THE QUALITATIVE IMPACT PROTOCOL

The Qualitative Impact Protocol (QUIP) is a qualitative methodology that can be used to assess change in complex projects and programmes. To reduce bias, field researchers are not given information about the project or programme being evaluated, or the theory of change behind its actions. Data analysis, however, is managed by trained analysts who are fully briefed on the project or programme.

The Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP) is an approach to impact assessment based on collecting narrative accounts from the intended beneficiaries of an intervention about what caused changes in specified areas of their life over a defined period. It is particularly useful in complex interventions where a variety of factors that are hard to disentangle – and may even be unknown – influence change, and where there may be unintended consequences. QuIP has been used in project evaluations in a multitude of sectors, including rural livelihoods, microfinance, nutrition and health promotion.

There are strong ethical grounds for asking people directly about the effects of interventions intended to benefit them. Doing so can also contribute practically to learning, innovation and wider accountability. However, asking beneficiaries about what caused their lives to change creates the risk of biased responses, meaning respondents may intentionally or unintentionally provide misleading information. This may be, for example, to please the interviewer, or in the hope of receiving further support.

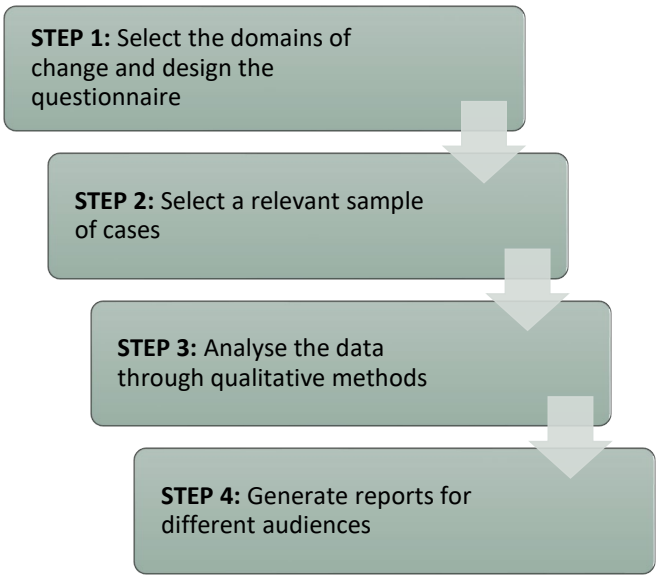
QuIP attempts to reduce this risk by referring to the organisation or intervention being evaluated as little as possible during the interview process, and by using open-ended, exploratory questions about change, rather than questions specific to project or programme activities. By doing this, QuIP gives equal weight to all possible influences on change in people's lives, not just the ones referring to the project or programme in question.

QuIP involves working, where possible, with field researchers who are completely independent of the organisation responsible for the actions being evaluated. Researchers are trained to conduct exploratory interviews, but are deliberately not given information about the organisation being evaluated or the theory of change behind its actions. This is sometimes known as 'blindfolding'. It is not always possible or appropriate, but even where it cannot be applied, simply using a well-designed exploratory approach to interviews can help to collect a much broader range of information than specific project- or programme-based questions.

In QuIP, questionnaires are designed by working backwards from expected changes (outcomes), rather than forward from activities. Interviews generate 'change stories' that explain how and in what way respondents' lives have improved or worsened. Once data has been collected, it is analysed to identify unexpected as well as anticipated changes, and to attempt to explain what caused these changes. Analysts trained in the QuIP approach flag up or code stories of change linked directly to project interventions, as well as to other causes. Other causes might include, for example, weather changes, illness, market shocks, changes in government policies or the activities of other organisations in the area. It is important that the analysts fully understand the theory of change behind the project or programme being assessed so that they can identify which particular changes can be attributed to the intervention, and which cannot.

How it works

QuIP is based around four main steps, as in the diagram below.



STEP ONE

Selection of domains of change and questionnaire design. The first step is to identify key domains of change, which then form the basis of the questionnaires which will be used in interviews and focus group discussions. Domains refer to areas of people's lives and livelihoods which contribute to their wellbeing. It is important that the

organisation commissioning the QuIP work feels confident that these are specific enough to the areas of impact the project or programme was aiming for. If respondents mention these activities without them being directly mentioned by interviewers then this is more credible evidence of impact.

QuIP questionnaires are therefore tailored specifically to the activities and expected impacts (according to a theory of change) of the project or programme being evaluated. However, they remain open-ended and exploratory, collecting information about all relevant, and even unexpected, influences on change in the selected domains of intended beneficiaries' lives. Having participated in designing the questionnaires, the commissioning organisation can also be expected to take the findings more seriously.

QuIP was initially developed and tested on rural development projects (although it has since been applied in a wide range of contexts and countries). Examples of some domains of change used in these projects are:

- food production
- food consumption
- income, assets and transfers
- expenditure and saving
- time spent on work and nature of that work
- children's education
- relationships within the household, including decision-making processes
- relationships and support networks within and outside the community
- overall wellbeing and confidence in the future

Interviews and focus groups are usually designed to take 60 to 90 minutes, and field researchers are trained to use prompting questions to collect as much detailed information as possible. Field researchers are expected to probe for change, identify whether change is positive or negative, and identify reasons why change has happened, capturing any reasons that are mentioned. This enables the creation of a broad picture of change over a pre-determined period of time, alongside the factors that may have contributed to that change.

Select the cases. Sampling approaches are determined by whether the priority is to confirm and quantify the overall impact of a completed project or programme on a defined population in relation to predetermined indicators, or to identify and explore what is happening in a more open-ended way. QuIP tends towards the latter, guided by a desire to understand why a change happened, rather than to quantify an effect. A QuIP study may, for example, deliberately interview people in a particularly high performing area to identify why successful outcomes occurred. Similarly it may focus on interviewing people in low performing areas to find out what appears to have gone wrong. In these cases, deliberately selective sampling is used, instead of seeking out a representative sample that allows for generalisable claims to be made.

Before selecting cases, therefore, it is often useful to start by looking at routine project monitoring data. If data is available on variation in who directly received what and when, and it is expected that these differences will have different causal effects, there is a case for stratifying the selection. This means sampling within identified sub-groups to ensure they reflect the full range of cases which are of interest to the commissioning organisation. This is particularly important if one purpose of the study is to aid decisions about which of a range of project activities or packages should be expanded or stopped, and for whom.

Apart from this, another reason for departing from pure randomised sampling is to cluster respondents geographically in order to reduce the time and cost of data collection. There is often a strong case for using contextual information (e.g. about agroecological zones) to purposefully select areas. There may also be a case for staggering studies – i.e. conducting two smaller studies a few months apart rather than doing a single larger study. This can help to build understanding of project impact lags, pathways and how processes build on each other.

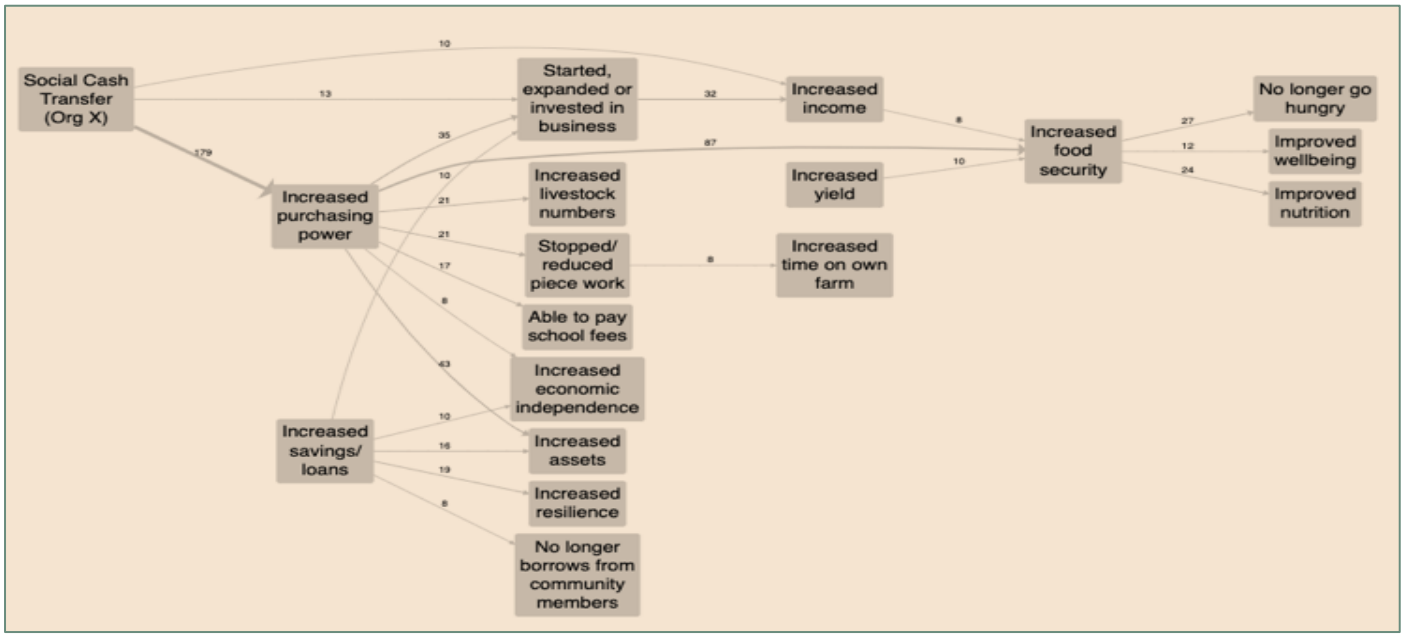
The sample size (i.e. the number of interviews and focus group discussions conducted) is not guided by a need to be representative, but by the need to capture the breadth of possible explanations and dynamics, as well as to test or augment prior knowledge and understanding. QuIP studies are normally planned in discrete sets of 20-25 individual interviews, plus four focus group discussions. This is usually a large enough number to gather detailed qualitative information within a selected community or cluster. With more interviews, uncovering new information on what causes changes becomes increasingly unlikely and, therefore, less cost-efficient.

Increasing the scope of the QuIP across diverse communities or projects may require a number of studies across different types of communities and/or beneficiary types rather than simply scaling up within the same sample. As with domain selection, the involvement of the commissioner in case selection is an important way of ensuring they take ownership of the findings, rather than being able to dismiss them as arbitrary or anecdotal.

A control or comparison group is not necessary in a QuIP study since the aim is to ask intended beneficiaries about attribution based on their own experience rather than infer it from how their experience has differed to a control group. Sometimes, however, it is useful to interview some people unaffected by the project, but similar to those affected by it, in order to explore whether they come up with a different set of reasons for why change has happened. This can then be compared with the reasons provided by the project or programme participants. Non-direct beneficiaries may also be sampled to ascertain the success of ripple effects on wider communities.

The sampling strategy for repeat studies can also be informed by lessons from earlier studies. The principle here is that the credibility of findings builds step by step with the addition of each extra piece of evidence.

Example visualisation of causal links from one selected factor (input) with citation counts included



STEP THREE

Analyse the data. Data analysis is managed by a trained analyst (or set of analysts) who are fully briefed on the project or programme theory of change. They code evidence of causal claims within the interview or focus group transcripts (or narratives) that were captured.

QuIP text analysis is based on two well-established social science approaches: qualitative data analysis and causal mapping. The analyst reads the narratives looking for causal claims like *"because of the heavy rains, we had a poor harvest"*. They highlight quotes like this within the narratives, and for each quote, identify a pair of causal factors: the cause (e.g. *"heavy rains"*) and the effect (e.g. *"poor harvest"*). As the analyst continues to identify more and more causal claims within the narratives, they can group together factors mentioned more than once, whether by the same respondent or others. QuIP analysts often use a web application called Causal Map, which is designed just for this purpose, though it is also possible to use other tools such as spreadsheets. An example of the visualisation of causal links from a single factor can be found in the diagram above.

By coding all references to links between different factors, a causal evidence map can be built up. The result can be a rich network or map with many hundreds of causal factors and causal links, summarising all the stories told by all the respondents. This map can then be aggregated and filtered to show particular aspects of the stories.

For example, causal factors can be selected according to whether they explicitly refer to project activities, implicitly corroborate or challenge the theory of change, or are incidental but potentially significant. This enables analysis of respondents' reported experiences and how different factors may have interacted to mitigate, or help intended change. The results can help answer questions such as:

- Is there evidence that the programme is having the expected effect on intended beneficiaries, and if so, *how much evidence* is there?
- Did other factors affect expected outcomes, and if so, *how much evidence* is there for that?
- Has the programme had any unanticipated effects, positive or negative?
- What patterns can be identified that could inform future programme design?
- Are there significant differences between the causal map as seen by different characteristics such as age or sex?

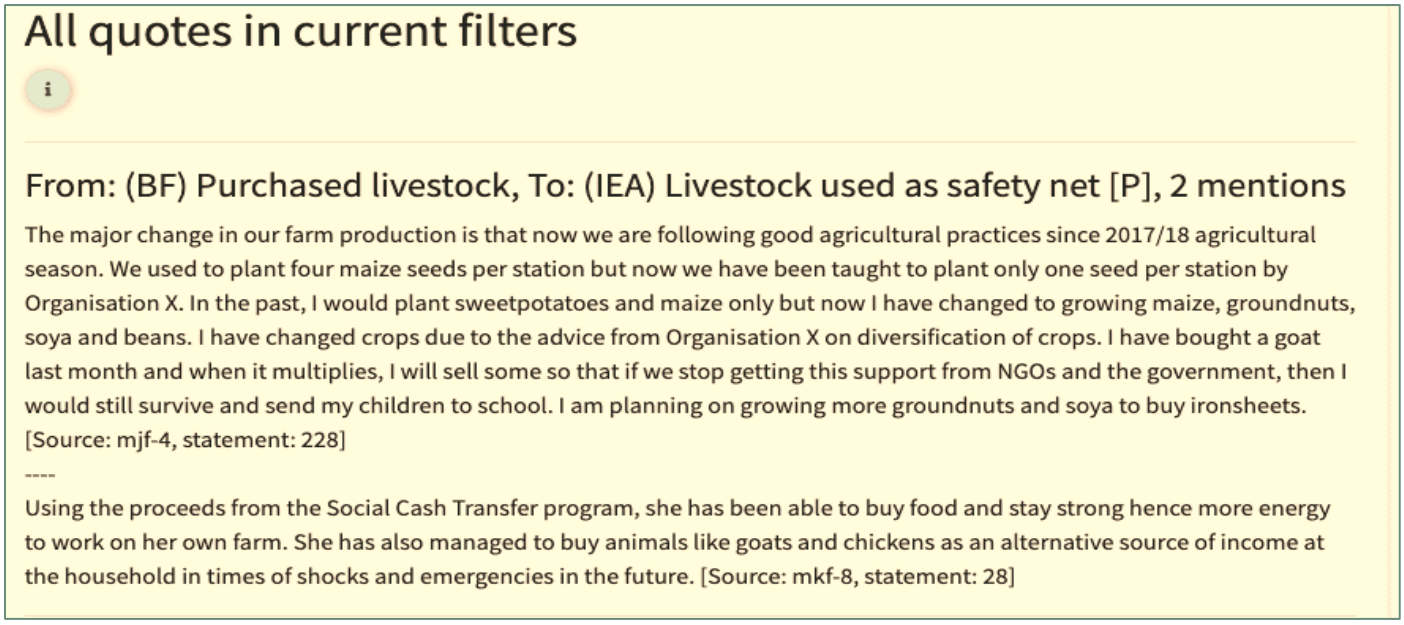
STEP FOUR

Generate reports. As with any methodology, reports need to be tailored according to their audience, and the purpose for which they are written. However, in QuIP analyses, respondent voices are always front and centre. All coded causal connections link transparently back to the original text, so that anyone asking *'where did that link come from?'* can read the respondent's original words.

One aim of QuIP reporting is to encourage the reader to get involved with respondents' original statements and read them in context. An example of quotes linked to a QuIP map, generated through the Causal Map app, can be found in the diagram on the following page.

QuIP analysis takes its cues about which outcomes are important from the respondents themselves. Once the draft report is ready, key stakeholders can be invited to a workshop to discuss and interpret the findings. This helps to close the feedback loop, and bring into the open different values and perspectives among respondents, researchers, analysts and other stakeholders. QuIP draft reports usually kick-start internal discussions on implications for future programme design, and are used alongside other evaluation methods.

Extract of quotes panel linked to a search in Causal Map



Parallels with other approaches

There are parallels between QuIP and other, similar approaches to impact assessment. Some of these are as follows.

- **Contribution Analysis:** QuIP borrows from contribution analysis by placing an intervention's 'theory of change' front and centre in many decisions over what to investigate. This includes the selection of relevant 'domains', the design of the hypotheses (theories) to be tested, the design of the questionnaires and data analysis.
- **Most Significant Change (MSC):** MSC is another approach that lends itself to open-ended inquiry into complex settings that often lack baselines or static target groups. As with QuIP, proposed beneficiaries' voices and interpretation of changes are at the heart of the process and the data that is being used to assess impact. MSC also aims to capture all significant causal factors as opposed to demonstrating the extent to which a specific intervention has had an impact. MSC differs from QuIP by adding a more structured and participatory process of selected stories at different levels within an organisational hierarchy, with the ones deemed most powerful by those involved attaining the greatest visibility.
- **Outcome Harvesting:** QuIP is described as a form of outcome harvesting, offering more specific and detailed guidelines. As with QuIP, outcome harvesting starts with documenting what has changed and then works backwards to explore the reasons for changes. Outcome harvesting, however, does not have established mechanisms for analysing data.

Conclusions

QuIP appears appropriate specifically but not exclusively in the following situations:

- where the need is to learn about how an intervention works and how to improve it, as opposed to proving the size of its impact;
- where there are sufficient researcher capacities and resources to collect open-ended data, and undertake the coding and analysis using the QuIP approach;
- where there is no quantitative baseline; and
- where there is a changing set of potential beneficiaries.

As the developers of the approach argue, QuIP continues to be applied and tested further to establish its usefulness compared to numerous similar approaches grappling with the 'attribution problem' in impact assessment.

Further reading and resources

Other papers in the M&E Universe series explore a range of related methodologies used for learning about and documenting complex change – Contribution Analysis, Outcome Harvesting and Most Significant Change. These can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

Contribution analysis
Most significant change
Outcome harvesting
Qualitative analysis

A number of useful resources on QUIP are freely available from the University of Bath website. These include the following papers, which can be accessed by clicking on the relevant links:

- *QuIP and the Yin/Yang of Quant and Qual: How to navigate QuIP visualisations*. Retrieved from: http://bathsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/How-to-navigate-QuIP-visualisations.pdf%C2%A0
- *Qualitative Impact Assessment Protocol (QUIP)*. Better Evaluation. Retrieved from: http://betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/QUIP
- Case and Evidence Selection for Robust Generalisation in Impact Evaluation. Available from https://bathsdr.org/about-the-quip/quip-casebook-attributing-development-impact/
- Credible Impact Evaluation in Complex Contexts: Confirmatory and exploratory approaches. Available from https://bathsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Credible_impact_evaluation_in_complex_contexts.pdf
- Managing Relationships in Qualitative Impact Evaluation to Improve Development Outcomes: QuIP choreography as a case study. Available from https://bathsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/QuIP-choreography-paper-18Aug2016.pdf
- Case Selection for Robust Generalisation: Lessons from QuIP impact evaluation studies. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09614524.2020.1828829

There is also a book available on QuIP. This is by Copestake, Morsink and Remnant, and is called *Attributing Development Impact: The qualitative impact protocol case book.* It is published by Practical Action Publishing, and is also available from the Bath University website as a free download at https://bathsdr.org/about-the-quip/quip-casebook-attributing-development-impact/

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