

# QUALITATIVE METHODS

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## **SUMMARY**

Qualitative methods are an essential complement to both quantitative and participatory methods in any impact assessment. Although it is possible to do an impact assessment using only qualitative methods, the focus of this paper is on how qualitative methods can complement other methods as part of an integrated impact assessment.

**Section 1** gives an overview of what is meant by qualitative methods and how these can complement quantitative and participatory methods. **Section 2** reviews the main methods: informal interviews, Case Studies, and direct observation and how their rigour and reliability can be increased for particular types of enterprise impact assessment. **Section 3** gives summary guidelines for commissioning and assessing qualitative methods in different types of enterprise intervention.

The paper does not give detailed guidance on use of qualitative methods in different academic disciplines. For this the reader is referred to the papers listed in the references at the end of the paper.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Qualitative methods are an essential complement to both quantitative and participatory methods in any impact assessment. They are a necessary to increase understanding of:

- ***complex and sensitive impacts and processes***
- ***differential impacts between stakeholders*** and the reasons for these
- ***potential consequences*** of any practical recommendations

This text has been prepared by Linda Mayoux
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Although it is possible to do an impact assessment using only qualitative methods, the focus of this paper is on how qualitative methods can complement other methods as part of an integrated impact assessment.

**Section 1: *What are qualitative methods? Principles and uses*** gives an overview of what is meant by qualitative methods and how these can complement quantitative and participatory methods.

**Section 2: *Using qualitative methods: challenges and ways forward*** reviews the main methods: informal interviews, case studies, and direct observation and how their rigour and reliability can be increased for particular types of enterprise impact assessment.

**Section 3: *Qualitative methods and integrated impact assessment: commissioning and assessing qualitative research*** gives summary guidelines for commissioning and assessing qualitative methods in different types of enterprise intervention.

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# **1. WHAT ARE QUALITATIVE METHODS? PRINCIPLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

## **1.1 WHAT ARE QUALITATIVE METHODS?**

Qualitative research is a well-established academic tradition in anthropology, sociology, history and geography<sup>1</sup>. Qualitative methods are usually understood to include:

- **Qualitative interviews** which can range from semi-structured questionnaires to open-ended ad hoc conversations
- **Direct observation** including participant and non-participant observation, ethnographic diaries, and more recently photography and video
- **Case studies** combining different methods to compile a holistic understanding of eg individuals, households, communities, markets or institutions

Qualitative methods are generally associated with evaluation of the social dimensions of development programmes, particularly programmes which have explicit social development aims. However any simple dichotomy between quantitative = economic and qualitative = social needs to be questioned:

- many social impacts can and should be quantified (see Toolbox Note on [Quantification](#)). Unless this is done there is a tendency to see social impacts as somehow less tangible and less important than economic impacts which have been quantified.
- qualitative methods have also made a contribution to areas which are generally seen as quantitative e.g. investigation of impact on incomes and markets. Failure to analyse qualitative dimensions of livelihoods such as non-market activities and power relations leads to misrepresentation and inaccuracy in analysis of economic impacts<sup>2</sup>.

Qualitative methods have also conventionally been used more in the context of micro-level analysis<sup>3</sup>. However more recently there has been increasing emphasis on qualitative analysis of macro-level policy, organizations and advocacy<sup>4</sup>.

## **1.2 UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES**

Qualitative research is based on a number of distinctive underlying principles. However qualitative methods are more usefully seen not as a discrete set of tools and techniques, but as complementary methods which can be adapted along a

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview and details of debates in different academic disciplines see papers in Denzin and Lincoln eds 1994 and Thomas et al eds 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For a convincing and interesting critique of the limitations of quantitative economic analysis in evaluating economic development programmes see Hill 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Good examples are some of the in-depth studies of microfinance and women's empowerment e.g. Kabeer 1998; Todd 1996.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion and references see relevant chapters in Roche 1999.

continuum of overlap with quantitative and participatory methods.

Qualitative methods contrast with quantitative methods in a number of important respects which they share with participatory methods. They are:

- **holistic** ie development is seen as an interconnected process with many different dimensions. A key focus of investigation is not on the different dimensions in isolation e.g. separating out economic and social impacts, but understanding the interlinkages and tensions between them. Whereas quantitative methods seek to separate and simplify indicators and impact processes in order to measure them, qualitative methods seek to understand the complexity as a more accurate reflection of reality.
- **based on recognition of multiple realities** where reality is seen as inherently subjective. The focus is on understanding different perceptions, aspirations and interests and how these influence accounts of ' facts ' and events rather than attempting to reduce them to one version of reality. For example women and men may have different accounts of levels of income and/or roles in household decision-making. Different stakeholders may have different perceptions of power relations within organizations. Qualitative methods treat these differences as interesting in themselves as indicators of relative power and as possible explanatory factors in differential impacts of development interventions.
- **heuristic, interpretative and inductive** ie qualitative research evolves rather than restricts itself to predetermined questions or hypotheses. Any assessment starts with an intensive familiarisation with the context, institutions and policies to be assessed and progressively builds up a comprehensive understanding of the processes involved. Because of the emphasis on understanding complexity the scope and focus of the research are continually redefined as understanding of different parts of the process increases and new issues arise.
- **requires in-depth face-to-face field work.** Because of the need to relate all these different dimensions together in the cumulative understanding of a particular context, it is more difficult to delegate or divide up different parts of the qualitative investigation between different people. Skilled (and hence more expensive) researchers typically spend long periods in the field rather than delegating field research and questionnaires to less-skilled enumerators, although in the field they may closely supervise local researchers to collect less difficult information.

In the above respects qualitative methods are broadly similar to participatory methods. However qualitative methods also contrast with participatory methods in a number of important respects:

- **central role of the outside researcher** in design, research and analysis. Although there is the focus on multiple realities, the ways in which these are investigated and the analysis of their significance lies largely with the researcher rather than being an open-ended process to be determined by participants.
- there is a **focus on information from individuals**: although qualitative methods may be used to compile case studies or observe groups and communities, there is much more of an emphasis on individual information. This makes it possible to ask

much more sensitive probing questions which people would not like to answer in a public forum.

- the investigation **records what is happening rather than seeking to influence events**: a key difference between qualitative and participatory methods is that qualitative methods seek to understand current events rather than intervening to change future events. Although recording individual accounts may aim to empower people and influence policy through making them more visible, there is no attempt to integrate qualitative research with empowerment and policy development. This may make the data more reliable in some respects as people are less liable to manipulate information in expectation of beneficial outcomes or fear of unwanted consequences.

### 1.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Because of these distinctive principles and characteristics, qualitative methods are useful compliments to quantitative and participatory methods in order to:

#### ***Increase understanding of WHAT is happening.***

- Qualitative methods are useful in informing the **selection of criteria and indicators**, highlighting any limitations or complexities and hence assisting in their interpretation.
- Qualitative methods are also often necessary to investigate more **complex and sensitive impacts** which are not so easy to quantify or where quantification would be extremely time-consuming and costly. They are also used to investigate more sensitive issues which cannot be easily aired in the public forum of participatory methods.

#### ***Contribute to understanding of WHO is affected in which ways.***

- Qualitative methods highlight the voices of those who are most **disadvantaged** in ways which might be difficult to the public and consensual nature of participatory methods or missed in the process of aggregation of quantitative methods.
- Qualitative methods can also be used for probing of **key informants** to further investigate issues of diversity and conflict.

#### ***Analyse WHY particular impacts are occurring.***

- Qualitative methods enable more probing investigation of **contexts and development processes** and the complex interactions between contexts, grassroots aspirations and strategies, institutional structures and enterprise interventions.

#### ***Assessing HOW POLICY CAN BE IMPROVED.***

- Qualitative methods are likely to be necessary in investigating more complex and sensitive issues essential to understanding the feasibility of proposals from participatory workshops.

## **BOX 1: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: SUMMARY OF KEY METHODS AND UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES**

### **KEY METHODS**

- *Qualitative interviews*
- *Direct observation*
- *Case Studies*

### **DISTINCTIVE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES**

#### **Contrast with quantitative methods but in common with participatory methods**

- holistic
- recognition of multiple realities
- heuristic, interpretative and inductive
- requires in-depth face-to-face field work

#### **Contrast with participatory methods but in common with quantitative methods**

- central importance of outside researcher in design, research and analysis
- focus on information from individuals as well as groups and communities
- seek to record what is happening rather than influencing events

### **CONTRIBUTIONS**

#### **WHAT** is happening:

- informing the *selection of criteria and indicators*,
- investigating more *complex and sensitive impacts*

#### **WHO** is affected in which ways through:

- probing of *key informants*
- highlighting the voices of those who are most *disadvantaged*

#### **WHY** particular impacts are occurring through probing investigation of the complex interactions between

- **contexts**, grassroots aspirations and strategies and
- **development processes**, institutional structures and enterprise interventions.

#### **HOW POLICY CAN BE IMPROVED** through investigating:

- *more complex and sensitive issues*
- *hypothetical cases* with key informants

## **2: USING QUALITATIVE METHODS: CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD**

At the same time the very strengths and contributions of qualitative methods can conversely be weaknesses if they are used badly for superficial analysis as indicated in Box 2. Qualitative research is frequently dismissed as ‘unscientific’ and ‘anecdotal’ by researchers used to quantitative analysis. As discussed in more detail in what follows, in some cases the potential challenges can be overcome through careful use of qualitative methods themselves and in other cases they require triangulation with other methods.

### **BOX 2: QUALITATIVE METHODS: ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES**

	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Ways forward</b>
<b>holistic</b>	a more accurate reflection of complex reality	investigation can be so all-encompassing that it is difficult to focus	continual refinement of hypotheses to focus investigation
<b>recognition of multiple realities</b>	more balanced representation of different stakeholders	may be difficult to reconcile differences and assess how representative they are	careful targeting
<b>heuristic, interpretative and inductive</b>	a better understanding of processes	again investigation can be so all-encompassing that it is difficult to focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continual refinement of hypotheses</li> <li>• skilled and focused probing</li> <li>• systematic use of computer analysis</li> </ul>
<b>requires in-depth face-to-face field work</b>	better rapport with respondents and more continuous contact leading to more accurate information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• requires skilled investigators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• training and close supervision of field assistants</li> </ul>
<b>central importance of outside researcher</b>	external understanding may enable a more balanced understanding than that of insiders	investigation may be overly influenced by the subjective views of the researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continually reflecting on own biases and prejudices</li> <li>• detailed recording</li> </ul>
<b>focus on information from individuals as well as groups</b>	Better understanding of difference and ability to get sensitive information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may be difficult to reconcile differences and assess how representative they are</li> <li>• the close relationship may give greater scope for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detailed recording</li> <li>• Triangulation</li> <li>• Developing good levels of rapport</li> <li>• Adherence to ethical code</li> </ul>

		manipulation and false application by informants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• raises ethical issues of confidentiality</li> </ul>	
<b>record what is happening rather than influencing events</b>	Information may be more reliable if the investigation is not influenced by expectations or fear of consequences.	The assessment process is extractive and may not make a contribution to program or policy development	• Attention to methods of dissemination

## 2.1 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS<sup>5</sup>

The central method in qualitative research is simply talking and listening to people. In qualitative research every opportunity for investigation and increasing knowledge is important. The unanticipated may often be more useful in highlighting what people really think and really do than answers in a formal survey situation. Qualitative interviews can take many forms including:

- Qualitative questions added to structured surveys and questionnaires at the end, or annotated in the margin
- Semi-structured interviews where the questions are more open and answers recorded in more detail, and where spaces are left for unanticipated issues which arise in the course of conversation.
- Open-ended but more probing interviews where the broad issues to be covered are clear, but the order or ways in which they are asked are decided in the course of conversation
- Completely open-ended ad hoc conversations with people as the opportunity arises and determined by what they are interested in talking about.

Depending on the focus of investigation, questions can range from micro-level details of people's daily lives to detailed questions about ways in which organisations and institutions work, or macro level policies. The distinguishing feature of qualitative interviews is their continual probing and cross checking of information and a cumulative building on previous knowledge rather than adherence to a fixed set of questions and answers. For this good interpersonal skills are crucial as is careful documentation (See Box 3).

Qualitative interviews can generate quantitative information, depending on the ways in which they are integrated with survey techniques and the [sampling strategy](#) used (forthcoming link). For example types of responses can be classed together and numbers of people counted. Qualitative interviews can also be conducted with groups of people. They often involve several members of one household, or neighbours who come in to hear what is going on or other members of organisations who happen to

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion see eg Patton 1990; Woodhouse 1998.



be passing by. They can also use visual methods like those used in participatory research. Diagram methods like timelines, Venn diagrams and maps are often useful to liven up interviews and build rapport, to help clarify communication and/or to make collection of information more systematic.

### **BOX 3: GOOD PRACTICE IN QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS:**

#### ***Probing and cross-checking***

- Questions or topics are tailored to different informants and stages of enquiry making use of findings from previous interviews
- Informants can be identified progressively to explore a range of different types of knowledge and perspectives,
- Findings reduced to understandable patterns using qualitative analysis and/or diagrams
- Findings are validated by cross-checking with other questions and information from other informants

#### ***Good interpersonal skills***

- sensitivity to the respondents' mood, body language and time constraints and to the different cultural norms that may shape these;
- ability to really listen to answers, and to probe and cross-check in a thorough but sensitive manner;
- taking notes in a discrete, non-threatening way which does not interrupt the flow of conversation; tape-recording is often a possibility
- using humour and personal experience to bring up sensitive issues or to challenge a response.

#### ***Careful documentation***

- continually examining own biases
- as far as possible quoting an interviewee's exact words and making clear where the interviewer's own analysis and interpretation has been added

## **2.2 DIRECT OBSERVATION<sup>6</sup>**

A second key element of qualitative research is observation in order to capture the unexpected, unusual or unsaid. Observation is useful in:

- ***getting a better understanding of context***
- ***cross-checking information*** and possible differences between what people do and what they say they do.
- ***assessing the quality of relationships*** between individuals or groups eg relations within the household, and between different parts of a community. for example in relation to patronage, dependency, or ethnicity.

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion see eg Adler and Adler 1994; Atkinson and Hammersley 1994.

- to **gain new insights** or to discover things that people may not wish to reveal in interviews, or may be not asked about in surveys and may not have thought of mentioning.
- **building rapport with informants**

A distinction is often made between:

- **participant observation**, where the observer shares in at least some of the activities or discussions that are being assessed in order to get a better understanding of insider views and experiences, and
- **non-participant direct observation** where the observer deliberately does not become involved in the situation under assessment in order not to influence it.

In reality the distinction is often blurred as any observer is likely to influence events in some way and/or stand back and let events happen.

Observation often occurs in all types of assessment. Good interviewers will carefully observe the nonverbal signals that a respondent may give and adapt their questions in light of this. They will observe the environment in which an interview is conducted to see if there are signs that confirm or contradict what the interviewee is saying. It is possible to make this observation process more systematic and more reliable as summarised in Box 4. Key elements are careful documentation and being critically reflective on ones own assumptions and biases. It is very important to cross-check information from observation to avoid misunderstanding particularly where the observer is from a different culture. Videos and photographs may be extremely useful for both aiding memory and as a focus for subsequent questions.

Observation can be combined with both quantitative and participatory methods. Some of the things observed can be quantified eg length of time or numbers of contributions taken by particular speakers at a meeting, numbers of houses of particular types which may indicate levels of poverty. In quantitative surveys inconsistencies and observations may be jotted down in the margins of survey forms or relegated to a section at the end. Documentation of participatory exercises should also include observation. Observations can also be recorded in the form of diagrams.

#### **BOX 4: GOOD PRACTICE IN OBSERVATION**

##### ***Careful documentation of:***

- the degree and quality of participation of individuals and groups in discussions, including who was not participating or not even invited to participate;
- the way in which different individuals and groups treat each other, and each other's ideas;
- the way in which conflict or disagreement between individuals and groups is handled;
- the degree of independent decision-making by different people and groups;

- the body-language of participants and the physical setup of the house or meetings and gatherings;
- the informal interactions before, during, and after discussions, meetings and during breaks.

### **Critical attitude**

- continual questioning of own assumptions and biases
- taking care to cross-check with other methods later to go beyond external behaviours which may have been misunderstood

**Video and photographs** may be very useful where possible

## 2.3 CASE STUDIES<sup>7</sup>

Case studies may use either of the above methods in order to compile a comprehensive and systematic picture of a particular case. Case studies may be of many different types including:

- **individuals**
- **households**
- **communities**
- **markets**
- **programmes and organisations**
- **events**
- **policies**

They typically combine investigation of:

- **context**
- **aspirations and perceptions,**
- **resources and power relations**
- **institutions and development interventions.**

Case studies are useful:

- where **broad, complex questions** have to be addressed in complex circumstances
- where **individual**, rather than standardised, outcomes are sought
- providing a **focus for debate and further probing** of sensitive issues in informal interviews with other respondents.
- for **illustrative purposes** of typicality and/or limitations of findings and/or to highlight particular issues
- for **demonstrating and communicating impact** in presentation of findings, dissemination, publicity and training

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<sup>7</sup> For more details see eg Patton 1990; Stake 1994; Thomas 1998 and for institutional analysis see Roche 1998, 1999.

These may often be combined for comparative purposes or to follow through processes at different levels. Case studies may not only be used to look at micro level impacts. They are also potentially useful in investigating macro level policies, for example following through the ways in which policies are implemented from their process of formation, through to their implementation by different agencies at different levels, down to their impacts on individuals and households. Following processes through in this way is likely to be very useful in indicating the ways in which macro level policies might need to be changed in order to have the desired outcomes.

Given the amount of time needed to compile a comprehensive case study, careful and purposive selection of the particular cases to be studied is crucial. The ways in which cases should be selected will depend on the use to which case studies are to be put as summarised in Box 5.

### BOX 5: TYPES OF CASE STUDY AND THEIR USEFULNESS

<b>Types of case</b>	<b>Usefulness</b>
<b><i>Unusual, extreme, or deviant cases</i></b> (programme dropouts, failures, or successes)	Useful in understanding puzzling cases which seem to break the rules, and why certain people or organisations seem to achieve particularly good or bad results. Useful in understanding the reasons for exceptionally good or bad performance.
<b><i>Typical or average cases</i></b>	Useful in understanding the situation of most people, communities, and organisations. Findings maybe replicable in other 'normal' situations.
<b><i>Homogenous or similar cases</i></b> (for example, looking at impact on a group of women of the same age, or looking at a number of credit projects)	Useful in looking at particular sub-groups in depth, which may be important when many different types of people or activities are involved.
<b><i>Varied or heterogeneous cases</i></b> (deliberately seeking out different groups of people, organisations, or types of programmes)	Useful in exploring common or distinct patterns across great variance. Common patterns in such cases are likely to indicate core and central impacts of wider relevance, precisely because they occur across diverse groups.
<b><i>Critical cases</i></b> (may have wider relevance; can be used for broader purposes, such as innovative work or work with new groups: or may produce results which have high political impact)	Useful when a single case study can dramatically make a point; statements such as 'if it happens here it can happen anywhere' or 'if it doesn't work here it won't work anywhere' indicate that a case is critical.
<b><i>Snowballing cases</i></b> (one starts with a few cases and then selects others on the basis of the findings)	Useful when the information to select all case studies is not available or are dependent on a greater understanding of the situation.
<b><i>Convenience cases</i></b>	Generally a bad idea if these are the only or most

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(where case studies are chosen important reasons for choosing case studies. solely because it is easy - the information already exists, the site is very close, and so on)

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Source Roche 1999 adapted from Patton (1990)

Case studies may contain information which can be quantified and/or followed up by quantitative surveys. This is often necessary in order to assess the significance of any particular case. Case studies may also often involve participatory methods if the case study is of a group, community or institution or with different members of households. They may also be analysed or documented using diagram techniques to clarify interrelationships between the different elements.

### **3: GUIDELINES FOR COMMISSIONING QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT**

Qualitative research must be an adequately resourced part of an impact assessment to ensure reliability and avoid anecdotal and biased reporting. They are nevertheless an important part of all stages of an impact assessment:

- **initial identification** of indicators, categories for sampling and analysis and initial formulation of hypotheses
- **during the impact assessment process** for crosschecking and probing issues raised by other methods and particularly investigating more sensitive and complex issues
- **towards the end of the assessment** to identify potential outcomes of recommendations generated in the more public fora of participatory consultations.

Many of the potential limitations of qualitative methods can be addressed through better use of the methods themselves:

- **continual probing, reflection and refinement of hypotheses**
- **good levels of rapport**
- **focused targeting of informants**
- **detailed recording**

The process of analysis can also be assisted by **computer analysis** using programmes like NUDist<sup>8</sup> which make analysis of large amounts of qualitative data more systematic. Attention to **methods of dissemination** can increase the usefulness of qualitative research in policy formation.<sup>9</sup> Other shortcomings can be addressed through **triangulation** with other methods. In common with all impact assessment, but particularly in view of the confidential and sensitive information which can be obtained through qualitative methods, **ethical issues** of how the data will be used and disseminated will also be important.

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<sup>8</sup> For discussion of computer analysis of qualitative material see eg Richards and Richards 1994.

<sup>9</sup> See the useful discussion in Chataway and Joffe 1998.

Given the open-ended and evolving nature of qualitative research, it is less easy to state precisely what questions and methods will be used, and which people will be interviewed. Nevertheless there are some broad guidelines which can be followed and questions which can be asked both in commissioning and assessing qualitative research as indicated in Box 6.

The skills and experience of the principal researcher/s will be crucial in keeping the qualitative research focused and exploring those issues which are important in a reliable manner. Nevertheless with appropriate training, less skilled local researchers can also be used for parts of the research. Local researchers, if chosen with care and have the requisite interpersonal skills, interest and enthusiasm, can be extremely effective in obtaining complex and sensitive information. They need not have academic training if they have good interpersonal skills and a good level of local knowledge and contacts. In fact if those to be researched are poor and illiterate, high levels of education in all the researchers maybe a disadvantage. In addition, the subjective observations of local researchers may be very useful as information in its own right for external researchers. Local researchers will however need to be much more closely supervised than enumerators in quantitative surveys, either directly in the field or through communication like e-mail. This will therefore need to be allowed for in the time allocated to the principal researcher. A particularly important requirement for qualitative research is language skills sufficient to understand complex issues, and good translation will be needed if the researchers do not speak the local language.

Given the time-consuming nature of qualitative research and its potential contributions and limitations, careful thought should be given to ways in which it can be integrated with collection of quantitative data and also participatory methods as outlined above. This will require good communications between different members of the team to enable those responsible for the qualitative research to insert questions and issues as necessary.

#### **BOX 6: CHECKLIST OF QUESTIONS**

##### **USE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS**

- Which qualitative methods are to be used at which stage? How are they to be integrated with other methods?
- Have the topics been specified? Or are some of these left open?
- How are respondents to be selected? Is this known or is this left open?
- Has sufficient time been allocated for the unexpected? for observation overtime? for crosschecking?
- How are the findings to be recorded?
- Will the researchers follow an ethical code of conduct?
- How will the qualitative research be disseminated to feed into project improvement and/or policy change?

- What limitations of qualitative methods are foreseen? How will these be dealt with?
- How are qualitative methods to be integrated with quantitative and participatory methods?

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## **RESEARCHERS**

- What skills and experience do the researchers have of using qualitative methods? of the particular context and organisations involved?
- Is some of the research to be delegated to less skilled and possibly local researchers? What provision has been made for their training? Are they likely to have good rapport with the people to be studied e.g. in terms of gender, ethnicity etc
- Do the researchers have the required language skills? If not what provisions have been made for translation?

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