Tool 7: Recommendations for conducting interviews

Users without previous experience in conducting interviews may want to consult the following table to improve their chances of obtaining good quality information.[29]

Table 1: General recommendations for conducting interviews

Prepare for your interviews
Make sure you are familiar with the interview form and understand its purpose. You should understand all the questions and know where and how to fill in the answers.

Introduce yourself and the purpose of the interview
Introduce yourself, who you work for, what you would like to talk about and why. This will allow the informant(s) to prepare themselves for what is coming. State clearly that you are here to learn about the impact of the recent shock on specific commodity markets to see whether or not the local population is able to buy these key commodities in sufficient quantity.

Address your interviewees in an appropriate manner
Adapt your interview style to your interviewee (e.g. someone you know or a stranger). Be polite and friendly. Be prepared to explain questions in more detail if your interviewee does not understand them right away and use local language and examples to explain.

Adapt your questions and interview style to your interviewee
Try to get an idea of who your interview partner is and what type of information you can expect from him. If you want to interview a trader and see that he is very busy, it may be better to ask him for an interview at a time that is convenient for him, otherwise you may have to limit your interview to a few precise questions.

Make sure you ask for descriptions and explanations
If the interview form asks you to ask for descriptions, explanations, or justifications, do so. Simple Yes- and No-answers are often only of limited use during the analysis that follows. The explanations of your interviewee(s) allow you to understand the context and give you the possibility to cross-check and verify consistency.

Cross-check your information
If you want reliable information you must interview several people on the same subjects. This gives you the possibility to compare their answers and increases the chances that you get a good picture of the 'real' situation.

You must also verify information during an interview. If you ask complex questions you should reformulate the answer of your informant and ask him whether you understood him correctly (e.g. So you say that… "….").

Be aware of the interview environment

Make sure you interview people in an environment in which they feel at ease to talk. Traders may not want to talk in front of their customers and you may want to ask them if they prefer a more private environment than, for example, their shop.

Be alert, flexible, and spontaneous
Do not be too constrained by the interview form. If you hear something of interest that is not asked for in the interview form, note it and make sure to discuss it during the later RAM team discussions.

However, as you do have to collect the information requested by the interview form you should nonetheless make sure that the discussion stays on track – it can be difficult to find the balance. If the discussion drifts away, be alert and try to bring your informant back to the topic you are interested in. If you do not obtain the information by directly asking for it, ask from another angle. Always make sure your informant(s) understood the question.

Observe
Questions are not the only way to obtain information. Observation can bring you a long way and it can be a very good way to verify oral information.

RAM users planning to use PRA techniques should consult the tables below before going to the field.

29 *For more information see for example: ICRC & IFRC, 2008, p. 45; IFRC, 2007b, p. 30; and Albu, p. 111.*

Table 2: Basic PRA techniques30 for consideration in the RAM

Semi-structured interviews
Semi-structured interviewing is a guided interviewing technique in which the interviewer knows exactly what questions ultimately need to be answered. This information is not obtained through a pre-defined list of questions but by using flexible, open-ended ones. Interviewers commonly use checklists as aids to ensure all topics are covered in the interview. The interviews appear to be informal discussions but are actually carefully controlled and structured.

General tips for semi-structured interviews

- Finish enquiring into one topic before moving on to the next. Follow the conversation's flow, keeping track of aspects that can be followed up later.
- Ask follow-up questions. Questions should be linked to the answer of the previous question. Listening to answers is important.
- Only ask questions to which the informant can be expected to know the answer to or have a valid opinion about.
- Keep track of the story you are being told. Is it consistent? Clarify inconsistencies.
- Cross-check as much as possible, by asking the same question in different ways and/or comparing different people's responses.
- Evaluate the interview afterwards. How well did it go? Do results seem reliable? How could tools and techniques used be improved?
- As you do more interviews, identify knowledge gaps before each interview, to become alert to seeking answers to those questions.

Ranking
When used in a participatory manner, ranking is used to gauge people's perception of the importance of a topic by evaluating it against a set of pre-determined criteria. Commonly a score is allocated to the item being valued against the criteria. The criteria used would be established either externally or by the group undertaking the ranking exercise.
Ranking can be useful because it:

- can be used in assessments to understand the relative importance of sources of food, income, coping strategies and so on, and humanitarian responses and development priorities
- enables cross-checking and the challenging of other information and opinions.

Proportional piling
Proportional piling allows participants to score or weight the value of an item, service, activity, or resource against a pre-determined aspect. It uses percentages, and although it does not provide accurate quantification, it can illustrate the relative importance of more than one variable (e.g. the relative importance of growing tomatoes and onions as cash crops in terms of household income).

Mobility mapping
Mobility maps depict the main places people go to and the significance of those places. A mobility mapping exercise analyses where people need to go to attain certain services. It includes an analysis of which social groups attend which places and why these places are important. This information should be depicted in the map. Mobility maps can also include information about movement-related factors such as distances, travel time, travel cost, and means of transport. These can be depicted using symbols or numbers.

30 *Adapted from Oxfam GB Rough Guide 1.5: Assessment Methodologies: PRA.*

Table 3: General recommendations when using PRA techniques and PRA principles

Sampling
Prior to going to the field you must select the marketplaces you want to visit. The sampling of the marketplaces is an important process that needs to be conducted with care. You should discuss within your organization and with key informants about appropriate candidates. Consider aspects like access and infrastructure; village characteristics; and type of people using the marketplaces. You should then make a purposive selection of marketplaces that comes as close as possible to covering the different aspects (maximum variance).

Techniques
Within the RAM, the techniques suggested are mapping and focus group discussion (FGD). Mapping is a good technique to start work with a group of people as it involves several participants and stimulates discussion and enthusiasm. It allows you to clarify your intentions. Once the people are aware of your intentions you can then switch to FGDs for more detailed information. Make sure you have your interview forms or checklist form ready.

Rapport-building
The very first step when meeting people in the field is to establish a rapport (i.e. relationship) with them. You should prepare yourself as much as possible: consult the secondary information you collected and learn about the population and area you are going to visit (e.g. cultural, ethnic, and historical background).

On meeting the people, greet them in their own language. Find a neutral place to meet and ask for a convenient time to meet. Once the meeting starts, ask the meeting participants to introduce themselves and then introduce yourself and explain the purpose of your visit. When people are ready, explain your first question in a clear and concise way and let them discuss the answer. Continue, always making sure all participants get a chance to express themselves.

At the end of the meeting, thank the participant for their time and inform them about possible follow-up activities.

Material required
Make sure you bring your interview forms and any market maps for verification, comparison, and refinement.

Mapping can often be done on the ground and using objects to hand for illustration. The advantage is that your drawing surface is less restricted. If you choose this option, you should make sure to bring a camera so you can take a picture of the final product to take away.

Mapping can also be done on paper. If you choose this option bring along flipchart paper so you have enough drawing space, and coloured markers so you have enough options to depict different issues.

The choice of the material depends on the context. Choose accordingly.

Documenting the process
It is important to document the process of each exercise (i.e. FGD or mapping). Note the marketplace where you conducted the exercise; who participated in the exercise; make sure you have a proper legend for your market maps (so you understand their meaning once back in the office); and the context of the exercise (this will allow you to put things in perspective once you compare the information collected from different marketplaces).

There are five basic principles underlying all PRA activities, regardless of their intended outcomes.
1. Participation: PRA relies heavily on stakeholders' participation, so tools and techniques need to be designed to involve participants as both information sources and partners in data collection and analysis. Providing feedback to the community is key to fulfilling this principle.

2. Flexibility: Techniques used should be appropriate to the context of analysis (e.g. literacy levels). The context and key aspects being investigated should also determine team composition in terms of technical area and applied tools.

3. Teamwork: The team needs to be made up of people who reflect the topics investigated and can work together. While one member is leading a discussion, another teammate can note responses while another observes behaviour.

4. Optimal ignorance: This is key to reducing bias and determining a complete understanding of the situation. Assumptions and bias will contribute to findings and conclusions that do not truthfully reflect participants' opinions.

5. Systematic: PRA data tends to have low statistical relevance (given its largely qualitative nature and relatively small sample size). However, there are ways to improve the data's validity and reliability. These include systematic sampling based on community stratification (e.g. by geographic location or relative wealth), and cross-checking data using a number of collection techniques (e.g. using a final community meeting.