

INTERVIEWS



Interviews are routinely carried out when projects and programmes are planned, monitored or evaluated. Interviews may be carried out face-to-face or through remote media. They may be carried out with individuals or groups. They may be unstructured, semi-structured or structured. And they may be informal or formal. Different types of interviews are appropriate in different circumstances.

Interviews are probably the most common data collection tool used in planning, monitoring and evaluation. They are used at all stages of the project / programme cycle. Interviews can be carried out with one person at a time or groups of people. They can be administered formally or informally. They can be carried out face-to-face or by telephone. Increasingly, interviews are being conducted through remote media such as Skype and webinars. Interviews can also be conducted through written questions via letters, email or other forms of social media.

Interviews are sometimes used on their own as a data collection tool. However, they are also considered an integral part of other methodologies. For example, interviews may help provide information for a survey, a case study or a story of change. From a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) perspective, interviews are often essential for acquiring an in-depth understanding of qualitative issues. They are therefore seen as important complements to more quantitative-based tools and methodologies

Different types of interview

There are several different types of interview. These are not mutually exclusive. Among the most common types of interview are:

- individual interviews;
- group interviews;
- semi-structured interviews;
- informal interviews; and
- focus group discussions.

These are described below.

Individual interviews: Individual interviews can be carried out with anyone involved in, or affected by, a project or programme. They can be carried out face-to-face or through remote media. They can be carried out with key informants or stakeholders targeted by a project or programme.

Key informant interviews are held with people who have specialised knowledge of a subject or area. For example, teachers could be key informants for an education programme, or local government officials for a governance programme.

When interviewing stakeholders targeted by a project or programme sampling is often carried out to ensure a cross-section of a wider group is covered. For example, if interviews are carried out with a community affected by a programme it is standard practice to interview a sample of people. The purpose would be to acquire a range of attitudes, opinions and behaviours which are representative of the wider population.

There is no single methodology that is used for individual interviews. Usually, however, there is discussion around a topic or topics, and notes are taken during the interview. Sometimes interviews are taped instead. It should be made clear from the start how any information generated through the interviews will be used.

Group interviews: Group interviews are carried out with a group of people together. They enable an interviewer to access the knowledge, views and opinions of several people at once. The purpose of a group interview is largely the same as for an individual interview. The main difference is that group interviews also allow an interviewer to record discussions between group members.

As with individual interviews there is no standard methodology for carrying out a group interview. However, it is important to ensure a good mixture of stakeholders within the group. For example, it is often necessary to interview men and women in different groups as women may not speak out in front of men. Equally, it may be important to interview teachers separately from children; or community mobilisers separately from local government officials.

An important consideration is the size of the group. Based on INTRAC's experiences with community group interviews, the following table shows the relationship between the size of the group and participation within that group (see Bakewell et. al., 2003).

| Number of people | Participation |
|------------------|--|
| 3-6 | Everybody speaks |
| 7-10 | Almost everybody speaks |
| 11-20 | 5-6 people speak a lot; 3-4 others join in occasionally; others keep quiet |
| More than 20 | 3-4 people dominate; there is little or no participation from others |

How well different people engage within group interviews also depends partly on the skills of the interviewer(s). More skill is usually needed to carry out a group interview than an individual interviews. The added difficulty of managing group interviews means it is common to have more than one interviewer for group interviews, with one person leading the discussion and another taking notes.

Semi-structured interviews: Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) are based around a checklist of questions that need to be covered during each interview. But they also allow for discussion around areas of interest that emerge over the course of the interview. Semi-structured interviews are therefore used to access information from a person or small group on pre-identified topics, whilst at the same time allowing for new questions to arise during discussions. They can be carried out with individuals or with groups.

Semi-structured interviews differ from interviews used to generate formal survey information in that questions are not always asked in the same order and the same way in every interview. Questions can be added or omitted as appropriate, and questions on the checklist can be asked in different ways or at different times during the interview.

During semi-structured interviews, respondents are often encouraged to give examples or elaborate on different aspects of topics which are of interest to them, or seem important to them. This can lead to important issues being raised which the interviewer had not previously considered.

Because semi-structured interviews cover a core set of questions they can be used to generate some statistical data. However, because the questions are not all asked in the same way or at the same time the statistical data is not considered as rigorous as when generated through a formal survey process. Consequently, semi-structured interviews are more commonly used to generate qualitative data.

It is often useful to carry out small pilots to pre-test semi-structured interview questions before applying them more widely. This means if there are mistakes in the questions they can be resolved at an early stage.

Informal interviews: Informal interviews are carried out on any occasion where information is exchanged between an interviewer and a respondent outside of a formal process. They are designed to explore the views, experiences and values of the respondent. Interviewers have the freedom to ask any questions they want, without worrying about having to keep to a script.

Informal interviews are routinely carried out by project and programme staff when visiting the field or partner organisations. They are also widely used in evaluations – indeed it is often the case that better information can be obtained in a cafe at the end of the day, when people are more relaxed, than through formal interviews where people may be more on their guard! Because of their informal nature, it is not usually necessary to take notes during an informal interview (although important information may be noted later on).

Although there are no set formats for informal interviews considerable skill may be required to bring out information from a respondent. The way in which questions are asked and the attitudes of the person doing the interviewing are important factors that help decide how much useful information is received.

Focus group discussions: Focus group discussions (FGDs) are structured discussions with a small group of people who have specialist knowledge or interest in a particular topic. They use a small list of guiding questions to probe for in-depth information. FGDs are widely used in evaluations. They are covered in a separate paper within this section of the M&E Universe.

Strengths and weaknesses of different types of interviews

Each different type of interview has its own strengths and weakness that make it more or less appropriate in different circumstances. Some of these are described below:

- Individual interviews are useful for getting an in-depth view from a stakeholder, and are usually best for assessing individual perspectives. They can cover areas that are controversial or sensitive, as answers can be treated as confidential (unlike within a group interview). However, a large number of interviews may need to be conducted before an overall consensus can be reached. If large numbers of people need to be covered in a short space of time it might be better to conduct group interviews instead.
- Group interviews allow issues to be discussed between different members of a group, therefore enabling some triangulation (or cross-checking) of information. More people can be covered in a shorter space of time than is the case with individual interviews. Group interviews can sometimes be good for exploring conflicts between a group of people and external organisations, as people within a group may feel supported to address issues of concern. On the other hand, information cannot be treated as confidential as it would be heard by the whole group, which means group interviews are not always good for discussing sensitive information *within* a group. Group interviews may require better facilitation than individual interviews, as facilitators need to be able to deal with conflicts or differences of opinion within the group. There is always a danger with group interviews that dominant voices take over.
- Semi-structured interviews are good for acquiring qualitative information on a range of topics, and are useful for acquiring information on unintended as well as intended changes brought about through a project or programme. They are more systematic than unstructured interviews, and can lead to the generation of some statistical data. The main disadvantage (compared to structured interviews) is that open-ended questions can be difficult and time-consuming to analyse. In addition, semi-structured interviews are generally more time-consuming to conduct than less formal types of interview.

- Informal interviews are often very useful for acquiring information that may not have been volunteered in a more formal setting. They can be done anytime and anywhere, and few, if any, notes need to be taken. However, they can also be very time consuming as conversations may range over many areas and can be difficult to control. Information coming from a number of individuals or groups may be difficult to collate. A key disadvantage of informal interviews is that

information is not always replicable. In other words it may rely on the relationship between the interview and the respondent, which means that other interviewers would not get the same information or arrive at the same conclusions.

There are certain elements of behaviour that are required across all different types of interviews. Some of these are described below.

Some Do's and Don'ts of Interviews

| Do... | Don't... |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the wording of questions is clear so that they cannot be misinterpreted. • Only ask one question at a time so that clear and concise answers are received. • Make sure the respondent(s) are comfortable with the person asking the questions. Otherwise they are unlikely to tell the truth. For example, in some societies women may not be comfortable providing honest answers to men. • Encourage alternative views and opinions in group situations. This helps avoid dominance by a small number of people. • Carefully lead up to sensitive questions. People are more likely to give honest responses if they know why you are asking them the question and how the information will be used. • Be aware of non-verbal signals! | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't ask leading questions that suggest what answer is expected. For example, it is better to ask "what do you think of the service?" than "do you think the service is useful?" • Don't let your own biases affect the interviews. Be open and objective. • Don't ignore anything that does not fit with your own ideas and preconceptions. • Avoid 'helping' the interviewee give the answer that you want or expect – it is better to wait until they have finished answering your question fully. • Don't ask vague or insensitive questions. • Don't believe everything you hear! Remember that people may provide false, ill-informed or misleading answers. People have many reasons for not telling the whole truth during interviews |

Further reading and resources

Two other relevant papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and surveys and questionnaires. To access these papers directly, click on the relevant links below.



A practical guide for interviewing people using different interview techniques can be found in the INTRAC book *Sharpening the Development Process: A practical guide to monitoring and evaluation* (see reference below) pp 82-87. A section on semi-structured interviews can also be found in the IFAD M&E Guide, annex D, pp14-15. This guide can be found at various internet locations.

References

- Bakewell, O; Adams, J and Pratt, B (2003), *Sharpening the Development Process: A practical guide to monitoring and evaluation*. INTRAC, UK.

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