

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

A toolkit for Community-Led Research Projects



Image: International Accountability Project

SHORT GUIDE ON RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES *FOR COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH PROJECTS*

Introduction

This short guide has been developed as part of ESCR-Net's project on community-led research¹. The guide has been co-authored by members of the Project Advisory Group² with the aim of providing a practical overview of key research methodologies to be used in community-led research. While there are a number of methodologies that groups involved in the project, and grassroots and community groups more broadly, could avail of, this guide focuses on research methods that are particularly appropriate to conduct research on issues of access to land, housing and natural resources, and which allow to engage individuals and groups who tend to be marginalised and excluded in traditional research.

The guide covers the following methodologies:

- 1. Surveys**
- 2. Focus group discussions**
- 3. Individual interviews**
- 4. Digital storytelling**
- 5. Using social media to crowdsource evidence**
- 6. Community mapping**

For each research methodology we have briefly outlined what it consists of, what it allows to do or achieve and what are some key limitations. We also indicated useful resources to provide more in-depth information and practical examples.

¹ To read more about the project: <https://www.escr-net.org/initiative/community-led-research/>

² In particular, we would like to thank Tom Weerachat for the section on surveys, Oscar Pineda (PODER, Mexico) for the section on community mapping, Jessica Mayberry (Video Volunteers, India) for the section on using videos, Elida Lauris for the part on focus group discussions and circles of narratives. The Monitoring Working Group coordinator, Francesca Feruglio, edited and contributed to other sections of this document.

SUMMARY TABLE

	Types of data	Specific skills required	Good for:	Limitations
Surveys	Quantitative - Numbers/ charts/written info	Developing questions effectively; Entering the data on a database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding the scale of a problem and identify key patterns. Getting numbers/stats. Reaching large numbers of people - it's easy to protect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Results can be quite anonymous and don't go in depth. If done on pen and paper, data entry can be time consuming.
Community mapping	Can be both qualitative and quant - Drawing or digital versions	Trained facilitator to lead the process; needs to be turned into a digital map	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting a full picture of of an area or issue Powerful organising tool (creating a shared understanding; allows strong participation; good for prioritising issues). It's very accessible to people with low literacy Relatively easy and quick. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Similar to surveys, points at 'issues/priorities' but doesn't give in-depth understanding. Requires transferring info on a digital map
Focus group discussions	Qualitative- Narratives (audio or in writing)	Training interviewers; Entering the data on a database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding 'how' and 'why' of an issue. Stimulating in-depth, collective reflections over an issue. Reaching groups that are marginalised/left aside. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data entry can be time consuming - discussions may be dominated by more vocal/outspoken participants.
Individual interviews	Qualitative- Narratives (audio or in writing or in video)	Training interviewers; Entering the data on a database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding 'how' and 'why' of an issue. Capturing specific experiences and perspectives. Allowing someone to express freely about sensitive issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data entry can be time consuming Doesn't give you the full picture over an issue.
Digital storytelling	Qualitative- Videos and photos	Training on using mobile phones for pictures or videos; video editing (can be outsourced)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates space for personal reflection and expression; captures a unique perspective. Improve digital skills. Increase personal confidence and visibility of a group/issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually involves a limited Number of people (unless it's used to crowdsource data, see below). Requires digital skills of
Crowd-sourcing video and photo evidence	Qualitative- Videos and photos	Effective use of social media and editing skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good for public campaigning: helps mobilizing people and Increase participation and visibility. Can gather large amounts of data - increase visibility of an issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not accessible to everyone: requires basic digital skills and confidence - may raise security issues. Can be costly and time consuming.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES TOOLKIT

1. SURVEYS

A **survey** is a method of gathering the opinions or experiences of a group of people by asking questions. A *Community-led Survey*, unlike a conventional survey, is not only about collecting information; it also allows for information and insights to be exchanged between the community and the research team.

What does it allow you to do

- Because there is a standard set of questions, trends and relationships can be easily identified.
- It can be conducted on a large scale, including responses from a significant number of people.
- Seen as a scientific or objective research method, it produces numerical results and generalized data that policymakers and the media tend to prefer.
- It allows participants to remain anonymous, encouraging them to be more candid about their experiences and opinions.
- Additionally, it is often inexpensive to collect, facilitate, and consolidate data.

What are some limitations?

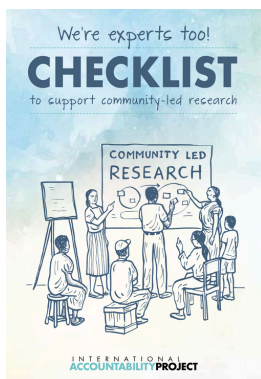
- Social and legal realities may make it difficult to have a representative sample of the entire community.
- Must consider language and literacy of participants.
- Need to ensure questions are understood by participants.
- Answers are often simplistic or limited by the choices presented, and require a combination of methods such as individual interviews or focus group discussion to get detailed and complex answers.
- Realities and attitudes change which may affect the accuracy of the response over time.
- Skills and guidance materials are needed to conduct the research.

When should you choose this methodology?

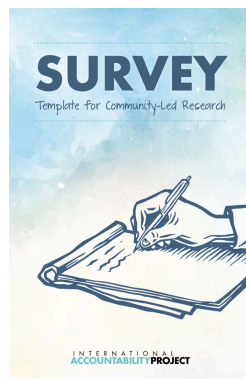
The community-led survey can help the community better understand their collective experience and perspectives on certain issues. It is one of approaches to include different voices in the community. The result can be reviewed by gender and other identities of the participants to have deeper understanding. It is an effective way to communicate with government or corporate actors whom often obsessed with numbers.



USEFUL RESOURCES FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT



We're experts too!
CHECKLIST
to support
community-led
research



SURVEY
template for
Community-Led
Research

2. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS & GROUP CIRCLES

Focus group discussions are group conversations, led by a (trained) facilitator, often consisting of a few questions that are discussed collectively and in depth. Questions should be simple and easy to understand, and open-ended, which means that they cannot be answered only by yes or no.

What does it allow you to do?

Group discussions are a highly effective way to capture diverse perspectives and ideas on the same issue. Participants have more freedom to express themselves than in survey settings, for example, and can drive the conversation to what's most relevant for them. Data emerging from group discussions not only reflects the experiences of different individuals, but also, through the interaction and exchange, participants' views are nuanced and teased out, and shy members are given confidence. Additionally, by providing people with a space for discussion and exchange about a common problem, they may feel better informed or more compelled to take action. In this sense, focus group discussions are particularly effective both for gathering qualitative information and for mobilizing people around a specific issue.

If you are looking for a stronger focus on storytelling, it may be worth **considering story circles or sharing circles**. Circles usually create a more horizontal space, which can be adapted to different cultural contexts, where participants are involved through active listening and sharing of personal experiences through stories. Circles begin by agreeing on rules around confidentiality (and therefore consent to report what's being shared outside the group), mutual respect, and listening, and by introducing a few elements or questions you would like people to include in their stories. Circles are acts of sharing all aspects of the individual—heart, mind, body, and spirit—and are a powerful tool to understand complex social problems. Similarly to other group-based methodologies, they also serve an organizing purpose by strengthening a sense of community among participants.

What are some limitations?

What are some limitations? This methodology requires having strong facilitators to guide the discussions and group dynamics. As in any group settings, some people may tend to dominate the discussion whereas others (e.g. people who are more shy or feel marginalized within their own community) may struggle to share their views. This can be avoided through careful facilitation and by considering power dynamics when planning the group composition. Also, it is essential that participants feel comfortable and trust the research process, so further considerations need to be put towards who is facilitating the group discussion, where and when it is taking place, and what information should be provided to participants about the research process. Secondly, this methodology may present limitations if you're focusing on issues that are particularly personal or sensitive—individual interviews may be more appropriate for that (see below).

When should you choose this methodology?

If you're looking to get qualitative data about the way a specific group of people is experiencing a problem, and to highlight discrimination or systemic injustices they face, this method is particularly suitable. It works especially well with participants who have low literacy levels and within the context of broader organizing and awareness-raising efforts.



USEFUL RESOURCES:

Guide and examples for preparing focus groups discussions:

- <http://www.researchfororganizing.org/iii-focus-groups/>
- <https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/archived/research/guides/methods/focus.htm>

Example of sharing circles:

- <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/160940690900800103>

3. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS:

One-to-one, guided conversations about a specific topic. These are usually done by an interviewer, whether virtually or in person. They usually entail open-ended questions that provide space for people to express themselves more freely than in a survey or other methods. In a community-led research process, interview questions can be developed in a group and several people can be trained as interviewers.

It is necessary to record the interview, usually through a digital recorder, as well as take notes (but not too many, because you want to focus on the conversation rather than note-taking). Sometimes people organize interviews so that one person asks the questions and another one takes notes.

To ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and views during an individual interview, you should consider:

- Ensuring anonymity and clearly explaining how you will use the data and findings.
- Considering who is conducting the interview: would the person interviewed feel comfortable sharing sensitive information with them?

What does it allow you to do?

Interviews are very effective to capture how some people experience a specific issue, what their concerns, thoughts, and feelings are. Interviews can help you deepen the understanding of key issues that emerged through surveys or community mapping, and allow you to talk about sensitive topics and gather in-depth understanding of an issue that people wouldn't be likely to share in a group setting or in a video—for instance, because of specific vulnerabilities, threats, or risks. It's relatively easy to anonymize the information gathered through interviews and protect the identity of the people involved.

What are some limitations?

Interviews can be time-consuming, not only because they take time to prepare, arrange, and conduct the interview, but also because you will usually need to transcribe the data afterwards (or clean up the notes, if you've taken written ones) and pull out any relevant findings and quotes.

- This methodology also requires training those who will conduct the interviews to ensure they are able to handle sensitive data appropriately and that there is consistency in how questions are asked.

- Analyzing a large number of interviews can be time-consuming, and while it is difficult, it is not impossible to extract quantitative data or hard numbers.

When should groups choose this methodology?

Groups should use this methodology when they want to capture an in-depth perspective or understanding of a specific issue. Similarly to storytelling, but because it's more structured and guided, it may be easier to analyze and can ensure some degree of consistency in the data you obtain.



USEFUL RESOURCES:

Tips to develop good interview questions:

<https://www.researchfororganizing.org/ii-interviews/#Tool34-tips-for-creating-effective-interview-questions>

4. DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND EVIDENCE CROWDSOURCING

Taking cell phone video as a research process is valuable both as a form of storytelling that gives people a voice, and as a method of capturing evidence. Cell phones with decent quality video and audio are becoming more widespread at the community level, and because of the popularity of these tools, the invitation to submit video clips is often enthusiastically accepted—making projects more participatory.

For instance, [Video Volunteers](#) has established a network of 180 Community Correspondents who produce about 3,000 videos a year, which they shoot and edit on their cell phones and then upload to YouTube. Each video serves a specific purpose—such as local-level grievance redressal, rallying the community for action, sharing best practices, monitoring promises, gathering evidence, or stimulating dialogue and reflection. Many of the videos address rights violations related to health, education, sanitation, and other issues, and are used in local advocacy campaigns that involve showing them to government officials and appealing for action. About 1 in 4 of the videos produced for local government advocacy actually manage to solve the problem they address.

In your ESCR-net community-led research project you could use video in a variety of ways:

- **Taking video clips (and photographs) as evidence**—capturing clear proof of damages done. These can be submitted as raw footage or lightly edited.
- **Video interviews/storytelling**—these are moving, first-person stories of a project’s impact and visions of the future. Similarly to other types of narratives (e.g. interviews and group discussions), this methodology allows you to capture unique perspectives and experiences about specific issues. If you’re looking for a more participatory approach, you can consider training a group of research participants to make their own videos. This may be particularly suitable for engaging young people in the research. To do so, consider building a small team and finding a manageable way to keep them engaged—for instance, by creating a WhatsApp group where they can share their experiences or things they witness, either as videos, text, audio, or photos. See [Spaces for Change’s project](#) on digital storytelling, involving young people from slum communities in Lagos.
- **Crowd-sourcing evidence through social media:** if there are no security risks in making your project widely known at the community level, you can create digital flyers for social media, asking people to share experiences through videos and pictures. This may allow you to reach beyond your community or movement and help gather large amounts of data on the issue you’re focusing on.

What are some limitations of using videos?

Using videos and other digital tools requires at least a minimum level of training and equipment (a smartphone can be enough). Even with adequate training, video projects can become expensive, time-consuming, complicated, and disappointing. To mitigate that, encourage people to create videos that require no or very simple editing—for instance, 20-second video evidence clips that are well shot, or video statements where the person has rehearsed a couple of times to deliver a clear message. Although this requires some level of training, it makes the project more manageable. If possible, ensure that the training also covers basic editing using simple phone-based software, so that participants can edit their own videos.

Depending on the outputs you’re planning to produce, it is possible to outsource more complicated tasks to a filmmaker, video editor, or communications professional who can help produce and post short digital video clips.

If you're looking to engage people through social media, you should consider which groups you are trying to reach. Poor digital skills and limited internet access may restrict engagement and participation to those who already have relatively good access and the means to raise their voice.

Security concerns may also arise if the issue you're working on is particularly sensitive. There are several ways to protect the identities of research participants, which should be carefully planned in advance.

When should groups choose this methodology?

Using digital tools has several advantages. Gathering photo and video evidence is highly effective in all advocacy strategies, especially when planning to incorporate a strong media component through press or social media campaigning. Videos and photos are instrumental in advocacy and campaigning, and increasingly even in litigation, helping you deliver strong and compelling messages.

Crowdsourcing videos and photos can be particularly useful for gathering large amounts of data in contexts where travel restrictions (e.g., due to COVID-19) make it difficult to reach many places. When used as a storytelling device, videos can allow people to express themselves more freely and can be particularly suitable for engaging young people in your movement.



USEFUL RESOURCES:



Video for Change
Impact Toolkit



WITNESS
Video as Evidence
Basic Practices

5. COMMUNITY MAPPING

Community or collective mapping is a technique of narrative and visual creation that involves the collective or community reproduction of the territory that is being defended or conserved. In a participatory way, the problems, themes, actors, dynamics, consequences, and more are made visible. Mapping should always be anchored to an organizational process. It is often a first step in a larger process and is used in conjunction with methods that collect more specific and in-depth information.

For example, [PODER](#) uses community mapping as part of project impact assessments on human rights. In the particular case of the HRIA process in the Sonora River in Mexico, a community mapping was carried out to identify the areas affected by the spill and, as a consequence, to define a sampling plan together with the communities living in the area.

What does it allow you to do?

At the research level, community mapping helps to diagnose problems or dynamics in a visual and participatory way. It helps reinterpret the territory and visualize aspects that are generally ignored by hegemonic discourse, such as cultural, social, and identity resources. It also helps systematize experiences, resources, stories, and problems. At the organizational level, mapping activities are important for planning and setting priorities in decision-making. In addition, the mapping process encourages community participation and promotes a pedagogical or knowledge-transfer process among community members.

What are some limitations?

In itself, the activity does not have major limitations. If you lack digital or technological resources, the easiest solution is to carry out the mapping on paper and later enter the information into a digital platform (preferably free software for security reasons). This could be considered a limitation. Beyond that, the main work consists of properly planning and systematizing the mapping exercise.

When should groups choose this methodology?

When the territory is at the center of the advocacy strategy to defend common goods. Mapping helps us reconstruct—both in discourse and in thought—the aspects we are defending or preserving against devastation or dispossession. It is important to remember that mapping is a means, not an end.



USEFUL RESOURCES:

Guides on community mapping:

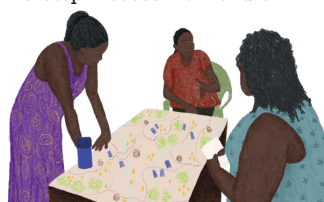


Iconoclasistas

Manual of
Collective Mapping

Community Participatory Mapping

5-Step Process Flow Chart



Women4Biodiversity

Community Participatory Mapping
5-Step Process Flow Chart

A practical example of community mapping: Mapping Areas of High Conservation Value in Liberia

An area is considered to have High Conservation Value (HCV) if it contains or provides values without which local communities would suffer an unacceptable socio-cultural or religious change, and for which the community has no alternative. There are several types of HCVs, including:

- Natural areas fundamental to meeting basic needs of local communities
- Natural areas critical to local communities' traditional cultural identity

The Natural Resources Women Platform (NRWP) in Liberia has worked with communities to map areas of High Conservation Value, helping to protect lands that are essential to livelihoods, identity, and culture. This work highlights the importance of participatory mapping as a tool to assert community rights and support advocacy strategies.

Know more about their work at: <https://nrwomenplatform.org/>

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Image: International Accountability Project

 **ESCR-Net**