



Frequently Asked Questions

Qualitative M&E for Food Security Activities during COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

On April 30 2020, the USAID-funded [IDEAL Activity](#) convened the online event [Qualitative M&E during COVID-19: Sharing Tips for Remote Data Collection](#), which focused on how to adapt our qualitative monitoring and research activities for food security activities. The IDEAL team compiled questions, comments, and resources that participants shared prior to and during the event to develop this FAQ—a living document we invite you to contribute to and update as we continue to learn and adapt our qualitative approaches.

Can qualitative research be done during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes, and it may be more important than ever to conduct qualitative research now. Qualitative research is one of the most important tools that activity staff have to gain situational awareness of their programming contexts. It is important to understand how COVID-19 and other risks are affecting target communities. Qualitative research is the primary tool for assessing changing contexts and their effects on target populations. Qualitative assessments can be conducted remotely using mobile phones, smartphones and other remote collection devices. In some contexts, qualitative assessments can be conducted in person with social distance measures, keeping in mind the first guiding principle of “do no harm.”

What are the risks associated with collecting data during an epidemic?

COVID-19 is easily spread from person to person because it is a respiratory illness. It is also a very hearty virus that survives on surfaces and in the air for extended periods of time. It is important that M&E activities “do no harm” and do not contribute to the spread of the disease. This can be achieved through:

- Remote assessments when possible.
- Carefully planned and executed face-to-face methods, when appropriate. Face to face methods can be undertaken with social distance measures (individuals staying at least two meters apart from each other) in contexts where public authorities have not instituted, or have lifted, lock-down policies AND where community infection rates are low or zero.

In making these decisions during the planning phase, consult appropriate government and global guidance (e.g., [WHO Country and Technical Guidance, US Centers for Disease Control](#)).

Keep in mind that remote assessments can make it more difficult to protect respondents in terms of privacy and confidentiality, because it is more difficult to control the data collection environment. To a

certain extent, these risks can be mitigated by developing protocols that enable respondents to opt out of interviews when they perceive risks to privacy or confidentiality. Alternatively, interviews can be scheduled at times specified by respondents.

What qualitative methods can be conducted remotely?

Most qualitative methods can be conducted remotely depending on access to cellular phone signals, internet, and the availability of mobile devices among informants. When video telechat capability is available, a broader array of methods can be used. Some telechat platforms perform particularly well in low bandwidth environments. For example, the telechat [VSee](#) can operate on 3G cellular service systems. It is also encrypted, so it provides privacy protection.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) are the easiest and least risky qualitative method to implement during a pandemic. These require only the ability to have audio phone interviews. Group methods are the most difficult to implement because these ideally should be conducted where multi-point video/audio methods are possible. For that, all informants must have access to smart phones, tablets, or computers/laptops.

DATA COLLECTION BY PHONE

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How do we get participant contact information (e.g., phone numbers) if we don't already have this information?

Collecting phone numbers during participant registration is key – and will be increasingly important going forward. When you do not have this data, there may be other options:

- Where baseline surveys serve as the source of your sampling frame, check to see if cell phone numbers have been collected. Panel studies that are sampled from baseline surveys are becoming increasingly common, and collecting cell phone numbers during baseline surveys should become best practice.
- If cell phone numbers cannot be acquired, connect with local counterparts and informants who can help collect phone numbers from their communities, if these are not already available from a participant registration database. A number of activities have developed a network of community field monitors or guides who have been critical for the collection of phone numbers and ensuring an appropriate space and resources (e.g., phones, credit, charging source) for potential study participants.
- Another source of a mobile sampling frame is third party vendors of numbers or completed cell phone surveys. [GeoPoll](#) is one of these services.
- You may be able to access phone numbers directly through a data sharing agreement with a phone company that could supply a database of phone numbers stripped of all personal identification (other than locality of phone registration, if the study is focused on a particular area). Selection of cellular subscriber databases should be done with care to understand the representativeness of the sample for assessment purposes.
- Another tactic is to recruit participants by advertising the assessment in various public spaces (and/or via radio) and asking participants to enroll in the assessment by calling a toll-free number.
- Staying connected: Activities often include mobile populations that may require extra care to track over time (panel monitoring). In some cases, respondents maintain their mobile phone numbers. For panel studies or routine monitoring, the activity should include a protocol to ensure respondents can be reached when they change sim cards. Note, people often maintain their WhatsApp contact by linking their existing WhatsApp account to a new phone number.

What strategies can be used to interview those who are reluctant to participate?

- Live operator calls as opposed to interactive voice response (IVR) and short messaging system (SMS) text messaging can increase participation rates, especially if the operators are well trained to establish rapport. This is especially true for panel studies, where the same operator surveys a household respondent over multiple rounds of data collection.

- To reduce attrition rates, consider options for compensating key informants and local guides. Airtime or a mobile money transfer to pay for charging may be useful incentives in lieu of those common for in-person focus groups, such as refreshments. If compensating participants by directly topping off their phones with airtime, be sure that the person being compensated is actually the owner of the phone. In certain cases where a participant is borrowing a phone, consider compensating both the phone owner for use of their phone and the interviewee for their time. Compensation to the phone owner can be done by adding a one-off payment of airtime directly to their phone, while also providing the interview participant with an airtime token that can be used in the future on any phone.
- To reduce gender bias, make it clear in the introduction or opening message that you would like to hear from all adult male and female household members. If you are using WhatsApp, identify and label clusters of questions for specific household members (e.g., 'for head of household,' 'for female household member').
- Simplify topical outlines and prioritize key questions to reduce the length of the interview. Qualitative interviews that successfully engage respondents can be longer than quantitative surveys, where the survey norm is 30 minutes—though some research shows that phone-based surveys should take approximately 15 minutes. Qualitative interviews should be piloted to determine the appropriate interview length.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS)

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What are best practices for researchers when conducting remote surveys and interviews?

- KIIs are the easiest method to implement remotely. That said, decisions about how to use this method (e.g., where, when, with whom) should be taken with context in mind, especially national and local policies and a 'do no harm' analysis.
- Use existing relationships with local counterparts, community-based monitors, agents, or community leaders. Consider contacting them remotely (cell phone, Skype, WhatsApp, etc.) to triangulate trends and issues.
- Concentrate on a smaller number of semi-structured interview questions and carefully craft and test open-ended questions to ensure that these fully engage informants. Prioritize "must have" rather than "nice to have" information. The qualitative tool should focus on filling information gaps and updating situational awareness during this dynamic time. Use secondary sources or results from previous surveys or monitoring activities to determine what is most essential and remove other questions that you may have included pre COVID-19.

How do you manage remote KIIs when translation is required?

- When telechat options are available (i.e., smartphones and adequate bandwidth), translations can be organized for KIIs through a local translator. Otherwise, interviewers must be capable of conducting KIIs in local languages. If this cannot be done, then structured interviews in local languages can be conducted (via phone, email, SMS, IVR, Skype, Zoom, KoBo, SurveyMonkey, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and other social media and messaging platforms).
- A notable advantage of interactive voice response (IVR) and computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) over short messaging system (SMS) is that they do not necessarily require the ability to read, write or produce text on a mobile device.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)

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What are the best practices for facilitating a FGD remotely?

- Real-time or synchronous online focus groups can be used in place of in-person focus group discussions. Skype, Google hangouts, Zoom, WhatsApp, FaceTime and VSee (on 3G networks) can all support focus group discussions or online training. Be sure to choose a platform that allows for

recording for transcription purposes, if needed. Platforms such as ThinkTank and NVivo are specifically designed to support focus group discussions, though they require a membership fee.

- Keep online groups smaller than in-person groups to keep the discussions manageable. Some researchers suggest a maximum of 6 participants. Be sure to have an appropriate protocol in place to Do No Harm and ensure that the FGD setting aligns with COVID-19 guidance and regulations.
- Spread questions across multiple subsets of respondents. Qualitative inquiries do not need to be the same for all individuals—and typically are not. Instead, the tool is adapted to the particular knowledge and experience of the informants. It may be necessary to have a larger sample and ask fewer questions to different subsets of the sample, supplemented with KIIs. Alternatively, you can spread interview questions over a period of months by asking only two to three questions each week (via WhatsApp or SMS).
- In asynchronous focus groups, participants access a site to answer pre-determined questions or respond to other participants' comments—the participants and researchers are not online at the same time. In some cases, these settings facilitate a more honest, open discussion of sensitive topics (e.g., sexual behavior, drug use, politics, or illegal activity), because participants cannot see each other and thus some anonymity is maintained. However, the challenges with asynchronous focus groups is that participants could drop out, misinterpret questions, and the facilitator does not have any insight into the non-verbal cues or an opportunity to probe.

How do you make up for the non-verbal cues that are collected in in-person interviews?

- Use video telechat options when these are available. Since participants do not have the same nonverbal cues available as they would during an in-person discussion to interpret signals from other participants, a round-robin approach or virtual 'raised hand' (e.g., Zoom) can help facilitate a smooth conversation.
- Facilitators will need to be attuned to audio cues, such as long pauses, silence and laughter, and follow up with respondents to better understand these signals.

DATA COLLECTION FOR HARD-TO-REACH PLACES

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How can you reach participants in low-connectivity environments, those who are often the most vulnerable?

- Make sure there is cellular signal or electricity for charging devices where the respondents are located. Remote data collection is dependent on the ability to use internet or cell phones, which may not be accessible to more marginalized and remote populations. In some cases, it may be necessary to provide households with phones, tablets, or other electronic devices that they can borrow in instances where they do not have access to a phone.
- Choose your mode wisely: WhatsApp has a [voice message function](#), which allows sending questions as voice messages to collect people's comments directly, including from those who are illiterate, whereas SMS text messaging requires literacy. VSee, a multi-point video telechat platform operates in low bandwidth environments (3G systems).
- Where internet connectivity is low or non-existent, it may be possible to access connections through special technology such as [Loon](#). Loon partners with mobile network operators globally to expand the reach of their LTE service. Satellite phones may be available to local governments or NGO offices.
- Where vulnerable populations (e.g., low socio-economic status, living in areas without connectivity, etc.) are not be able to participate, use KIIs when possible and account for these adjustments in monitoring reports.

SAMPLING

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What sampling methodologies should be used for remote FGDs and KIIs?

- Carefully consider the sampling strategy to ensure that qualitative data broadly reflects different sub-populations of interest. Be aware that using mobile platforms may introduce selection bias favoring men, higher income, and non-disabled participants.
- Inequalities in phone ownership are an important contextual consideration when deploying mobile data collection strategies. Phone ownership is associated with factors such as years of formal education, higher wealth, urban residence and male gender, and disparities are particularly high in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (GSMA, 2010; Tortora et al., 2011). Since these characteristics are correlates of food insecurity, sample selection is an extremely important potential source of bias.
- If some connectivity makes it possible to target populations, consider using a stratified [quota sampling](#) approach with quotas set to roughly equivalent to the population of interest.
- Remote sample designs tend to have a higher non-response rate than in-person studies. Response rates of 25% and less are common and can be improved by scheduling interviews in advance, conducting live-facilitated interviews, offering incentives, and using panel designs, where researchers and respondents build trust and rapport.
- As described above, sampling frames can be developed in a variety of ways. The easiest frame is drawn from baseline surveys or participant registration data that include cell phone. Phone numbers may change frequently so this frame can be outdated if surveys are not relatively current. Other sampling frames can be constructed through the collection of local mobile phone numbers by activity staff or the purchase of cellular databases through third party vendors.
- Some activities distribute phones to households that do not have them. This strategy may incentivize initial participation and help improve the representativeness of the sample (Ballivian and Azevedo, 2013), though modest cash credits or phone credit has shown to be a higher incentive. Distributing phones can carry a risk to beneficiaries if they become targets of crime or resentment.

How do you maintain data quality when using remote data collection?

- Written protocols that establish clear expectations for data quality and quality assurance mechanisms are critical to enable collection of quality data.
- Recruit interviewers who have facility establishing rapport and invest in comprehensive training, including role playing and standardization exercises.
- Record all interviews and review a sample of the recordings, looking for inconsistencies in how operators or researchers are implementing the study tools.
- Review data as it becomes available and advise researchers in real-time, to fill gaps, address discrepancies and affirm expectations for data quality.
- Conduct a follow-up call to 5%-10% of participants to verify key information already collected by interviewers. This should be done by a different operator or researcher. Major discrepancies should be discussed and addressed.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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What ethical and security considerations do we need to consider for phone interviews?

- As with all qualitative research, ensure your study protocol meets ethical review board standards in the country where the research is carried out, as well as donors and home institutions. With the onset of

COVID-19, studies or monitoring activities that are being adapted for remote data collection may require approval for changes to the protocol.

- Carefully consider the protection concerns associated with distributing phones. Distributing phones can expose participants to new risks, particularly women, including harassment, theft, or assault. They may also raise tensions within or between households. Alternatively, the distribution of phones can increase safety and access to information for some participants, which may outweigh the risks if proper mitigation strategies are in place.
- Consider reducing the sensitivity of interview content, as facilitators cannot control factors influencing the privacy of the interview, such as where the respondent takes the call.
- In some instances, participants may be borrowing another person’s phone. In these cases, it is important to determine if they can really speak freely. It may be necessary to have field monitors do pre-checks to ask participants if they feel safe and can talk openly and freely.
- Schedule phone interviews ahead of time so that participants can identify a safe space to talk. Consider providing interviewees with a unique code phrase they can use during the interview to indicate if they are no longer able to talk freely or need to end the call.

How do you get parental/guardian consent when interviewing youth remotely?

- Parental permission is generally required when children and youth participate in research. Most countries consider the age of majority to be 18 years. When getting written consent is not a viable option, it may be necessary to obtain verbal permission from parents or guardians to interview youth. A simple oral description of the child's involvement is given to the parent/guardian and verbal assent is requested. The procedure may be documented on the informed consent form by the presence of the signature of a witness or by recording the verbal consent.

Should participants be compensated for their time?

- Typically, researchers compensate FGD participants for travel costs and/or offer refreshments. For remote FGDs and KIIs, consider compensating respondents with money to charge phones at local charging stations or directly purchase airtime. When a participant is borrowing a phone, consider topping off airtime for use of the phone and compensating the interviewee for his or her time.

TECHNOLOGIES AND SOFTWARE

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What technologies or software do you recommend for remote FGDs and KIIs?

- FGDs can be done remotely via internet-based video conferencing platforms (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Slack, FaceTime, VSee, etc.) using phones, tablets, or laptops. Platforms such as ThinkTank specifically designed to support focus group discussions require a membership fee.
- A notable advantage of interactive voice response (IVR) and computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) over short messaging system (SMS) is that they do not necessarily require the ability to read, write or produce text on a mobile device.
- WhatsApp’s end-to-end encryption also ensures that messages are not accessed by third parties.

When doing FGD research in Syria, we found that simplicity was key. We ended up encrypting files through 256-bit encryption and shared the data through Slack. One way to speed up analysis was to analyze audio files using MaxQDA software, instead of going through transcription first.

– Arno Bratz, Mercy Corps

What tips do you have for facilitating remote inquiry using WhatsApp?

- In areas where WhatsApp is widely used, it can be helpful to coordinate and conduct real-time interviews or group discussions. It also has the voice message function, which allows sending survey questions as voice messages and then collecting responses. WhatsApp is free for both parties wherever Wi-Fi or 3G is available.
- To send voice messages to several phone numbers, you may need to compress the size using free online software (e.g. <http://www.mp3smaller.com/>).
- Even when people change phone numbers as they move around, [they often maintain their WhatsApp contacts](#) linked to a new or previous phone number.
- [WhatsApp Business](#) can be used to verify the account of the sender, and the platform allows unlimited numbers of people in your broadcast list.

How can you record remote inquiry to ensure data accuracy?

- Many CAQDA (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis) software packages and webinar-style software platforms can record audio sessions. If not, a separate program can be used to record interviews. Be sure to securely download and store the recording, and ensure the data management protocol meets the project requirements.

What software do you recommend for analysis of remote qualitative data?

- Webinar participants offered these suggestions for qualitative analysis software:
 - [Ona](#) is a Kenya-based software company (formerly Formhub) with a web-based and mobile app that allows the monitoring of real time field data collection and analysis.
 - NVivo is a qualitative data capture, management and analysis software. Follow this [link](#) to a webinar on using NVivo for remote qualitative fieldwork during COVID-19.
 - University of California Berkeley compiled a [matrix](#) to compare leading qualitative analysis software packages, including Atlas.TI, MaxQDA, and NVivo.
 - [Social Science Software](#) presents an overview of open-source qualitative analysis software.
- To save and analyze data collected with WhatsApp, you will need to download WhatsApp on your computer (this requires Windows 10). You can then download voice messages and save them to a folder with unique ID numbers for each voice note to manage the data.

LOOKING FORWARD

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How do we continue to adapt our monitoring when the context of COVID-19 continues to evolve rapidly?

Be flexible in your approach. Use KIs and secondary data to alert you to changes in the context. Be aware of government and local authority policies and guidelines.

How do we minimize participant fatigue and respect participant needs as they are adapting to COVID-19 and being contacted by many organizations?

Be very judicious to minimize the number of respondents and the frequency of follow-up. Only collect needed information. Where possible use rotating panels that minimize the number of times each respondent is interviewed.

How can we make sure we are better prepared to adapt M&E practices in the future to similar situations? Is there a role for the UN or a large institution to lead on developing processes or tools so we are prepared in the future?

Establishing communities of practice around adaptive monitoring is important. All organizations should have contingency mechanisms in place to adapt monitoring for different and dynamic shock contexts.

How do we collect data that would normally be collected through observation (e.g., WASH-related behavior change, quality of latrines)?

Use of photos, video, and interviews with local guides or key informants that specifically gather observational data can be useful. For some studies or monitoring, satellite imagery may provide visual insights. See this [World Bank page](#) for an overview of remote sensing analytics.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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ABOUT IDEAL

The Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) activity, funded by the USAID Office of Food for Peace (FFP), works to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities. IDEAL consists of a consortium of four partner organizations (Save the Children, the Kaizen Company, Mercy Corps, and TANGO International).

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