



TOOL 14

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW



Semi-structured interview as part of project development in Vietnam.
Credit: Peter Branney



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What is the **purpose** of a semi-structured interview?

- To seek in-depth information and ideas from knowledgeable local persons or small groups of people.
- To obtain expert advice and suggestions from key informants.
- To check how certain critical stakeholder groups are being affected by a project (e.g. to see if equity issues and safeguards are being properly addressed).

Plan Vivo Carbon Standard (PV Climate) **requirement?**

No - not a specific requirement of the Plan Vivo Standards, but recommended as a means of getting the views of specific stakeholder groups or informed individuals and to ensure that safeguarding requirements are being met.

When to use this tool?

- Semi-structured interviews can be used at almost any stage during a project. They are particularly important for ensuring in-depth consultation with a specific stakeholder group (during project development) - similar to focus group discussions or to seek the views of a particularly well-informed individual (a key informant).
- Semi-structured interviews are very useful during validation and verification when the validator or verifier needs to interact with a particular stakeholder group (usually an identified disadvantaged group), or with a knowledgeable person, but would like to do this away from other stakeholders or the project team because of the need to discuss sensitive issues in private.

Why is this tool required?

A semi-structured Interview is a flexible tool that can be used for many different purposes both with individuals and small groups (see also Focus Group Discussion). It is a way to get beyond a simple questionnaire by adding depth to existing information or to find out more and get a better understanding of a particular topic. It is also a useful tool for checking information that has already been provided or obtained from elsewhere (through a process called triangulation) and is therefore a useful tool for project impact monitoring, validation and verification.

Semi-structured interviews can be used on their own as a separate participatory tool, or as part of other participatory exercises. It is often useful to use semi-structured interviews at the end of another participatory exercise to get a better understanding of the issues that have just been raised by a larger group.

The important feature of a semi-structured interview is that it enables participants to explain and describe things in their own words rather than giving answers to specific predetermined questions. This allows them to become more confident, especially if the individual or group is normally unable to speak out in public.

Who should participate?

Participants are normally selected according to the requirements of the interviewer. Usually, this is because a particular stakeholder group has been identified about which more detailed information is needed or because a particularly knowledgeable individual has been suggested as being a potentially useful informant. Sometimes, for example during validation, a particular individual or group might request an interview because they have a sensitive issue which they want to discuss (this may form part of a safeguarding procedure). If a semi-structured interview is being conducted with a group of people, it is important to ensure that the group is small (less than 5 people) and that they have a common attribute e.g. single gender, or a single ethnic background. In this way they will be empowered to speak out with greater confidence than if they were in a larger mixed group.

How to use the tool?

- ☐ Start by preparing an outline or check-list of the topics to cover during the semi-structured interview. Usually a few formal questions are included at the start e.g. for participants to explain who they are and where they come from. This will help to put them at ease from the start. The rest of the topics are simply listed - not necessarily in the form of questions.
- ☐ Identify and inform the individuals to be interviewed. This will depend on the purposes for which the semi-structured interview is being used. Make sure that those persons chosen can communicate with the interviewer in a common language (or arrange for an interpreter if necessary).
- ☐ Select a suitable place and time for the interview. Often, an informal setting will help to put participants at ease - so a semi-structured interview can be conducted in a cafe or other quiet place, but make sure that there will be no disturbances and that the interview can be carried out in confidence. If there is a small group attending, make sure that seating arrangements are suitable (don't use a desk, but sit around a table or in a circle on the ground). Normally a semi-structured interview should not take more than about 30 minutes.
- ☐ Begin by explaining the purpose of the semi-structured interview to the

person or group participating. Explain that, if necessary, all information provided will be treated confidentially. If you wish to record the discussion (this is not usually recommended) then make sure you have everyone's permission to do so.

- ☐ Ask the few prepared formal introductory questions (see point 1 above). Make sure that in a group everyone has spoken - if only to introduce themselves.
- ☐ Work through the check-list you prepared earlier by asking relevant questions and carefully listening to the answers. Questions should be short, simple and 'open' i.e. questions should not be answerable with a simple 'yes' or 'no' or with a single word. Avoid asking 'leading questions' e.g. where you are suggesting what the answer might be in your question (see examples below). Don't rush participants' answers and if necessary let them speak at length. The aim of a semi-structured interview is to allow participants to speak as much as possible and for you to listen in a non-judgemental way.
- ☐ After participants have spoken, follow up by asking other related follow-up questions based on the answers they have given. This helps to ensure that you have understood their answer properly and allows you to explore it in a bit more in-depth (this is called 'probing'). Avoid jumping from topic to topic.
- ☐ In a small group - follow up on one participant's answer by asking another person what they think (about the same topic or about the other person's answer).
- ☐ Maintain eye contact with participants and don't try to take notes at the same time. If necessary, another person can (discreetly) take notes.
- ☐ If the line of discussion goes too far off-topic, then use your check-list to bring it back on track - but don't be too rigid because participants may have things they wish to discuss that you didn't include in your check-list.
- ☐ In a small group, give every person a chance to participate and speak. If someone is unwilling to speak then ask them questions personally, rather than to the whole group e.g. 'So what do you think about that person's answer'? But don't embarrass people if they don't want to speak out.
- ☐ Before finishing, ask the participants if they have any questions they would like to ask you and answer them accordingly.
- ☐ At the end of the interview, remember to thank everyone for their contributions.
- ☐ If you have taken notes, or if you want to keep a record of the interview, then do this as soon as possible, so that answers are still fresh in your mind. If you can remember particular quotes that a person has said this will help to convey the quality of the discussions you have had.

Example Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

It is important to ask open questions, that do not lead participants towards a particular answer. See the examples below.

Don't ask: "Are you planting maize on your land?"

Do ask: "What crops have you been planting on your land?"

Don't ask: "Do you collect medicinal plants from the forest?"

Do ask: "What sort of plants do you collect from the forest?" then follow up (probe more deeply) by asking about each different plant that has been mentioned in turn e.g. "What is it being collected for?", "Who collects it?", "How abundant is it?" etc.

Don't ask: "Is the forest now more degraded than it used to be?"

Don't ask: "Is there any illegal logging taking place in the forest?"

Do ask: "How does the condition of the forest now compare with what it used to be?" then follow up (probe) by asking: "What do you think are the causes of the changes in forest condition?"

Don't ask: "Do you have any mango trees on your land?"

Do ask: "What tree species are you growing on your land?" then follow up (probe more deeply) by asking for each species that has been mentioned "What is that tree species useful for?", "Where did it come from?" "Does it grow well and produce fruit?" etc.

Don't ask: "Has climate change affected the growth of your crops on your farm?"

Do ask: "How has the growth of crops on your farm changed over time?" then follow up (probe more deeply) by asking "What do you think is the reason for that change?"

Don't ask: "Is the project going well?" or "Are there any problems with the project?" or "Have you benefited from the project?"

Do ask: "How do you feel about the project so far?" then based on the answer given ask follow-up questions to get more detail.