



Performance Monitoring and Evaluation **TIPS**

USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation

CONDUCTING KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

USAID reengineering emphasizes listening to and consulting with customers, partners and other stakeholders as we undertake development activities.

Rapid appraisal techniques offer systematic ways of getting such information quickly and at low cost. This Tips advises how to conduct one such method—key informant interviews.

What Are Key Informant Interviews?

They are qualitative, in-depth interviews of 15 to 35 people selected for their first-hand knowledge about a topic of interest. The interviews are loosely structured, relying on a list of issues to be discussed. Key informant interviews resemble a conversation among acquaintances, allowing a free flow of ideas and information. Interviewers frame questions spontaneously, probe for information and take notes, which are elaborated on later.

When Are Key Informant Interviews Appropriate?

This method is useful in all phases of development activities—identification, planning, implementation, and evaluation. For example, it can provide information on the setting for a planned activity that might influence project design. Or, it could reveal why intended beneficiaries aren't using services offered by a project.

Specifically, it is useful in the following situations:

1. *When qualitative, descriptive information is sufficient for decision-making.*
2. *When there is a need to understand motivation, behavior, and perspectives of our customers and partners.* In-depth interviews of program planners and managers, service providers, host government officials, and beneficiaries concerning their attitudes and behaviors about a USAID activity can help explain its successes and shortcomings.
3. *When a main purpose is to generate recommendations.* Key informants can help formulate recommendations that can improve a program's performance.
4. *When quantitative data collected through other methods need to be interpreted.* Key informant interviews can provide the how and why of what happened. If, for example, a sample survey showed farmers were failing to make loan repayments, key informant interviews could uncover the reasons.

5. *When preliminary information is needed to design a comprehensive quantitative study.* Key informant interviews can help frame the issues before the survey is undertaken.

Advantages and Limitations

Advantages of key informant interviews include:

- they provide information directly from knowledgeable people
- they provide flexibility to explore new ideas and issues not anticipated during planning
- they are inexpensive and simple to conduct

Some disadvantages:

- they are not appropriate if quantitative data are needed
- they may be biased if informants are not carefully selected
- they are susceptible to interviewer biases
- it may be difficult to prove validity of findings

Once the decision has been made to conduct key informant interviews, following the step-by-step advice outlined below will help ensure high-quality information.

Steps in Conducting the Interviews

Step 1. Formulate study questions.

These relate to specific concerns of the study. Study questions generally should be limited to five or fewer.

Step 2. Prepare a short interview guide.

Key informant interviews do not use rigid questionnaires, which inhibit free discussion. However, interviewers must have an idea of what questions to ask. The guide should list major topics and issues to be covered under each study question.

Because the purpose is to explore a few issues in depth, guides are usually limited to 12 items. Different guides may be necessary for interviewing different groups of informants.

Step 3. Select key informants.

The number should not normally exceed 35. It is preferable to start with fewer (say, 25), since often more people end up being interviewed than is initially planned.

Key informants should be selected for their specialized knowledge and unique perspectives on a topic. Planners should take care to select informants with various points of view.

Selection consists of two tasks: First, identify the groups and organizations from which key informants should be drawn—for example, host government agencies, project implementing agencies, contractors, beneficiaries. It is best to include all major stakeholders so that divergent interests and perceptions can be captured.

Second, select a few people from each category after consulting with people familiar with the groups under consideration. In addition, each informant may be asked to suggest other people who may be interviewed.

Step 4. Conduct interviews.

Establish rapport. Begin with an explanation of the purpose of the interview, the intended uses of the information and assurances of confidentiality. Often informants will want assurances that the interview has been approved by relevant officials. Except when interviewing technical experts, questioners should avoid jargon.

Sequence questions. Start with factual questions. Questions requiring opinions and judgments should follow. In general, begin with the present and move to questions about the past or future.

Phrase questions carefully to elicit detailed information. Avoid questions that can be answered by a simple yes or no. For example, questions such as “Please tell me about the vaccination campaign?” are better than “Do you know about the vaccination campaign?”

Use probing techniques. Encourage informants to detail the basis for their conclusions and recommendations. For example, an informant’s comment, such as “The water program has really changed things around here,” can be probed for more details, such as “What changes have you noticed?” “Who seems to have benefitted most?” “Can you give me some specific examples?”

Maintain a neutral attitude. Interviewers should be sympathetic listeners and avoid giving the impression of having strong views on the subject under discussion. Neutrality is essential because some informants, trying to be polite, will say what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

Minimize translation difficulties. Sometimes it is necessary to use a translator, which can change the dynamics and add difficulties. For example, differences in status between the translator and informant may inhibit the conversation. Often information is lost during translation. Difficulties can be minimized by using translators who are not known to the informants, briefing translators on the purposes of the study to reduce misunderstandings, and having translators repeat the informant's comments verbatim.

Step 5. Take adequate notes.

Interviewers should take notes and develop them in detail immediately after each interview to ensure accuracy. Use a set of common subheadings for interview texts, selected with an eye to the major issues being explored. Common subheadings ease data analysis.

Step 6. Analyze interview data.

Interview summary sheets. At the end of each interview, prepare a 1-2 page interview summary sheet reducing information into manageable themes, issues, and recommendations. Each summary should provide information about the key informant's position, reason for inclusion in the list of informants, main points made, implications of these observations, and any insights or ideas the interviewer had during the interview.

Descriptive codes. Coding involves a systematic recording of data. While numeric codes are not appropriate, descriptive codes can help organize responses. These codes may cover key themes, concepts, questions, or ideas, such as sustainability, impact on income, and participation of women. A usual practice is to note the codes or categories on the left-hand margins of the interview text. Then a summary lists the page numbers where each item (code) appears. For example, women's participation might be given the code "wom-par," and the summary sheet might indicate it is discussed on pages 7, 13, 21, 46, and 67 of the interview text.

Categories and subcategories for coding (based on key study questions, hypotheses, or conceptual frameworks) can be developed before interviews begin, or after the interviews are completed. Precoding saves time, but the categories may not be appropriate. Postcoding helps ensure empirically relevant categories, but is time consuming. A compromise is to begin developing coding categories after 8 to 10 interviews, as it becomes apparent which categories are relevant.

Storage and retrieval. The next step is to develop a simple storage and retrieval system. Access to a computer program that sorts text is very helpful. Relevant parts of interview text can then be organized according to the codes. The same effect can be accomplished without computers by preparing folders for each category, cutting relevant comments from the interview and pasting them onto index cards according to the coding scheme, then filing them in the appropriate folder. Each index card should have an identification mark so the comment can be attributed to its source.

Presentation of data. Visual displays such as tables, boxes, and figures can condense information, present it in a clear format, and highlight underlying relationships and trends. This helps communicate findings to decision-makers more clearly, quickly, and easily. Three examples below and on page 4 illustrate how data from key informant interviews might be displayed.

Table 1. Problems Encountered in Obtaining Credit

Male Farmers	Female Farmers
1. Collateral requirements	1. Collateral requirements
2. Burdensome paperwork	2. Burdensome paperwork
3. Long delays in getting loans	3. Long delays in getting loans
	4. Land registered under male's name
	5. Difficulty getting to bank location

Table 2. Impacts on Income of a Microenterprise Activity

“In a survey I did of the participants last year, I found that a majority felt their living conditions have improved.”

—university professor

“I have doubled my crop and profits this year as a result of the loan I got.”

—participant

“I believe that women have not benefitted as much as men because it is more difficult for us to get loans.”

—female participant

Table 3. Recommendations for Improving Training

Recommendation	Number of Informants
Develop need-based training courses	39
Develop more objective selection procedures	20
Plan job placement after training	11

Step 7. Check for reliability and validity.

Key informant interviews are susceptible to error, bias, and misinterpretation, which can lead to flawed findings and recommendations.

Check representativeness of key informants. Take a second look at the key informant list to ensure no significant groups were overlooked.

Assess reliability of key informants. Assess informants’ knowledgeability, credibility, impartiality, willingness to respond, and presence of outsiders who may have inhibited their responses. Greater weight can be given to information provided by more reliable informants.

Check interviewer or investigator bias. One’s own biases as an investigator should be examined, including tendencies to concentrate on information that confirms preconceived notions and hypotheses, seek consistency too early and overlook evidence inconsistent with earlier findings, and be partial to the opinions of elite key informants.

Check for negative evidence. Make a conscious effort to look for evidence that questions preliminary findings. This brings out issues that may have been overlooked.

Get feedback from informants. Ask the key informants for feedback on major findings. A summary report of the findings might be shared with them, along with a request for written comments. Often a more practical approach is to invite them to a meeting where key findings are presented and ask for their feedback.

Selected Further Reading

These tips are drawn from *Conducting Key Informant Interviews in Developing Countries*, by Krishna Kumar (AID Program Design and Evaluation Methodology Report No. 13. December 1986. PN-AAX-226).

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