

CONDUCTING LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWS

A HOW-TO GUIDE



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1. Introduction

This ‘how to’ guide has been developed to guide researchers, step-by-step, through the process of using the life history approach to conduct interviews. The idea for the development of this handbook arose following a series of life history interviews that were conducted in India, Ghana, Kenya and Namibia under the Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions (ASSAR) research project. The valuable experiences that were had by the ASSAR researchers who undertook these in-depth interviews inspired them to share their practical knowledge, which has been documented herein. The advice provided is generalised, to ensure that it is accessible and useful to researchers working in many different fields. However, certain points are emphasized through the use of examples that link to the ASSAR researcher’s work on mobility as a livelihood strategy to adapt to the impacts of climate variability and change.

The following section looks at what a life history approach essentially is, why it is useful and what its possible limitations are. The main body of the guide, which documents the interview process itself, is split into three sections:

1. *Before*: how to prepare for your fieldwork
2. *During*: how to conduct life history interviews
3. *After*: what to do with your data once leaving the field

2. Life history approach

2.1. What is a life history approach?

Life history (LH) interviews are a qualitative method of data collection that elicits written and/or oral narratives through question and answer to describe or comment upon a person’s life (Bertaux, 1981; Olive, 2014). The method calls on interview respondents to provide a subjective account of their life over a certain period, described in their own words across their own personal timelines. LHs are therefore used to study temporality, and are often conducted over multiple interviews during which there is a constant reference to instances of change. They thus help both the researcher and the respondent to explore how events and behaviours shape individual choices and actions. Their subjective nature allows for a more contextual understanding of how and why certain decisions are made. Through the telling of LHs, important events and /or ‘turning points’ in the lives of the interviewees can be mapped over time (Ingelaere et al., 2018).

BOX 1: Life course or life history?

The plethora of “life-related” concepts used in social, behavioural and biological sciences has caused some confusion around what is meant by each. How is a life cycle distinguishable from a lifespan, a lifetime or a life expectancy, for example? In his 2012 article, Duane Alwin provides some clarification on the different varieties of life-related concepts. Here, we explain what is meant by a *life course* and a *life history* (the latter of which is the focus of this guide). These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but they actually have subtle differences:

A *life course* measures the progression of a person’s life from birth to the present day, or to death. Life courses are predominantly concerned with time and age, and are used to map the occurrence of major events and transitions that happen sequentially during a person’s lifetime. For example, a life course would plot when a person was born, when they started and finished school, got married, had children, divorced, acquired a disease, experienced a natural disaster, retired and so on.

A *life history* is similar to a life course in that it plots, through time, the significant events and transitions that have occurred in a person’s life. However, life histories also consider the role played by more nuanced, subjective factors - such as an individual’s memories, perceptions, relationships, aspirations and regrets - in the choices, behaviours or events that have shaped their lives. As such, life histories provide a more in-depth perspective of how and why a person is in the position that they are at that moment in time. Based on the emerging patterns that are identified, suggestions can be made as to what kinds of decisions and actions people might take in future, and thereby when, where, or in what form interventions might need to occur.

2.2. How might a life history approach be applied?

Life histories have been applied in various contexts to understand how, why and when people move through periods of vulnerability and resilience. For instance, in some cases it has been used to study the dynamics of poverty, in which families shift across a trajectory of either impoverishment or accumulation over time (Murray, 2002; Kothari and Hulme, 2004; Bird and Shinyekwa, 2003). In other cases, the approach has been used to analyse the impacts of policy on people’s livelihoods (Chimwohu and Hulme, 2006) and, more recently, their vulnerability to climate, which itself is driven by underlying structural conditions such as social and economic inequality (Singh, 2017). In development studies, life histories have helped researchers to explain nuances in people’s voices and opinions within a community (e.g.: in the study of protest action) and thus counter predetermined generalisations about a specific group or socio-cultural context (Kothari and Hulme, 2004). In whichever context or field the method is applied, life histories can provide a deeper understanding of the events that have shaped a person’s life - one that goes beyond a broad consideration of the macro-scale social, cultural and economic conditions that have given rise to particular events, to delve into the subjective perspectives and meanings that people ascribe to their personal experiences.



Table 1: What is meant by ‘life history’?

What is a life history?	What a life history is <i>not</i> ?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A qualitative research method • An in-depth approach to conducting individual stakeholder interviews • A subjective narrative of a person’s life • A method that considers temporality and change • An analysis of decisions across a continuum • A method that accounts for personal meaning and perspective in relation to key events • A proxy that provides a picture of the contexts in which past decisions were made 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A key informant interview • A focus group discussion • A multi-stakeholder workshop • A case study • A survey • A questionnaire • A basic timeline of major events • A ‘snapshot’ look into a person’s life • An examination of discrete, rational choices • The simple retelling of a particular incident or event • A map of only the macro-scale context that has affected a person’s life

2.3. Why is a Life History approach useful?

Life history approaches have been used across many academic disciplines. Cole (2001:126) gives three purposes of life history research:

1. to "advance understanding about the complex interactions between individuals' lives and the institutional and societal contexts in which they are lived";
 2. to provide a voice to the experienced life of individuals, especially those voices that may be unheard, suppressed, or purposefully ignored;
- to convey individuals' stories through their own words.

Thus, when conducted in a rigorous yet skilful manner, LHs can “serve to disrupt the commonly held beliefs which are widely considered to be "the truth" regarding a certain group of people” (Olive 2014:2).

2.4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of an LH approach?

Life histories are a valuable tool for conducting qualitative research. However, as with all research methods, LHs do have some limitations. The strengths and weaknesses of the approach are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2: Strengths and weaknesses of a life history approach

Strengths of an LH approach	Weaknesses of an LH approach
LHs are people-centred. They call on the interviewee to provide a first-person narrative of his / her life and to give a personal perspective of the decisions made over a period of time	LHs do not lend themselves well to generalisation because each person or household's story is unique
LHs highlight temporality and thus how decisions made at one time impact longer-term life trajectories or pathways	LHs are time consuming due to the in-depth processes required for data collection and analysis
LHs are transferable across disciplines as they consider the impact of social, cultural, economic, institutional, and political elements on people's lives	LHs can place significant mental and / or emotional strain on both the interviewer and interview respondent
LHs can be applied to cases at different scales , for instance to assess inter- and intra-household dynamics	The practicalities of conducting LHs can be tricky. For example, finding people to commit to being interviewed, and getting them to show up at the agreed time and stay until the end, has shown to be a challenge

Box 2: Using life histories for climate change adaptation research

Life histories add to adaptation research by: (1) capturing the complexity of how climatic risks shape livelihood strategies; (2) providing insights on how household strategies change over time; (3) unpacking dynamics at an intra-household level; and (4) being able to discuss aspirations.

1. **CAUSATION:** “Through life history research in Kenya, I was able to understand the perceived significance of environmental change on Martha’s (pseudonym) decision to move and set up home in a new location. Unlike a survey or key informant interview, the LH gave me a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers of mobility and response.”
2. **TEMPORALITY:** “The life history interviews in India helped chart how people move in and out of vulnerability as they make livelihood choices. In this case, to move or not move out of farming which was becoming increasingly difficult due to repeated droughts. Life histories allowed us to capture the dynamic nature of risks and responses and how structural drivers of vulnerability affect present-day risk management.”
3. **INTRA-HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS:** “In Namibia, we were able to explore how mobility within the household depends on other household members. For example, in one household a young male was obliged to stay at the household as other household members had moved to urban areas to work. This shows that LHs can help us to understand how an individual interacts with his or her environment and community. This is essential for understanding social capital and networks, both of which are an integral part of adaptive capacity.”
4. **ASPIRATIONS:** “In the Ghana interviews, it was noted that the desire for different opportunities against failing agriculture activities motivates young people to move to larger villages or even cities in order to meet their aspirations. For example, a young respondent moved from his household in the village where farming was unprofitable, to a bigger community where he could pursue business and higher education. LHs have a forward-looking component that assesses not only ‘where’ a person has come from, but also where they want to be in future.”



3. The interview process

This section is divided into three main parts, namely: ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’ the interview process. Each part provides a narrative of what should be considered at that stage of the process, as well as a ‘checklist’ which can be used by researchers to ensure that no oversights are made.

3.1. Before the interview

Before going in to the field to conduct life history interviews, there are a number of things that should be considered, and various aspects of the research that need to be prepared. If the interviewers (and, where applicable, the translators or research assistants) are well equipped, then it is likely that the interviews will go more smoothly and the data will be more accurate and comprehensive. However, even if all precautions have been taken, it is still important to remain flexible and be prepared for the unexpected.

Box 3: That wasn't in the plan!

When conducting life history interviews, it is important to **always be aware that things might go wrong** - even if you are well-prepared. For example in Kenya and India, researchers were sometimes unable to conduct interviews with secondary members in some of the households, as they had planned to. And in some cases, people were not available for the interviews or refused to participate even though they had previously agreed to do so. **Being flexible with sampling and respecting the choices of the interview participants** is therefore very important:

“Through a local gatekeeper in **Kenya**, I was introduced to Julia (pseudonym) and made an appointment with her for the following day to carry out the life history interview. The following day we met in the agreed place and started the interview. However, after half an hour, she said that she needed to leave as she had to buy some vegetables to send to her parents. Whilst this was frustrating, I had to understand that **everyone has busy lives and as interviewers we must respect that**. Thankfully, I was able to make another appointment and speak with her the day after.”

“In **India**, we started out with a clear idea of the household ‘types’ that we wanted to select for the LH interviews. For example, we wanted to include a range of households from different castes, religions, landholding sizes and income categories. However, **in practice, this was not always possible** due to factors such as people’s availability. We therefore had to be more **flexible** about who we interviewed.”

Although things may not always go according to plan, there are several things that you can do to help you to be as prepared as possible for the interview process. Before going into the field, ensure that you:

i. Have clear objectives and research questions

Develop aims, objectives and key questions with the research team. A starting point is to consider what, broadly, you are hoping to find out by conducting these interviews. The interview questions themselves will be refined as you decide on your case and begin to gain a better understanding of the context.

ii. Understand the context of the area that you are going to work in

Contextual knowledge is necessary for informing the timing of the research, the selection of people to interview as well as the articulation of questions.

Understanding the context is also important for knowing what behaviour is culturally acceptable, for example whether or not it is possible to have a male interviewer and translator when interviewing a female subject.



Sensitivity to religious and local socio-cultural norms such as not setting up interviews on significant local holidays or in places where certain people may not be able to speak comfortably are things to keep in mind.

Box 4: Be sensitive to your surroundings

“As a male researcher working in a rural Muslim community, I faced some issues when speaking to female interviewees. In several of the cases, this was a problem because the husband of the interviewee would not want to leave his wife alone with me. This meant that I had to carry out the interview in the presence of the husband, which compromised the woman’s responses and meant that I was unable to use the data. However in some cases, through my research assistant, I was able to negotiate access or else started the interview with the husband present, but then encouraged him to leave once he had got an understanding of the sorts of things I was interested in. Through this experience I learnt that, regardless of the circumstances, the wishes of the participants and their cultural norms must be respected even if they run counter to your own.”

iii. Be clear about the interview approach

Before going in to the field, it is important to clarify the specific techniques that you will use to collect your data. Whilst the methodology for life history interviews is fundamentally qualitative, the approach taken to conduct these interviews may tend more or less toward either an unstructured or semi-structured approach. These qualitative techniques may also be used in conjunction with more structured approaches (e.g.: questionnaires or surveys) and used to complement quantitative data sets. Table 3 describes three possible approaches that could be used to carry out LH interviews.

Table 3: Three possible approaches for conducting Life History interviews

Approach	Method	Pros	Cons
Semi-structured	Formal interviews are conducted using a pre-prepared list of open-ended questions and / or topics of interest that the interview participants speak to / answer in their own words. These questions or topics are usually listed in a particular order and used to guide the conversation and prompt more targeted responses from the interviewees	<p>The format of the interview can be determined by the topic of interest</p> <p>The interviewer can decide whether to introduce certain issues or to let them rise up naturally</p> <p>Affords a degree of flexibility whilst keeping the interview within particular boundaries</p>	<p>There is a possibility that people’s lives or experiences won’t fit into the structure of the interview. In such cases it might be difficult for some people to make sense of and respond to the interview questions</p> <p>Challenges may arise when attempting to extract material facts from within a longer narrative</p>
Unstructured	Informal interviews are typically conducted without the use of a pre-prepared interview schedule. Where an interview schedule is used, the questions will be very broad and open-ended and won’t follow any particular order. The interviewee might be asked to speak about what is important to him / her, with the interview then being allowed to flow in any direction, based on the participant’s responses	<p>People are able to express what they mean in their own words and therefore respond to questions with greater depth</p> <p>Given the high degree of flexibility in unstructured interviews, questions can be easily adapted based on the responses of the participants</p>	<p>Because the conversation is determined more by the participant than the researcher, the main topic of interest may not be covered in any depth</p> <p>Unstructured interviews are time-consuming and can be costly because interviewers need to be trained beforehand and more than one interview may be required</p>

Approach	Method	Pros	Cons
Mixed methods	<p>Structured interview techniques are used as a precursor to more qualitative approaches. During the first 'phase' of the interview process, interviewers ask a set of predetermined, closed questions that follow a particular order and elicit a fixed set of responses from the interviewees</p> <p>The second 'phase' of the interview process is conducted using the semi-structured or unstructured approaches described above</p>	<p>Quantitative, numerical data provides valuable background information (e.g.: household size, participant age, sex, years of residence, number of livelihood activities, income, etc). This type of data is easily comparable across cases.</p> <p>By combining a structured approach with semi-structured or unstructured narratives, more 'layers' are added to the data. This elicits a richer understanding of the meaning behind the numbers and can help researchers to explore how people make sense of their lives and their social surroundings</p>	<p>Mixing methods is time-consuming and costly as it requires significant preparation and training for both the data collection and analysis processes</p>

Box 5: Mixing methods

Life histories can help develop contextual, detailed understandings of how people conduct their lives and make livelihood decisions. Whilst a very strong method in itself, LHs are also valuable when used in tandem with other methods. For example, they could be used to complement large quantitative data sets, such as from a household survey. By telling a more comprehensive story, the qualitative LH data can help researchers to improve their understanding of statistical norms and outliers.

Using a mixed methods approach could also help researchers to identify drivers and trigger points that trap people in entrenched cycles of poverty and vulnerability, or enable them to invest in adaptive strategies. It could further contribute to more temporally-sensitive analysis that also links to broader scales - for instance, by pairing LH interview data with community-level focus group discussions or desk-based policy reviews that analyse changing governance regimes.

iv. Decide on your case

When developing your research questions, it is important to consider what your case is. Is it an individual or household, for example? If the household is your case, how many people are you going to talk to within each case? Ultimately, the decision as to what constitutes your case will be determined by your research questions and what you are trying to find out. For instance, if you are looking at the aspirations of young adults in an urban area, it may make more sense for your case to be an individual.

Alternatively, if you are interested in the way in which migration is used as a household adaptation strategy, then your case is probably more suited to the household level. Once you have decided on your case, you can work out the best way to proceed and determine the most appropriate sampling approach.



v. Sampling

Life history data is not representative of the population and therefore interviewees are not randomly or systematically chosen. Your sampling will most likely be stratified in that you will most likely be interested in sampling different locations and different groups of people e.g. different ethnic groups or different livelihood groups. Your sampling will also be purposive in that you will decide on who you interview based on who you have access to and whether they have the characteristics that you are interested in. Your sampling approach will be influenced by your overarching research question and the focus of your research more generally. If you are interested in intra-household dynamics then it is important to interview different members of the household of different sexes. For example, the household head can be interviewed along with another household member of the opposite sex. If you are in an area where female-headed households are a characteristic of the landscape, then you will need to make sure you interview female household heads. If you are interested in movement then you will want to interview people who have moved. If your question relates to people that are economically active, then you will need to interview someone of the appropriate age that is economically active.

vi. Develop interview questions

To prepare for the LH interviews, it is useful to create a list of possible questions that you want to ask. Although the initial questions that are asked should be broad and open-ended (e.g.: “tell me about your life?”) it is also helpful, when developing your questions, to carefully consider the main issues that you are interested in and what information you would like to get out of the interviews.

If you have thought about these issues and considered some relevant interview topics prior to engaging with the respondent, then you will be better equipped to prompt the interviewee, which is useful to do when the conversation begins tending naturally towards an issue of concern. For example, you might ask a general question about livelihoods, in which you enquire about the participant’s experience of shocks and their responses. However, your main interest might be related more specifically to environmental change and migration, so once the topic of livelihoods has been opened up, you can then steer the conversation towards more focused responses based on the questions that you have developed. If the topic that you are specifically interested in is not mentioned in enough depth, you could also then follow up on those aspects of the conversation by asking more detailed questions.

vii. Consider timing

In planning the interviews it is ideal to plan to do one interview per day and to conduct these at a time that is most suitable for the interviewee. This would depend on the schedule and preference of the interviewee. For example, he / she may begin work very early, but have more free time in the afternoon.

viii. Brief the translators and / or research assistants

Prior to beginning the interview, it is essential for the researchers to brief the translators and / or research assistants about the objective of the work, as well as to agree on issues that should not be brought up during the interview. For example, if you are interested in the impacts of climate change and drought on people’s livelihoods, this shouldn’t be mentioned as being a focus of the enquiry. Rather, the interviews must be framed around understanding people’s lives and livelihoods more generally. The translators and / or research assistants should also be briefed such that they ensure that the interviewee’s responses are not left as monosyllabic answers, but that all aspects of the questions are answered. The translators and / or research assistants should also have a practice run through of the entire interview process before starting interviews including how to introduce the research and how to feedback responses to the interviewer.

Box 6: The importance of translators and / or research assistants

When working in a language that is not your own, the importance of using good translators and / or research assistants cannot be overstated. A translator and / or research assistant mediates the conversation that you have with the interviewee, can help with prompting and probing to ensure that the conversation flows, interprets your questions and ensures they are sensitive to the context, and should faithfully reproduce the responses provided by the interviewee.

After the interview, the research assistant / translator can help you to understand the interview, provide context and background information about the interviewee and circumstances of the interview, as well as help to clarify any responses that you are uncertain about. A good translator and / or research assistant is often hard to find but highly valuable. They should therefore be treated as such - look after them and they will look after you!

ix. Have access to interviewees through an appropriate entry point

When engaging in social science research, it is common for researchers to encounter what are known as 'gatekeepers' - people, organisations or institutions that negotiate and mediate access to communities and / or households.

Depending on the circumstances and the perceived value and / or sensitivity of the research, gatekeepers may act either as barriers or enablers to the effective completion of LH interviews.

Ensuring that you access interview participants via the appropriate channels is essential for both practical and ethical reasons.



Box 7: The role of gatekeepers

"In Namibia, we could not just go and start speaking to people. Rather, it was necessary to first approach the local Traditional Authority (TA) to explain our research and our reason for being there. Luckily, we had already begun to establish a relationship with the Secretary of the TA, who had assisted some of our postgraduate students in their fieldwork.

"As a result, we didn't have a problem when requesting access to the villages to carry out our life history interviews. The Secretary of the TA introduced us to the chief or headman of each village, who then gave us permission to speak to the community members. In Namibia, it is custom to go through these channels before entering the villages - whether to carry out research or otherwise."

x. Pilot the approach

Before you go into the field it is useful to pilot your approach. This should be done to ensure that the method works and that you are asking the right questions. In addition to testing the data collection method, it is useful to pilot the analysis of the data so that you know what you are going to do with the data once you have it. This should help to refine the focus of your objectives and research questions.

During the piloting phase check that the life history unfolds nicely but also scrutinise the data that is being generated. Ask yourself, can you come to some conclusions, can you tell a story about the thing you are trying to understand? If it isn't working ask why it isn't working? What has gone wrong here? When making decisions about method it is important to document them so you can trace back your thinking and justifications.

xi. Ethics / positionality

The nature of life histories is such that ethical research procedures could easily become compromised if care is not taken throughout the interview process to maintain an appropriate standard of ethical conduct. This is because prolonged and repeated conversations and immersion in the respondent's personal lives predisposes the researcher to developing a deep relationship with the subject. Data must therefore be collected in a way that does not compromise the position of either the interviewer or the interview respondent. This is relevant to all LH approaches and must be considered whether the interviewer uses a free-association technique, in which the subject brings out material at his / her own speed and in his / her own order; or an active technique, in which the interviewer elicits the desired material by a process of direct questioning. Prior to the interview it is also important to clarify the specific roles of the research team (which may comprise, for example, the lead researcher, interviewer, local facilitator / translator, research assistant etc.), and what these roles mean for ethical data collection. The researcher will also have to be aware of the potential negative or emotional impacts of the process on the respondent and try to minimize this during the discussions.

Checklist A: Before the interview

1.	Gain clarity on research objectives and questions	
2.	Develop an understanding of the context of the study site	
3.	Develop a list of focus areas and related questions	
4.	Plan your field work for an appropriate time	
5.	Arrange access to interviewees through relevant entry points	
6.	Arrange an appropriate translator	
7.	Get ethics clearance and prepare a narrative to tell the interviewee before the	
8.	Think about priority directions you want the interviews to go in when different	
9.	Know how you are going to analyse your data	
10.	Select a cross section of various ages, ethnic groups, livelihoods etc.	
11.	Pilot your approach (interviewing and data analysis)	
12.	Decide on whether you want to use mixed methods	
13.	Have appropriate attire and be familiar with appropriate customs	
14.	Get appropriate gifts of food/sweets	
15.	Be sure you know how long you are planning to interview people for	
16.	Go over the objective and process of the interview with your facilitator/	

3.2. During the interview

i. Gain the interviewee's consent

Before asking the interview respondent any questions, make sure that they have explicitly provided their consent to be interviewed. The type of consent required (e.g.: written or verbal; formal or informal) will be determined by the researcher's institution and should be checked prior to making fieldwork arrangements.

Typically, researchers will take along a consent form that the interviewee will be asked to sign. This form should explain the purpose of the interview and clarify any outputs that the researcher expects to produce from the data, making sure that the respondent is aware of confidentiality requirements.

The researcher should verbally explain what is said on the form and allow the interviewee to read it if they wish (translation must be used where appropriate). It is important to ensure that the respondent understands that the process may require them to revisit emotional experiences and that they may opt out of the interview at any time if they do not feel comfortable.

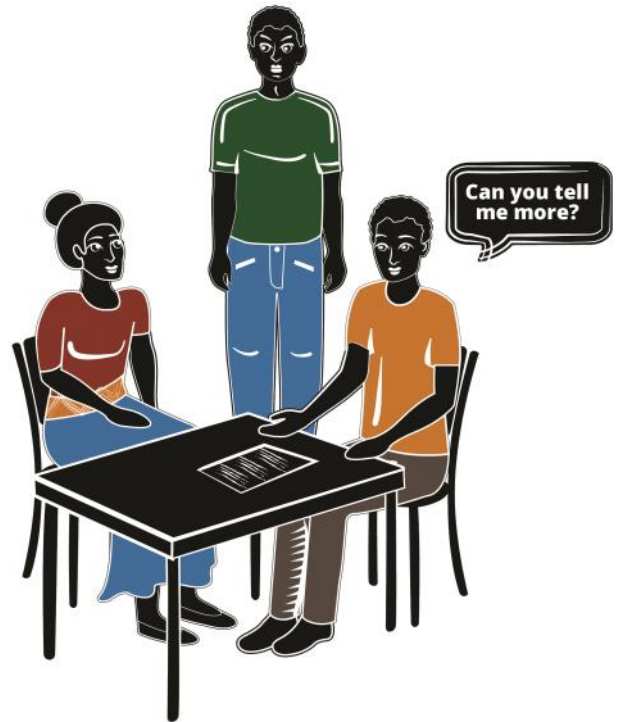
ii. Create a trusting and comfortable atmosphere

A relaxed, conversational atmosphere should be created before the interview begins, either by the researcher or, where the researcher does not speak the local language, the translator / local facilitator. This will allow an initial foundation of trust to be built and ensure that the respondent is comfortable enough to open up about their life experiences.

The amount of time that it will take to establish this atmosphere depends on each situation, but should not be too lengthy considering the amount of time that the interview process itself will take. If the interviewers are unsure about how to go about this, a list of general questions can be taken along as a guide to help establish some familiarity. The interviewers should also be prepared to answer personal questions of their own, as this will also help the familiarity process.

iii. Ensure privacy

As far as possible, LH interviews should be carried out solely with the interviewee, rather than in the presence of any secondary parties (such as friends or other members of the household). This is important as it ensures that the individual who is being interviewed feels free to express him/herself without any sense of intimidation. It also minimizes the risk of the interviewee's responses being influenced by others. This is of particular concern when interviewing household dependents, whose responses are most likely to be intimidated or influenced by the presence of their guardian.



As highlighted by the interviewer's experience described in Box 8, women might be intimidated or influenced by the presence of men, particularly in certain cultural contexts. In cases where there are children present, be sure to have a bag of sweets or little toys that can be shared to keep them occupied and allow you to carry out the interview with minimal disruption.

BOX 8: Are we alone? The influence of others

"Lalitha seemed to remember me from the focus group discussion (FGD) that we held last year. The conversation was quite good but since we were still busy when it was nearly lunchtime, her husband joined us midway. He didn't join the interview directly but was sitting in the next room during the discussion, which I think may have influenced her answers - she seemed more reserved this time than in the FGD. Any time she spoke of difficult times in their life, we heard him clear his throat as if to warn her not to divulge too much. Finally, he called out to her, and she rushed inside. Soon after, she apologetically told us that we'd have to cut the interview short. Realising her discomfort in speaking with her husband in the next room, we scheduled (and conducted) an interview at a later date that was most convenient for her. "

iv. Be aware of non-verbal cues

Throughout the interview process, the researcher should be sensitive to the interviewee's body language and other non-verbal cues, such as his / her facial expressions or tone of voice.

This is particularly essential if the researcher does not understand the local language. Picking up these cues requires active listening, observation and a high level of awareness.

Any non-verbal cues should be taken note of and used to support the information obtained during the interview process.

v. Maintain a conversational style

Even if your questions or interview topics have been developed prior to the interview, these should be open-ended and serve only to guide the conversation. When conducting the interview it is important to remain flexible and inquisitive, and to maintain a relaxed, conversational style throughout.

vi. Ensure all relevant questions are asked by the translator

Where the researcher does not understand the local language, the translator should frequently provide short summaries of the discussion during the interview process. This will enable the researcher to ensure that all the issues are being addressed and to advise the translator when to probe for more detailed information.

vii. Ensure specific information is obtained

As much as possible, specific details (rather than general statements) should be obtained. To do this, the interviewer might need to probe the respondent by asking ‘how’, ‘why’ and ‘what’ questions. If more detailed responses are elicited, then the quality and potential value of the data will be greater.

viii. Remember the objectives of the interviews

Given the informal and open-ended approach that characterizes LH interviews, it is likely that many interesting facts will arise in the interviewee’s narrative. Although these issues may be explored at a later stage, it is important to keep in sight the main objectives of the research and to maintain a particular direction of questioning so as not to compromise the type of data collected.

ix. Be flexible - within reason

Allow the interviewee to attend to other matters during the interview if necessary. However, if other activities are not considered urgent and are expected to take a considerable amount of time, then politely request for the interviewee to stay on until the interview is complete, rather than rescheduling the remainder of the interview.

x. Record the process

If possible, each interview should be audio recorded and transcribed. If the interview is conducted in a language that the researcher does not understand, then the interview transcription should also be accurately translated. In addition, the researcher should keep detailed field notes and record any observations. Table 4 highlights the various ways in which LH interviews can be recorded. The researcher may choose to use a number of these methods. (See table 4)

xi. Take note of the scene






It is important to take detailed notes of the scene. This could include factors such as where the interview was conducted, where you were sitting, what you were wearing, what the weather was like at the time, who was around, etc. This will help to put you back in the scene when you are analysing the data.

Box 9: Field notes from Namibia

“It is a cool day here in the Omusati Region of northern Namibia. Myself and Patrick (pseudonym) are sitting in the shade of the garage building with the morning breeze blowing gently. There is a calm atmosphere and I feel relaxed as I watch the chickens and cockerels walk past, scrounging for any tasty morsels on the bare ground. A little black dog walks past. He looks hungry, and when he notices the chickens he barks a bit, but then settles down in the shade for a sleep. The odd car drives slowly past, and now again, passers-by pause to greet us. They are probably inquisitive as to why Patrick is talking to me, as I am clearly not from around here. We are surrounded by what can only be described as a car graveyard. The cars have been salvaged for parts and many stand with only their flimsy metal frames remaining, their old paint peeling off in chunks. Across the street, a small shebeen opens its doors to let in the first customers of the day.”



Table 4: Recording process

<p>Note taking</p>	<p>Take detailed notes, not only of the interviewee’s responses but of the setting, tones of answers, surroundings, interruptions, silences, reluctance to reply and other such nuances</p>	
<p>Audio recording</p>	<p>If the researcher has the luxury of audio recording, recorded interviews must be carefully transcribed</p>	
<p>Time stamps</p>	<p>Include timestamps in the note taking process so that points to be explored can be checked on the audio</p>	
<p>Thoughts and observations</p>	<p>Additional thoughts and observations can be included in the field notes, but should be distinguished from the actual interview information (e.g.: by using a different ink colour)</p>	
<p>Supplementary notes</p>	<p>Notes can be supplemented by wider information gathered through chats with neighbours, transect walks, participant observation, etc.</p>	

xii. Finalise the interview

Once you are satisfied with the interview and have checked that all of the necessary information has been gathered, be sure to ask the interviewee if he / she has any questions that they would like to ask you. Remember that the interviewee has spent significant time talking openly to you, so it is important to afford them the same courtesy. Showing your appreciation for their time is important, but must be done in a way that is sensitive to any cultural nuances. Small gifts, food or cash may be handed over at this point, if this is deemed appropriate.

In some cases, the interview may need to be terminated early. For example, if the respondent becomes too emotional and is unable to continue the conversation, or requests that the interview ends prematurely. The interview can also be terminated if the researchers feel uncomfortable or threatened in any way, or if the process is not working effectively (e.g.: if it is taking too long).

Checklist B: During the interview

1.	Gain (written or verbal) consent from the interviewee to conduct the interview	
2.	Meet at a place and time that is most convenient for the interviewee	
3.	Explain the purpose of the interview and its outputs and ensure that the respondent understands	
4.	Consider the atmosphere and the level of privacy - ensure that the respondent is comfortable enough to open up about their life experiences	
5.	Make sure the pace of questions is not too fast or slow, and adapt them based on the interview	
6.	Maintain a conversational tone throughout	
7.	Take note of the scene and who was present (in the interview itself and/or in the 'background')	
8.	Be aware of non-verbal cues such as body language	
9.	Avoid getting sidetracked - keep in mind the objectives of the interview	
10.	If possible, probe the interviewee for details rather than broad, general statements	
11.	If a translator is required then make sure to pause frequently for summaries to be provided	
12.	Make sure that the entire interview is audio-recorded and take rigorous written notes and observations throughout	
13.	Ensure that you have a means through which to contact the interviewee again and inform them that a follow-up interview may be required	
14.	Extend appropriate gratitude to the interviewee. This may include gifts	

3.3. After the interview

i. Discussion

Once the interview has been completed, the research team should spend a period of time together discussing the interview. If possible, this should happen directly afterwards (before any subsequent interviews) so that the information is still 'fresh' in people's minds. The discussion should cover things such as:

- interesting or anomalous issues
- the feel of the interview and how the interviewee responded at different points
- key issues discussed and areas for clarification or follow up
- issues to focus on in subsequent interviews
- what worked well, what didn't work and what needs to change



ii. Transcription

The notes from the interview must be typed up. This process will be repeated for all interviews. Each interview will be digitally recorded. The recordings will be transcribed and then translated to enable a more detailed textual analysis.

If possible and if there is time, it is useful to have the translator check and compare the transcribed notes and interviews. This will provide another layer of quality assurance and help to ensure the accuracy of the data.

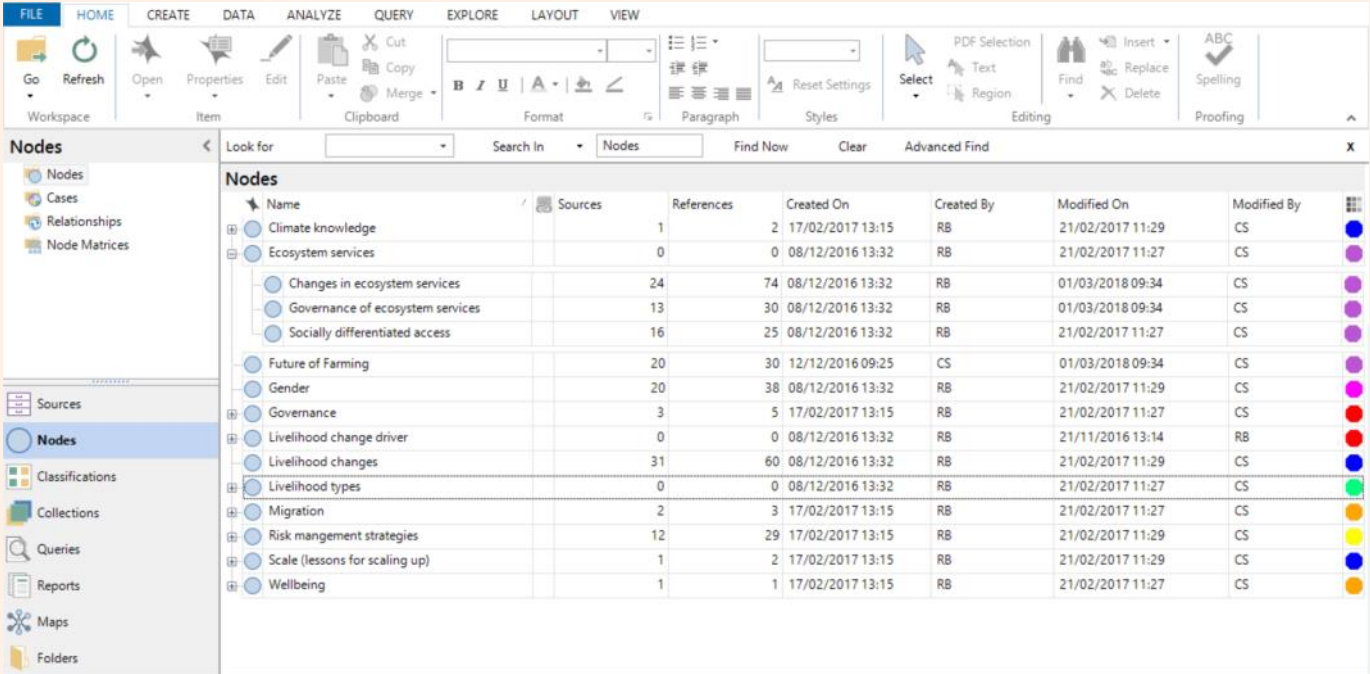
All interview recordings, notes and transcriptions must be stored in a place that is safe and mutually accessible (e.g.: in the cloud).

iii. Coding

Once the transcripts have been produced, these will be analysed using a series of descriptive codes. Consider using a qualitative data analysis software such as Nvivo to assist with the coding process. This would involve identifying or deciding on certain key themes or categories, and then working through the data to apply the codes.

If you are conducting a cross-regional analysis, then it is useful to agree on a series of pre-set descriptive codes that are common across all of the regions. The coding should be applied to sentences rather than to individual words, so as to avoid any loss in the accuracy of the data associated with the translation process. The value of using pre-agreed codes is that it helps to increase the comparability of the data.

Fig. 1 shows an example of codes produced using the NVivo software package.



The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface. The top menu bar includes FILE, HOME, CREATE, DATA, ANALYZE, QUERY, EXPLORE, LAYOUT, and VIEW. Below the menu is a toolbar with various icons for workspace, item, clipboard, format, paragraph, styles, editing, and proofing. The main window is titled 'Nodes' and shows a list of nodes with columns for Name, Sources, References, Created On, Created By, Modified On, and Modified By. The nodes are listed as follows:

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Climate knowledge	1	2	17/02/2017 13:15	RB	21/02/2017 11:29	CS
Ecosystem services	0	0	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	21/02/2017 11:27	CS
Changes in ecosystem services	24	74	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	01/03/2018 09:34	CS
Governance of ecosystem services	13	30	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	01/03/2018 09:34	CS
Socially differentiated access	16	25	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	21/02/2017 11:27	CS
Future of Farming	20	30	12/12/2016 09:25	CS	01/03/2018 09:34	CS
Gender	20	38	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	21/02/2017 11:29	CS
Governance	3	5	17/02/2017 13:15	RB	21/02/2017 11:27	CS
Livelihood change driver	0	0	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	21/11/2016 13:14	RB
Livelihood changes	31	60	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	21/02/2017 11:29	CS
Livelihood types	0	0	08/12/2016 13:32	RB	21/02/2017 11:27	CS
Migration	2	3	17/02/2017 13:15	RB	21/02/2017 11:27	CS
Risk management strategies	12	29	17/02/2017 13:15	RB	21/02/2017 11:29	CS
Scale (lessons for scaling up)	1	2	17/02/2017 13:15	RB	21/02/2017 11:29	CS
Wellbeing	1	1	17/02/2017 13:15	RB	21/02/2017 11:27	CS

iv. Data analysis

Developing a common framework for recording and analysing life history data is very important. If possible, prior to the collection of the data, it is good to think through how the life histories will be recorded and analysed. Doing this will help to ensure that the data sets are usable and amenable to (cross-regional) analysis. In addition to deciding on a framework for analysis, it is useful to agree on a comprehensive way of summarising the data.

This summary should cover the important elements of the life history and provide an overview of the story that has been told in the interview, particularly in relation to the topic of interest.

If software such as Nvivo is not used to analyse the qualitative data, then the material facts that have been collected can be summarised in an excel spreadsheet so that they can be viewed in one place.

Box 10: An iterative analytical approach

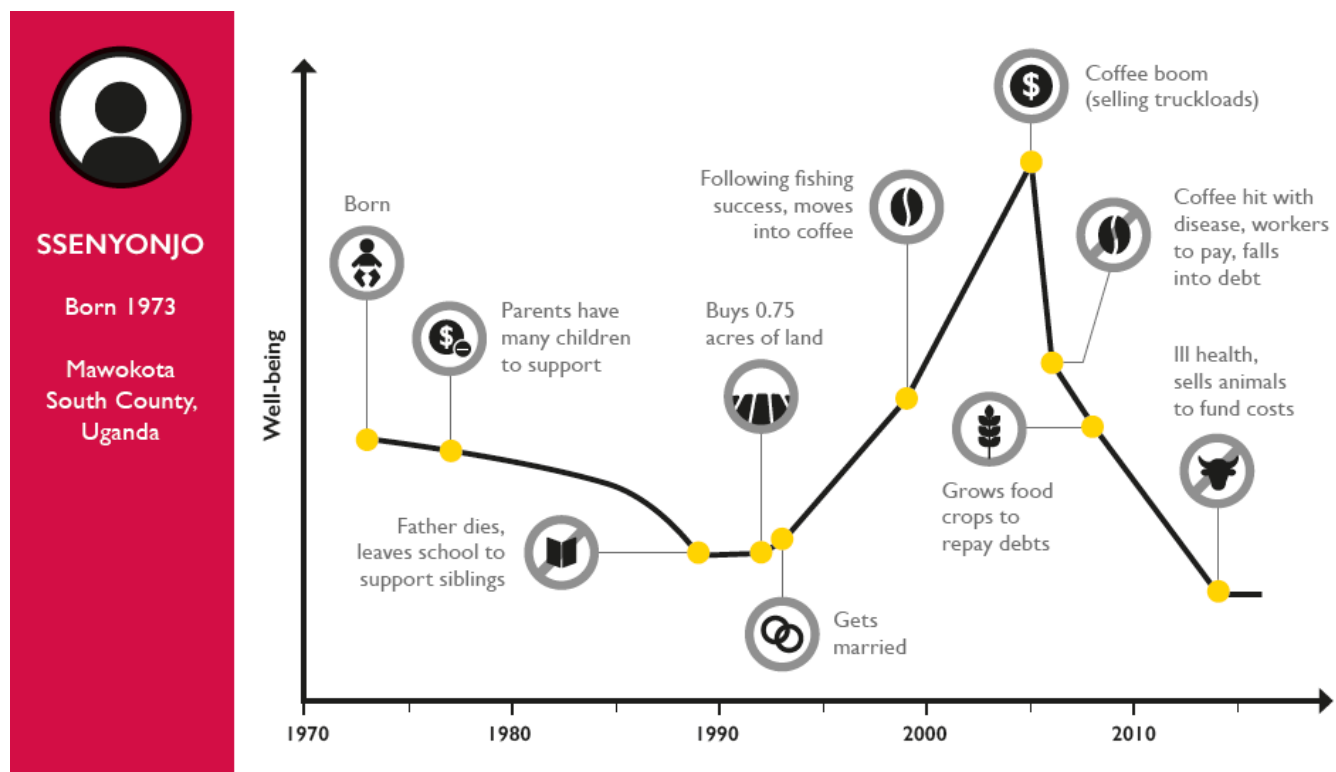
Analysing data is an iterative process: part deductive and part inductive. The analytical process starts the moment you begin collecting the data, so remember to always be aware of what is being said, what is being implied and what is happening around you. Generally, you will have an idea of what it is that you are looking for before you enter the field. However, as you begin collecting the data, these preconceived ideas / research themes may or may not hold - and this is ok! Whilst some will remain relevant, the importance of other themes will fall away and new themes will almost certainly emerge - be sure to take note of these.

Once the interviews have been completed and the transcripts have been produced, you can start working with the data more intensively. You may decide to begin the analysis with a pre-identified set of codes (a deductive approach) or a more open reading of the data (an inductive approach). As you become more familiar with the data, you will move from an initial descriptive analysis, which is quite broad, to something that is deeper and more detailed.

Throughout the process of analysis, you should be looking for patterns, relationships, similarities, differences, generalities and specifics across the data set. Because this analytical process is iterative, you will have to shift backwards and forwards between the data, the descriptive analysis and the deeper reading of the data, until you are satisfied and ready to present and write up your findings.

v. Presentation of data

Life history data tends to have a strong element of temporality as it shows how things change over time. Thus, the data lends itself well to timelines and graphs that can depict these changes visually. Graphics such as these can highlight key life events or bring attention to the significant drivers of these events. Figure 2 is an example that was produced by the Chronic Poverty Network to illustrate the major events that shaped “Ssenyonjo”, a Ugandan farmer’s, rise and fall through poverty and accumulation. [For more examples from the Chronic Poverty Network, visit <http://www.chronicpoverty.org>]



There are various other ways that life history data could be presented. For example, you could produce tables or text with illustrative quotes showcasing different points of view, or organising the data thematically according to the research question. When thinking of data presentation for life histories, it is important to communicate the changes over time, the variations and similarities between the individuals interviewed and, as appropriate, to link the findings to the broader social, cultural, economic etc. dynamics that are at play.

vi. Writing up (post-analysis)

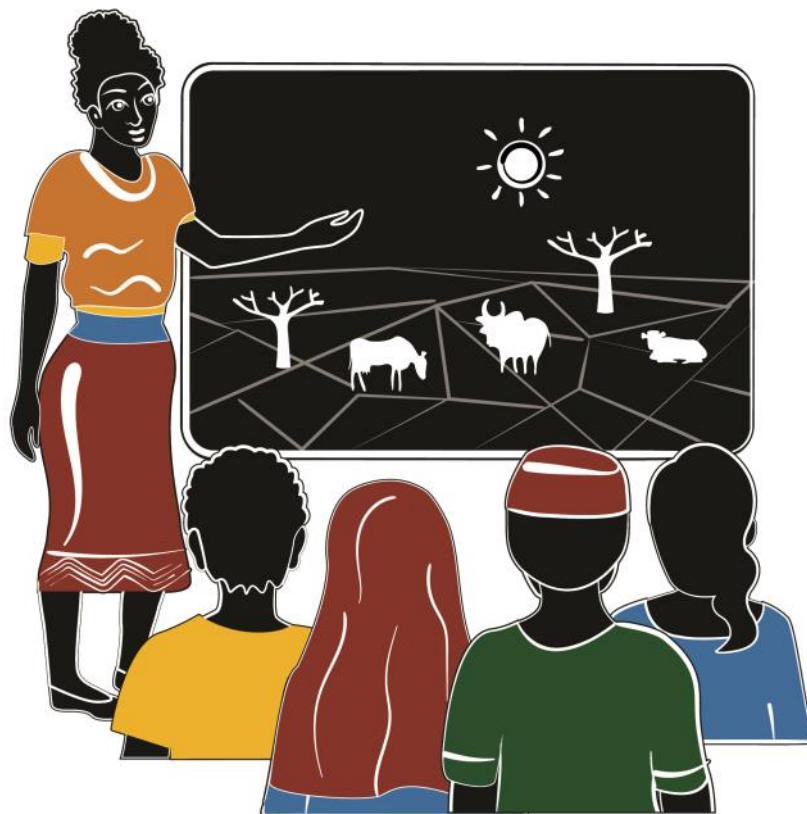
At this point, you should be familiar with your data and ready to write up your findings into article format. You will need to decide precisely which aspect of the data you wish to focus on and how you want your article to be framed. In doing so, be sure to think about where the gaps in the existing research lie and how your findings might contribute to filling these gaps (or at least contribute to the conversations taking place in the current literature).

You should also consider which publications you wish to target, as this will affect the framing of your article and the tone of your writing. It is important to make sure that you are able to say something valuable about the broader context (e.g.: the social conditions that people are living in) as well as to describe people’s own lived experiences. By considering your specific findings in relation to the general context, you will be less likely to jump to conclusions based on an individual’s experience or to push the data to say more than it actually is.

vii. Feedback

Consider communicating your key findings back to the communities, households and individuals with whom you engaged during the interview process. They are likely to appreciate the opportunity to see how the information that they provided was used, and could perhaps apply some of your findings or recommendations to make more informed decisions in future.

Importantly, any feedback that is given should be in a format that is easy to understand and that is in the local language. It is also useful to develop basic communications products such as information briefs, videos or cartoons that can help you to communicate your findings more effectively.



Checklist C: After the interview

1.	Type up your notes straight after the interview while it is fresh in your memory	
2.	In your notes describe the scene - where you were sitting, what you were wearing, the weather etc.	
3.	Go through your notes with the translator to clarify any gaps	
4.	Get the translator to listen back to the recording and ensure that the notes are accurate	
5.	Finish writing up the notes before moving on to another interview	
6.	Get the audio files transcribed	
7.	Conduct quality assurance on the transcription	
8.	Agree on and carry out the process of coding the interview data	
9.	Develop a common framework for recording, summarising and analysing the data	
10.	Agree on how the data will be presented and written up	
11.	Arrange to feedback your findings to the interview participants	

4. Conclusion

A life history method of conducting stakeholder interviews has been applied in various contexts in which temporality and change at an individual, household or community level are of key concern to researchers. For instance, it has been used to study the dynamic trajectories of poverty and accumulation, changing livelihood characteristics and the effect of policy on people's wellbeing over time. The authors of this guide employed life histories to study the role of mobility / migration as a strategy to adapt to a changing climate. Whilst LH's are primarily used for collecting in-depth qualitative data, they can be carried out in conjunction with quantitative methods, such as household surveys, in order to provide a richer picture of a subject's life.

Life histories are unique in that they go beyond merely plotting key events and 'turning points' across a timeline. Rather, they seek also to understand and map the role played by more nuanced, subjective factors - such as an individual's memories, perceptions, relationships, aspirations and regrets - in the choices, behaviours or events that have shaped their lives.

This How-To Guide has provided a step-by-step approach to guide researchers through three phases of the LH interview method, namely: preparing for fieldwork (section 3.1: 'before the interview'); conducting LH interviews (section 3.2: 'during the interview'); and analysing LH interview data (section 3.3: after the interview). It has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the LH methodology, described different approaches to carrying out LH interviews and provided examples from fieldwork conducted by the authors in Africa and India. Whilst the guide is envisioned to be a tool for researchers to familiarise themselves with the process of conducting LH interviews, it is important that they remain aware that unexpected challenges could be encountered when in the field. Such challenges are likely to be unique to the specific socio-ecological, economic and cultural context in which the research is taking place. In whichever context or field they are applied, however, life histories are a valuable qualitative methodology that can provide a deeper understanding of the key factors that have influenced and shaped a person's life, and thus at what points or in which types of scenarios interventions could be introduced.

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7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix A

Checklist A: Before the interview

1.	Gain clarity on research objectives and questions	
2.	Develop an understanding of the context of the study site	
3.	Develop a list of focus areas and related questions	
4.	Plan your field work for an appropriate time	
5.	Arrange access to interviewees through relevant entry points	
6.	Arrange an appropriate translator	
7.	Get ethics clearance and prepare a narrative to tell the interviewee before the	
8.	Think about priority directions you want the interviews to go in when different	
9.	Know how you are going to analyse your data	
10.	Select a cross section of various ages, ethnic groups, livelihoods etc.	
11.	Pilot your approach (interviewing and data analysis)	
12.	Decide on whether you want to use mixed methods	
13.	Have appropriate attire and be familiar with appropriate customs	
14.	Get appropriate gifts of food/sweets	
15.	Be sure you know how long you are planning to interview people for	
16.	Go over the objective and process of the interview with your facilitator/	

7.2 Appendix B

Checklist B: During the interview

1.	Gain (written or verbal) consent from the interviewee to conduct the interview	
2.	Meet at a place and time that is most convenient for the interviewee	
3.	Explain the purpose of the interview and its outputs and ensure that the respondent understands	
4.	Consider the atmosphere and the level of privacy - ensure that the respondent is comfortable enough to open up about their life experiences	
5.	Make sure the pace of questions is not too fast or slow, and adapt them based on the interview	
6.	Maintain a conversational tone throughout	
7.	Take note of the scene and who was present (in the interview itself and/or in the 'background')	
8.	Be aware of non-verbal cues such as body language	
9.	Avoid getting sidetracked - keep in mind the objectives of the interview	
10.	If possible, probe the interviewee for details rather than broad, general statements	
11.	If a translator is required then make sure to pause frequently for summaries to be provided	
12.	Make sure that the entire interview is audio-recorded and take rigorous written notes and observations throughout	
13.	Ensure that you have a means through which to contact the interviewee again and inform them that a follow-up interview may be required	
14.	Extend appropriate gratitude to the interviewee. This may include gifts	

7.3 Appendix C

Checklist C: After the interview

1.	Type up your notes straight after the interview while it is fresh in your memory	
2.	In your notes describe the scene - where you were sitting, what you were wearing, the weather etc.	
3.	Go through your notes with the translator to clarify any gaps	
4.	Get the translator to listen back to the recording and ensure that the notes are accurate	
5.	Finish writing up the notes before moving on to another interview	
6.	Get the audio files transcribed	
7.	Conduct quality assurance on the transcription	
8.	Agree on and carry out the process of coding the interview data	
9.	Develop a common framework for recording, summarising and analysing the data	
10.	Agree on how the data will be presented and written up	
11.	Arrange to feedback your findings to the interview participants	

Acknowledgments

This work was carried out under the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA), with financial support from the UK Government's Department for International Development (DfID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The views expressed in this work are those of the creators and do not necessarily represent those of DfID and IDRC or its Board of Governors.



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