How To

Interviews and Interview Guides

Digital Agriculture Landscape Assessment Toolkit

JengaLab
TechChange
DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY
An IREX Venture

INTERVIEWS AND INTERVIEW GUIDES :

DIGITAL AGRICULTURE LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

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IFAD

JengaLab TechChange DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY An IREX Venture

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PART 2: INTERVIEWS AND INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview guides are a series of questions that the assessment team anticipates asking during key informant interviews. Why does Development Gateway's methodology emphasize interviews over surveys, especially when surveys could potentially reach more people and simplify quantitative analysis? **Because interviews are the best way to get the information you need to understand the decision space and develop user stories, use cases, and stakeholder maps.** It is very difficult to get the same level of detail with a standardized survey.

Therefore, digital ecosystem assessment interviews take a very human-centered approach to understanding the digital ecosystem and decision space in which an interviewee operates. Assessment teams should use the interviews to empathetically understand users' needs, test existing and developing assumptions about their needs and the decision space, and validate and revalidate your understanding of these needs with actual users. In other words, these interviews should be used to:

- Inform, test, and iterate your understanding of key user personas and use cases.
- Develop an in-depth understanding of the **decision space** (incentives, mandates, capacity) of a given **user persona.**
- Collect information to further develop the content of other analyses.

While it is important to have a clear understanding of the type of information that should be gleaned from an interview, this approach encourages flexibility. While the interview itself is intended to be open-ended and qualitative, interviewers should use a mix of quantitative and qualitative, story-based questions effectively**. It is also important to think about the flow of questions; specifically, which questions will make an interviewee feel comfortable and build trust from the start.**

DEVELOPING AN INTERVIEW GUIDE

The first step in interviewing is creation of an interview guide. This is a document that outlines the questions you plan to ask. It should be loosely based on the desk research you have already completed. The following steps will help you fully develop questions, listen closely during the actual interview, and maintain a constant degree of flexibility.

STEP 1: THINK ABOUT THE OVERALL GOAL, TOPIC, OR FINAL OUTPUT

Writing down an overall research goal statement is the first step in developing an interview guide. What do you need to learn to write a report or make recommendations? Keep returning to this overall statement when developing the interview guide.

Considering logistics at this point is important as well. Generally speaking, interviews should not last more than one hour, but can be shorter depending on the time allotted and the specific stakeholder. As you develop the guide, keep time in mind. Identify the questions that will be the most effective and appropriate for a specific interviewee in the shortest amount of time. For example, you may want to skip highly-technical questions about data disaggregation and calculation when speaking with high-level policymakers; similarly, you may want to de-prioritize high-level policy and strategy questions when speaking with technical analysts or field officers.

STEP 2: BREAK THE TOPIC INTO SUBSECTIONS

A landscape assessment is a very broad research topic. Hopefully, the desk review will have created boundaries of what should be included and excluded from the research scope. Such boundaries will apply to the interview guide as well. You can ensure that the overall scope is maintained and all research aspects are covered by breaking down questions into topical areas.

The interview guide should also be broken down by interviewee type. Identify all the potential stakeholders existing in an ecosystem that you would want to interview. For example, you may want to have a guide for government officials or digital entrepreneurs. Create an interview guide for each type of stakeholder.

STEP 3: WRITE THE QUESTIONS

Open-Ended Questions

Focus on open-ended questions that allow someone to describe their specific context, understanding, and experience. An example of an open-ended question is “explain how you use technology in your work.” The respondent cannot answer the question with a simple “yes,” “no,” or “seven.” Consider these question openers:

- Describe/explain…
- How does…
- What is…
- Why…

A word of warning: Avoid leading questions. Leading questions imply some level of bias or direct a stakeholder toward a specific answer. For example, "how strongly do you agree with the statement 'the Ministry of Agriculture has the data it needs'?" is a leading question. In this scenario, the implication is that the stakeholder agrees. A more neutral framing would be "how strongly do you agree or disagree with the statement 'the Ministry of Agriculture has the data it needs'?"

Other Types of Questions

While open-ended questions are common in these assessments, asking scale or ranking questions, followed by an open-ended question, can also be helpful. Not only does this ground a stakeholder's answers in a specific understanding and context but also provides quantitative data as well.

Scale example: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being unprepared and 5 being very prepared, how prepared are you to use the data collected by the Ministry of Agriculture?

Follow up: Can you explain why you said number?

Priority example: In your opinion, which should be the highest priority for the Ministry of Agriculture to improve their use of technology?

- Updated computers/infrastructure/WiFi
- Training and upskilling employees
- Investment in an information management system
- Other, please explain

Follow up: Can you tell me more about why you said training employees?

Note: To avoid bias, include "other" in the list of potential options to allow for further explanation.

Final Questions

Finally, consider asking "is there anything else you would like to add?" or "is there anyone else we should talk to?" Such questions can be incredibly helpful in getting information that you did not know you needed, specifically at the point where the interviewee feels most comfortable.

CONSIDER THE FLOW

Thinking about how questions flow together is important. You can write down 'ice breaker' questions designed to make a stakeholder feel comfortable; you can also design different questions for different types of stakeholders. The guide should give you an idea of how to jump from one section to the next if specific inquiries are not leading to fruitful information or if the stakeholder does not have information on that topic. It should also note areas for additional probing.

Example: Are you currently using any digital agriculture technology in your programming?
Probe: How do you determine which technology to use?
If you have a co-interviewer, ensure the guide identifies who asks particular questions and describes how follow-up queries should be handled (an appropriate approach can also be discussed before the interview).

To ensure the flow is coherent, consider testing the interview guide with a colleague. Sometimes asking the questions out loud can clarify what is most comfortable.

WRITE FOR THE AUDIENCE

Questions should be specifically tailored to the audience. You may want to know about how the Ministry of Agriculture uses crop production data, but asking a farmer on the street will not produce useful information. Use desk research to understand what types of information different stakeholders have and tailor your questions accordingly.. If a guide was improperly prescriptive, asking open-ended questions, changing the flow of questions, and listening to stakeholder answers can help you course correct during an interview.

Interpretation

In some contexts, you will need an interpreter. In such a situation, sending the questions to the interpreter ahead of time – or even showing them a few minutes before – can make everyone more comfortable. Interpretation adds significantly to the length of an interview as each question and answer must be said twice. As such, consider reducing the number of questions by 50% or more. For example, interviews over Zoom can still take a long time even if the simultaneous interpretation function is used to speed up the process.

Additionally, interpretation is often done by whoever is present. This can mean tangential context gets lost even if a direct question is answered. Speaking with the interpreter before or after the interview to ensure all information is collected is a good approach. In scenarios where the budget allows, getting a translation of the recording can be useful as well.

Prepare for the Unexpected

When thinking of the audience, prepare for the unexpected. Consider the following scenarios:

- The Minister of Agriculture is unavailable the day/time you anticipated speaking and an aide is sitting in his/her place
- You planned the interview with only one person, but you end up in a room with three or more people
- A data analyst is being interviewed but his/her supervisor is hovering nearby
- The interview was arranged by a third party and the interviewee does not have anything to say on the topic
- You and your interviewee do not have a common language or translator
- It is your last day of interviews, but you wait on a Zoom call for 45 minutes and the interviewee does not show up

These are not uncommon scenarios when interviewing. Having a plan for common but unexpected scenarios will be ideal. Being understanding and flexible enough to handle unforeseen circumstances will inevitably lead to success.

REFORMULATE AND RETOOL

Before the Interview Phase

In many ways, your interview guide can be considered as an analytical output or deliverable of a landscape assessment because it will help you, your partners, and stakeholders clarify the goals of the assessment. Before you fully deploy your interview guide, **take some time to sit down with your counterparts to get their feedback** interview.

During the Interview Phase

Some questions in a guide may not work in particular interviews, even if you have asked them before in other sessions. Each time you use the interview guide, you will learn more about which questions are effective, confusing, or inadequate. Consider tweaking the order, the framing, or method of asking the questions. In some cases, you may want to add questions to the guide that cover topics you originally dismissed. This approach is flexible and can be updated as needed.

CONSIDERATIONS DURING THE INTERVIEW

The planning of introductions, logistics, and niceties ahead of time is essential for success.

Introductions/Conclusions – If not included in the guide, plan a basic introduction. Tell the interviewee who you are, what organization you are with, why you are interested in this topic, and what will happen with the information provided. Give the interviewee time to do the same. An introduction will also present an opportunity to build rapport and trust with the interviewee. If more than one interviewer is present, decide who will carry out the introductions beforehand.

With respect to conclusions, make sure you plan for follow-up sessions and provide your contact information to interviewees (this will allow them to reach you if they have additional questions/information). In addition, inform interviewees how to find the project outputs. You may offer to send the finalized reports to them as well.

Notes and Recordings – If possible, ask the interviewees if you can take notes and/or record prior to the interview or during the introduction. Recording is particularly helpful if there is only one interviewer. If there are two interviewers, taking notes may be sufficient, but identifying who will take notes prior to the interview will be crucial.

In some cases, you should offer the interviewees a copy of the notes or the recording if they want them. In addition, inform interviewees about when the notes and recordings will be destroyed or if the records will be kept long term.

Business Cards – In many contexts, exchanging business cards is a normal part of interviews. We recommend having traditional paper business cards available, even if this seems out of fashion for your own business context.

INTERVIEW TIPS & TRICKS

Below are a few tips and tricks for conducting successful ecosystem assessment interviews:

- Having a casual conversation at the beginning of an interview can help interviewees feel more comfortable and boost your understanding of their roles (and which questions are or are not relevant to them).
- In your interview guide, make sure it is clear which questions are mandatory or optional.
- Have a clear game plan with your fellow interviewers. Who handles which section of notes? Who is giving the introduction? Who is closing?
- Ideally, one person should be a designated “notetaker” for the interview. In some cases, people who have done assessment interviews by themselves ask if the interview can be recorded, so that they or another team member can later transcribe the notes.
- Set sufficient time after the interviews to process and categorize the notes. While this process can take two to three times longer than the interview itself, it is nonetheless important. You can reduce delays by processing notes daily when they are still fresh in your mind.
- Make note of follow-up actions or connections related to each interview.

Favorite Questions

The following examples should provide a sense of the types of questions that are useful.

Q: Tell me about your project/ program. What challenges have you faced? What would be the biggest enablers for you?
Q: What do you think is the biggest risk of this project/idea/plan?
Q: If you could change one immediate aspect to make your work easier/more impactful, what would it be?
Q: Is there anything you think we should be considering but aren't?

For an Agricultural Data Landscape Assessment:

Q: If you could make one recommendation on data or digital capacity building for the agricultural sector, what would it be?

- ➔ *Why this is a useful question:* The interviewee is asked to prioritize (in this specific context, training and capacity building). It can be helpful to ask for a list of all challenges related to data and technology, but sometimes asking for a single priority can be illuminating.

Q: What are some of the most popular digital agriculture solutions used in [country]?

- ➔ *Why this is a useful question:* It presents a great opportunity to validate or build on the information you collected in your desk review. Useful follow-up questions that probe how used or liked an agriculture solution is (or is not) can also be insightful and highlight challenges faced by smallholder farmers in using technology.

Q: In your opinion, what are some of the most common challenges faced by farmers in [country]? Can any of these challenges be solved with a data or digital solution?

- ➔ *Why this is a useful question:* This question allows the interviewee to share their experience and interpretation of the challenges faced by farmers in a country, while still keeping the conversation focused on data or digital solutions. The interviewee may respond with solutions, ideas, or challenges that have not yet come up in your research.

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