Participatory assessment toolbox

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Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in policy and environmental research to collect qualitative data. An interview is a discussion, usually one-on-one between an interviewer and a stakeholder, structured around a predefined set of open questions.

The objective of the interviews is to gather opinions, perceptions, attitudes or background information (expert knowledge, facts, description of process) about chosen topics.

The questions are designed to investigate chosen topics and must be standardised for the whole panel of interviews. The questions have to be open and invite discussion, favouring an in depth understanding of the answers provided.

An interview collects expert knowledge, position of stakeholder groups and individual trajectories

Very efficient for qualitative data collection, this method is however time consuming, in terms of interviews and also of transcription: to be useful, interviews must be recorded and transcribed word for word.

The material from the interview can be used directly, or a further treatment and analysis can be carried out but will require a higher level of methods, expertise and time resources.

1. A discourse: a data of a specific nature

The discourse collected during a semi-structured interview is a data of a specific nature (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). This discourse can bring different levels of

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information relevant for a participatory assessment. The challenge of a good interview is to always be able to identify from which of this three following levels the person is speaking from.

Level 1: collect expert knowledge

Two main types of expert knowledge can be extracted:

- Factual information, data that would not otherwise be available or fine information that may be missing.

  For example: *"The latest statistical data from agricultural holdings on a territory dates back to 2012, which holdings have since closed".*

- Record of specific events. Not usually assessed or even recorded but essential to understand the dynamics of the system.

  For example: *"There were fire casualties in the considered territory but this data is not recorded".*

This data must be verified by triangulation or overlapping of sources and one must be cautious in the use of these discourses depending on the context.

Level 2: position and arguments reflecting collective stake holding

Collect the interests or worldviews of a stakeholder group. At this level, we want to identify what binds a person to a larger group, how an actor can react with others and the social experience of someone who carries the word of a whole group. This level of the discourse will inform on the interests and representations of issues at stake.

For example: *Discourse from a representative of the issue impacting or impacted activity.*

Level 3: Specific features of individual trajectories

Identify the singularity of the person and the multiple dimensions of her or his social and environmental experiences. This level informs more finely and more globally on the issues, representation and worldviews. In this level, you need to identify all that is not stakeholder strategy in the discourse.

For example: *When a scientist presents an environmental issue, some of her or his personal opinion will be mixed in the discourse and might not be supported by science.*

2. Running the interview

Question guide

It is essential to prepare a guide that gathers all the questions that need to be asked of the stakeholders and/or experts. This question protocol ensures that interviews are consistent across interviewer and respondents, and comparable. It should not be too long, about 5 main questions, with possible additional probes. The guidelines are not to be shared with the respondent. Examples of questions are presented in the following paragraph *'§ Exploratory interviews in BGIN strategies'*.

The design of the questions is important. They should not be too formal, avoid using too much project jargon, be open ended - question that cannot easily be answered by a yes or a no - and finally, non-leading in the sense that the interviewee is not pushed in a certain direction. You can use different type of questions depending on your objectives:

- Descriptive questions bring a narrative and might bring up areas of questioning that the researcher did not think about
- Structural question help identify connexions between things and categorise processes for example
- Contrast questions can help explain the difference between two identified objects or processes.

Running the interview

1. Start the interview by a brief introduction of about 10 mn:

- Introduce yourself briefly, the project and why you are here (if available, offer a project flyer).
- Explain at which stage of the project this interview takes place.

Prepare guidelines, record the interview, but let the discussion flow even it does not stick to the plan.

- Ask the person how much time you have for the interview so you do not risk not having time for your last questions.
- Explain how her or his words will be used: in what context; in what format; on which support; and if it will be public or not. In France, for example, you have to assure your respondent that he will not be named or else you have to ask for a signed, written authorisation.
- If the interview is recorded, confirm permission to record the interview, and if necessary ask to sign a pre-prepared form of authorisation and **launch the recording**.

Remark: most persons agree to be recorded (everybody forgets very fast about the recorder, including you!). If it is not the case, plan for a person to take notes with you.

2. Present the plan of the interview, which topics will be discussed.

Example: *'I propose that we discuss the following topics...'*

3. You can now start with your thematic questions, using the question protocol, one question at a time. Don't hesitate to reformulate the questions from your guide with more targeted wording adapted to the stakeholder's. You should take some key notes during the interview, but do not write everything the respondent is telling you, the recording is there for that. It is a good practice to know by heart your guidelines (you can have a printed copy in your notebook) and thus be able to adapt depending of the direction the interviewee is taking.

It is a discussion, you have to be a passive-active participant. Let the interviewee speak and give indication that you follow what she or he is telling. If something is ambiguous, you can reformulate in your own words or ask for clarification (on a specific wording, on a concept, on a source of information...).

You set the pace of the interview, but must be careful not to interrupt the reasoning of the person or influence with your own worldviews. Do not finish the sentences of the respondent and do not try to make her or him say what you want to hear. Do not judge what is being said. Do not express your point view unless you are asked, and in this case do it briefly with no bias. Keep in mind that it is an interview, not a debate.

4. Finally, conclude the interview. It is an essential step. The interview situation is asymmetric, and you should be careful to leave open spaces of expression especially at the end of the interview.

Example: *'Have we addressed all the important issues for you?'; 'Do you have questions about the project or questions you would like to ask me?'*

Thank the interviewee for the time taken to meet you, and inform the person about the next steps of the project, including sharing the outputs.

3. Tips for preparation

Identifying stakeholders to be interviewed

The panel to be interviewed must try to be the most representative of the different type of stakeholders involved in the issue. The panel can be chosen through the stakeholder mapping process (cf. § STEP4 - Identify the stakeholder forum). The number of interviews must take into account the time resources available.

The actors to be interviewed need not necessarily be the official representatives of their sector. The choice will depend on the situation: the type of institutional relationship between the actors, including the interview leader; the legitimacy of the approach - made for scientific reasons, disconnected from a decision-making process or in the context of setting up a plan or a potentially binding operational program).

You can either make requests for interviews to representatives of the sectors (fishing, agriculture, protected area managers, presidents of activity associations ...) or make requests to people you know will have an interesting outlook to answer the question at the base of the interview, and that will not hold a protest speech for which you can not do anything and which will not make you progress in your questioning.

Setting the appointment

Regarding how to approach the person, the method to be used is undoubtedly dependent on the context: (1) if very institutional and with potentially binding repercussions then it is the hierarchical and institutional way that prevails (president to president ...); (2) if it is more informal, everything is possible (email, mail, phone call).

Each interview should be scheduled in advance and take place in a calm environment (avoiding parasite noise on the recording). Best of all, the location of the interview should be where the interviewee wants it so that he is in a known location where he can be at ease. Be careful to plan at the maximum 2 (– 3) interviews per day, so that you can be at ease in your schedule and not rush the interview.

You can confirm the day before the appointment to check if your interlocutor had not forgotten ... and give him the opportunity to confirm or postpone and avoid travelling for nothing.

Recording & authorisation

Before confirming an interview you should ask permission at the interviewee to record it and explain that if they wish, the interview will be treated anonymously, referring only to the sector of the interviewee. An authorisation of use of the material of the interview, explaining in which context the material of the interview will be used, should be signed by the interviewee at the beginning of the interview.

Material

- Recorder (with enough battery life and sufficient storage space) and backup recorder
- Some blank paper, pencils, pens, highlighter... to let the interviewee take notes or make sketches
- Some blank maps of the geographical area can be brought also.

4. Transcription, feedback and analysis

Transcription

The interviews have to be transcripted word for word and not only summarised. Each word is important to analyse the interviews. This a time consuming step, but it is a really important one! You we'll have to count between 4 to 6 times the duration of the interview to have a complete transcription of the interview. It has to be WORD FOR WORD, even if the interviewee repeats the same word several times and not use synonyms, it has to be in the words of the interviewee.

Feedback

Here are two possible options to validate the interview with the respondent.

- Have them individually validate the transcription of the interview (whether it was made on the basis of a recording or live). One exposes oneself to a retreat of some people who will prefer after reflection not to be attributed some of their sayings. On the other hand, it has the advantage of validating things definitively if the return is positive. You can indicate that you have a deadline and that without return from them on a specific date, you will consider the interview as validated (a bit abrupt but for a reminder it can be effective, especially since it is often true that one is constrained by time).
- Collective validation via a return of key ideas during a phase of common culture.

Also, always send the final version of the use made in the project of the interview content.

Time	1 to 2 hours/interview + 2 days of transcription
Technical level	Can be performed with no previous experience
Output	Transcription of a stakeholder's discourse
Advantages	Collect expert's knowledge and opinions; bring different worldviews on the issue at stake; initiate links with stakeholders and introduce the project.
Limits	Availability and involvement of stakeholders; time consuming.
Resources needed	Recording device
Advice	Prepare the interview guide and information on the interviewees and their activities.

5. In practice: in Blue and Green Infrastructures strategies

When to use semi-structured interview in the stakeholder engagement process?

Semi-structured interview can be used very early in the process as an exploratory tool. It can be used in STEP 2 and STEP 3 of the stakeholder engagement process. At this stage, interviewing 2 or 3 stakeholders who have an overview of the socio-ecological system through their involvement on the territory will enrich the core team views and knowledge. These exploratory interviews will complement the first scoping and mapping of BGIN opportunities carried out by the core team. It will also be an opportunity through the interviewee knowledge to identify other relevant stakeholders to be engaged in the process.

A wider set of exploratory interviews can then be carried out at STEP 5 with a wider panel of stakeholder to gather knowledge, opinions and perceptions. It is an opportunity to meet prospective stakeholder forum participants, start making the project known and initiate partnerships in the project.

Designing the question protocol for BGIN strategies

In the context of BGIN implementation strategies, interviews with stakeholders, scientists, experts and elected-members are a good way to collect information and knowledge on:

- How the territory is structured and if logical sub-groups emerge.
- Socio-ecological networks, ecological connectivity, connection between actors and economy...
- Pressures and drivers of change, local or global effects which affect certain compartments of the territory.
- Degree of interaction and social vivacity, 'social visibility', liveliness of issues and of worries,
- Identify existing forums of discussion and identify other relevant stakeholders

The analysis of the interviewee discourse will provide insights on BGIN opportunities. Regarding climate change, it can be presented as a driver during the brief introduction to the interview, but it is then interesting to see which drivers of change on the territory the respondent puts forward.

Guidelines for a Blue and Green Infrastructure Network interview

Question to ask	What we want to know	Possible formulations
1. Your relationship to this territory?	Type of expertise of which the person is depositary, her or his level of commitment	*'The first theme is your relationship with this territory, can you tell me about it?' or 'Since when are you on this territory?'*
2. How is the territory organised?	What are the entities on the territory? Are there ecological sub-groups that emerge? *(Spot the BGIN in the discourse.)*	*'According to your experience, how is the territory organized, how does the territory work? Are there subsets in this territory?'*
3. How are the components of the territory connected to each other?	Question of networks, ecological connectivity, connection between actors and economy.	*'Are these entities connected to each other and how?'*
4.Transformations, main drivers for change?	Locate and characterise pressures. Local or global effects which affect certain compartments of the territory.	*'What do you think are the main drivers of change affecting the territory, past period or in the future?'*
5. Is it discussed on the territory? In which context?	Degree of interaction and social vivacity, 'social visibility', liveliness of issues and of worries, identify forums and actors.	*'Are these questions are discussed? And if so, where, when and between whom and who?'*
6. Who are the key players?	Verify who are the relevant stakeholders.	*'Do you identify key stakeholders? You mentioned this and that important player, do you know anyone else?'*
Conclusion	Offer an open spaces of expression.	*'Have we addressed all the important issues for you?'; 'Do you have questions about the ALICE project or questions you would like to ask me?*