

Designing a Questionnaire

Questionnaires are often used for situation assessments and project evaluations. As a carefully selected set of questions, a questionnaire has some advantages. Hired interviewers can be trained fairly quickly to collect the information, results can be analyzed relatively efficiently, and asking the same questions of everyone makes it easier to compare different individuals, households and communities. Questionnaires can be a very useful tool to collect specific, key pieces of information such as the number of people in a village that own livestock, the proportion of households that do not have sufficient income to buy food, or how often people are eating certain foods. In order to understand some of the more complex issues such as social interactions, perceptions of hunger, or justice issues, it may be more appropriate to use a more flexible and open-ended method such as interviews or focus groups (see *tips* 202).

Designing a good questionnaire takes time and attention. There is an art, as well as a science, to questionnaire design. Before setting out to design a new questionnaire from scratch, it is a good idea to find out whether questionnaires already exist that could be used or modified to gather the required information. A little bit of research with other organizations and government agencies could save a lot of work in creating an entirely new questionnaire. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank can provide some sample questionnaires for basic food security data collection.

Once specific information needs have been clearly identified, and a questionnaire seems appropriate, an evaluator must decide how the questionnaire will be administered, choose specific questions, structure the questionnaire, pre-test and implement the questionnaire.

Administering the Questionnaire

In areas where many people cannot read, interviewers are commonly used to administer questionnaires in food assistance situations. The content and flow of the questionnaire, as well as the training of the interviewers, are very important in order to maintain people's interest and ensure that accurate information is collected.

Many of the important qualities of an interviewer are covered in *tips* 202. The interviewer should be trained to put the interviewee at ease, and to set aside his/her own opinions or interpretations of the responses. There may also be a need for translation. If not trained in the local language, interviewers should ensure that the person translating questions and answers is not adding to or changing the information. Interviewers should also be

trained to respond to common questions people may have about the survey – its purpose and ways in which the information will be used. People need to be assured that their answers will be kept confidential – especially if there are questions that relate to sensitive issues (local politics, sexual behaviours etc.). The quality of information gathered will depend heavily on the interviewer's social skills. People are much more likely to respond honestly to an interviewer who is non-threatening, open and trustworthy. Verbal and body language are very important – and must be appropriate in the local culture.

The Questions

In deciding on specific questions, there are two key issues: *what* information each question asks for, and *how* the question is asked.

The information that questions should ask for will depend on the objectives and expected results of the project (*tips* 101 and 104). Remember the principle of 'optimal ignorance' – only collect information that is really needed. Carefully examine each question in a questionnaire, to determine 'is this information *useful* or is it merely *interesting*?' Ask how each piece of information will be used in the planning or analysis of the project. Extra time and resources are often wasted asking for information that will never be put to use.

The wording of questions will influence the answers that people give. Here are some important things to consider when designing the questions:

Value loading: Certain words may influence people, or indicate that a certain response is expected. For example asking

"Has the famine caused your family to miss meals in the last month?" may produce different responses than simply "Has your family missed any meals in the last month?" Using a value-loaded word like "famine" may cause people to over-estimate their level of food insecurity. Using such words in a food security assessment may result in inaccurate information, or unrealistically raise people's expectations about what will be done in their community.

Precise wording: Questions can often be interpreted in many different ways. Try to be as precise as possible to ensure that people understand exactly what is being asked. For example "Does your family have enough food?" is fairly vague. How much food is "enough"? A better way to ask the question might be "How many times does your family eat per day?" (This example illustrates a dilemma: when questions are made more precise, they often become more limited in scope. Here, the more precise question about number of meals per day may not

The wording of questions and the structure of the questionnaire will influence the answers people give.

Make sure questions have these qualities:

- precise
- non-leading
- simple
- clear
- good structure
- logical flow

accurately describe people who eat several times a day, but only consume very small amounts. It is probably better to ask a second question about the quantity of food consumed at a typical meal. Thus, two precise questions may be needed to provide the information requested in one vague question.) Asking for numerical data can improve the precision of a question. However, beware of numerical questions that are too demanding. For example, instead of asking, "What percentage of your animals did you lose in the flood?" it is probably better to ask two questions: "How many animals did you have before the flood?" and "How many of your animals did you lose in the flood?" Be precise with time periods. Most food security information changes significantly over time. When asking how many times a family eats per day, clarify whether this refers to the last week, month, or season.

Leading Questions: People sometimes have a desire to give the "right" answers to a questionnaire – whether or not they are actually true. Avoid suggesting a particular response. For example, "Has the health of your family improved as a result of this project?" may be too directive. Instead, consider asking a less obvious question such as, "Has the health of your family changed over the last three months?" or, "What has changed as a result of this project?" Words like "change" are less leading than "improve" or "worsen." The revised questions also avoid assuming a link between the project and any effects on health. The questionnaire should explore whether such links exist, not assume them.

Double questions: Each question should focus on one issue only. Avoid confusing issues with double questions. For example, the question "Have you sold livestock in the last month in order to buy food or seed?" could be confusing. The question does not distinguish between those who did not sell livestock and those who did sell livestock for other reasons. A better approach may be to ask two questions: "Have you sold livestock in the last month?" and, if yes, why?

Question structure: How structured should the questions be? Open-ended questions are good starting points for discussion (e.g. "What are the main factors affecting food security in this community), while more structured questions are useful for obtaining specific pieces of information. Structured questions may require:

Short answers: "What is the staple food in this area?"

Numerical answers: "How many animals have you sold in the last month?"

Yes/no answers: "Have any members of your family left the community to look for employment?"

Multiple choice answers: "What is your main source of food?"

1. relief; 2. purchase; 3. relatives; 4. farming; 5. other"

Although structured questions are easier to analyze, they may miss important information due to their narrow focus. Often a mix of open- and closed-ended questions maximizes the efficiency and flexibility of the questionnaire.

Checking for accuracy: Given the possibility that people may be influenced by the way a question is asked, or may misinterpret a question, it is helpful to ask for important information in more than one way. For example, if a questionnaire focuses on food intake, it may be useful to ask about total quantities of food consumed over a one-week or one-month period, as well as amounts consumed at an average meal and the average number of meals per day. Consistent answers give greater confidence of accuracy.

Pre-testing the Questionnaire

Before the main survey begins, the questionnaire should be tested to check how well it works. Initial pre-testing can be done by practicing interviews with various people, including some of the people for whom the questionnaire was designed. After the first few interviews, ask respondents how they found the questionnaire. It is not too late to change the questionnaire to make it clearer and easier to use.

Some questions to ask:

Does the questionnaire miss some key information? Should multiple-choice questions include other possible answers? Can respondents follow the questionnaire or do they get confused or frustrated? Are questions repeated unnecessarily? Are questions understood and answered properly, or are there confusing words or phrases? Is the questionnaire too long?

No questionnaire is ever perfect. However, a little extra time and care in the design of a questionnaire can avoid many problems, and greatly improve the quality of information available for planning and evaluation.

Resources

Sudman, S. and Bradburn, N. Asking Questions: A Practical Guide to Questionnaire Design. New York: Wiley, 1978

FAO. Conducting Small-scale Nutrition Surveys: A Field Manual 1990.

World Vision Canada, Design and Implementation of Nutrition Surveys, an excerpt from the MICA Guide. Download a copy in Word format from:

www.foodaidmanagement.org/mne3.htm

For more information on designing questionnaires or any other planning, monitoring or evaluation issues, contact the Canadian Foodgrains Bank at the address below, or email inquiries to cfgb@foodgrainsbank.ca