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## Learning Note –

Using Qualitative Research  
to Inform Inclusive Food Security Programming



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## Learning Note –

### Using Qualitative Research to Inform Inclusive Food Security Programming

#### Purpose of This Paper

This paper presents learning on the application of qualitative research for more inclusive food security programming. WFP relies to a large extent on quantitative methods, such as surveys. Yet, it is increasingly recognised that qualitative approaches may be a useful complement to quantitative data. Qualitative methods such as key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD), when analysed following qualitative principles, aid in understanding the effects and effectiveness of programmes. They are particularly useful with marginalised groups not represented in standard quantitative sampling.

This paper draws on examples from work with HQ, regional bureaux, and country offices, particularly WFP Cambodia and WFP Myanmar, through the WFP-Trinity College Dublin (TCD) research partnership.<sup>1</sup> Six key tips are presented, drawn from the TCD research team's experience both supporting and directly planning, conducting, analysing, and applying qualitative research across WFP programmes.

This paper is not designed to teach a beginner how to plan and conduct qualitative research; many such WFP-specific resources are already available.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the lessons presented here are designed to support practitioners to avoid common pitfalls that arise in WFP's complex operational contexts, and to implement qualitative research in ways that complements WFP's use of quantitative data.

This paper does not present a recipe for qualitative research, with step-by-step instructions. Instead, these tips are like telling you when and how much salt to add, so that your dish will really come together!

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<sup>1</sup> This global level partnership (2020 – 2024) has generated evidence to inform inclusive food security programming and outputs and research papers can be accessed through WFPGo.

<sup>2</sup> [docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000103363/download/](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000103363/download/)

## Tip One

Only collect and analyse qualitative data once you can clearly outline how and for what purpose it will be used, and why a qualitative approach is preferred.

Qualitative research is misused in food security programming if it collects information that cannot be acted upon, or if it collects information that would have been better collected using quantitative methods.

A “more is better” approach to data does not make sense when WFP operates with limited resources and tight timelines. **Qualitative research questions should be focused on generating information that can be tangibly used**, for example through informing programming decisions or advocacy efforts.

Qualitative research that is not based on an operationally useful research question will return information that is too vague, that does not expand or enhance existing knowledge, or that is not relevant to WFP’s operational mandate.

For example, identifying that an Indigenous community has traditional birth and post-partum practices is vague, could already have been reasonably assumed, and does not relate to WFP’s mandate. However, a qualitative exploration specifically focused on nutrition beliefs and practices before and after childbirth would be useful if WFP implements a nutritional programme for expectant and nursing mothers.

## Example from the literature

Mixed-methods research undertaken in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya combined both quantitative and qualitative data to examine food distribution and social cohesion<sup>3</sup>. The purpose of the qualitative data was not to collect interesting quotes, but to provide a level of deeper exploration, of important dynamics that were absent from the quantitative data alone.

A quantitative survey asked whether refugees had ‘shared a meal’ with anyone from the local host population. It was assumed that a positive

response would indicate low tensions and good relations between the groups. However, the qualitative component of the research revealed that many refugees, who did not have access to cash, used what they called the ‘shared meal’ to pay for firewood from the host population. What appeared in the quantitative data as social cohesion was revealed by the qualitative research to represent a transactional relationship, based on unequal control over necessary resources.

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<sup>3</sup> ODI Global, 2023. <https://odi.org/en/insights/socialcohesion-or-coercion-refugeehost-relationships/>

## Tip Two

A quantitative enumerator asks questions to get answers to a survey, but qualitative facilitators work together to facilitate a conversation.

In general, quantitative approaches are very useful for *quantifying* a phenomenon, for e.g. average monthly household expenditure.<sup>4</sup> As a result, surveys often consist of multiple pages of scales, measures, and multiple-choice questions. By contrast, qualitative approaches are suited to *describing and/or understanding* phenomena - as long as respondents can be supported to give relevant and detailed answers.

When undertaking qualitative research, the facilitator should use fewer, well-designed questions, and allow genuine curiosity to prompt participants into deeper exploration of each question. Eliciting participant narratives in this way results in rich qualitative data related to the issues being explored. **This means asking fewer questions, often fewer than five.**

For example, imagine that WFP is implementing an early warning intervention as part of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). WFP knows that some of the most marginalised people, including many persons with disabilities, live in more remote areas that are at risk of flooding. The WFP team hypothesises that these households might be less likely to receive warning messages, and, if they do, they might have more difficulty understanding them or taking action. To understand how effective the intervention is at reaching those who are furthest behind it decides upon a qualitative Research Question (RQ).

### RQ: How do persons with disabilities experience early warning activities in this community?

WFP decides to use a combination of KII and FGDs, as the protection and programme teams are experienced in these methods. The team decides on three main interview questions that capture the most important elements of how person experiences an early warning message; whether they receive the message; whether they understand the message; and whether they take action as a result of the message.

1. Do people with disabilities receive the early warning messages?
2. Are people with disabilities able to understand the early warning messages?
3. Can people with disabilities act on the information in the early warning messages?

Good qualitative research depends in part on the skill of the researcher. The example<sup>5</sup> below shows how the three guiding questions are re-worded to sound more conversational, and how prompts encourage detailed responses. The colour of each question in the example corresponds to the main interview question above.

Using only three guiding questions and skilful use of prompts, a lot of useful information has been gathered. When there is more than one interviewer or facilitator, they should both have a clear idea of the research objectives and develop potential probing questions in advance. The interviewer could have probed further, regarding worries about getting message later, the expenses associated with moving, asking to explain yellow and red warnings, or what could be done to make the text messages more trustworthy.

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<sup>4</sup> The use of quintiles can allow for the comparison of averages, for example between the poorest groups of households, and the richest. However, comparison of minority demographic groups, e.g. households with a member with a disability and households without, is often not statistically possible due to the enormous sample sizes required.

<sup>5</sup> This imagined, composite conversation vignette is based on real research conducted by Trinity College Dublin with WFP Cambodia in March 2024



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**Interviewer:** Do you current receive the warning messages?

**Respondent:** Sometimes, I don't know if I receive every message.



**Interviewer:** How do you get the messages?

**Respondent:** My son shares them with me.

*[Interviewer nods to show they are listening, and to prompt the person to continue]*



**Respondent:** My son receives text messages through a group on his phone. I can't afford a phone, and I don't know how to use one anyway.



**Interviewer:** Do you get the information from anywhere else?

**Respondent:** Yes, if a big flood is coming then the village leader will call to our houses to tell us to put the animals away and prepare ourselves.

*[The interviewer restates part of the information to confirm their understanding]*



**Interviewer:** Ah, so the village leader also calls to your house?

**Respondent:** Usually he does, but our house is far from the main road so fuel to get here is expensive, and the way is difficult. I worry that they will not always pass to us, and if my son is not with me, I might not get the warning in time.



**Interviewer:** When you do get information about the floods, is it easy for you to understand?

**Respondent:** Yes. I cannot read the text messages on my own because my eyesight is not good at all, but when my son tells me that there is a yellow or red warning, everyone knows what this means for the water levels.



**Interviewer:** When you receive a red warning, what would you do?

**Respondent:** Well, it depends. When my son gets the messages, I'm not sure who this information is coming from. I prefer to wait for the village chief, or to get official information before I decide what to do. It is not easy for me to leave my house to go to the shelter. If the information is not reliable it will be a waste of effort and money.



### Tip Three

A good qualitative sampling plan chooses respondents for their experience and insight, and remains flexible and responsive.

A sample is a sub-set of individuals (or households, or other relevant unit) from a larger population. Using a sample is necessary as it is usually not feasible to speak with every person or household. Quantitative methods usually aim to collect a random, representative sample.

Qualitative research, by contrast, aims to include only people who have specific insight to the research question. This makes qualitative research especially useful for research on marginalised groups, such as persons with disabilities, or Indigenous communities. Even when focused on marginalised groups, qualitative research is an exercise in understanding, not representation. This means that samples need not be evenly divided according to age, gender, or other demographics. Instead, your sample may be *purposively* constructed to intentionally include certain types of people or groups, such as mothers, vegetable farmers, female cooks etc.

Sampling plans may need to change as data are collected. For example, to understand how food insecure people with disabilities are using cash top-ups, you may plan to conduct focus groups with households with a member with a disability. During the first three focus groups, both men and women talk about discrimination by bank staff when they try to take their cash payments. Therefore, you realise that you need to add a focus group discussion with bank staff to the data collection plan.

In the end, a report that shows that persons with disabilities experience stigma when dealing with bank staff is good to know, as it identifies a barrier to their equal participation in the cash programme. However, it is likely that even without specific research, WFP is already aware that persons with disabilities experience such discriminatory barriers – even if this is not formally documented. Therefore, research findings that also contain information about the attitudes of bank staff is more useful, as it could identify avenues for training and re-education of the staff to take action to address the stigma. **Maintaining some flexibility in a qualitative data collection plan allows refinement of the sample as the ‘how’ or ‘why’ start to become clearer.**

## Tip Four<sup>6</sup>

Analyse and code data in a way that prioritises patterns of meaning, and that provides novel and actionable information.

Avoid the trap of highlighting an isolated quote just because it sounds 'good'. **Analysis is a process of looking for patterns of meaning in the data.** During analysis, draw out latent codes<sup>7</sup> (see the example below) to provide the most novel and actionable insight from the data. When developing themes in the analysis, use direct quotes from the contributing data. This is helpful to both the researcher during analysis, and the eventual report reader.

Latent codes also help to avoid a final analysis or report that only repeats already known or obvious information, which lacks explanatory or descriptive depth and therefore is difficult to act upon e.g., women are at risk of gender-based violence, or people with disabilities experience stigma.

## Example<sup>8</sup>

WFP Myanmar conducted qualitative FGDs with Indigenous communities. Among some communities, repeated references (i.e. a pattern of meaning) were made to shared resources and knowledge. See below for how excerpts from the FGD transcripts could build a theme related to shared resources, and how this theme could be titled.

### FGD 4 Female Elders

[Female 1, 62 years old] "When a woman in the village is giving birth, **we move together as one** to support her. We do not go to the hospital."

[Female 4, 55 years] "We are happy with having the baby at home because we have experience and **share our knowledge**. We have many happy babies here!"

### FGD 7 Male Farmers

[Male 2, 36 years] "**Most people cannot afford a motorcycle, but we can borrow one if it is needed,** to go to the market or something like that."

[Male 5, 28 years] "You must ask the owner, and pay for your own petrol but **it works well, and we are used to helping each other out. That is how we always do things in our village.**"

Semantic coding captures the surface meaning of the data. Here, semantic coding might relate to traditional birth practices, or vehicle ownership. Neither of these topics are particularly relevant for WFP. Latent coding identifies the deeper meaning, which here includes a pattern of shared material and knowledge resources. This code might be named '*We move together as one*' with the text in yellow as contributing evidence. In further FGDs or KIs the analyst would look for further corroborating evidence, and this may become a main theme in the analysis and report.

Unlike literal information regarding motorcycle ownership, identifying a pattern of behaviour of community sharing and support may be very useful to WFP. For example, if deciding whether community-based targeting might work, or if a livelihoods project based on a shared asset could be successful.

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<sup>6</sup> This tip relates to the use of thematic analysis, and a mix of inductive and deductive coding, which in TCD's experience was an appropriate methodology for WFP.

<sup>7</sup> Latent in this context refers to the implied meaning of the words/data, while semantic refers to the explicit meaning.

<sup>8</sup> This imagined, composite conversation vignette is based on real research conducted by WFP Myanmar in September 2024, with technical support from TCD.



## Tip Five

Use 'Other' as a strategic opportunity to add qualitative value.

Quantitative surveys provide an under-utilised opportunity for quickly collecting small amounts of targeted qualitative data. Quantitative surveys collected pre-determined responses. This means that unexpected or atypical responses cannot be captured in quantitative surveys. To overcome this gap, quantitative surveys often include an open response such as 'Other', with or without a text box to add detail. However, these data are often discarded during the (quantitative) analysis process.

If 'other', please explain

**Example:** Data entry for "Other".

**If a text response option is included and the response is sufficiently detailed, this can be directly analysed.** The proportion of 'Other' responses, or similar responses such as 'Prefer not to say' or 'Don't know' can also be counted and trends analysed over time. If a survey is returning a high or increasing proportion of such responses, this suggests the standard answers categories are inadequate. A qualitative approach may then be justified to understand why.

See our publication "[Inclusive Accountability to Affected Populations: Lessons from CFM hotlines in Syria and Moldova](#)" for an example of how such 'Other' responses were used through a Community Feedback Mechanism in a quick onset emergency.

## Tip Six

Triangulate appropriately to increase the power and reliability of qualitative insight.

Qualitative insight can suggest important changes to make programmes more efficient or effective. **To be confident in recommendations arising from qualitative research, it is important to triangulate the data using other sources.**

Together, TCD and WFP Cambodia conducted qualitative KII's with communities engaged with Home Grown School Feeding (HGSF). Female farmers and suppliers referenced challenges with late payments that were putting them at risk of needing to take on debt and preventing them from scaling up their production.

Although the number of respondents was small (n=3), it constituted both a potential risk as a result of engagement with the HGSF. The data were quickly triangulated to assess whether this represented a risk that should be addressed. A review of the literature, including a report commissioned by WFP, confirmed that debt levels in Cambodia were indeed very high, particularly for this group. Secondly, WFP's own monitoring had identified issues with delayed payments in some areas.

Combining these data sources increased confidence in the qualitative findings and suggested female enrolment in the programmes would not increase or scale-up, and could present risks to participants, until the payment issues were addressed. The qualitative findings were strengthened through triangulation, and the resulting data was sufficiently compelling to prioritise action on the issue.

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