get distorted or misrepresented. Visualisation is one way to help reduce communication problems, provided that researchers give the opportunity to the interviewees to visualise their *own* perspectives and use known symbols.

In choosing interpreters you should consider:

- **Quality** - the interpreter's ability in both languages, the speed and accuracy of their translation. But also important is familiarity with the local environment and local concepts of farming: a rurally based interpreter might be better an urban candidate.
- **Personality.** An interviewer/interpreter must be patient and respectful to local people, and be able to put people at ease.
- **Social considerations.** If an interpreter is from the study area studied, some of the interviewees may know him/her personally. This may have both positive and negative aspects. Local knowledge is valuable, rapport is better and the interpreter can help contextualize the information gained.

But it is possible that the interviewee might see the interpreter as representing a social group in conflict with them and hence hesitate to provide certain information that they might more readily have told to a stranger. Being knowledgeable about the environment may also make it embarrassing for the interpreter to translate simple and obvious questions (which might be important to the researcher); or answer the question themselves, rather than listening carefully to the people involved and translating their perspective.

- **Gender**. In almost all societies men and women have different conversations depending on whether they are talking to other men or women. Often, women do not participate in providing information, or certain sorts of information, when men are present. It may be socially unacceptable for a male interviewer to work with a female interpreter or with local women.

4 Bibliography

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