Imp-Act

Practice Notes

QUIP

Understanding clients through in-depth interviews

What is the QUIP?

QUIP (Qualitative in-depth individual impact assessment protocol) is a practical method to help managers of microfinance institutions (MFIs) better understand their clients through market research or impact assess-ment. Most managers would like to know who is benefiting and who is losing out from their services, and why this might be. This is vital information if they wish to design services that are effective and useful for clients.

Why do in-depth interviews?

In-depth interviews with individuals can provide very useful information about the impact of products and services provided by MFIs. They give clients the opportunity to tell their own story and to speak openly and in detail about how services received from the MFI have affected them. The approach can reveal unexpected insights into how clients use the services, and highlight variations in impact for different types of client. It can also show links between service use and impact. In-depth interviews are a long-established data collection method for social scientists, but they

are less used by microfinance practitioners, who are often unsure of how to get reliable and useful information by this method.

The QUIP shows that it is possible for practitioners to make use of these methods confidently and effectively. It describes a method that can be conducted simply and inexpensively over a short period of time to produce detailed information about how particular clients feel about financial services and the impact they have on their lives.

How can these Practice Notes help you?

The Practice Notes provide a step-by-step guide to developing and conducting in-depth interviews, analysing the information and making conclusions based on what you have learned. The ten steps cover planning, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings to inform decision-making. This will enable you to plan and implement the interview and data analysis process in a way that is appropriate for your organisation, programmes and clients.

The QUIP in ⑩ steps

Below is a summary of the ten steps involved in the QUIP. The remainder of the note discusses each step in more detail, drawing on pilot studies in Zambia and Peru.

1 Deciding what data is needed.
Before you start the study, you need to decide what data you need and why you need it. You may want to know about the impact of your service on one group of clients, or you may want to understand the effects of new services.

2 Deciding who should do the work.
Who carries out the work will affect the quality and nature of the results. Are there MFI staff members willing and able to do the work? More likely you will need to hire an independent researcher to assist MFI staff with the work, particularly if using this method for the first time.

3 Identifying baseline information.
Baseline information tells you what the situation was at a fixed time in the past that you can refer back to. The information will enable you to track more clearly when particular changes took place.

4 Selecting the sample for qualitative interviews.
Conducting a study of all your clients is generally too costly and time-consuming. A solution is to select a sample – a small number of clients who are randomly selected from all clients or from a certain group.

5 Designing a semi-structured interview schedule.
A semi-structured interview has a basic structure but is more flexible than a standard questionnaire-based survey. This kind of interview can provide richer and unexpected information.

6 Preparing for interviews.
Careful preparation is needed before interviews. You need to think in advance about how you will ask your questions and the order you will ask them in. The way you ask questions will affect the quality of the answers you get.

7 Conducting interviews.
You need to be sure that interviews take place in an appropriate location, that respondents fully understand the purpose of the interview, and are able to speak freely.

8 Analysing and interpreting narrative data.
After data collection is complete each interview needs to be typed up into text that can easily be synthesised into a single and more easily readable report, organised by topic.

9 Analysing and converting qualitative data into numbers.
In some cases it may be helpful to convert qualitative into quantitative information by using an impact scoring system. Scores can then be entered onto a spreadsheet and subjected to various forms of statistical analysis in order to identify differences in impact between clients.

10 Using the data to improve your services.
The final and crucial step is to make the most of data to inform the decision-making within the MFI, and perhaps beyond.

Putting QUI

1 Deciding what data is needed

Are there particular groups of clients you need to know more about?
Table 1 provides a checklist that may help. You may want information on those who have recently joined to understand their motivation for participating in the programme. Are there informal or anecdotal ideas about impact that need to be checked? Does the effect on clients of changes in services provided need to be assessed? For example, in a pilot study in Peru, MFI managers wanted to know more about why some clients who always repaid their loans on time were nevertheless leaving the programme.

Are there specific issues you need to know more about? The QUIP is designed to be open to unexpected feedback from clients. However, you may want to be sure that particular issues are also covered. It is important to be realistic about what any study will be able to deliver. Make sure consultation takes place at each step with all those involved, including operational staff. Costs of the study must also be made clear. An advantage of the QUIP is that it is possible to start with a small and focused study, following up with studies of a larger range of clients later.

TABLE 1 CHECKLIST OF POSSIBLE	
Questions	**Ex**
1 Who are my clients?	Ag ed
2 How and why is their demand for microfinance services changing?	Flu de
3 What are the current levels of satisfaction with the services they use?	Wh us
4 What are the direct impacts of their services on clients?	Ma ski qu
5 What are the indirect impacts of their use of these services?	On rel oth

IP into Practice

2 Deciding who should do the work

Make sure one person oversees the study. Someone must take overall responsibility for any study, even if they also rely on others to help with interviewing, data entry, data analysis and presentation of findings. This person must understand:
• The reasons for the study
• The need to document the collection and analysis of the data very carefully so that it is as reliable as possible; and
• All the steps involved and any potential problems with each.

If in doubt, use an independent consultant. MFIs using the QUIP for the first time may find it helpful to hire an experienced qualitative researcher. In addition to having the skills required, the consultant will have the advantage of finding it easier to enquire into sensitive issues, such as relations with field staff and group leaders. However, consultants should be asked to share their experience. One way to do this is for them to team up with a less experienced researcher, who they can guide on how to conduct further studies independently. When choosing research staff, think about the mix of gender, age, language skills and local knowledge as well as research experience required.

3 Identifying baseline information

What is baseline data and how can it be useful? Baseline data consists of information about selected clients from an earlier date, which could be anything from six months to two years before an in-depth interview. Such data provides an invaluable reference point, making it easier to identify where positive and negative changes have taken place over a given period of time. It can be used as a reference point for specific questions and reduce the duration of the in-depth interview. Repeat visits can also help to build up rapport and trust, and hence the quality of information provided.

What information would ideally be included in baseline data?
Baseline data should ideally include information about the profile of clients, such as age, gender, place of residence, number of dependants, business activities and educational attainment. In addition, MFIs may want to collect baseline data relating to the research objectives in Table 1.

4 Selecting the sample for qualitative interviews

Decide who will be in the sample. To identify a sample you will need to draw up lists of the clients you would like to know more about. Next, decide on the number of clients in the sample. If you want to draw general conclusions about a particular type of client then the sample size will need to be at least ten. Whatever the sample size take care to select clients for interview at random from each list, and decide how to select substitutes if any of those selected are not available for interview.

Do not use a list of current clients alone for your sample group. A list of current clients will by definition not include those who have left, so any sample drawn from it will be biased. Previous clients must be included so as to give a more complete picture of client trends over a given period of time.

Keep records to show that your data is reliable. In order to demonstrate the reliability of your data and the conclusions you have drawn from it, it is important to keep a record of all steps in the research process so that someone else can "audit" it if necessary. This means keeping records of how your sample was selected, who responded, who did not and why, how you replaced them in the sample, and how you conducted interviews. You should also maintain an archive of interview notes.

5 Designing a semi-structured interview schedule

Think about the structure of your interview. First, select key interview themes. You then need to think about the questions you will ask, the way you will ask them, and the order. For example, it is often good to start with simpler, relatively uncontroversial topics first, and to build up a rapport with the respondent. Wait until you feel you have built up a good relationship of trust with respondents before asking difficult questions. There are two main types of questions: open and closed. A closed question can only be answered in a specific way – with a number or by ticking boxes. An open question leaves it to the respondent to decide how to answer.

Ask generative questions first. For each new theme you enquire about, you

TABLE 2   EXAMPLES OF GENERATIVE AND SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS

Theme	Generative question	Examples of supplementary questions
1	Please tell me how the overall situation has changed for you and your household since the last interview. Please also explain the reasons for these changes.	• How has the composition of the household changed? • How has the health of you and other household members been? • Have you purchased or sold any important assets?
2	Please tell me how your own business activities have changed since the last interview. Please also explain the reasons for these changes.	• What is your main business and how has this changed? • What about other businesses? • What changes have there been in business turnover?
3	Please tell me how your use of financial services has changed since the last interview. Please explain the reasons for these changes.	• Have you taken any new loans? What for? • Have you repaid loans? How? • Have you increased or drawn down savings? • What did you do with savings (if any) you withdrew? • What other financial services have you used?
4	Please tell me how you have changed as a person (if at all) since the last interview? Can you explain the reasons for any change?	• How have your relationships changed within your family and household? • How far do you feel able to plan for the future? • What roles (if any) have you played outside your household? • How and why have these changed?
5	Please tell me what other members of your household feel about the effect of you joining the MFI.	• How has your contribution to the household budget changed, if at all? • How has your use of time changed? • How has the way you make decisions changed? • How have personal relations changed?

need to ask an initial open question, known as a generative question. An example is: 'Tell me what changes you have noticed in your business activities since last year. Could you explain to me the reasons for these changes?' More examples of generative questions are provided in Table 2.

Ask supplementary questions to probe for more detail. You may want to follow the generative questions with supplementary questions, where possible. These are questions that help sustain respondents' discussion and encourage them to provide greater detail. Respondents will sometimes cover all issues in their own way without the need for any help of this kind. Supplementary questions, like generative questions, should be open-ended and should avoid pointing to a specific answer.

Ask closed questions last. It is better to avoid including closed questions in semi-structured interviews. This is because they can establish a pattern of short responses to prompts, rather than a more open conversation. Closed questions also narrow the range of possible responses. Rather than ask closed questions, you could use information from a previous survey or from branch records. Alternatively, you can include a few closed questions at the very end of the interview.

Think about the time period the interview questions will refer to. If the period you are referring to is short, say three months, then impact is likely to be less, but people will remember more. If it is long, say five years, then there will be more impact to report on, but people may remember less. Either way it is useful if the start of the period is marked by an event that respondents can remember, such as the

CASE STUDY 2

With PROMUC (Consorcio Promoción de la Mujer y la Comunidad) in Peru, an initial sample of 20 was found to include five clients who had left the programme during the following year. The organisation at first tried to exclude these from the sample but later realised that it was important to include these ex-clients to understand the reasons why they had withdrawn. Interestingly, the organisation had initially feared that the clients who had left would not divulge information to the researchers. However, in practice this was not a problem once respondents realised that their identity would not be revealed.

date of securing a first loan, or the date of the baseline interview.

6 Preparing for interviews

Always pilot your interviews. The key to developing a good interview schedule and technique is pre-testing. You should produce, test and revise drafts through mock interviews, initially with staff, which can be useful training, but also with at least two real clients who are similar to but not part of your actual sample.

Issues to bear in mind during this stage include:

• Was the interview too long/short?
• Were the questions clear?
• If not, which ones and how could they be amended?
• Has a major topic been omitted?
• Was the order of the questions satisfactory?
• How well did the process of interviewing go?
• How easy was it to take notes and to record responses?
• Are the questions generating the type of information that will answer your research questions?

7 Conducting interviews

Making the most of interviews. The manner in which introductions are made and the interviews are conducted will greatly affect the quality of the information you obtain. Key words here are sensitivity and respect. Always get permission to interview. Make sure you choose an appropriate time and place where respondents can relax and interruptions can be minimised. Because the questions are open-ended the length of interviews can vary widely, even when using the same semi-structured format, though most should last between one and two hours.

Explain the purpose of the work clearly, and reassure respondents that the information will be held in confidence and used anonymously. It is also important to think carefully about the following:

• Whether respondents should receive something as a token of gratitude for their participation;
• How many interviews you can realistically conduct within the limits of your budget and available time. Cut down if necessary – focus on quality not quantity;
• Who will be present during the interview, because this will affect what people are willing to tell you.

Making a written record of interviews. Always make notes. One way to do this is to write them up opposite a copy of the generative and supplementary questions.
If interviewing as a team of two then decide who will ask the questions and who will be responsible for taking notes. Type up your notes as soon as possible after interviews, while your memory is still fresh. Keep to a predetermined word length for each interview report, to make the most of your time.

Tape-recording interviews. It is good practice to tape-record interviews, but you should always secure the permission of the respondent first. Tapes should be used only as a supplement and as quality control, not in place of taking written notes. Transcribing tape recordings onto paper is very time consuming, so this should generally be avoided unless you have a very generous budget.

8 Analysing and interpreting narrative data

Preparing typed summaries of each interview. Notes are best typed up into an account of each individual interview, following the order of questions in the interview outline. It is good to include quotations that you have noted down if they capture the spirit of an individual's response. Typed transcripts or summaries make it easy to rearrange data into themes.

Organising the information into a report.
1. Identify key issues that came up under each theme.

2. Cut and paste the information from case studies into another document so that it is organised by theme and issue rather than by interview.
3. The next task is to write a clear and thorough overview of what the evidence collated together reveals about each issue and theme. Look for repeated answers and cut-and-paste them together. It should then be possible to summarise each main point in one or two sentences. For example, note how many clients gave the same reasons for leaving the group, such as economic problems or conflict in the group.

Good practice. It is good practice to note in brackets or footnotes the code numbers of interviews to which a particular point refers. It is then possible for you or another researcher to trace any general argument back to the set of specific interview transcripts that support it.

Software packages. Qualitative data analysis computer packages (such as N-Vivo, Hypersearch, Nud.ist) are powerful tools for assisting the task of collating and sorting your data. However, they are expensive to buy and it takes time to learn how to use them effectively. For relatively small studies it is easier to rely instead on cutting and pasting text in Word or another word processing package.

9 Analysing and converting qualitative data into numbers

Constructing an overall impact score. In many cases a synthesis report, arranged by topic, will provide sufficient evidence of findings from which relevant conclusions can be drawn. However, some statistical analysis may also be useful, particularly when the sample size is more than 20 and there is scope for combining the qualitative data with quantitative data (see below).

• One way to do this is for the researchers to draw up a list of different types of impact, such as change in income, asset purchases or sales,

TABLE 3   EXAMPLE OF RESPONDENTS' ANSWERS TO CLOSED OPINION QUESTIONS

	Better	Worse	No change	Not sure
1. Overall, and in the light of this discussion, how has your economic situation changed since the last interview? (Change question)	8	6	1	1

	Better	Worse	No diff	Not sure
2. How does this compare with other people like you who are not members of the MFI? (Change or Impact question)	7	3	1	5
3. How does this compare with what you think would have happened if you had not been a member of the MFI? (Impact question)	5	2	3	6

employment creation, or improved self-esteem. By reviewing evidence in interview transcripts they can then give a score (say on a scale of −5 to +5) for each. These scores can then be added together to obtain a single measure of impact, which can be compared for different types of respondent, according to location, personal characteristics, services received etc.

• A more direct way of arriving at a score is to ask respondents themselves to rank impact in numerical terms at the end of each section of open questions. Table 3 provides an illustration used with CETZAM in Zambia. This example illustrates the need to be clear with respondents about questions that ask about change, and questions that ask about impact; that is changes that would not have occurred without their access to services from the MFI. Question 1 asks about change, and question 3 asks about impact. For question 2 to provide

information about impact, the non-members referred to must be similar to the client in every respect.

Identifying who has benefited most and who has lost out. Once each respondent has been given an overall score, it may then be useful to analyse what client characteristics are associated with having experienced positive or negative impact. For example, clients could be divided into two categories: those with positive and those with negative overall impact scores. The next step is to identify whether there are any other significant differences between the two categories. This can be done in most detail if there is quantitative data from a baseline about each. In both Zambia and Peru, this analysis revealed that younger women with small children who lack support from other adults were the most likely to lose out from taking loans.

10 Using the data to improve your services

It is important to ensure that the findings of this data are fed into the internal learning systems of your MFI. The feedback loop (see ***Imp-Act*** Practice Note #1) discusses in more detail the steps that an MFI needs to follow after the data analysis stage in order to make effective use of the data collected. These include reporting results, decision-making and piloting major decisions before they are implemented. In Zambia, for example, the study highlighted the need to ensure that new members went through a more formal introduction and training when joining a group, even if the group itself was well-established.

Key resources

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