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CDS Briefing Paper

The Qualitative Impact Assessment Protocol (QuIP)

This brief presents an overview of the QuIP in three steps: the background to the QuIP and its main aims; the data collection and analysis methodology; and QuIP in the context of other approaches to evaluation. Each section can be read independently.

1. Overview: Understanding the background to the QuIP

Assessing Rural Transformations was a three year ESRC/DFID funded action research project investigating credible ways to assess the impact of development activities, particularly when the intervention takes place in the context of complex processes of rural transformation. The ART project specifically sought to address the issue of how changes can be attributed to different stakeholders or events, whilst minimising pro-project and other sources of bias. It piloted a Contribution Analysis approach; combining quantitative monitoring of key indicators with qualitative, self-reported attribution of impact to provide sufficient evidence to test the theory of change behind the activity being evaluated.

The University of Bath worked with two NGOs; Self Help Africa and Farm Africa, assessing the impact of four of their rural development projects in Malawi and Ethiopia over a three year period. These projects all aimed to strengthen rural livelihoods and food security in the context of both rapid commercialization and climate change. This context can be described as one of organised complexity arising from the presence of interconnected, uncertain and hard-to-measure confounding factors (Z) affecting the casual links between project activities (X) and impact indicators (Y).

The quantitative monitoring tool used in the ART project was Evidence for Development's Individual Household Method. This measured changes in factors contributing to household disposable income relative to basic food needs. A baseline study was conducted for each project, followed by two rounds of monitoring studies a year apart.

The qualitative monitoring was conducted using a new qualitative impact assessment protocol, referred to as the QuIP. In contrast to quantitative impact assessment methods, the QuIP sets out to generate differentiated evidence of impact based on narrative causal statements elicited directly from intended project beneficiaries without the need to interview a control group. Evidence of attribution is sought through respondents' own accounts of causal mechanisms linking X to Y alongside Z rather than by relying on statistical inference based on variable exposure to X. This narrative data is intended to complement quantitative evidence on changes in X, Y and Z obtained through routine project monitoring.

Updates, reports and a guide to using the QuIP, including the full questionnaire, are available at:
www.qualitysocialimpact.org

Staff from the ART project have set up a non-profit research organisation which specialises in QuIP consultancy projects to fund future development of the methodology. Contact us at info@bathsdr.org to find out more.

There are strong ethical grounds for asking people directly about the effect of actions intended to benefit them. Doing so can also contribute practically to learning, innovation and wider accountability, but this entails finding credible ways to address potential response biases. The QuIP does so by arranging for qualitative data collection to take place without any reference to the project being evaluated.

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2. QuIP Methodology: Understanding how the QuIP works

The QuIP is made up of semi-structured household interviews and focus group discussions to assess impact based on self-reported attribution. The interviews are carried out by trained independent consultants who, in order to reduce bias, are informed as little as possible about the organisation and project whose impact is being assessed. The purpose of this 'blinding' is primarily to reduce potential for pro-project bias on the part of respondents who may respond to cues from the researchers. The generic nature of the questionnaire is designed to reinforce this blinding, even in cases where it may not be possible to meet the ideal of researchers with absolutely no prior knowledge (good researchers can be trained and used again). Individual and focus group respondents are asked a series of open-ended, non-project specific questions about any changes in their lives and livelihoods over a specified period of time (e.g. the past two years), going through a series of discrete sections covering different domains: food production, sources of real and cash income, changes in spending, food consumption, asset accumulation, relationships and overall wellbeing. These questions are deliberately open-ended to allow the conversation to be led by the respondent, but they are followed by closed questions to establish clearly the respondent's own views on how this element of their life has changed overall. This helps the researcher and respondent to close the preceding section, and provides useful respondent led 'snapshot' data to compare to the narrative data which is interpreted and coded by an analyst.

The researchers record narrative data in the field on a paper pro-forma, which they type into a pre-prepared Excel spreadsheet as soon as possible after the interview. This is then passed to the commissioner of the study for analysis. The analyst's task - having been briefed about details of the project - is to identify and code cause-and-effect statements embedded in the data according to whether they (a) **explicitly** attribute impact to project activities, (b) make statements that are **implicitly** consistent with the project's theory of change, (c) refer to drivers of change that are **incidental** to project activities. These statements are also classified by impact domain, and coded according to whether respondents described effects as positive or negative. The impact domains can be decided upon depending on the type of project being implemented, but in the ART study included; Food Production, Cash Income, Cash Spending, Food Consumption, Intra-household Relationships, Household Assets, External Relationships. The coding key is below.

Positive		**Negative**
1	Change explicitly attributed to project and project-linked activities	2
3	Stories confirming/questioning a mechanism by which the project aims to be achieving impact, but with no explicit reference to the project	4
5	Change attributed to any other forces that are not related to activities included in the commissioning agent's theory of change	6
7	Change not attributed to any specific cause	8

Findings are fed back to the NGO in the form of an easy to read, standardised ten page report for each project, accompanied with an annex setting out the classified and coded cause-and-effect statements in full. The body of these reports comprises a series of tables with frequency counts of different kinds of narrative statement. Simple quantification of responses in this way provides an initial indication of the extent of congruence in responses across the sample, and encourages readers to draw on the specific coded narrative statements behind the charts which can be easily found using the classification and coding system. The statements are organised thematically making them easier to read, whilst retaining the richness of the original data.

Excerpt from responses to closed questions (self-evaluation of change over the specified period)

HH Code	Main respondent	Age of respondent	1. Food Production	2. Cash income	3. Cash Spending	4. Food consumption	5. Assets	6. Overall Wellbeing
TG1	Female	33	+	+	+	+	+	+
TG2	Male	38	-	-	-	+	+	+
TG3	Male	37	+	+	+	+	+	+
TG4	Female	52	+	-	-	=	-	+
TG5	Female	52	-	-	-	=	-	-
TG6	Female	40	-	=	+	+	+	+
TG7	Female	47	+	+	+	+	+	+

Frequency count of positive changes reported by households and focus groups

	1. Project explicit	3. Project implicit	5. Other	7. None
Food production	TG2 TG7 TG10 TG13 TG14 ***TGF1 TGF3 TGF4***	TG3 TG4 TG9 TG12 TG13 ***TGF2***	TG1 TG3 ***TGF3***	
Cash income	TG7 TG10 ***TGF1***	TG3 TG8 TG9 TG12 ***TGF2 TGF4***	TG1 TG3	
Cash spending	 ***TGF1***	TG3 TG7 TG10 TG12	TG1 TG3 TG6	 ***TGF4***
Food consumption	TG1 TG7 ***TGF1***	TG2 TG3 TG12 TG16 ***TGF2 TGF4***	TG9	TG6 TG10
Relationships		TG3, TG7 ***TGF1***	TG1 TG2 TG4 TG10 TG14 ***TGF3***	 ***TGF3***
Asset accumulation*	***TGF4***	***TGF1 TGF2***		
External relations	TG1 TG7 TG10 TG12 TG14 TG16 ***TGF1 TGF2 TGF4***	TG1 TG2 TG3 TG7 TG11 TG14 TG16 ***TGF1 TGF2 TGF4***	TG1 TG2 TG10 TG12 TG15 ***TGF4***	

Notes: TG1 to TG16 refer to individual household codes. TGF1 to TGF4 refer to focus groups: TGF1 Younger women; TGF2 Older women; TGF3 Older men; TGF4 Younger men.

Frequency count of negative changes reported by households and focus groups

	2. Project explicit	4. Project implicit	6. Other	8. None
Food production		TG2 TG5 TG6 TG7 TG8 TG11 TG14 TG15 TG16	TG4 TG5 TG8 TG9 TG10 TG16	
Cash income		***TGF2 TGF4*** TG2 TG8 TG11 TG14 TG15 TG16 ***TGF1 TGF2 TGF4***	***TGF1*** TG4 TG13	
Cash spending		TG8 TG11 TG14 TG15 TG16 ***TGF2 TGF4***	TG2 TG3 TG4 TG5 TG9	
Food consumption		TG5 TG8 TG14 TG15 ***TGF2***		
Relationships			TG5 TG9 TG 10 TG11 ***TGF1 TGF4***	
Asset accumulation*		***TGF2***		
External relations	TG5 TG6	TG15	 ***TGF4***	

The use of household codes in the tables enables the reader to find the source narrative data very easily as the annex is sorted into domain and codes. Using the example chart above, if the reader wanted to see what narrative data lay behind household TG5 & TG6's attribution of a negative outcome linked to the project's theory of change, they could skip straight to the section on External Relations, and look for the household code under all text coded with a '2'. See the excerpt below:

1. Explicit project and linked causes (positive)	**2. Explicit project and linked causes (negative)**
[TG1] We were given three goats by [xx NGO] and all of them have delivered so that the number of goats increased twofold.	[TG5] [xx NGO] provided us with chickens but all of them died
[TG10] They [xx NGO] have been providing many types of support, such as providing goats, beehives, manual water pumps and eQuIPment for drip irrigation. The goats have doubled in number and will obviously improve the income of the beneficiaries. The manual water pumps have been used to pump water to the vegetables, although due to water shortage they are not effective any more.	[TG6] [xx NGO] gave us 15 chickens. However, there is no change. Except one all of them have died. The one that survived is laying eggs.

The next tables produced summarise the main drivers of change identified by the respondents. This moves on from classification of impacts, to classification of cited causes. Two separate tables list out the positive and the negative drivers. Excerpts are shown below:

Excerpt from Drivers of Positive Change

	Food Production	**Cash income**	**Cash expenditure**	**Food consumption**	**Relation ships**	**Assets**	**Overall wellbeing**
Increased production of fruit and vegetables (improved seeds, tools, irrigation and fertiliser)	TG3, TG4, TG7, TG12 ***TGF1, TGF2, TGF3, TGF4***	TG3, TG7, TG10, TG12 ***TGF1, TGF3, TGF4***	TG7, TG10, TG12 ***TGF1***	TG1, TG2, TG3, TG7, TG12 ***TGF1, TGF2, TGF3, TGF4***		TG7 ***TGF4***	TG1, TG6, TG7 ***TGF1, TGF2, TG4***
Goat rearing (goats purchased using credit scheme provided by 'government' or given by 'government')	TG3 ***TGF1, TGF3, TGF4***	TG8, TG9, TG11 ***TGF1***				TG1, TG2, TG8, TG9, TG14, TG16 ***TGF1, TGF2, TGF3, TGF4***	TG1
Beekeeping	TG13 ***TGF4***					***TGF4***	TG1, TG7

Excerpt from Drivers of Negative Change

	Food Production	**Cash income**	**Cash expenditure**	**Food consumption**	**Relationships**	**Assets**	**Overall wellbeing**
Increased prices			TG1, TG2, TG3, TG5, TG6	TG5			
Snow last August (and shortage of rain last season)	TG2, TG5, TG7, TG9, TG10, TG11 ***TGF1***	TG2, TG5, TG9, TG11	TG2, TG11	TG5			
Problems maintaining livestock (chickens & goats)	TG5, TG8	TG5				TG2, TG5, TG6, TG15	

The final table goes back to the theory of change, combining information about known interventions with reported drivers of positive change from the beneficiary households. This mines the data for expected overlap and, importantly highlights gaps where a known intervention does not yield any reports of positive change. A shaded box indicates that the household was a beneficiary of that intervention. A tick indicates that the household reported a positive change (in any dimension) citing a driver relevant to that intervention. An ideal scenario would be shaded and ticked boxes in as many areas as possible. The example below uses data taken from a different project to the tables above.

Interventions vs. reported drivers of positive change

DATE	Intervention	KM1	KM2	KM3	KM10	KM11	KM12	KM15	PK3	PK5	PK6	PK7	PK8	PK10
Q4 2012	Training in crop husbandry practices				✓	✓			✓					
	Seed A distributed			✓		✓	✓							
Q1 2013	Training in value addition													
Q4 2013	Training of farmers in seed multiplication principles and general crop husbandry practices		✓		✓	✓			✓					
	Seed A distributed (basic)					✓								
	Seed A distributed (certified)			✓			✓							
Q3 2014	EQuIPment given to the cooperative													
Q4 2014	Seed A distributed (basic)			✓										

See Copestake and Remnant (2014) for fuller illustrative material from rural development projects in Malawi and Ethiopia.

Application of the QuIP

The ART project has produced a comprehensive set of QuIP Guidelines which can be freely downloaded. This includes the full household and focus group questionnaires used in the field. At present the QuIP data is collected and analysed using a bespoke macro-enabled Excel spreadsheet. This is undergoing testing by NGO staff undertaking the second round of QuIP analysis. The spreadsheet is designed to mimic the limited pertinent functions of qualitative packages (such as NVivo) for the purposes of the analysis required, while avoiding the need to invest time and money in such software packages.

The QuIP in its present form is designed for use in rural livelihoods projects. However, the approach has the potential to be developed for use in a range of other contexts, wherever household level impacts are part of the theory of change. Development of the approach to take in a broader range of development contexts and test how far the approach can be scaled up are part of a planned second phase of the project. There is also scope to further develop the data collection and analysis software, whilst maintaining easy accessibility for small NGOs. If you are interested in finding out more about our future plans or working with us, please contact us using the details on the first page of this paper.

3. What the QuIP adds to existing evaluation approaches

While there are several established qualitative impact evaluation methods to choose from, we believe there is scope for improving practice by researching how best to employ and to adapt these to different development activities and contexts. More specifically, the QuIP aims to provide evidence of the causal impact of multi-faceted and evolving activities in complex rural contexts, using a non-experimental approach that is cost-effective for small as well as large projects and organisations. It seeks to give voice to intended beneficiaries, but goes beyond many participatory approaches to impact evaluation in its aspiration to generate evidence that is credible to those not directly involved in the activities being assessed. By systematically reviewing evidence against project goals and theory the QuIP aims to serve a "confirmatory" purpose; but by employing goal free data collection methods (to reveal unintended consequences of development actions) it also aims to serve as a more open-ended or "exploratory" reality check (Copestake, 2014). As such it is consistent with the "context, mechanism, outcome" framework of Realist Evaluation" but can also be viewed as an application of and extension to Contribution Analysis (CA) and Process Tracing (PT). The table below illustrates how the QuIP relates to the steps entailed in CA as described by Mayne (2008, 2012).

QuIP and the Contribution Analysis Approach:

Contribution Analysis Steps	QuIP related activities
Step 1: Set out the attribution problem to be addressed The NGO programme staff agree the cause-effect relationship to be assessed, including: • The nature and extent of the *contribution* it expects the programme to make • Other potential key influencing factors	• Initial consultations and framing of the study, ideally at the time of project design.
Step 2: Develop a theory of change and risks to it The theory of change and results chain detail the assumptions and risks behind the expected causal chains, including external factors which may influence outcomes.	• Agreement on project theory of change and a suitable monitoring system
Step 3: Gather existing evidence on the theory of change • Evidence on results and activities (outputs and outcomes/impacts) • Evidence on validity of assumptions of theory of change • Evidence on other influencing factors	• NGO monitoring and reporting of project implementation • Quantitative project monitoring • QuIP data collection
Step 4: Assemble and assess the contribution story and challenges to it • Assess strength of causal links and patterns and credibility of theory of change overall • Identify any weaknesses in evidence	• QuIP analysis and triangulation against quantitative monitoring of change.
Step 5: Seek out additional evidence • Review and update the theory of change, if needed, in the light of previous evidence • Gather additional evidence, for example from project staff, beneficiaries, synthesis reviews.	• Micro-simulation work • Discussions of findings with staff and other stakeholders • Possible follow up data collection and analysis.
Step 6: Revise and strengthen the contribution story	• Final synthesis report

Mayne (2012) also makes a distinction between 'contribution' and 'attribution'.

> "*attribution* is used to identify both with finding the cause of an effect and with estimating quantitatively how much of the effect is due to the intervention." (Mayne 2012: 273)

Whereas *contribution* is defined as:

> "in light of the multiple factors influencing a result, has the intervention made a noticeable difference to an observed result and in what way?" (2012: 273)

Taking "observed results" to refer to changes measured through routine monitoring, the QuIP conforms to this definition of contribution. But as the basis for identification of causal chains it also conforms to the first part of Mayne's definition of attribution. Indeed, as an input into micro-simulation analysis (alongside monitoring data and project theory) it can also support some quantitative attribution of impact.

Turning to Process Tracing, the QuIP can be viewed as one way of gathering additional evidence to test prior theories of change. As a first and intuitive approximation, positive **explicit** evidence of attribution generated by the QuIP resembles "smoking gun" evidence because it significantly increases confidence in the applicability of prior theories of change; whereas positive **implicit** evidence is more akin to "hoop" evidence because its presence is less conclusive but its absence does cumulatively cast doubt on whether the intervention is working as expected (Punton and Welle, 2015). To elaborate, the table overleaf relates to the QuIP to ten "best practices" in Process Tracing set out by Bennett and Checkel (2015:261). An additional point they emphasise, and the QuIP also addresses is greater transparency with respect to the procedures used to collect and analyse evidence. It is also consistent with their call for a "(partial) move away from internally generated practices to logically derived external standards" (p.266) without at the same time removing more exploratory "soaking and poking" of available evidence.

References

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QuIP and the Process Tracing Approach:

Process Tracing best practices	Relevance to the QuIP
1. Cast the net widely for alternative explanations	The exploratory nature of the QuIP (use of open ended questioning and mitigation of potential pro-project bias) makes it open to a wide range of explanations, as does accommodation of multiple cases, and triangulation against evidence from focus groups.
2. Be equally tough on the alternative explanations.	Evidence on project related and incidental drivers of change are collected and analysed in the same way.
3. Consider the potential bias of sources of evidence	The approach aims particularly to mitigate the potential effect of pro-project and confirmation bias.
4. Take into account which explanations are most or least likely to explain a case	Collection of data for multiple households (and through focus groups) helps to mitigate the risk of attaching too much weight to 'freak' occurrences.
5. Make a justifiable decision when to start.	Start linked to commencement of the project being evaluated.
6. Be relentless in gathering diverse and relevant evidence, but make a justifiable decision when to stop.	The number of cases assessed and process of selecting them can be adjusted to increase diversity of evidence, with the limit determined by accumulating experience of when diminishing marginal returns arise to increasing the number of households for different kinds of project. Validity is also enhanced through comparison with evidence of change in key variables obtained through quantitative monitoring
7. Combine process tracing with case comparisons when useful for the research goal and when feasible.	Comparison between households is integral to the approach. Standardisation of the protocol also facilitates comparison of projects.
8. Be open to inductive insights.	Exploratory nature of the QuIP (openness to respondents' own unprompted causal narratives) makes it open to these (and unforeseen consequences).
9. Use deduction to ask "if my explanation is true, what will be the specific process leading to the outcome"	Interpretation of evidence is aided by triangulating it against steps in the prior theory of change for the project.
10. Remember that conclusive process tracing is good, but not all process tracing is conclusive.	The methodology does not rule out being inconclusive about the relative contribution of different causal drivers identified.