Tool 4: Semi-structured interviews

Aim of the tool

To explore an issue involving different stakeholders and to enhance stakeholders engagement.

When to use it?

The tool can be used in practically all stages of projects, MSP's or research if further in-depth exploration of an issue is required.

What is a semi-structured interview?

As opposed to closed surveys with fixed questions, a semi-structured interview is open, being flexible to new ideas that can be brought up during the interview depending on the interviewee's answers. This can be an initial activity to understand an issue with different stakeholders, or usedat a later stage for in-depth enquiry.

Why develop a Semi-structured interview?

In depth, semi-structured interviews provide qualitative data and create understanding of theissue for both the researcher as well as the interviewee. These interviews can also be used for stakeholders' engagement, as it builds mutual connection. Such an interview setting is a co- constructed interface between interviewer and interviewee, which can serve as a space for information sharing, confrontation, reflection and learning.

Instead of leaving the research process to qualified researchers only, there are good reasons to involve stakeholders from different sectors in conducting semi-structured interviews and analysing these. It is an appropriate way to promote stakeholder interaction and learning, and canserve to bring the voices from particular stakeholders into MSP discussions. The voices can be of community people who will not be able to join formal MSP meetings, or from relevant senior stakeholders. In CDI's experience, we sometimes find high-level stakeholders not very keen to join a workshop (because of time constraints or delegation to junior staff), but usually happy to share their views through an interview.

Source: Tools4dev

Semi-structured interviews - Step by step

In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer has an interview guide, serving as a checklist of topics to be covered. This guide can be based on topics and sub topics, maps, photographs, diagrams and rich pictures, where questions are built around. Unlike fully structured interviews, the guide is not a rigid one, however the wording and order are often substantially modified based on the interview flow. The interviewer also has considerable freedom in regards to the amount of time and attention given to different topics. Additional unplanned questions can be asked based on direct observations during the interview. Semi-structured interviews leave space to explore unintended directions, go deeper/probe into interesting remarks or topics and create a mutual indepth understanding of a situation.

Preparation

1. Introduce yourself and the purpose of interview;
2. Present the general topics or themes to be covered in the interview;
3. Start with simple questions that require description. Then move to more complex structural and contrast questions;
4. Ask open-ended questions, and avoid leading questions;
5. Be particularly sensitive when asking probing questions;
6. Write up interview ASAP when it is still fresh in your mind;
7. When possible share with the informant how you use the information from the interview;
8. Remember you are there to learn not to teach;
9. Individual interviews should not be longer than 45 minutes to 1 hour;
10. Group interviews should not last longer than 2 hours.

Tips

- Write down the different topics and related questions you would like to cover on a series of cards. Whenever a topic is covered, the card can be put aside.
- Start with general questions and then get more specific.
- Make links between comments by asking further questions with informants' own words to encourage him/her to provide information in their own terms.
- Ask questions in different ways to probe so that informants will provide additional information.
- Make links between observations and information given during the interviews.

Learn more

C. Robson (2011). Real World Research. Patstow, UK, Wiley.
www.sswm.info/content/semi–structured–interviews
www.tools4dev.org/resources/how–to–do–great–semi–structured–interviews/