

# Ethnographic Action Research



A user's handbook developed to  
innovate and research ICT  
applications for poverty eradication



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The unnamed authors of this handbook are the researchers attached to UNESCO's ICT and poverty reduction projects in South Asia. Without their hard work and input this method would not have been developed and this handbook would not have been written.

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# Foreword

UNESCO recognises the importance of using information and communication technologies to achieve development goals. It is also important to learn how ICTs can play an effective role in economic development, social transformation, political empowerment and cultural enrichment. Research is of immense value in this context. Ethnographic action research is considered to be one of the innovative research approaches to study the impact of information and communication technologies. This handbook presents and explains the approach and the methods employed in it particularly for projects using information and communication technologies related to poverty alleviation. We hope that along with other research methods it would prove useful for people working with information communication technologies for sustainable development.

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# 1

## PREFACE: PUTTING ICTS IN THE HANDS OF THE POOR

The Ethnographic Action Research methodology was developed through an initial grant from the UK Government's Department for International Development (DfID) and with continuing support and funding from programmes of UNESCO's information and communication sector in South Asia.

DfID funding allowed initial research to be undertaken in rural Sri Lanka in early 2002 to investigate the usefulness of ethnography as a research approach, and to design a transferable methodology for the monitoring and evaluation of community multimedia centres (Slater, Tacchi and Lewis 2002). Ethnographic Action Research was developed as a result of that work and is being further developed through UNESCO's pilot programme initiative, *Putting ICTs in the Hands of the Poor*, part of a cross-cutting theme on the eradication of poverty, especially extreme poverty.

*Putting ICTs in the Hands of the Poor* focuses on the innovative use of ICTs to empower people living in poverty. It was devised as a project to combine innovation and research by Wijayananda Jayaweera (UNESCO Regional Information and Communication Advisor for Asia) and Ian Pringle (media/ICT specialist and UNESCO's coordinator for the project). Research is integrated into a range of projects in South Asia to help them develop



effectively as sustainable initiatives while at the same time investigating - through site specific research and through comparison - how ICTs can contribute to poverty reduction strategies. The focus is less on the technologies themselves than on their uses, in various combinations, in specific locations.

Each of the projects within the UNESCO programme has a project worker trained in the research methodology who is responsible for ensuring the research is undertaken and integrated into each project's own development. The researchers are being trained, supported and supervised by a research coordinator, Savithri Subramanian (based in New Delhi), and by Jo Tacchi and Don Slater. Training, support and supervision happens online through email, a research website and chat, and face to face through workshops and site visits.

The projects themselves cover a range of poor individuals and communities with a variety of technology mixes. Each one is developing different social and technological access models that address both the root causes of poverty and key barriers to ICT usage by the poor. Working with parallel UNESCO initiatives, nine project sites have been established (in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan) in partnership with NGOs, governments, universities, private companies, media and technology groups as well as poor women, youth and their families. Given below is a brief description of each of the projects included in this programme.

***Namma Dhwani Local ICT Network*** (Budikote, Kolar District, Karnataka, India) combines a radio studio, an audio cable network that delivers radio to local households, and a telecentre with computers, internet connectivity and other multimedia tools. It is run by and centred on a network of women's self-help groups (SHG) and linked to a government school and a local development resource centre. Daily community radio programming addresses local information and communication needs, drawing on a variety of multimedia resources, like websites and CD-ROMs.

***Empowering Resource Poor Women to Use ICT*** (Chennai, Kancheepuram and Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, India) has put computers with internet connectivity into the homes of women's self-help group (SHG) members. In rural, urban



and semi-urban areas, women and their SHG networks are using ICTs in familiar, empowering spaces with content developed specifically to meet their needs. Particular attention is given to income generating activities and the need for innovation product development and marketing.

***ICT Learning Centre for Women*** (Seelampur, New Delhi, India) is an open learning centre for girls and women located at an inner-city *madarsa* (Islamic school) in a high-density, low-income area of New Delhi. Interactive multimedia content is developed and used to support vocational and life-skills training, to provide rights-based information to poor girls and women and to build their awareness of health issues and livelihood opportunities.

***Nabanna: Networking Rural Women and Knowledge*** (Baduria, North 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, India) uses grassroots processes to build information-sharing networks among low-income, rural women. Networking is done face-to-face through regular meetings as well as being web- and print-based, linking women and their groups from different parts of this geographically distinct municipality. Focus areas include agriculture, environment, health, sanitation, family planning, education, literacy and law.

***Darjeeling Himalayan Internet Railway*** (Darjeeling, West Bengal, India) established community ICT centres at stations along the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR). The network offers secure, central and easy computers and internet access to people living below the poverty line in communities close to the railway. The DHR is a historical focal point for the area and is being promoted as a potential information highway and renewed stimulator for development.

***Youth-Led Digital Opportunities*** (Sitakund, Chittagong District, Bangladesh) established a rural ICT centre and linked it to a grassroots youth development network that works to address root causes of poverty and key areas of social and economic development. It promotes the empowerment of marginalised youth through ICT skills training, access to computer, internet and other multimedia facilities.

***Tansen Community Media Centre*** (Tansen, Palpa District, Nepal) works with local youth from poor families and

marginalised groups, training them in TV production and the use of ICTs. The centre is made up of a TV production studio and an ICT access centre. A 'TV Browsing the Internet' show and other local programming is distributed through local cable TV networks to some 1000 households.

**Jakar Community Multimedia Centre** (Jakar, Bhutan) is part of a remote Bhutan Broadcasting Service production station in Jakar. Local TV and radio production feeds into the national broadcast system, allowing for increased level of content from isolated rural areas. High-speed connectivity offers the local population access to new online services, like e-mail and e-post, and new resources.

**Uva Community Media Network** (Uva Province, Sri Lanka) uses a combination of radio and new ICTs as a way to facilitate responsive development and governance on a province-wide basis. A series of ICT centres and a large network of grassroots knowledge societies feed into radio networks, including the new Uva community radio station.

This handbook was developed for the researchers attached to the nine projects and has been adapted and refined as a result of lessons learned through working with those researchers and through their valuable feedback. Examples and illustrations used throughout this handbook are drawn from the work of those researchers, and our efforts in training and supporting them. The methodology, while developed largely through its application in the UNESCO programme, is transferable. It is hoped that this handbook will enable other ICT projects to become more effective through the adoption of ethnographic action research.

The researchers who have been using the method in the UNESCO programme come from a variety of backgrounds. None of them had experience of either ethnography or action research. They underwent intensive training through workshops and have been supported throughout by the lead researchers (Tacchi and Slater) and research coordinator (Subramanian). For other projects, the level of training and support required to implement ethnographic action research will be dependent on the background and experience of the researchers. We have attempted to make the handbook as comprehensive as possible and have not assumed any prior experience of the research approaches we draw upon.



# 2

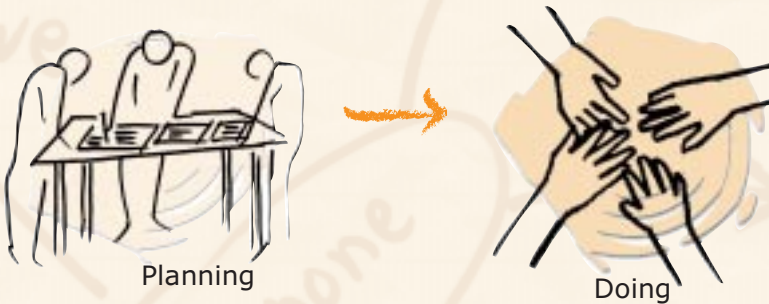
## Introduction

The ethnographic action research approach for the research and development of ICT projects is based on combining two research approaches: **ethnography** and **action research**. **Ethnography** is a research approach that has traditionally been used to understand different cultures. **Action research** is used to bring about new activities through new understandings of situations. We use ethnography to guide the research process and we use action research to link the research back to the project's plans and activities.

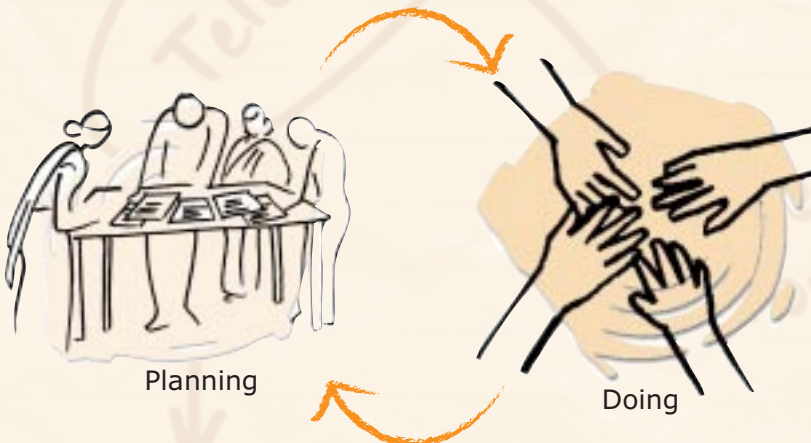
In this *Introduction* we set out some of the basic premises of ethnographic action research. The following section, *Ethnographic Action Research and Information and Communication Technologies*, gives a more detailed explanation of how the methodology can work as a way of researching and developing ICT projects. That is followed by a section on *The Research Process*, which guides you through the actual research process from planning to action. The final section, *Methods Toolbox*, presents the key methods used in ethnographic action research.

## 2.1 A basic introduction to Ethnographic Action Research

Typically, projects involve two activities:



Over time our actions shape our next set of plans:

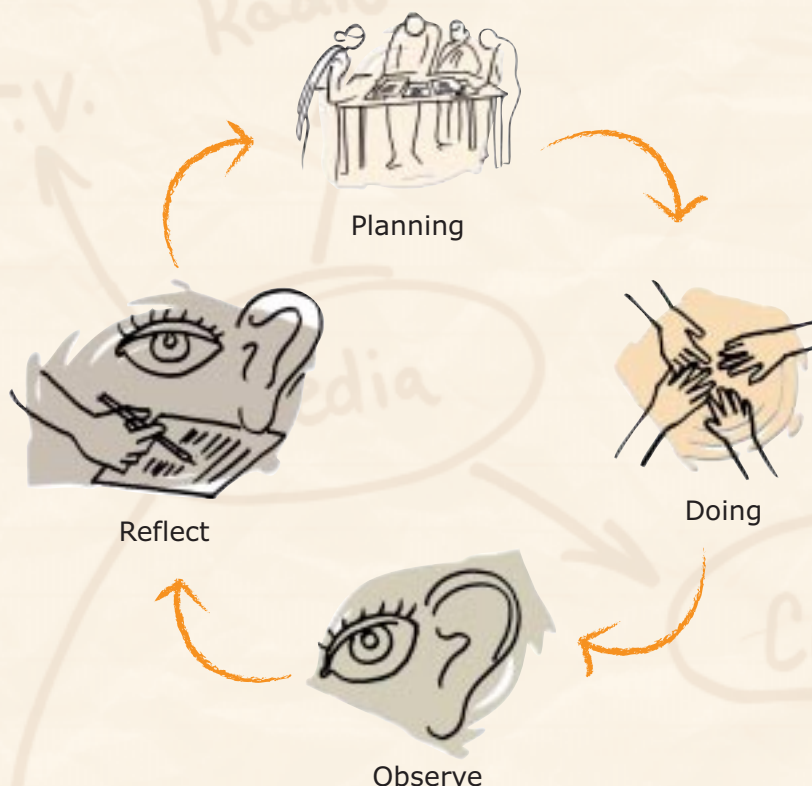


But there is another step in this process where research can play a constructive role. By *observing* our actions we can generate knowledge and learn from our experiences. By critically *reflecting* on our actions and experiences we can plan our next actions more effectively. We call this *informed reflection*.

Research continuously involves observing (and asking and listening) and reflecting on (making sense of) what we



observe. So, another way to depict the ethnographic action research approach is:

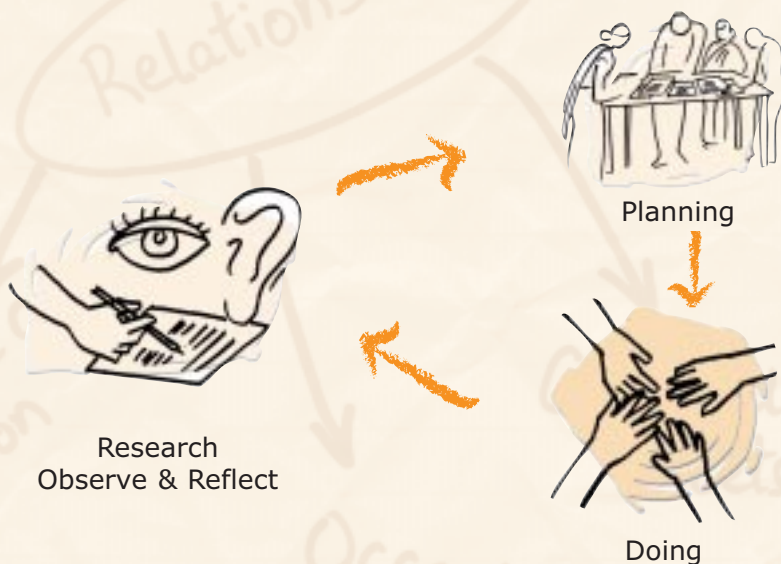


Informed reflection is continuous throughout the life of a project.

Research is often divided into two phases: baseline research (before the project starts) and monitoring and evaluation research (to assess how the project has developed). This latter phase tries to measure the impacts of the project and its effectiveness in relation to the 'baseline'. These two phases are best dealt with by integrating research into the project's continuous cycle of planning and acting. The benefits are that the organisation can change, adapt and respond on the basis of informed reflection and that instead of simply measuring impact it continuously thinks about and

produces knowledge about how it conducts its business. In this handbook, therefore, we have avoided terms like 'evaluation' and 'impact assessment', even though these issues are involved in our discussion. Instead, we are concerned with how a project develops a **research culture** through which knowledge and reflection are constantly fed back in ways that help projects develop.

Of course, projects involve and affect many people. We need to understand many viewpoints in order to formulate plans and to track progress. A key feature that distinguishes ethnographic action research is that it involves people in all four stages of planning, doing, observing, and reflecting:



Using participative methods ensures:

- \* The aims, methods and analysis of research arise from, and then feed back into, a rich understanding of the particular place and project being developed. The problems to be addressed, the concepts used, and the social processes to be looked at are all chosen and developed as part of the research process;



- \* Research is focused on how problems and opportunities are defined by people locally and allows research methods and the project itself to be creatively adapted to the local situation; and,
- \* There is never a simple division between 'us' (researchers) and 'them' (research subjects). Rather, research involves many different roles and different kinds of conversations. Hence, you can involve participants both as informants and as fellow researchers. Action research should be a way of listening carefully to what people know from their experience, helping to structure this more clearly, and bringing it into the processes of planning and acting.

## 2.2 Questions to guide Ethnographic Action Research

Underlying the research process outlined here are four key questions that need to be addressed throughout the life of projects. These are questions that ICT projects must ask themselves regularly:

1. What are we trying to do?
2. How are we trying to do it?
3. How well are we doing?
4. How can we do it differently/better?



### ***What are we trying to do?***

The first question is to establish the *purpose* and *goals* of your project.

Every project takes a direction and produces outcomes. Defining the purpose of a project publicly identifies what the project is about. Defining more specific goals of a project helps the project stay on track. These goals can be used to assess whether a project has been successful. In other words, goals describe what should happen as a result of the project.

How are project goals defined? Usually everyone involved or affected by a project – the stakeholders – have a view on what they think the goals of a project should be. Potential stakeholders could include:

- \* Community members
- \* Funding agencies
- \* Government agencies
- \* Community organisations
- \* Private companies

Many projects will have goals defined for them by their funding agency. Whether these goals can be achieved may depend in part on whether other stakeholders agree with these goals. Goals therefore need to be clearly defined and negotiated amongst the different stakeholders. If all of those involved in the project are also involved in discussions around the purpose and goals, and they understand them, they are more likely to work towards achieving them.

### ***How are we trying to do it?***

The second question turns goals into specific plans. How is your project trying to achieve its purpose and goals in its day-to-day operations? It requires an awareness of:

- \* Your own project's activities;
- \* The ways in which you are attempting to achieve your purpose and goals on a day-to-day basis, as an organisation, and in relation to stakeholders, including the communities you seek to serve; and,
- \* An awareness of your project's internal structures and systems, including the ways in which you use the resources of the project.

### ***How well are we doing?***

The third question demands a realistic and researched *evaluation* of how your project is working to achieve its purpose and goals, through reflection and self-awareness, and through researching those whom you seek to have an impact upon.

Your rigorous research will uncover how well you are doing according to local communities, local users, project staff and volunteers, donors and other external agencies.

### ***How can we do it differently/better?***

Informed by your research findings, the fourth question requires a re-evaluation of your purpose and goals, a review of your processes and practices, and an analysis of your effectiveness, achievements and shortfalls. It requires renewed planning and actions that will draw on the research, reflection and evaluation undertaken and improve the overall effectiveness of the project. It will take into account the resources at your disposal and allow you to generate ideas for further developments and funding sources to be implemented in the short, medium and longer term.

This whole process should allow the development and ongoing adjustment of short, medium and long term plans. Aims and objectives of the organisation and its various components (for example, Board of Trustees or Management Committee) can be written along with job descriptions for all staff, paid and volunteer, and financial planning can be managed.

These four questions must be asked periodically. In answering them you will be effectively researching and developing your project. Beyond these general questions there are more specific questions that will need to be asked as the project develops. The processes laid out in this handbook will assist you in asking these key questions and in defining more specific questions appropriate to your project and its purpose.





# Ethnographic Action Research And ICTs

# 3

## Ethnographic Action Research and ICTs

### 3.1 Ethnography

An ethnographic approach to researching projects will produce rich understandings and allow for the more effective use of knowledge and information. Rich research consists of a range of grounded and relevant facts, observations, understandings, perceptions and interpretations.

Ethnography literally means to 'write (or represent) a culture'. Ethnography is traditionally based on long-term engagement in the field of study, or 'field site' (i.e., your project and its community). A key method is participant observation, where the ethnographer participates in the society or culture being studied (i.e. lives amongst those people) yet retains an analytical or observational position so that through reflection and analysis the ethnographer can describe and interpret the subject of the study. An ethnographer looks for patterns, describes local relationships, understandings and meanings. Ethnography takes a 'holistic' approach to the subject of study – that is, the ethnographer looks at the whole social setting and all social relationships. S/he also seeks to contextualise these in wider contexts (e.g., the wider economy, government policies, politics, etc).

For our purposes an ethnographic approach aims to make sense of the complete range of social relationships and processes within which a project is doing its work. They include:



- ★ The immediate circle of workers and active participants – how they are organised, how they carry out their work, how the project fits into their lives;
- ★ Users, their everyday lives and ways of doing things (both in the project, but also in their families, friendships, social networks, jobs and so on);
- ★ The wider social context of the project: (e.g., social divisions within the community, language issues, local economy, social and cultural resources, power and institutions in the community); and,
- ★ Social structures and processes beyond the community (e.g., infrastructure, government policies, economic developments).

Ethnographers try to make sense of each feature of a place and a project in relation to the bigger picture and not in isolation. This is why we as ethnographers would rarely talk about, for example, 'the impact of internet on empowerment' – that is too abstract, and treats 'the internet' as one isolated medium, and 'empowerment' as one isolated indicator. Instead we look at particular uses of internet and particular meanings of empowerment. This also means that we focus more on actual processes – e.g., how does internet fit into the many different ways that people pass along information about health or education (by word of mouth, through health systems, alongside rituals and 'superstitions')?

Through *immersion* in the field (that is, the project and the context in which the project is working), you, as an ethnographic action researcher, will be in a position to animate actions based on sound local knowledge. This requires flexible and responsive use of a wide range of methods. Every experience, conversation and encounter can be treated as 'material' or 'data' alongside more formal research activities such as interviews. You could say that, in ethnography, 'everything is material', and can be noted in your field notes for analysis.



In ethnography, research is not isolated. Each interaction, chat, experience... "everything is material".



Research takes the form of diverse relationships and 'conversations'. Even when it includes apparently impersonal methods like surveys you will treat them as part of an on-going conversation or relationship with a place and with people – for example, one can only devise a good survey with interesting and locally relevant questions if one has a rich understanding of *that* place.

In general, the key to ethnography is that we focus on understanding a specific place, in *detail* and *in its own terms*.

For example, more conventional and more statistical approaches may start from a concept like 'internet access', perhaps to measure something called the 'digital divide'. They usually use a concept like this as an 'indicator': they will apply the term 'internet access' to many different countries in a standard way, usually by collecting statistics on the number of ISP accounts in each country.

However, ethnography will ask, What do people mean by 'internet access' *here*, in *this* place? How do they get access *here*? What do they mean by 'the internet'?

For example:

- \* In Trinidad, some people in squatting settlements have never seen a computer, yet they regularly send emails to relatives in Toronto or London. They give messages to friends who work in offices, who send their emails and bring back the reply in the evening. They will say that they are 'using the internet' (and we would agree), but they would not appear in statistics on 'internet access' following the indicator approach.
- \* When exam results are published, many ICT projects experience a high volume of phone calls or visits from students seeking their results from the internet. They may never use the internet during the rest of the year, but clearly this is an important case of 'internet access'.



ICTs involve new ways of learning: peer-to-peer, shared and group learning

- ★ In some projects, 'using the internet' means that individuals sit on their own doing email or chatting. In others, it means groups of people sitting together helping to find information on the web, translating English, sharing skills and making local indigenous knowledge available to others.

Ethnography fits very well with action research because it is all about understanding how your particular community and your particular project work together.

Ethnography is an *approach* to research. It is not one specific method (like participant observation, or interviews, or surveys). In fact, it is a *multi-method* approach: we use whatever mixture of methods is appropriate to our situation; and we adapt each method to our situation. Moreover, ethnography tries to *integrate* different methods into one holistic study. We do not carry out and analyse a survey, for example, separately from our interviews or in isolation from the diaries or field notes that our volunteers or participants write. We try to look at all this knowledge and experience together and in relation to each other.

For example, if your interviews show that people are very concerned about water scarcity and who controls water, then you can add questions to your survey questionnaire, or spend time hanging out at local wells talking to people, or look through your field notes for your earlier observations about water and water access. By putting all your material together – and developing your methods in relation to each other – you can better understand the whole picture.

### 3.2 Action Research

*Action research* means integrating your research into the development of your project. Through ethnographic action research you are *developing* your project through a rich understanding of your community, your project and the ICTs you are using.

Therefore action research depends on planning your research in relation to the needs of your project. And it requires your project to look at and respond to your research

continuously (not just at the beginning or end of a project period). Another way of putting this: the aim is to build up a **research culture** in your project, in which research and documentation is an integral part of its everyday operation. Everyone contributes to and learns from research; it is discussed at your meetings; staff and volunteers think about research when planning any activities.

Action research means that the research process is tightly connected to the activities of a project in three possible ways:

1. **Active participation:** the people who should benefit from the research participate in defining the aims and direction of the research and in interpreting and drawing conclusions from it.
2. **Action-based methods:** the activities and experiences of participants produce knowledge alongside, or in combination with, more formal methods. Similarly, new projects and activities can be treated as 'experiments', producing new knowledge if they are looked at in structured and reflexive ways.
3. **Generating action:** research is directly aimed at generating things like medium and long-term plans, including business plans; ideas for new initiatives; solving problems; targeting particular kinds of users; finding new resources or partners. Action-generating research can be a combination of general, wide-ranging, background research, and very specific and focused research. Indeed, the approach we develop here argues that such a combination is essential for good planning and development.

Ethnographic action research involves the production of knowledge through rigorous, well-planned, structured and self-aware methods. All participants in a project can contribute to the research, feeding back their thoughts and observations and actively engaging with the research process. People generate enormous amounts of knowledge in the process of doing their work. We generally call this 'experience', or 'instinct'. But if you gather and document

this knowledge and reflect on it, it is also good research data. Being part of the research process, for project participants, may simply involve taking a different attitude to what they already know and sharing this knowledge with others. You can encourage project participants to reflect on what they and their colleagues are learning.



Documentation is crucial to ethnographic action research. Observing everyday activities and experiences of your project, you turn it into research by writing it all down, and analysing it alongside your other data, and perhaps supplementing this with a few other research methods (eg, a few interviews with participants).

For example, an ICT project in Karnataka sets up a new initiative in which they help the local school to make radio programmes in their classes. These will be broadcast later through their cable network. The idea is to link the project to the school curriculum and to help the teachers innovate their teaching methods.



Consistent research stirs up ideas & innovations. E.g. "How could radio work with education systems in your community?"

This is an *action* (and was developed in response to earlier research). It is also an experiment – they want to see what processes are set in motion by this action – What do teachers, pupils and parents do differently when they can use radio? Does it improve teaching and learning?

It will produce very good research if they *document* this project so that they can track it and reflect on it. This documentation will mainly take the form of *field notes*. Every day, they will write down their observations of what participants are doing, of problems and issues, of new ideas which arise, of discussions, of what programmes are produced and how everyone works together. They will also do some interviews with a few teachers, pupils and parents to find out about their experiences and thoughts about this initiative. They might also ask a teacher and some pupils to keep diaries of their involvement in the project.

All of this turns the activity into action research: they can reflect on the project in detail, learn lessons from it and think about how to develop it or replicate it.

### 3.3 Studying 'Communicative ecologies'

Instead of focusing on individual ICTs and their 'impacts', an ethnographic action research approach will look at the whole structure of communication and information in a people's way of life. What kinds of communication and information activities do they carry out (or would like to)? What communications resources are available to them – media content, technologies, and skills? How do they understand the way these resources can be used? Who do they communicate with, and why? Once we have built up this bigger picture it is far easier to understand the impacts and possibilities of a particular medium, and how communications fit into the other things that people are doing.

The concept we use in ethnographic action research is 'communicative ecology'. If you are studying the ecology of a forest or desert, you do not look at one or two animals or plants in isolation. You study how animals, plants, soil, climate and so on are interrelated, and may have impacts on many things simultaneously. The same applies to communications and information: there are many different people, media, activities, and relationships involved.

For example, it makes little sense to separate 'internet' and 'poverty' when both are part of much more complicated ecologies.

There are many ideas we can use to study communicative ecology:

1. **Media mixes or media repertoires:** people do not use or think about media in isolation from each other. They have a mix or repertoire of communications skills and resources. If I am trying to say something to a relative who lives abroad, I might consider sending a letter, passing a message through a friend who is travelling to their area, travelling there myself, sending an email, faxing, phoning from work or from home, etc. Each of these possibilities involves different assessments of factors such as cost, the different meanings and possibilities of these media, and what is appropriate.



It is also crucial to look at *everything* that could count as a medium of communication. That is, not just press, broadcasting or telecom but also roads, buses and trains, visits to neighbours, and public and private places where people meet to communicate.

It is also important to look at how people *combine* different media. We do not use media, including internet, in isolation, but are very skilful in using them together. For example, in order to contact a relative in Dubai, a Sri Lankan villager may talk to a neighbour to ask to use their *phone*; then *travel* to town to send a *fax* to Dubai arranging a time to receive a *phone call* at their neighbour's house.

2. **Social organisation of media:** A teenager using email in a cybercafe is involved in a quite different world from a businessperson using it from the office, perhaps via a secretary. There will be different rules and regulations; the equipment may be set up quite differently; there are different social activities going on; and different levels of resources. In order to make sense of the 'impact' or effects of email you have to research the different ways it is organised in different settings, including your own project.
3. **Social Networks:** It is common in Indian villages for women to say that they mainly communicate with their immediate household, perhaps a few neighbours, and an occasional visit to their parents or siblings. That is, their social networks are often quite restricted: they are connected to, and communicate with, a limited range of people, mainly family members. If they join a self-help group, their social networks often grow to include other women; bank, NGO and local government officials; teachers, health workers and many others. It is important to know who people communicate with, and how. Does a particular medium – like radio or internet – fit into their existing social networks? Does it expand those networks? How can your project connect to its users' social networks?

There are several reasons for studying a communicative ecology rather than media 'impacts' or effects:

- \* We can understand communications as processes that involve a mix of media, organised in specific ways, through which people connect with their social networks. Our ICT project will work better if we can fit the media we are offering into these processes. We can also see which of our services fit best: perhaps CD burning or photocopying is more important than email because they fit better with what people are trying to communicate?
- \* We can understand different communicative ecologies: women and men, and boys and girls, different castes or religions will have different social networks, different access to media, and understand media differently. Their communication patterns and needs may differ. We can work better with each group if we understand the specific aims and problems each faces.
- \* We can study the effectiveness of our project by seeing how these communications processes are changing over time. Rather than simply asking, how many more people are using the internet? we can ask, have women's social networks expanded, and are they passing different kinds of information along these networks? For example, we may ask, Have we reduced the cost or difficulty of contacting relatives abroad? Are young people able to get and share the music and films they want?

In the case of ICTs, where the aim is multi-media capability, focusing on the complete picture (ecology) and on social networks is vital. These are new media that do not yet have a fixed form. We need to, and can, adapt them to local ways of communicating. Moreover, in the case of multimedia, we have to bring together media with different histories and institutions, creatively adapting them to make something new and effective, and - importantly - locally relevant and appropriate.



### 3.4 Broad and targeted research

In order to research the project you are developing and the wider social context in which it is operating you will undertake both broad research and targeted research:

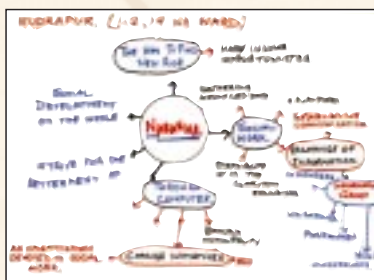
#### **Broad research: Social mapping and contextualising –**

**You use a range of methods to build up a rich understanding of the project and its context, including the communicative ecology. Through this research you build relationships with workers, users and stakeholders; and build up a picture of the main themes and issues that need to be understood.**

**Targeted research – Once you have a clearer map of the social context, and once your project is underway, you – and your project – will need to focus on more specific issues and groups of people.**

#### **Broad research: Social Mapping and Contextualising**

From the start, and throughout the life of a project, you as the researcher will become immersed in the project and the local community, and will map the characteristics, needs and relationships that exist. The aim of this broad and holistic research is to build up the 'bigger picture' of the project and its context, and to ground



Mapping exercises: Graphic depictions of roles and relationships in your research environment help understand your project and its context.

planning and evaluation in the local setting, so that any actions emerging from the research are more likely to be relevant and successful. This is broad based exploratory research, designed to generate an understanding of the location and the social and cultural structures and networks that exist. Throughout the life of your project you will learn more and more about the communicative ecology of the area, and you will see the ways in which your project brings about change.

This type of research can be called 'broad' because you are using it to build up a picture of the project and community,

which you can build upon and update throughout the research process and the life of the project. Your aim is not simply to *measure* things like needs or media use as a basis for measuring the impact of the project through a later survey. Instead, the focus is on *learning* about and *understanding* the community and building connections with it. You will use a range of methods in combination to build up your understandings. For example, the projects within the UNESCO programme are all designed to reduce poverty. However, poverty is not one thing but involves many different social processes and takes different forms in different places. Just as in the case of 'internet access' that was mentioned earlier, we want to know how poverty works and is experienced *in each place*, so that we can also see what social processes and structures are most relevant to reducing poverty and how the ICT projects can be effective in this regard. Measuring poverty, or finding 'indicators', is not enough to understand what poverty means and how it works in a particular place. Ethnography, on the other hand, can say a great deal about how poverty works, how it is understood, how local poverty relates to wider social structures, and how particular social processes might be changed by different flows of information and communication.

Research has shown that in many countries the single most effective way to reduce poverty is to educate young women. This has a dramatic impact on family size, family income, health, equality of resources and opportunities, aspirations, education of the next generation, and so on. That is to say, poverty is being targeted through a wide range of processes, some very direct (e.g., increased income), and some much more indirect.

But young women live in very different conditions in different places. You can use ethnographic action research to learn about the different conditions of women in your community, and in great detail.

- \* What are the restrictions and freedoms in their lives that determine what activities they can participate in, and in particular whether they can access education, and what kind of education?



- \* What do their families and community leaders believe about the value (or danger) of educating young women?
- \* How is this related to their marriage prospects?
- \* What work will be available to them after schooling is finished?

The overall aim of this broad research is to build the 'bigger picture' of the project and its social context. There will be specific outcomes of this stage:

1. **Themes:** A list of the fundamental themes – relationships, problems and opportunities – impacting on the project. In ethnography, we often talk about these as the important 'stories'. For example, your research may show that much of what people tell you keeps coming back to health issues; or that people primarily see the project as a vehicle to get education and jobs.
2. **Connections:** Through the research process itself (talking, meeting, contacting people) and through mapping themes and relationships, this research should result in *building relationships* with people and institutions and in *enlisting participants* in both research and the project.
3. **Develop Project Strategies:** At the social mapping stage, we are concerned with fairly broad research, but it is still crucial for developing your project. Your project may have quite general aims, like 'to empower the poorest members of the community'. Social mapping should relate such an aim to the specific character of *your* community: who are the poorest, and what specific forms does poverty take here? What are their lives like, what are their survival strategies, who do they communicate with, how do they relate to other kinds of people, how are they organised? What makes them poor *here*? What kinds of problems are the poorest concerned with? What kinds of empowerment would make a difference?

By answering these kinds of questions, your project can develop strategies that address your aim of

'empowering the poorest' in terms of a specific understanding of how your community works.

### Example

Budikote is a large village of 750 houses, with many outlying smaller villages. The ICT project, Namma Dhwani, combines cable radio, radio programme making, computers and internet. They are strongly connected to 10 well established women's self-help groups (SHGs), as well as drawing in people from the general population.

They used the following methods to carry out their *social mapping*:

- \* Because the SHGs are so important to their work, and to the community, they studied these groups by doing group exercises, interviews with individual members and taking field notes on their meetings. They also used the same methods on a few SHGs, which were not connected to the ICT project. All these methods looked at issues of poverty (how did people define poverty? Who is poor?); at media use and at the social problems that concerned them.
- \* Many people are not in SHGs. Namma Dhwani therefore organised their mapping into two types: organised poor (SHG members) and non-organised poor. For the latter, they organised group exercises with groups of neighbours, they did household interviews with non-SHG members; and interviewed men (husbands of SHG members, but also men from other families).
- \* They also interviewed community people who had a special knowledge of the area: some teachers, health workers, social workers, religious leaders, the operator of the cable network, Panchayat members.
- \* They made sure that they covered all sectors of the population – eg, Muslim as well as Hindu households, households of different castes and occupations, a selection of outlying



Study your key groups and networks through different methods. E.g. Group exercises with women SHGs



The bigger picture: Address and understand related players in the community. E.g. spouses of SHG women, opinion leaders.

villages as well as Budikote itself. Not only are all these groups important to the project, but the differences between them told them a lot about poverty, media use and how the project might work with different types of people.

- ★ They also conducted a survey of 130 houses in Budikote and a neighbouring village, with a very large questionnaire that asked about family finances, education, media use and much more.
- ★ They kept extensive field notes on the life of the village: public events and dramas; observations of where people met and communicated (eg, wells, tea-shops, street gatherings during power cuts); and everyday use of the ICT centre.
- ★ They also did regular broadcast research: during a radio broadcast they would walk down a few streets to see what programmes each household was watching or listening to, and having a chat with many people along the way about their media use.
- ★ They also mapped Namma Dhwani itself by drawing an organisational chart: how does the organisation work, who does what, how does it involve community members in managing and running the project?



As you can see from this example, there are a variety of objectives for this kind of research; it is quite broad in its scope. It depends on the community that you want to map. In fact, although you want to plan your social mapping, you will also want to keep adapting it in terms of what you are discovering. In this case, they started by focusing on the self-help groups, but then

realized that they were missing other groups of people who might be quite different.

In general, the objectives of social mapping might include (and you may add more specific objectives):

- ★ The gathering of local demographic and statistical information;
- ★ A description of communication and other service infrastructures;



- \* Building an understanding of the local communicative ecology;
- \* Building an understanding of local information and communication needs;
- \* The identification of stakeholders;
- \* The mapping of relationships; and,
- \* A reflective examination of the project and its structures and processes.

### ***Targeted research***

Targeted research can be used to focus on specific issues that have emerged from broad research, on particular groups within your target communities, or on particular aspects of your project's work. That is to say, from your broad research you will have identified some of the main issues and areas of work that are appropriate and/or important to explore for your research and your project development. We therefore need research targeted specifically on these themes or issues.

The central question is: what more do you need to know in order to plan effective interventions in these issues? This stage should also involve consultation in order to get people's agreement about issues and priorities.

Here we establish a clear focus for the research. You might, for example, want to explore why certain groups in your local community do not engage well with your project, or why others do. You might want to explore what these groups aim to get from your project and whether they think they achieve this. Targeted research can be undertaken on a number of different issues throughout your project's life. The same issues may be researched more than once as the project and local involvement with it develops.

In essence, targeted research should have a clear focus – it should aim to answer clear and specific questions such as 'why do young women fail to take advantage of the services we are offering them?' or 'what do the young women who use our project facilities feel about us and what do they gain

from the services we offer?’ In this way you will obtain information that you can then feed back into your project development, improving the appropriateness of your services. It will be useful to use a range of methods to explore the issues and themes you have identified. You may, through other research, have identified some methods that are more useful than others when working with specific groups – perhaps young women prefer to talk in groups rather than individually, or perhaps a combination of group and individual interviews will reveal more (you noticed previously that young women say different things in these different situations). Participant observation should be undertaken and field notes should be kept at all stages of research and project development.

### **Example**

In Budikote, the researcher gradually focused on three major themes. This focus arose from both the social mapping and from the development of the ICT project itself.

1. **Education – how to work with schools**— their mapping showed that parents were very ambitious for their children’s education but very concerned about the low level of educational resources. At the same time Namma Dhwani wanted to work more closely with the schools in order to bring their more informal teaching methods into the curriculum.

As mentioned above, they started a project in which pupils and their teachers would make radio programmes as part of their schoolwork and broadcast them on Namma Dhwani. This ‘experiment’ will need to be carefully researched: the researcher can make extensive field notes about the development of the project; interview teachers, pupils and parents about their experience; study the programmes that are made; observe and document classroom activities – and much more.

2. **Governance and local politics**— social mapping showed that, particularly through the SHGs, people were becoming very articulate about local problems but their relations with political bodies like the Panchayat (local



council) were confused and unsatisfactory. At the same time, one of the primary aims of Namma Dhvani is empowerment: being aware of one's rights and acting on them.

They decided to focus research on local political processes by, for example, studying Panchayat documents (their accounts and information systems); the flow of information between community and Panchayat; what issues were important to people and how they organised themselves to act on them.

3. **Organised versus non-organised poor** – this theme was present from quite early in the social mapping, as the researcher realised they were working more closely with SHG members than anyone else. Aside from needing to know about other kinds of people for the purposes of social mapping, she also became very interested in the differences between organised and non-organised poor people. For example, there were only two Muslim women in all the 35 SHGs in Budikote – Why? And what difference did this make for the other Muslim women? Men saw the benefits of SHGs very clearly but so far had not been able to organise themselves in similar ways. Again, why? And could research help find a way to organise them?

In the case of both Muslim women and village men, targeted research involved in-depth interviews as well as observation to understand their place in the community, how they related to each other and the rest of the village, and to identify the various barriers to organising.



As you can see, targeted research can involve both investigating specific themes and often specific kinds of people (pupils, political processes and actors; men or Muslim women). These focuses are ones that are important for the project's development and for further developing a rich understanding of the project and its local context. To plan targeted research it is necessary to do the following:

- ★ Clarify needs and problems
- ★ Prioritise issues and objectives – e.g., poverty, health, inequality, social conflicts

- \* Identify gaps in your knowledge and produce rich data on targeted themes
- \* Build on relationships with stakeholders and communities
- \* Engage participants

### 3.5 Integrating research culture into your project

Creating a *research culture* within your project may be really useful for you. Ethnographic action research is a way of thinking about the relationship between knowledge and action (rather than simply a specific research method), and it should be part of the culture of a project or organisation. That is to say, people should routinely think about

- \* what they need to know?
- \* what they do know?
- \* what knowledge their activities produce?
- \* how they can go about knowing more?
- \* how they relate their knowledge to planning future activities?



The process is continual and should be built into the operations of your project. It is necessary to plan research, to take account of the resources required and to develop means of documenting, organising and managing research data. Furthermore, as a continual process, when developments in the project are implemented as a result of research, research is required to see how things change as a result.

As a researcher you can also play an important animating role in ensuring active participation in the research process (see next section). The participation of workers, stakeholders and users is important for three reasons:

1. Ensuring that the research really reflects all the issues and aims a project must respond to in order to do its job.

2. Ensuring that all the knowledge-producing potentials of the project are being used; and
3. Ensuring that the project is accountable to its community through open and transparent processes.

**Participation does *not* mean inviting participants only at the beginning, to frame project goals and research aims, which are then handed over to others to carry out.**

**It *does* mean inviting appropriate participation at all stages of research, as an ongoing process or as part of a 'research culture'.**

### **3.6 Role of the local researcher: Social-cultural animator**

In ethnographic action research, we see the researcher's role as more than simply being attached to a project to carry out research. You will undertake a variety of roles that can best be expressed in the title 'social-cultural animator'.

Animation is an appropriate term to use to describe this role. You will help breath life into the projects and the underlying dynamic of the communities in which they are located. You will work with project staff, local people, and groups, so that they participate in the project activities, helping to build enabling environments and relationships, and facilitating understanding of different needs and perspectives. This will allow the projects the best and most appropriate basis for achieving success in their purpose and goals.

You as the researcher and the social-cultural animator, will encourage a concern amongst project workers for the local social and cultural environment. Not only will you encourage project workers themselves to be active in the shaping and evaluation of the projects, you will encourage project workers to engage in interaction with local people and groups, to look to local people and groups as participants, and to include their ways of making sense of the world and themselves in their evaluations of the projects. Animation in this sense suggests viewing project workers, local communities, groups and individuals as active agents.

In this way, the ethnographic action researcher will undertake research by taking part in the day to day activities of the project as a project worker, facilitating various information gathering and sharing opportunities, training people to recognise and make the most of the knowledge they have and apply it, and encouraging project workers and wider communities to participate in and influence the research process and the projects themselves. The researcher will establish a **research culture**.

### 3.7 Research Ethics

Ethnographic action research involves researchers in a wide range of ethical issues. You need to remain very aware of the following issues:



**Explain yourself:** Before doing an interview, group discussion or survey, tell people briefly but clearly why you are doing it, what you are trying to find out and how you will use the material. This is usually impossible in everyday participant observation and even in meetings, but if people ask you about your role, explain it to them. And ask them if they have any questions.

**Respecting confidences:** You need to assure all interviewees that what they say will be kept confidential and non-attributable, if they so desire. You need to honour that assurance by not using people's real names when communicating your material (eg, in published reports); *never* telling interviewees what other people have told you in ways that might identify those people; and by keeping recordings, transcriptions and field notes safely.

**Treating people sensitively:** In your research you may elicit strong emotions and confidences, and form close relationships. These need to be treated sensitively – it is your responsibility to respect the research relationships you develop. In both interviews and observation you need to be careful not to be intrusive or disruptive.

**Exploring sensitive issues:** You will need to be prepared to find ways to explore sensitive issues in your research.

Respecting people's opinions and viewpoints is important in this enterprise, even if you strongly disagree with them. You need to first understand people's perspectives and beliefs about such things before you can consider whether and how your project might challenge them.

***Never put people at risk or endanger their well-being:***

Reporting on what people say and do can have real consequences for them (and for the project) – think carefully about the possible implications for them. No research is more important than people's lives or livelihoods.









# The Research Process

The Research Process

# 4

## The Research Process

In the introduction we **define research** as 'informed reflection', part of the project development cycle of **plan, do, observe, and reflect**. In the last section we described what an ethnographic action research approach consists of. We now need to look in detail at the research process itself and how it works in practice. It is a process that needs to be constantly repeated throughout the life of the project. We can think about this process in the following terms:

**Planning research → Conducting research (collecting and documenting data) → Organising coding and analysing data → Planning and action**

Each strand of your research should follow this process, and you might have more than one research strand happening at any one time. For example as covered in the last section, there are two main types of research that you will undertake as part of ethnographic action research –broad research that helps you to understand the wider context in which your project works, and targeted research that aims at understanding more specific issues or parts of the community. For both types of research activities you must go through the same research process.

### 4.1 Planning research

In any research related activity, there are fundamental questions to address prior to engaging in serious attempts to carry out research. This is especially so for participatory research approaches such as ethnographic action research. Participants will only engage fully with research activities and give them the

amount of time and human resources they require if they understand its purpose and can recognise the benefits.

- \* What is the research for?
- \* What are you trying to uncover through the research?
- \* How will you use the research results?



These questions are fundamental yet often overlooked. It has been remarkable to observe the dedication of researchers who are now trained in ethnographic action research, yet it is always necessary to remind them of the continuing need not only to acknowledge the importance of research but also to question its purpose. Asking these questions about the research provides a healthy environment for research that benefits project development, and ensures that research is properly planned and always relevant. The effectiveness of the research itself has greatly increased as researchers and other project workers have begun to recognise its value to their own project development.

### ***Example of a research plan***

Here is an example of a research plan from the Darjeeling Himalayan Internet Railway project<sup>1</sup>:

#### **AREAS OF RESEARCH**

1. The organisation
  - a. describe
  - b. evaluate (how is it working)
  - c. strengths
  - d. problems

**Methods:** Participant observation (and field notes), interviews.

2. The four ICT Centres
  - a. Take one centre at a time for in-depth research
  - b. BPL (below poverty line) users – their use of centre, what they are getting from this, their profile (everyday lives, poverty)
  - c. Site coordinators (what are they doing, how are they feeling about the centre)

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1. All examples presented in this book are from the project's action researchers and are reproduced as written in their notebooks etc. Language has not been corrected unless considered essential so as not to be misinterpreted.

**Methods:** Participant observation, short questionnaires, in depth interviews with BPL users (25), in depth household interviews with families of users (10).

Take one centre at a time and concentrate on it (spend two days of each week working on this part of research) for three months. Complete this research with two centres from August to the end of February.

3. Poor communities
  - a. Who are they?
  - b. Where are they?
  - c. What is their communicative ecology like? (communications and information resources and networks)
  - d. What is poverty to them?
  - e. Mobilise these communities (be an animator)

**Methods:** Documentation, demographics, statistics (existing data from Govt etc) about 2 small areas – one urban, one rural. Household interviews with 5 households in each area, group interviews, participant observation, possibly a survey (but decide this after some household interviews to see what kinds of data we are getting and what issues need further exploration).

	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
<b>organisation</b>							
<b>centre 1</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
plan			■	■	■	■	■
do research			■	■	■	■	■
analysis/write up	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>centre 2</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
plan	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
do research	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
analysis/write up	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>communities</b>							

#### Other tasks:

- \* Feed into eNRICH [portal] development of content/use
- \* Project Management Team participation (observation and field notes)
- \* Networking and facilitating
- \* Making contacts (beneficial contacts for the project, e.g. with NGOs in local areas).





You will see from this example of a research plan that there are three main strands of research included. They are: research on the organisation and running of the project itself, targeted in-depth research on two centres within the total project; and more broad research on poor communities in the area. Each individual strand of research requires its own planning phase. You can see from the example that the researcher has begun to think about what it is he is trying to uncover through each research strand, and the methods he will employ to get at the information. He has even considered the number of interviews he expects to undertake, and in the methods toolbox section of this handbook you will see one of the in-depth interview schedules he has drawn up and an extract from an interview carried out using that interview schedule. The general plan given above will be adapted and refined as things progress and new understandings are gained.

Good planning is essential both for the research itself and the development of your project. Research schedules or plans should be drawn up because they force you to think about why you are doing research, what information you are seeking, what methods are best suited to each research strand and how you might use the findings. Every research plan will look different, because it is addressing the research needs of particular projects in specific locations.

## **4.2 Collecting and documenting data**

The need for research planning applies to both broad research (social mapping and contextualising) and targeted research (on specific issues or communities). The selection of methods and participants is also a part of the planning stage. You then conduct that research, using and adapting the methods you have chosen as you go about the collection of data.

You will see in the methods toolbox that there are a few key methods that are especially appropriate to ethnographic action research. You may add other methods. As you are collecting data through one method, you may find the need to supplement this through alternative methods – while you must plan in

advance the methods you will use, you can also adapt that plan as the research situation requires. It is never a good idea to use only one method to investigate an issue. **Using more methods will strengthen the validity of your findings.**

You will collect a lot of data. It is highly important to ensure that you document your data thoroughly. You might conduct a fascinating set of in-depth interviews supplemented by participant observations - but this data will be lost and useless if you do not **WRITE IT ALL DOWN**. You will forget most of what you found out or perhaps only remember the bits that interested

you at the time. You will not be able to code and analyse your material properly because it is all in your head. And other people will not be able to read the details of what you have learned (e.g., they will have to take your findings on trust because they cannot see the evidence on which it is based).



Carry a note book : record every observation, thought, action... everyday "Field notes are the backbone of EAR"

**When we talk about documentation at this stage in the research process, we do not mean reports, summaries or things you might write after data analysis. We mean the *raw material* of your research; detailed notes, transcripts or other material.**

Documentation means three things:

1. **Write it all down:** take detailed field notes every day (see description of field notes below), make detailed notes or full transcriptions of all interviews and group discussions, take photographs, keep examples of users' activities (paintings, websites, writings), and so on.
2. **Organise your notes:** whether on computer or paper or both, work out a filing system so that you can find things easily. Make sure you label data with basic information such as date, time, place, who was there and so on and file them systematically.
3. **Read your notes regularly:** ethnographic action research is a continuous process. Your further research



is guided by what you are finding out now. You do not wait until all of your research is completed before thinking about and starting to make sense of it.

Documentation is *fundamental*. It is a researcher's job – not something additional that you might fit in if you have some free time. You will probably need 1-2 hours *every* research day for writing up just your field notes. And it can take up to six hours to transcribe a single hour of tape-recorded interview. But this is part of your job and you should allocate working hours in which to do it, and explain to your co-workers just how important this work is.

As your research develops over weeks and months, this body of notes and research material will become a very precious asset to your project, a detailed history and picture of the project and the community. But only if you document it fully – **write it down**.



Different methods require different approaches both in their collection of data and in their documentation. The methods toolbox below describes a range of different methods. When you read the toolbox, take careful note of the differences between the documentation that results from an in-depth interview, and the documentation that results from participant observation (in the form of field notes).

### 4.3 Organising, coding and analysis of data

Conducting ethnographic action research requires high levels of research rigour – that is to say, you must be highly disciplined and organised both in the way in which you carry out the collection of data (not cutting corners because this approach is so time consuming) and the ways in which you manage it (because the kind of data you are collecting is often documented as long passages of text and finding your way around it will be very time consuming if you have not organised it well). Make sure you label all the data you



Analysis is continual in research. Spread out your material-discuss-analyse for significant themes, issues, ideas-plan ahead

collect with basic information such as date, time, place, who was there and file them systematically. The rich understandings you will develop and feed into your project's development are not simply there waiting for you to discover them, you must follow a strict research regime so that once you have collected data you must then organise it and begin to make sense of it.

### ***Coding and analysis***

Analysis is a continuous part of the research process, not something you leave until the end of research, when all the data is gathered. You start to think about analysis as soon as you have collected some data. In ethnography, we spend some time each day reading and thinking through our material in order to

- ✱ see what interesting and significant issues are emerging,
- ✱ to develop ideas and interpretations that we can pursue through further research,
- ✱ and to explore ideas across *all* the different kinds of material we are gathering.

In this kind of analysis, you are normally looking for common themes, ideas, issues or questions that are emerging across your research methods. This is one reason why documentation is essential: it is impossible to analyse your material properly unless it is on paper or in electronic form.

For example, in one interview you find some discussion about education and learning. This interviewee has been taking computer classes at your centre. Although she enjoys the informal style of teaching at your centre, both she and her parents worry that it is not 'like school', and therefore might not be as worthwhile. Moreover, you do not give out diplomas or certificates like private computer schools, and so her parents question whether they should pay a fee for your classes.

You write the phrase 'formal and informal education' on your interview notes, right next to this part of the interview. This issue seems to be important to the interviewee, and certainly seems an important aspect of your ICT project. We call this process



'coding': you are simply labelling interesting sections of your notes with 'codes'.

Your next step might be to look over your other interview notes and transcripts to find other discussions of 'formal and informal education'. You also look over your field notes, questionnaires and any other material, such as diaries. You also look at the material that your users have produced in your project (e.g. websites, or drawings) and at how they relate to different styles of learning. What do all these things tell you about 'formal and informal education'?



That is to say, you *organise* and *explore* your data in terms of particular codes. This allows you to look at all of your material in terms of significant themes or ideas. This is the main way in which we develop *analyses* in ethnographic action research:

1. **Organise data in terms of codes:** You can go through all your material to find other sections that you have coded for 'formal and informal education'. You can cut and paste all these sections into another document, allowing you to see everything you have collected on this theme (adequately labelled so you can see where it came from), looking at similarities and differences, variations on the theme and so on.
2. **Analysing data:** Write down your thoughts, speculations and ideas about 'formal and informal education': What does your material tell you about different styles of learning, or about the benefits and problems of informal learning at your centre?

Finally, on the basis of your coding and analysis you will think of ways of developing your research and relating your research to your project. For example: You might want to interview some teachers at local schools or private computer schools. You might want to have a group discussion with some users of your centre. Or you might want to add a question about informal education in your feedback form or questionnaire. You might want to discuss this issue with project workers or bring it up at the next staff meeting. Or suggest ways of organizing your training courses so that they address issues that came out of your analysis.



### **Example of coding data**

Electricity failure & problems with net connection. Unable to teach. We got electricity only at 11.30 A.M

Technology  
problems

Mrs.Sxxxx was appointed by Mrs. Satxxxxx to look after the centre. She started her duty at 9 A.M. She asked me to teach computer. She is an illiterate. Will learn literacy through non-formal literacy programme.

Literacy

When she touched the computer the power immediately went off. She felt bad about this. After an hour we got power. I taught her how to open and shut down the computer. I explained to her only once. She that they did it without my help. I congratulated her ability to use the computer.

Technology  
problems  
Learning computing  
Confidence with  
technology

She asked me to teach her Paint. She learned Paint tools and used brush to write. She wrote her youngest daughter's name. Mrs.K asked her, Don't you like your elder daughter? Whenever I am watching you give more importance to your younger daughter. Mrs Sxxxx replied: I love my younger daughter more than my elder daughter. She is very intelligent. Quick in understanding. My elder daughter respects the elders and is very silent. What do we need today? . Intelligent and good speaking. My younger daughter is good in studies. But my elder daughter failed in ninth standard. She failed because of TV. My mother in law scolded me. I stopped watching TV. I am always worrying about her future.

Education  
Children's future  
Value of education

Mrs K listened to her story and said she had more talents but she is not showing them. We should encourage her to bring out her talents. You send her to computer class; I try my best to bring her talents out. Mrs S said, I will be thankful if you do

TV  
Children's future

Education  
Children's future  
Employment  
Poverty  
Value of computer  
centre  
Computer classes

this favour for me. We should sacrifice to bring out our children. I don't get regular work. The only relaxation to me now is visiting the computer centre. She said that she should visit the centre regularly and should admit her daughters in the centre.

### **Students joining for Class.**

Two boys asked for print outs of their mark sheet to attach to an application. We hadn't installed the printer CD. I installed it and made the printouts. They were so happy and thanked us for the timely help. They said our centre was working more quickly than their schools.

Mr.Sxxxxxxx, a line man working in Tamil Nadu Electricity Board, came to ask us to type something. We said that we couldn't type in Tamil because we don't have Tamil fonts in our computer. He became upset and asked us, What are you saying? Everyone says we can do everything with computer. Then we patiently explain to him about the fonts. To fulfil his wishes we wrote his name by Paint in Tamil. He was happy to see his name on the screen.

### **Mrs.Vxxxx shared her happiness**

I moved from Varakkalpattu to Kandarakottai. Mrs.Vxxxx said, We think of a computer in our midst like TV. We had seen our SSLC results through internet in our place. We used the computer to see my nephew's results. He got good marks. We were happy to see the SSLC results in our place. Soon it spread to our village and many students gathered in front of the computer centre to see their results.

Mrs Vxxxx continued, We felt sorry to get money from the failed students. We got error in the Net. I immediately contacted the EID Parry people to rectify the net. They immediately responded to my request. They asked the reg.no. through

Uses of ICTs  
Technology  
problems  
Education

Uses of ICTs  
Technology  
problems  
Language and  
computing  
Confidence with  
computers

TV  
Internet  
Education  
Uses of ICTs  
ICTs &  
communicative  
ecology

Value of computer  
centre  
Technology  
problems

phone. I said to them about the results and we conveyed them their results. It became the great news of our village. I should learn the computer properly otherwise it would be difficult to run the centre. But I lack the cooperation from my group members. They are not helping me. I asked them so many times to learn computer. They never turn-back except two or three. Really madam, I don't know what do with this people?.

ICTs &  
communicative  
ecology  
Technical  
sustainability  
Self-help group  
Social sustainability

We called the members for meeting, only few participated the meeting. I briefed them about the training programme. Many are not willing to come. The reason was that they were illiterate. Only three came forward for training. Then I compelled three illiterate women to touch the computer and showed TANUVAS site. They're happy to see the site.

Self-help group  
Social sustainability  
Literacy  
Confidence with  
computers  
Internet

They went to their home to view the serial.

TV



Read through the example, taken from one day's field notes from a project in Tamil Nadu. We have placed the field notes on the left, and relevant codes on the right so that you can see how coding works. Each code refers to the section of text next to it.

Some things to note about the example:

- \* You can use any number of codes for the same section of text. For example, the paragraph that starts 'Mrs K listened to her story...' has six different codes attached to it. The researcher thinks this section is relevant to several different topics she is exploring. If she is looking through her data in terms of 'education' or 'children's future', etc. she wants this section to be included.



- ★ Some of the codes are basic and descriptive (eg, 'TV' or 'Internet' simply label sections that mention these media so that she can find them in the data). Others are more analytical or conceptual: eg, 'value of education' is a topic that the researcher is trying to explore – what role do people feel that education plays in their lives and in helping their children?
- ★ Codes can label sections of very different lengths, from a word to a paragraph to an entire day's worth of field notes. For example, it would make perfect sense to label this entire field note under one code: 'first experiences of computer', because all the notes are about people's very first responses to the computer.

Coding is not a mechanical or 'scientific' procedure. Coding involves *interpretation* and *exploration* of your material. Different researchers will code the same material quite differently. Moreover, the same researcher will often change their codes over time, as their ideas, and their material, develops. The codes you use will depend on what is important to the people you are studying; what is interesting to you and your project; what you think is going on.

You can and should do your coding all through your research. It is part of the process of analysing your material as you go along, so that you know your material well, develop your ideas and can therefore adjust and refocus your research in response to what you are finding out.

### **Organising and exploring data**

Probably the most important reason for coding is that it is a strategy for looking at all your data in a coherent way. That is to say, you can *organise* your material and *explore* it. In fact, in ethnography it is hard to distinguish between organising and exploring data. You organise the material in terms of the themes that you find in it (coded sections). At the same time, the more you explore the material, the more your codes will change and develop; and you will therefore organise the material somewhat differently.

The basic idea is fairly straightforward. We can take one code and use it to explore all the material, from all different

sources, and to organise that material in terms of this one code or theme.

For example, let's look at the code 'Technology problems'. The researcher did not use this code until recently. She had experienced all kinds of computer and internet problems – breakdowns, software that did not work, users getting frustrated because the computers did not do what they expected. She noted all these down, but only recently started to think about how important they were and now she wants to analyse them in more detail.



She now goes through all her material looking for this code. She might also look again at sections that are not coded for 'Technology problems' but perhaps should be. For example, she finds from her field notes that one day she spent five hours going to a nearby town to deal with a broken UPS – a major hassle, and one that brought the whole centre to a halt.

She looks at *all* her material: some of the sections coded for 'Technology problems' are in her field notes; some in interviews; a lot of her centre's feedback forms include comments about frustrations with the computers, or disappointments; she finds a diary entry in which a user talks about the satisfaction of solving a printer problem without asking the trainer. One of her self-help groups held a group discussion about their experiences so far with the computer. The researcher found the following section of her notes on that discussion coded for 'Technology problems'. A woman had said:

"I am an illiterate. When anybody comes to the centre I watch keenly what they are doing. Once we had a failure in the internet connection. One man from EID Parry came to our centre and corrected the error. Mrs K. asked him about Xerox. I was standing near by her, just watching what they are doing. Another day someone came for a Xerox. Mrs K tried to make the Xerox, but was not able to do it correctly on the other side of the paper. I was able to do it. I didn't know how I got the idea. Everybody was surprised. This incident gave lot of hope to me."

In this case, 'Technology problems' turns up a case in which a non-literate woman is able to take charge of technology and gain much self-confidence from it.





All of this material can be organised through the code 'Technology problems'. This researcher might well choose to organise the material *physically*, by cutting and pasting all these sections into one document – either on the computer, or by photocopying the relevant pages and then collecting them together into a file. Or she might just spread all the material around her and write about them all in her notebook.

Whichever way she does it, the principle is the same: she has explored the material through a particular theme, used it to organise her material, and can then analyse all the material that she has grouped together through this code.

### **Working with codes**

Of course, this researcher is working with a large number of codes, not just one. An important aspect of organising your material is to organise the codes themselves. The simplest thing to do is to make a list of all the codes that you use, and to keep updating this list as your codes develop.

In addition to simply listing the codes, however, you also want to have a clear idea of what they mean and how you are using them. Remember: codes are part of a process of *interpretation* and *exploration* – they are not self-evident labels. Adding definitions of your codes to your coding list is actually a crucial part of your analysis.

Here is a list of some of the codes from our example, with some discussion of what each means and how it is being used:

- \* **Literacy** – Illiterate versus literate users of ICTs (do they have different problems with ICTs, use them in different ways, understand the computer or internet differently?); use of ICTs for literacy training.
- \* **Confidence with technology** – What helps or hinders people in becoming confident with technology? What are the main fears of technology?
- \* **Education** – This is a very broad category and probably needs to be broken down into some sub-categories: at the moment it includes what people feel

about both formal education (the school system) and informal education (any learning process, including the ICT centre); what are their educational ambitions; what value do they place on education (of any sort).

- \* **Children's future** – What are parents' hopes, fears and strategies for their children's future? This is a key theme for the ICT centre, because every mother has said that ICTs are not for her but are crucial for her children. The issue of their 'children's future' seems to shape their whole attitude to the centre and its facilities.



Codes organize & interpret ideas in your data. For example: "Education" reflects attitudes about ICTs and children's future

- \* **Value of education** – This is really a sub-code under 'education'. What do people say about the value of education? What sacrifices will they make for their own or children's education? How does education fit into their aspirations?



Keeping a list of codes – and adding or subtracting codes as you explore your data – can do several helpful things:

1. The list can help organise your coding work – there is always a danger of using too many different labels for the same idea, or using the same label in too many different ways. Having a 'master list' of codes can keep things under control.
2. The list of codes provides a kind of *map* of the ideas that you are exploring in your research and analysis. It helps you get an overview of the important themes and topics in your research, and to see how they are changing as you explore your data.
3. By listing codes and also *defining them*, you can see where there are overlaps, or where several codes are closely related.

In our example, 'education' turns out to be too broad a code, and needs to be broken down into sub-codes. On the other hand, 'children's future' – which looks

like a separate issue – could actually be grouped under education too. Most of the material we find there is about the importance of education for their children's future and all the mothers understand computers as something which will be essential for their children to know about 'in today's world'.

4. You can – and should – look at *relationships between codes*. If you look through the example, you will find the codes 'social sustainability' and 'technical sustainability'. As we saw, the researcher found that 'technology problems' was becoming quite an important code. One reason it grew in importance was because she was very concerned about sustainability. She realised that, in addition to financial sustainability, her project involved problems of participation (social sustainability) and of having the technical skills to actually keep it running day to day (technical sustainability).

All of these issues are interrelated: some technology problems could be dealt with by the members if there was more participation and hence greater skill and experience, but these problems were themselves threatening to make the project unsustainable. At the same time, technology problems were becoming so frustrating that they were threatening the social sustainability of the centre: people were afraid to use the computer because they might be held responsible if it 'broke'; this really reduced their participation.

We can also talk about this as 'modelling': you look at the links between codes to create a model of how they relate to each other.

### **Software solutions**

There are commercial programmes available for qualitative data analysis. The main ones are QSR Nudist and AtlasTi. These programmes allow you to import all of your different kinds of material into a single software environment. You can then apply (or remove) codes across all your data, and use these codes to call up relevant bits of information. This obviously makes it easier to organise your material in terms

of different codes (or sub-codes, groups of codes, etc.) You can also generate lists of your codes at the touch of a button; and you can attach memos to your codes (so you can write definitions and commentaries on your codes as they develop). Finally, you can 'model' your data by organizing your codes into flow charts and diagrams.

This sounds very attractive, and it can work well. However, be careful: it can involve a lot of work. Above all, whether you use software or scissors and paste, the process is still the same: it requires interpretation, analysis and lots of thought. No software can do your coding or analysis automatically.

### ***Developing analysis and further research questions***

In ethnographic action research, much of the work of analysis is done through coding, organising and exploring your data. As you can see from the previous section, the researcher was already doing a lot of analytical thinking by going through her data in detail, and finding out about 'technology problems', and what issues they were related to. As her research develops she will explore many more of her codes in this way, building up an increasingly detailed understanding of her project and community.

In the process she will also generate many more research questions, as well as findings that relate to taking actions and developing strategies within her project. For example, she may well ask a lot more questions about the resources that are available to a rural community for dealing with technology problems, and how to increase these.

As the research process develops, she will also do a lot more thinking and writing which tries to summarise the kinds of material that arises in relation to different codes. The issue that was emerging above – about the relationship between technology problems and broader issues of sustainability – is what we might call a major *theme*. It brings together a wide range of material, grouped under several codes, and allows the researcher to think more generally about the social relationships and issues that are really important for both project and community.

Finding major themes in your research is very closely related to the idea of *targeted research*, discussed earlier. There are themes that emerge from your research and are important for the project in terms of carrying out its core aims. They are usually difficult to specify in advance, but generally emerge quite clearly in the course of research.

## 4.4 Planning and action

### *What next?*

We have all this data, gathered from different methods, we've organised it according to codes and themes, now what do we do with it?

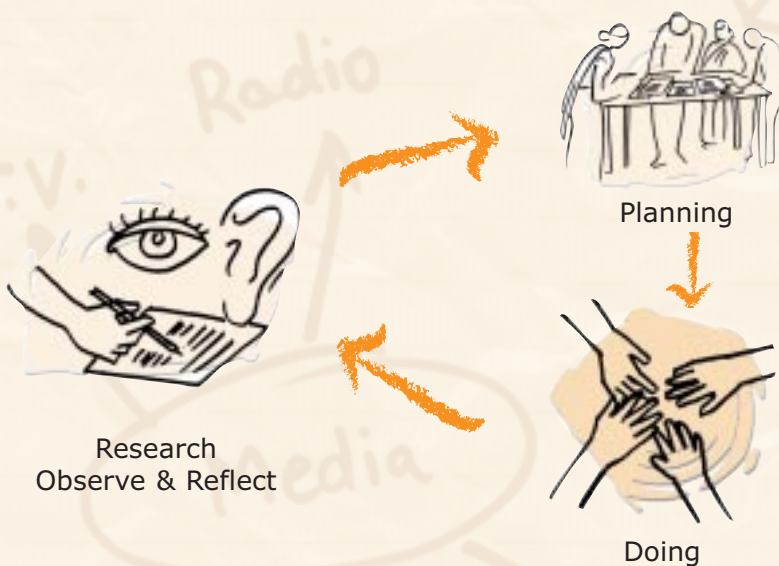
You draw out some pertinent findings and recommendations for your project and you identify areas where you need to do further research. In terms of ethnographic action research and your project development this is part of the continual cycle, so you think about:

- \* What you have found out and how you might apply this to your project's development; and,
- \* How to deepen your understanding about the issues you have explored, and what other issues you need to explore.

You can write reports from your analysis – so that you can disseminate your research findings widely. This is an evaluation of your project's work, what it has achieved, and importantly what are its strengths and weaknesses. Your research approach will allow you to ground this evaluation in the wider social context in which your project is working, and you will be able to describe direct and indirect benefits that your project has delivered in great detail. This is a hugely valuable and rare resource and it places your project in a good position to decide what it needs to do to improve on its performance.

**Armed with your findings, your project can PLAN actions, it can then DO them, and you can OBSERVE and REFLECT (i.e. research) on how they work or do not work. Here we are again, back at the beginning of**





**the project development cycle, only each time you get there you are armed with a better understanding of what is possible and how your project might achieve it.**

You are continually investigating the ongoing impacts of your project, in what ways it is working, in what ways it can be improved, and you are continuously building on the rich understanding you have developed of the project, its context, its possibilities and its potentials. You are always working, as a member of the project team, to make your project better, to ensure its services are both appropriate and relevant.

**Basically, you are always asking those 4 key questions set out in the introduction:**

1. What are we trying to do?
2. How are we trying to do it?
3. How well are we doing?
4. How can we do it differently/better?

In other words, you just keep going, but at each stage you are better informed and you are developing your project from a position of growing strength.





# Methods Toolbox

# 5

## Methods Toolbox

In this section we go through the key tools you will need to carry out ethnographic action research. For ethnographic action research you will need to adapt these tools to your specific project and community, to do what is appropriate and what makes sense in the context of your research plans. You may add tools to this toolbox as appropriate. In many ways your best guide is your own common sense and your own growing knowledge of both project and community. Keep reflecting on what you are learning, and discuss it with those around you: the important questions and methods for answering them will come from that and careful research planning.



We have provided some examples in order to demonstrate some of the different things that people can do with particular methods. They are not necessarily models to be copied; they are some of the experiences of researchers using ethnographic action research for their own project's research and development. The examples will give you an idea of how methods can be used in specific ways and you can think about and adapt them for your own research.

There are also some exercises so you can practice some of these methods.

## 5.1 Key methods

This kind of research is flexible, responsive and diverse - in a word, *creative*. But there is a range of methods - a toolbox - that we can draw on for different purposes, and adapt as necessary. Moreover, by looking into this basic toolbox we can get a sense of the different kinds of knowledge that are likely to be important:

- \* Observation and participant observation
- \* Field notes
- \* In-depth interviews
- \* Group interviews
- \* Diaries and other 'self-documentation'
- \* ICT/Media content analysis
- \* Questionnaire-based sample surveys
- \* Public information and documentary material
- \* Feedback mechanisms



## 5.2 Participant observation

**Participant observation** is the central research method of ethnography. It means engaging with people in as many different situations as possible. This is important because we are looking at what people actually *do* as well as what they *say* they do (as in interviews or documents), and we are looking at what they do and say in the real flow of events.

The basic idea of ethnographic fieldwork is that 'everything is material'. Any conversation or encounter can be a source of insight (it doesn't matter if it did not happen in a formal 'research situation'). Even the most apparently trivial detail can help develop your understanding as you fit it into the evolving picture.

You must try to observe everything and put as much detail as you can in your field notes. For example - you are observing a computer class. Think about: the space itself (layout, colour, lighting), who is sitting with whom, what they are doing, and what they are saying).



Observe and participate:  
This gives new,  
unexpected insights to  
your cultural  
environment.



In ethnography, participant observation will include both formal events (the computer class, meetings, and decision making processes) and informal ones (casual conversations, socialising, and routine work). It can also include both public events (observing a street or neighbourhood, local events) and private spaces (families and households).

The term 'participant observation' indicates that by actively participating in social situations the researcher learns about what is going on and at the same time builds strong and informative relationships with people. Participant observation does not rely on strict objectivity, but accepts that subjective understandings of research situations – when applied with caution – can be extremely valuable. This requires a careful balance. You are both a participant **and** an observer. You are **not** attempting to be a detached and totally objective observer, you are attempting to engage with people in their environment and learn from them.

You are participating in and observing what is happening and what is being said – you are building a research relationship with people. You are part of the situation that you are observing. You need to recognise that you will therefore have some impact upon what is happening. An ethnographer accepts that they are a part of the research situation and attempts to be reflexive and be aware of his/her role in events - using this fact constructively rather than trying to maintain the role of an objective observer.

The difference between a participant observer and a 'normal' participant is simply reflection and awareness. A 'normal' participant will take a lot for granted – this is just how things are done; it's obvious! The participant observer tries to not take anything for granted. You need to keep the attitude of someone entering a new and strange situation who is trying to understand how things work. This is one very important reason for making detailed field notes – as you get more involved in your project, you too will start to take a lot of things for granted, as obvious and not worth mentioning and this must be avoided.

The ultimate objective of ethnography is to participate in and observe social situations to the extent that in time you learn

how that situation works and how people understand what is going on. You are able to understand cultures, social situations, practices and relationships from the perspective of the people you are researching, yet at the same time you are able to maintain enough objectivity to record the details of any situation and use them to inform your research.

This understanding has been called 'thick' or 'rich' description (see Geertz 1975). Geertz gives a simple example: in observing a social interaction, can you tell the difference between a 'blink' and a 'wink'. A blink is simply a physical movement (one eye quickly closing and opening). However, a wink might be a signal from one person to another, indicating complicity between them, a humorous comment on the situation, sharing of secret knowledge, a desire to make contact, a flirtation, and so on. To understand a wink, and to interpret it as the participants do, you need to understand the local culture, the social situation, and the people involved in it.

### 5.3 Field Notes

**Field notes** are the backbone of ethnographic action research. From the very first day of research, you should always carry a notebook in which you take notes while things are happening, or very soon afterwards. You should also get into the habit – from the start – of sitting down each evening with your notebook and writing out your observations more fully (usually a minimum of three or four pages per day), either in your notebook or – preferably – on computer. When we refer to 'field notes' in this handbook, we mean the fully fleshed-out notes that you make at the end of the day.



Write it all down, *everyday*. Don't save notes for weekends-Any time is field notes time.



**Field notes have to be written every day.** They are your most important record of all that you observe, talk about and think about your project and community. Over time, your field notes will build into a rich and invaluable archive of your research.

The aim in writing field notes is to record everything, and in detail. As we said earlier, field notes are not reports or

summaries, or just a selection of interesting things. It is the full *raw material* of your research – write it all down! Otherwise you will forget an enormous amount, or only remember selectively.

1. **Take notes:** Keep your notebook with you all the time. During or after each activity of your day, jot down at least a few notes, key words or phrases, ideas that will jog your memory later. For example, in the morning you were running around the ICT centre helping people at the computers. You probably could not write a lot, but during a break you jot down a list of things you did, some of the problems you dealt with, some interesting things that a user said. Later you went to a meeting where you were able to take quite full notes that you could simply type up later. Finally, late in the afternoon, you had tea with a user and an interesting conversation took place. So as not to break up the flow, you simply jotted down the key topics from time to time, and some of the phrases she used. These notes are often a mess. The important thing is that they help you remember accurately, and that they are legible to you!
2. **Field notes:** In the evening, you develop your notes into full field notes. Field notes should have several elements:
  - \* They should provide a log of the main activities and events of the day – those you observed, and those you participated in. Observing the ICT centre, meetings, conversations, etc.
  - \* They will include details of each activity or event - where you were, who was there, when this happened, what people said, what they did and so on.
  - \* In addition to this kind of description, field notes will also include *interpretations*. What did you think was going on? (you might have several different interpretations, and are not sure which is right – write them all down!) You can include your ideas,

opinions, and speculations. Also, you will probably want to write about your role in the activities.

Full field notes will include everything you could observe. For example, you visit a local internet café, researching communicative ecology in your area. You will probably write:

- \* A physical description: where is the café located (what kind of area, street); how is it arranged (what kind of chairs, computers, equipment; are the monitors private or visible to everyone); the atmosphere or ambience (is it like a café, or run down).
- \* Who was there? What kinds of people, how many? How many staff?
- \* What were they doing? What were they saying?
- \* While at the café you had a few short conversations with some users, and a longer series of chats with the very busy manager, interrupted by crises she had to deal with – make notes on all of these.
- \* You developed the impression that this café was in financial trouble because there is growing competition, and because there wasn't the money for the latest equipment. How did you reach this view?



Note that the field notes include conversations. Interview notes or transcripts are kept separately (see page 71) – you will want to make full, or nearly full records of everything that was said in an interview. However, you will also take notes while doing an interview, and should include these in your field notes for the day. For example, during a household interview, you made notes that will be added to your field notes, including a physical description of the house, some notes on your overall impressions and interpretations of the person and what they said.

One of the biggest problems in writing field notes is to remember to write down the most obvious things, the ones that are taken for granted, or seem too immediate and pressing to be observational material. For example (and this



is very common), your ICT project is going through a major crisis. There has been a big row and the whole community is arguing. You are busy running around dealing with things, and caught up in the emotions. On a normal day you would write down everything, but in this case you don't. It is often difficult to make space for documentation, but this is precisely the time when you need to tell the story of the event carefully, and to tell it through the scenes and conversations that you observed.



**Field notes are 'work in progress'**, they help you to develop ideas and to theorise about the research over time. In practice, field notes can be taken at the time of a research encounter, or written up immediately (or as soon as possible) afterwards. It may not always be appropriate to take out your notebook and write things down – it may stop the flow of the conversation, or it may make people uncomfortable.

Remember that field notes are both a factual account of the encounter and your interpretations. You are not seeking to be totally objective, but need to recognise the difference between factual report and interpretation. To further complicate this, you are of course recording the interpretations of your respondents. You will see from the example below that these types of data are not separated on the page – an experienced ethnographer may not distinguish between them in her notes, but will always recognise the difference in her analysis. In the exercise following the example you will be asked to record field notes and then distinguish between the types of data you have recorded.

When you start making field notes,

- \* Try to be comprehensive – note down as much as possible (who is present, what kind of space, appearances, interactions, etc).
- \* You don't know in advance what is relevant or revealing, important or trivial.
- \* 'Thick description' – can you distinguish between a 'blink' and a 'wink'?
- \* Go back to your notes and review, comment.



## Example of field notes

*Field note from Seelampur project researcher*

**Date 20/5/03**

While returning from Nxxx's home I met Axxx and other girls on my way to Centre. Axxx took me to her home. At Axxx's home met very interesting woman (Mxxx Bxxx). Very talkative, energetic and cheerful. Earlier, she used to teach society children the Quran. During her teaching period she established good relations with many households.



Fieldnotes: invaluable data to perceive and interpret the cultural milieu

Husband being drunkard forced her to take tuition. Claimed to belong to a very good family from parental side. Parents helped husband to start xxx shop. She is blessed with 4 daughters. She had financial problems that compelled her mother to give one of her daughters to other sister. (she narrated the tortures her husband gave her for sending her daughter to her aunt's place). And another daughter was taken away by her mother in law. Only two sons, and two daughters live with her. Son is running father's xxx shop.

For the past 10 years Mxxx Bxxx has run a marriage bureau from home. She has facilitated in fixing over 100 marriages so far in Seelampur as well as outside the area.

Earlier she was not charging anything, thinking it's a social service. Subsequent death of her husband and responsibility of her daughter's marriage forced her to charge. She told me how this work requires most of her time from morning to evening. Charges depend upon the party. A wealthy party pays up to Rs 1000-3000 for getting a match fixed. When asked, she claimed no marriage fixed up by her has broken so far.

She narrated these problems in getting marriages fixed up:

Girls are getting educated. Parents of educated girl expect to marry her daughter to an educated boy. This is difficult because in this area and other parts too, wherever she goes, boys are less educated. Hence rich people offer handsome amount for perfect match for their daughters resulting in increase in dowry

Good proposal for girls come from the boys side at the early age of 16 yrs and up to 22 yrs. Very difficult to fix marriage of girl over 22yrs. Easy to get sixteen yrs old girls marriage fixed.

Like Hindu's weddings, the plague of donation (dowry) has also entered in our society. Apart from giving utensils and clothes, which is essential, open demand of motorcycle, scooter and cash is made. Even if the girl is educated demand is there.

Many good, educated, beautiful girls do not get good match just because parents are not able to fulfil demands asked by other party.

Money plays significant role in marriages.

She told me how Mehhair (amount fixed up by family of the bridegroom to be paid to bride in case of divorce) money has also gone up. (Rs. 50,000 is very common).

She claimed to know many families who have taken a loan for the marriage purposes from other relatives or local lenders. No limitation to spend in marriages. It is increasing. She does not remember any bridegroom denying gifts/donations from bride side.

(When this woman left) Axxx's mother told that she was known to her for the past 15 yrs. And feels that she is exaggerating the number, not more than 30 marriages she could have fixed up. She said that the problem with this woman is she lands up any time anywhere. Nothing can be kept secret. You have to entertain her because annoying her means an invitation to a bad reputation of your family as well as to your unmarried daughter in the society. It might hamper a good marriage proposal to come.

She said Mxxx Bxxx had brought many proposals for Axxx. None of the proposals she brought matched with our Axxx's personality. Some time the family is very orthodox, or the boy is not educated or the demand is too much. Two proposals she brought were good, but the demand was high, which did not suit us. Though politely we declined yet we brought criticism. She said she had given up effort of Axxx's marriage. Allah must have arranged life partner for her somewhere - it's a matter of right time.

I asked Axxx's mother what did she do with Axxx's salary (as Axxx wanted to give party to her brothers and sisters)? She told me she had convinced Axxx she should not waste this money, as they are not rich. She should use this money for getting her dahej (dowry) ready to ease their burden. Hence she purchased a bed cover for embroidery, a wristwatch and a few utensils. She showed me all. She also expressed her desire for her younger daughter to get job. She got very emotional while talking to me. She wants an educated simple boy for Axxx. Axxx's mother wanted Axxx to talk to me regarding her other younger daughter's job. But Axxx felt shy saying.

I had heard dowry is only prevalent in Hindu. But it seems Muslim community is also subject to it. I should include more women in research on the dowry issue. I would like to know how severe it is and what are the issues. Though Axxx's mother and Mxxx Bxxx confirmed the dowry presence.

After returning from the field to the centre I initiated informal discussion focusing on the issue of dowry. I asked if anyone knows any case of dowry in their neighbourhood or in the family or if dowry is just not an issue.

I was surprised to know all of the eleven young girls available there acknowledged the presence of dowry. And they told me that in many of the houses demands were made after marriage and women could not go back to their in laws home just because their parents did not have enough money to fulfil the demands made, thinking that if this time demands are fulfilled how can one ensure that no other demand is made in the future.

Our interviews with women disclose that the most common apprehension of mother has been the number of daughters. It is not only the security/safety of daughter that concerns them, but the amount of effort and money that is involved in getting daughter married. This causes anxieties for mothers resulting bad health. During our field visits and interaction with local doctors we found that on an average there is one TB patient in each household. A large number of women suffering from diabetic, blood pressure etc. 80% women are anaemic. Anxiety is given as the most common reason for women's ill health.



These field notes both describe what happened to the researcher on that day, who she saw and talked to, where, what they said, and it includes her interpretations and feelings about those events – 'I was surprised to know...' You can see that, through the careful keeping of field notes, the researcher is forming ideas about the data she is collecting, she is making links between the things she discovered on this day and findings from interviews with women and with local doctors. She is building an analysis of her data as she writes her field notes and beginning to formulate themes for further research.

We have focused on *writing* field notes, but they can include other forms of recording, such as diagrams or sketches, which might map relationships or physical spaces – you might paste in or collect objects. Field notes should be as comprehensive as possible. Events and things people say in

passing may turn out to be significant, even if they do not appear to be so at the time.

In this way, you will use your field notes to record as much as possible of what you see and hear, and record your own reactions and ideas as they happen. Include comments on your role in the situation you are observing (and how your presence might have affected it) and comments on how you learned about the situation (including mistakes and misunderstandings along the way).

### **Exercise**

Choose a local site – this can be any place where there is some kind of activity happening, perhaps a lobby, street corner, bus stop or tea shop. Observe and take notes for 15 minutes. Think about and take notes on the physical space, interactions, conversations, types of people, sounds and anything else you observe. You can also talk with people and make notes on these conversations (not necessarily at the time of the conversation).

In your notes try to distinguish between description (facts– who, what, when, where) and interpretations (how you make sense of your observations - commentary, questions, ideas, building up themes)

When you get back, add any further thoughts you might have in relation to what you observed. Go through your notes and think about the difference between descriptive and interpretive data.


## **5.4 In-depth interviews**

There are many different kinds of interviews, from casual chats to long and more formal conversations. Some are fairly structured – you have a list of questions that you want to ask everyone you interview. Others are quite unstructured – you might have some topics in mind, but the conversation develops in terms of what the interviewee says and what they want to talk about.

‘In-depth interviews’ are more like the unstructured type but they always have a purpose. Your aim is to get the other person to tell their own story in their own words and in their own way. They will normally last between one and two hours, so that you can really get into some depth. And although you will have topics and questions that you want to

cover, many of your questions will be responses to what the interviewee has actually said rather than standard questions that you ask everyone.

There are several types of in-depth interview that you are likely to do as part of ethnographic action research:

- \* **Household interviews** – literally, interviewing people in their homes, where they are comfortable, and where you can see and talk about their own space. You might be interviewing just one person, or several members of the household. These can be quite intimate and personal, talking about their feelings, their family relationships, their financial situation, aspirations and so on.
- 
- Interviews with different members of a household: an eyeglass to myriads of feelings, opinions and aspirations in just *one* family
- \* **Interviews with 'key informants' or community figures** – for example, you might want to interview teachers, business people, religious figures, health workers, political figures. These are likely to take place in their offices, and will probably be less personal. Your aim is to find out how they understand the community and its problems from their professional perspective and experience.
  - \* **Interviews with staff and users of your ICT centre** – the aim is to find out how they relate to and use the centre, and how it fits into their lives.

Rather than using a questionnaire, in-depth interviews use an *interview schedule*. This is a list of themes or topics that you would like to cover during the course of the interview. Careful planning will enable you to devise a list of specific questions under each topic as a guide (see example below). The aim is to cover all these topics in each interview, but flexibly, adapting both the order of topics and specific questions to the flow of the conversation.

It is best to think about in-depth interviews as fairly deep conversations. Instead of asking standard questions, you are trying to *explore* topics, often in quite indirect ways.



For example, while interviewing a husband and wife, we wanted to explore what poverty meant to them. When we asked about their financial situation, they told a long story about how they borrowed money from family, banks, moneylenders and a self-help group to buy land on which to build a house. They could not sleep for the worry. Over a third of the interview was about this situation, partly because it was the most important thing to them; partly because through this story we learned an enormous amount about how they managed their poverty, how it impacted on family relationships, about their aspirations, and so on. We could never have planned this in advance, but could respond to what they wanted to talk about.

In-depth interviews will focus as much on things like feelings, meanings and understandings as they do on getting hard information. Moreover, interviews do not just focus on media and technology use in isolation: for example, we would not *just* ask about radio listening, but try to find out how radio fits into the respondent's everyday life. This might mean asking quite wide-ranging questions.

For example, in a household interview that seeks information on radio listening we might ask about the respondent's life – family and social relationships, life histories, employment and educational experiences, religion and ethnicity, leisure interests, other technologies that play a role in their lives (both media and non-media) -before asking specific questions about radio listening.



In-depth interviews: know your purpose and explore topics. Listen to their own story, in their own words, in their own way.

In an interview at a business or trade union that seeks information on the relevance of radio locally we might ask about the respondent's position and role in the organisation, their personal career development, other technologies and technological skills involved in their work before asking where radio specifically fits in.

A key skill in this kind of interviewing is to be open and responsive. You need to listen carefully and actively. At every moment, the interview could go in any number of different directions. You need to be alert to the different possibilities and develop an instinct for sensing what is going to bring out the most interesting material.

The kinds of information that the researcher is attempting to uncover through in-depth interviews are:

- \* Understandings
- \* Meanings
- \* Stories and experiences
- \* Feelings
- \* Motivations

### ***Example of an interview schedule***

This interview schedule was developed by the Darjeeling project researcher to guide household interviews. The researcher went through a planning exercise to establish what kinds of information he wanted to get at through these interviews. Below, there are extracts from interview notes of an interview conducted using this schedule. The researcher has developed different interview schedules for different strands of his research. This schedule is designed to get some general information about households, their religion, education, employment, feelings about poverty, communication and media use and whether they have heard about the ICT project. It is important, when designing an interview schedule, to think carefully about ways of getting at information – sometimes direct questioning is not going to uncover the kind of information you are attempting to get at. The point to remember is that you are trying to establish a rapport with the interviewees and as such are engaging in a 'conversation with a purpose' rather than simply asking a list of questions to which you may or may not get adequate responses. All interview schedules followed the same basic design – the schedule lists a number of topics that you want to cover during the interview with a few suggestions for questions designed to elicit relevant information.

The researcher would probably not ask all of the questions below. The aim would be to cover all the main topics – household, education, employment, poverty, communication, and media use. In each interview, the specific questions can be used as prompts: it is important in this kind of interview to respond to what people are saying in terms of the topics that you want to cover. The schedules are used as guides and provided a checklist so that we can ensure that we cover all of the areas we intended to during the interview. As your research progresses you may need to update your schedule in the light of things emerging as important to your project.

## **Sample interview schedule**

### **About you and your household**

- \* Who lives in this house?
- \* What ages are they?
- \* How are you all related?
- \* How long have each of you lived here?
- \* Is it a rented house or own house? How many rooms?
- \* If own, when did you build it?
- \* Did you face any financial problem building a house?
- \* Who owned the land?
- \* If rented, how much do you pay per month? Do you have any problem with the landlord? Where does the land lord live?
- \* Do you have bathroom, toilet? If not, where do you go for toilet and washing?
- \* Where do you cook your food? What do you use? Gas, Kerosene, firewood. Is it easily available?
- \* Do you have any problem with water?
- \* Do you have water connection? If not, how far do you have to go for water?
- \* Electricity- Do you have electric connection?
- \* If not, is it inconvenient without electricity?
- \* What do you use for light?
- \* If electricity is yes, then do have a problem with power failure?
- \* Do you have to pay separate electricity bill? If yes, what is the monthly bill?

### **Religion:**

- \* What is your religion?
- \* Is religion important to your family?
- \* Do you follow your religion? Why?
- \* Do you have time & money for religion?
- \* Is it expensive to follow religion?
- \* How often do you go to temple, monastery or church?
- \* Do you understand your religion?

### **Education:**

- \* Is education important to you & your household members?
- \* If yes/no, why?
- \* What educational level has each of your household members achieved?
- \* Have you ever been to school? If no, why?
- \* Which schools do your children/grand children attend? How much does it cost?
- \* What is your children's ambition after finishing the school?
- \* How likely is that they will achieve this?
- \* Are they still studying? Why could not they continue their studies?
- \* Do they get time to study at home?
- \* Do your children/grandchildren attend any extra tuition, classes? Why do they attend?
- \* How much does this cost? Do you think you can afford?
- \* Do any of your household members use computers? Do you have one; if not where did you use it?
- \* Where did your children first use the computer?
- \* Do you want to learn computers?
- \* Have you ever seen a computer? If yes where?
- \* Did you and your family have ever touched a computer? How do you feel touching a computer?
- \* Is it important to learn or use computer to you and your children?
- \* What do you want to learn in computer?
- \* What do you really mean by computers?

### **Employment:**

- \* What does each household member do? What is the average total income for your household?
- \* Is this adequate?
- \* Why do you think it is not adequate?
- \* Is it difficult to get a job?
- \* What kind of job are you looking for?

- \* Did you apply/try for it?
- \* If yes how many times? What was the reason for being rejected?
- \* If no why?
- \* Overseas Employment?
- \* Govt.job/pvt.job. Which one do you prefer?

### **Poverty**

- \* Are you and your family members poor?
- \* Why do you think you are poor? Were you poor before?
- \* If not, what made you poor?
- \* Define poor in your terms?
- \* Do you come under B.P.L?
- \* How do you feel when people call you "poor"?
- \* Do people take advantage over you, because you are poor?
- \* Do you get support from the govt.?
- \* You don't look poor from what you wear? Why is it so?
- \* You carry yourself very well? Does that mean your priority is to wear good clothes?
- \* How many meals do you take in a day? What do you normally eat?
- \* Do you have a bank account? If yes, how much do you have in a bank?
- \* Do you have any other account apart from bank?
- \* Do you go to hospital when you get sick?
- \* Did you experience this in the past? When?
- \* How difficult is it to buy medicine? How did you support your family?
- \* SECURITY- Are you secured in life?

### **Schedule caste/tribes:**

- \* Do you come under Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe?
- \* Are you proud of being Schedule Caste?
- \* What is the advantage?
- \* Do people see you in a different way?



- \* Are you comfortable with your other caste friend?
- \* Do they come to your house?
- \* Do they eat at your place?
- \* Do they take you at their place?
- \* How do they and their family treat you?
- \* Do they give you what they eat?
- \* Do you get discriminated in the society? Why?

### **About Communication:**

- \* How do you communicate with other relatives and friends living nearby or far away?
- \* If you need to send urgent message to someone how do you do this?
- \* Do you have a telephone? When did you last use it? If no, where do you go to make phone call? How much do you pay?
- \* When did you last travel to (local town)? How? For what reason?
- \* Do you a send / receive letter?
- \* How do you find what is happening locally/nationally/internationally?
- \* Where do you get the information about social events and religions?
- \* How do you get the information about health?

### **Community Organisation:**

- \* Is there a community organisation in your village? What is the name of the organisation?
- \* Are you and your family members part of it?
- \* What is the role of the community organisation?
- \* How important is it to be a part of community organisation?
- \* What do you have to do in order to become a member of the community organisation?

### **About Media Use:**

#### **Newspaper:**

- \* Do you read newspaper? Which ones?
- \* Do you buy them? How much do you pay?

- \* Is it easily available? Do they deliver at house or how far do you have to go to collect the newspaper?
- \* What do you normally read?
- \* Which section do you find more interesting?

### **Radio:**

- \* Do you have a radio? Which station do you listen? How often do you listen?
- \* When and where do you listen?
- \* What type of programmes do you like?

### **Television:**

- \* Do you have a TV? Is it colour or black and white?
- \* Do you have cable connection?
- \* Which channels do you watch?
- \* What is your favourite program/channel? Why?
- \* Where and when do you watch?
- \* How much do you pay for cable network?
- \* How many channels do they broadcast?
- \* Do they have local channel?
- \* How often do they broadcast local channel?
- \* Are you happy with the cable services?

### **Phone/mobile:**

- \* Do you have phone?
- \* Where do you often call and for what purpose?

### **Video CD/Tape Recorder**

- \* Do you have VCD/ Tape Recorder?
- \* What kind of music do you listen?
- \* What kind of movies do you watch? How often do you watch or listen?

### **Internet.**

- \* Do you know what the internet is?
- \* Have you or a household member used it? When & where?
- \* What do you use it for?

- \* What do you think of it? Do you think computer is a useful tool for eradication of poverty?
- \* Do you think internet to be relevant to your daily life?

### *E-mail*

- \* Do you know what email is?
- \* Have you or household member used it? When & Where?
- \* Who do you email? What do you think of email?
- \* Have you or your household members used computers for other things? Eg. Games.

### *Centre*

- \* Have you heard of ICT Centre?
- \* Have you ever been there? How did you come to know about the centre?
- \* What do you think of it?
- \* Did you know they have computers there?
- \* Do you know it is for BPL Families?
- \* Did you know you can use the internet there?



Tape record interviews where possible and transcribe them as soon as you are able. Label all recordings as soon as you have finished with the date and other relevant information (who was interviewed and where). You will collect many recordings and must label each one clearly for ease of access at a later date. Also make a note of the interview and any impressions you had of it when you write up your field notes for that day. It is also sometimes useful to take notes during the interviews. These notes can be useful at the time as you can note down points that you feel it would be useful to expand upon but do not want to stop the flow of conversation at that point. They can also be a useful guide later when you come to transcribe the interview. You can also use these notes later to add observations and thoughts about the relevance of this interview to your overall research in your field notes.

Not all interviews will need to be fully transcribed, which is a very time consuming activity. One hour of interview takes

up to six hours to transcribe. When translation is involved this takes even longer. Full transcriptions are preferable, but it is often more practical to listen to recordings and write up the main points – fully transcribing sections that you feel are particularly relevant or interesting. These verbatim transcriptions of particularly rich sections of the recording are useful as you can then analyse them in more depth. They may also serve to powerfully illustrate your research findings when you write research reports.

It is not always possible to tape record interviews, in which case you must ensure that you or a colleague takes extensive notes. The notes or transcripts from interviews will form a major part of your data and if they are not properly documented this data will be lost.

### ***Example of notes from a household interview***

One of the first household interviews conducted with the interview schedule above was with a household in Kurseong, one of the towns along the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in which an ICT centre is located. Below we reproduce extracts from the notes – the full document is ten pages long, indicating the amount of information you can gain through this method. The extracts are chosen to illustrate how important it is to include some general information at the top of your notes – where and when the interview took place, who was present, a brief description of the location – plus some general information about the situation of the interviewees and some of the insights you might hope to get at through in-depth interviews – in this case an interesting discussion of what poverty means to these interviewees.

### ***Extracts from In-depth Household Interview notes.***

Date: 18th July, Time: 2 PM

Ward X, Kurseong.

Present were Rxxx (49 years old), Mxxx (Daughter-32), Sxxx (sister in law) and Karma (researcher).

Structure of the House: Cement House with tin sheet roof. Rooms were very neat and clean.

**Karma:** Who lives in this house?

**Rxxx:** Three daughters, two nephews and I. My husband passed

away some years back. He was a Blacksmith. One daughter is married in Darjeeling. Mxxx is working in Farbisganj in Bihar as a teacher. She is here because she was not keeping well. She is still not very well. She will probably leave tomorrow.

**Sxxx:** You are lucky that you met her. She is the pillar of the house. She can give you the information in detail. She is the one who is currently running the house.

**Karma:** Thank you for giving your valuable time. I may cross my limit, in that cases please forgive me and let me know.

**Mxxx and Rxxx:** No not all, in fact we are happy that you came to our house to know about us. In the past some people like you have come but they never questioned us in such details.

**K:** What ages are household members?

**R:** Eldest daughter Mxxx (32), Jxxx (24), Mxxx (21) and not sure about the age of two nephews. It's been four years that they have been staying with us. They are my brother's son. They work in a restaurant as waiters.

**K:** How long have each of you lived here?

**R:** It has been about 30 years (not very sure), Mxxx was born when we shifted here.

**K:** Where were you living before this?

**R:** It's 10 minutes walk from here. It falls under the same ward.

**K:** Is it a rented house or own house? How many rooms?

**R:** Own house. 4 rooms and a kitchen. Apart from house we do not have anything. Though we own a house our condition is worse than the one who stays in a rented house. Roof leaks and becomes difficult during monsoon.

**S:** It is actually 3 rooms, the other rooms does not look like a room.

**K:** When did you build the house?

**R:** In 1970. My late husband built it.

**K:** Did you face any financial problem building a house?

**R:** Money was a problem. We had to take a loan from the local community, friends and the relatives. The local communities are very helpful when in need.

**K:** Who owned the land?

**R:** Can't exactly remember but I know that we bought from somebody and if you ask me how much you paid for it. I won't be able to tell you.



**K:** Do you have bathroom, toilet? If not where do you go for toilet and washing?

**M:** No we don't have. For toilet we go in the bank of Jhora (stream). Whenever we have guest we send them to aunt's (Sxxx's) place, lives just above our house.

**S:** There is no privacy in the Jhora but they are helpless and people will be seeing from up.

**R:** I think one day Kurseong cable channel will take a film when we are in Jhora. [smiles]

[... Later in the interview notes: a discussion about poverty...]

**K:** Are you and your family members poor?

**M:** We never consider ourselves to be poor. We are financially weak but we have courage to work hard. It is in the mind of the people how they take it. Today I have to help myself to come out from this problem. I accept challenge and work for it. When I got rejected number of times that was the time I felt I am "Poor".

**R:** I can't deny that I am poor. May be things will change with the support of my children and God.

**K:** Why do you think you are poor?

**R:** I cannot do what I want to. I can fulfil what is necessary and that interest me.

**K:** Can you define poor in your terms?

**M:** Difficult question. How can I answer that? Somebody who cannot save, cannot go to doctor when needed, one who doesn't get an opportunity to face the competition, a family without a male child. When the hard work doesn't pay, feels miserable. This is my personal experience and I have lost confidence. No enough money. Money is important because you are helpless without it.

**K:** Do you come under BPL? [Government classification, 'below poverty line']

**M:** Yes.

**K:** Do you feel bad when people call you poor?

**M:** It hurts.

**R:** I really feel bad and low.

**K:** Do people take advantage over you because you are poor?

**R:** Yes, even the relatives and they make us feel very low – personal experience. When we go to their place, they think we

have come to ask money or some kind of help. They have questions about how we make money. It is really difficult for females to go out and work.

**M:** One has to be true to oneself, if we go according to the society we will not be able to do anything. Poor people are always dominated. We don't have male in our family; people take advantage of that as well.

**K:** Do you get support from the government?

**R:** No.

**M:** If they have to support, I would request them for a job. Once I am employed I will work hard. This will financially make me strong.

**K:** You don't look poor from what you wear. Why is it so? Is wearing a good cloth your priority?

**M:** Everyone tells me the same thing. Is it necessary to prove that I am poor? I like to carry myself well. I work very hard for these basic amenities. Dad and I worked very hard. I use to give tuition.

**R:** Their uncle used to buy clothes for them. Now he is married and hasn't bought them for last 3 years. They buy clothes once a year (dussehra).

**K:** How many meals do you take in a day? What do you normally eat?

**R:** We take three meals a day. We generally eat dal, rice and vegetable. We are pure vegetarian.

**K:** Do you people have Bank account?

**M:** We don't have sufficient money to save in a bank. It becomes very difficult, can't think of saving.

**K:** Do you people go to hospital when you get sick?

**R:** We go to Government Hospital in Kurseong. The hospital provides a free check up and free medicines (if available). When my husband was sick, Dr was very supportive. He provided us with free medicine. We never had to buy medicines.

**M:** Some medicines are very expensive. I am not keeping well and I haven't taken a medicine.

**K:** Do you feel secure in life?

**M:** Our future is very dark. We don't have insurance and savings. When I see future I really get scared. Suppose if anything goes wrong with me, who will take care of Mum and sisters?

**K:** Do you come under schedule caste (SC)? Are you proud of being SC?

**M:** We are SC and we are proud.

**K:** What is the advantage?

**M:** We get lot of support from the Government. I could complete my education because we used to get stipend in the school and college. It wasn't a huge amount but was sufficient to pay my college fees. I could even help my sister buy books with that money. We have relaxation in applying for job [there are SC quotas for Government jobs].

**K:** Do people see you in a different way? Are you comfortable with your other caste friends?

**M:** There is an inequality. People see us in different perspective especially the upper class. We don't get invitation when they have a social gathering. When invited, they refused us to touch their utensils, water etc. We face lot of discrimination. We have faced problems in the past but I have friends in Nepal, they respect me [this even though Nepal is very orthodox, they are very strict regarding this matter].

**K:** Do they come and eat at your place?

**M:** My friends have no problem. They eat and I even go and eat at their place. I am very comfortable with their families as well.

**K:** Do you get discriminated in the society and why?

**M:** Most of us here come from low caste. There has not been development in our area.

*[...the notes continue...]*



You will see that interview notes are descriptive - the researcher is giving an account of what happened, where, and who said what. This is different from field notes, which are very much more about a mix of description and interpretation. In the researcher's field notes for this day he will have written about this interview - that it took place, what he found interesting about it, and how it relates to other data he has collected. Documenting interviews as fully as possible is important and time must be allowed for this to happen.

## Exercise

Draw up an interview schedule that lists a number of themes and under each topic a few questions – but do not expect to stick strictly to the questions, the way they are asked, or the order. You should cover each topic, but again, if the interview takes an interesting turn you should be responsive and open to this as new topics might emerge. Given that we want to understand ICTs in the context of local social and cultural understandings and experiences, a schedule might begin by asking general questions and gradually become more focused on experiences of ICTs. Try your interview schedule out on two or three people. Remember to be responsive, listen carefully and try to conduct the interview in a relaxed way – the in-depth interview aims to gain a depth of information that is most likely to emerge if you gain a rapport with your respondent. In this way you might think about the interview situation as a ‘conversation with a purpose’ rather than a formal question and answer situation.

Think about the kind of information you are getting from the interviews, if you are getting at the type of information you expected and wanted, and adjust your schedule accordingly. What types of information are missing, and what kinds of information is this method good at eliciting? How can you complement this information using different and additional methods such as questionnaires or group interviews?

## 5.5 Group Interviews

Group interviews, sometimes called ‘focus groups’, are simply in-depth interviews with more than one person. The aim is generally similar to individual in-depth interviews – to gain rich and often exploratory material. However, there is also another dimension to consider here:

**group dynamics.** The group develops its own conversation, raising issues and ideas that might not emerge in a discussion with the interviewer alone. Group interviews are less suitable for exploring personal topics and feelings, and some people will not feel able to express certain views in a group, so you need to use the method in conjunction with other methods like participant observation and in depth interviews.



Group interviews: Use materials, topics from everyday life as stimuli. Step back and observe how the group develops them.

The participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approach is based primarily on group methods such as discussion ranking and mapping. This approach can provide rich qualitative data and is particularly useful while doing research with rural and semi-literate populations.

The interviewer's role in a group interview is often described as being a 'facilitator'. You come to a group with a limited number of carefully targeted topics to explore, and with 'stimuli' to get the discussion going (e.g., exercises, visual materials). During the group interview, your role is to stimulate discussion and to guide it. The skill is in keeping the discussion on course but without stifling unexpected and interesting developments. Dealing with a group is both chaotic and creative.

Typical tools for stimulating and focusing a group interview include:

- \* **Asking each discussant:** to comment on each others' comments
- \* **Using materials as catalysts:** e.g. If you are exploring communication needs in the locality, you might bring a selection of photographs of daily life; you might explore understandings of radio by selecting a few clips from programmes; you might bring printouts of websites, or a log of online chat, to explore people's understandings and uses of internet.
- \* **Exercises:** It often helps to structure the discussion through activities. Role playing and simulations are common tools: set up a situation (e.g., you are planning a website, or you are trying to find some kind of information) and ask the participants to act it out. Afterwards, ask them to comment on how the situation developed.
- \* **Wall charts and posters:** A white-board, flip chart or just large pieces of paper tacked to wall are a good tool. One sheet could have the main themes of the discussion clearly laid out for people to refer to throughout. On another sheet, you might want to summarise key points and concepts that have been raised.



As with in-depth interviews it is useful to record group interviews and later to transcribe them. Because there are several participants it is useful to take notes that indicate who is saying what as this may be difficult to discern from the recording later. Where it is not possible to tape record group interviews, it is important to take extensive notes at the time. **Ideally you will have one person facilitating the group interview and another taking notes.**

### *Example of extract from notes from a group interview*

The following extracts are from group interview notes made during a group interview when one of the lead researchers visited the Nabanna project in West Bengal. It was a fairly straightforward group interview in that the project staff raised a topic for discussion and each woman present told us her feelings and experiences. There was some interaction between the women, but it felt rather formal. In this case, the presence of a visitor from overseas may have contributed to this formal feeling. (In her field notes for that day, she documented such observations). The women were all participants in the Nabanna project, and the project workers have been developing a relationship with them over the past 5 or 6 months. This group interview added an additional layer to the growing understanding that the project researcher has been developing about the lives and experiences of these women, and crucially, the ways in which Nabanna fits into these women's lives.

Prior to the group interview the project staff and researcher had conducted a series of similar group interviews with other participants. It was felt that one issue that came up often was that of 'independence' or its lack. We therefore decided to concentrate, for this group interview, on that one topic and explore it in a little more depth.

Meeting with candidates [direct beneficiaries of the Nabanna project] – Taragonia

10.07.03

8 candidates present, 3 Muslim, 5 Hindu plus Kankana [project researcher], Jhumpa [project worker], Jo [research trainer], Niranjana [visiting researcher]

At house of friend of Hxxx (candidate) who arranged for us to meet here because she has no electricity at her house.

[...]

Jhumpa introduced the topic of 'independence'. Do they consider themselves to be independent, if so, how?

**First candidate (Dr of homeopathy):** She said she was not independent and that whatever she wants to do she is stopped from doing it. The diary writing exercise is the only way she can express herself and be in any way independent.

**Second (Uxxx):** She is independent in as far as being able to choose her own subjects (in education) and she's been allowed to continue with her education but since she lives in a patriarchal society she is not independent – for example, her brother can stay out late but she can't. [she is asked why she can't] she can't because society would ostracise her, her father would have to face criticism and it would be difficult for him to get her married.

[Jhumpa asked if she would be able to marry a Muslim if she met someone she wanted to marry]

She doesn't believe in caste but she would be ostracised, as that is the custom in Hindu society, so the fear of that is strong.

**Third (Kxxx):** She feels she is 75% independent and 25% dependent. She takes all the decisions about herself and her daughter, but if she goes somewhere and is late back society can criticise her for no good reason. If she had a close friend who is male and even if her family and husband are fine with that, society would constantly criticise and she fears this would adversely affect her family. So, she has not maintained friendships with male friends for this reason.

**Fourth:** She feels she is totally independent; she takes all decisions in her family. She takes lifts with people en route to ICT Centre and other places, she tells her husband so there are no misunderstandings.

**Fifth:** She thinks she is independent because her parents allow her to attend the ICT centre, and to teach (tuition). Because she earns money herself she also has some financial independence and she contributes to the family finances.

[Question, will this change when she is married?]

She can't choose her husband but she can say, 'not yet'. She trusts her parents; she could refuse someone they choose. She can't tell her parents she wants to meet the man, but she can ask her sister and brother in law and can arrange to meet him through them. [Kankana tells me that relatively this candidate enjoys quite high levels of independence.]

**Sixth (Mxxx):** Before marriage she was quite independent, since marriage she lost all independence. Gradually this has improved, largely due she says to the computer opportunity. She feels it has been a great achievement to persuade her family. She has gained confidence. She aims to change conservatism and fixed norms, she is trying to challenge ideas. She has been stopped at every point by great obstacles that she faces, but she keeps trying.

Earlier she had to answer to and explain everything to her husband and in laws (e.g. if delayed) but not since she started to attend the ICT centre, mix with other women, go out more. She has been telling her husband of the things she has learned, raising his awareness of the world outside. Now the questioning by her family has stopped. She didn't even have a radio before; she was not expected to entertain herself. Now her husband had given her one, and she didn't even ask. [I asked why she thinks her husband did such a thing, is he worried that she may leave him behind as she gains access to new things?] She said he fears she may find a better life and leave him behind, so he's moulding himself to fit her new expectations.

[Three candidates from Arbelia arrive, they had trouble finding the place, there are no addresses as such]

**Seventh:** She is Muslim. In her community everything a girl wants to do is stopped. But her parents have allowed her to study. She is a graduate and has taken Montessori training plus other training. These things she has been allowed to do. So regarding her parents she has always been independent, but society always poses obstacles to her. There is a custom of early marriage, but she hasn't got married yet because she wants to stand on her own feet and wanted to be educated. So her family (beyond her parents) are very annoyed with her. She was the first woman in her neighbourhood to continue with her studies despite hardships. She feels she has been an influence to other girls, and this has been worth it – it is satisfying to her. Now her parents are trying for her marriage, she also wants to get married now. The problem is that she is overqualified for her community – it's hard to find a good match for her.

Third candidate (also Muslim) says this is a common problem in the community and that's the reason parents don't like to educate their daughters beyond class 10.

*[... notes continue...]*



The group discussion was full of interesting insights into the lives of the women present. Following the group interview, we discussed the data that had come out of this method and how 'independence' as an issue would merit further investigation through similar group interviews.

This investigation of 'independence' will also be pursued through other methods such as individual in-depth interviews and informal conversations. It is important to recognise that each method will have its particular strengths and weaknesses. Some women may feel hesitant to speak about some things in a group, alternatively, if a discussion or debate gets going it may provoke some women to talk about things that might otherwise have not been seen by them as relevant. Using a range of methods to investigate an issue like 'independence' is the only way to ensure that you are really getting to understand that issue and its relevance to the people you are working with.

## 5.6 Diaries and 'self-documentation'

You can get very rich material by asking people to document their own lives through diaries, photography projects, sound recording and other media. This is also an excellent way of combining research with project development, by getting people to use



media actively and creatively, and learning many technical and communications skills in the process. It also creates possibilities of active participation by the community in the project. And through allowing for self-expression diary writing may eventually lead to empowerment of individuals.

*Diaries* can take many different forms. They may be simply records of a person's day ('I woke up at 6.00; made breakfast for the family and got the children ready for school...'). They may be more extended discussion of the person's thoughts and feelings, or the writer may choose to write about one important event in each entry. They may also be more like short essays on particular themes. People may write diary entries every day, once a week, or whenever they feel like it.

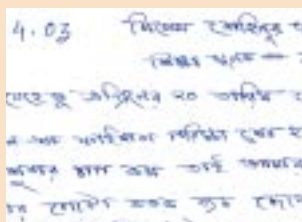
Any of these can be an enormous research resource. Some projects have asked people to keep logs of what they did each day; in others they have set topics for everyone to write about ('What is a woman?', 'What is poverty?'). In other cases, researchers simply hand out notebooks and ask people to write a paragraph a day on whatever they feel like discussing.

*Multi-media* self-documentation, using audiovisual media, is excellent for both individual and group work. It is also obviously a good way to work with non-literate people. For example, ask people to photograph the ICT centre, or their family or street, or take pictures that address a particular issue. They can then write or voice-record a commentary, or simply discuss the images with you. Similarly, they could record sound and assemble it into a short programme.

Diaries, both text based and multi media versions, can also form part of the content of your project. Think about ways in which you can use (with the contributor's permission of course) such content within your project's work. The Nabanna project (see below) produce a print version of a newsletter for the local population, and much of the content is provided by the project participants, whose first experience in content creation was through the diary writing exercise.

### **Example**

The Nabanna project in West Bengal has used the diary method to great effect. They initially asked participating women to keep diaries on any topic that they wished, things that were significant to the women themselves. The amount and richness of the data that they collected astonished them. Below are a few extracts from one of the project's participants.



Diaries are a vast research resource and powerful self-expressions. Explore use of multimedia- photos, audio, etc for self-documentation

### **Candidate from Ward No. 16**

**6th March, Thursday**

Today is Thursday, the 6th of March. In the morning I went outside, brushing my teeth. This is my old habit and I do it everyday since the road is just besides my house. But today while

I was doing my routine job, I heard that a boy in our locality had got married. I was very excited by the news. I love to see new brides. Thus I decided that I must go and see her. But since it was not possible immediately I sat down to study. However my mind was not in my studies, it constantly went back to that new bride, who would now appear any moment. Then finally the news came that the new bride has come. I immediately ran to see her. When I reached there some people had already gathered to see the new bride. But surprisingly the countenance of few present there showed that they were disappointed. The reason I discovered was because the bride's complexion was dark! However, to me she seemed quite pretty and I vehemently disagreed with our neighbours' opinion. I also felt sorry for the girl, since it was not her fault. Neither was it her parents'. It forced me to think that is being dark a curse in the society? If everybody demands fair brides then what will happen to the girls who are not? [...]

### ***8th March, Saturday***

As I returned from college today, I saw a woman standing in our courtyard with her son, who's 6-7 years old. When my mother asked her what she wanted, she said that she and her son had not had food the whole day. They were very hungry and wanted some food. My mother is a very kind lady. She immediately made arrangements in our verandah and gave them a plate of rice. The women had said that they would both manage from one plate. As I was watching them eat, I saw that the woman, after some time, did not allow her son to eat any further. Instead she grabbed away all the food. She even beat the boy for it. I was shocked to see the stark reality of poverty. Hunger can make you so inhuman that you even forget your child! I immediately asked my mother to give them more food and history repeated itself! I felt pathetic. I realised that what we are, is not the real picture of a country. I get to eat so I do not know what is hunger. But there are several thousands who die of hunger everyday. [...]

### ***9th March, Sunday***

[...] When I returned I heard that some people were coming to see my elder sister for her marriage. I was very excited. What will she wear? What will she say? etc. etc. Any ways, my long wait ended at 4 p.m., when they finally arrived. Every thing was carried out as ritual demand. And finally the discussion of dowry began. Though my father was expecting a smaller amount, the would be bridegroom's father demanded 1 lakh rupees. On top of it they also demanded jewellery and stuff. My father was absolutely



dumb-founded. It's unthinkable that even today people ask for dowries. It's like the fathers using their sons as a medium to earn money. It's shameful. How many people can afford this amount? And those who can not, would not they even get married? We need to take up this issue seriously. We must understand that taking dowry and giving dowry is equally condemnable and should be punishable by law.



This example shows the kinds of insights that diaries can provide – and how such data can help you to identify issues worthy of further exploration through other methods. On their own, diaries cannot provide you with data from which you can build project developments. Equally you cannot use them on their own to reach firm research conclusions. That is because they are extremely intimate and subjective. Nevertheless, as part of an ethnographic action research approach that uses this kind of data alongside other types of data, diaries can add a very personal touch to your analysis and findings. They can help you to gain richer understandings of a place and its populations.

## 5.7 ICT and media content analysis

We have tended to emphasise communications processes (eg, social networks and media mixes), but media content is also important, and can be analysed in many different ways. What media content are people watching, using or making?

You might want to make an initial distinction between:

1. Media content that people produce or consume outside the project.
2. Media content that people are producing or consuming in your ICT project: kinds of information, websites, chat, etc.

Of course these are related – e.g., the fact that your users generally want to visit websites with cinema news about films and stars is part of the story of their everyday

passion for films. Nonetheless, you might have different questions about what they do at your centre, with your specific media, and also have different methods for researching this.

### ***Media content outside the project:***

You will know from interviews and observation what kinds of content are important to people: e.g., music (which they listen to on radio, TV, tapes and CDs, at local events, on buses, and so on); films (which they watch together on VCDs they rent for the evening, or on cable TV); posters and handbills (which are all around them on the streets).

Try to get a comprehensive list of all the media they use, and what content is important to them in each. In interviews and chats, *talk* about different content with them: what kind of music or films do they like? People might say in interviews that they mainly watch the news on TV. It is important to probe such statements further – what else do they watch (they may feel embarrassed about admitting to watching soap operas). Talk with them about the news: what kind of news are they interested in and why? Talk about other types of programmes. Once you have developed a rapport with people, they may feel more comfortable telling you that they regularly watch soap operas. **And do remember to write it all down.**



And look at these media yourself! You won't be able to talk with people about soap operas, for example, or understand what people are saying about them and their importance, unless you also watch them. Keep an open mind about all kinds of media. You might not like computer games or romantic novels, but the point is to see what other people see in them. For example, in diaries written by very socially restricted Muslim girls in Delhi, it was obvious that romantic novels and soap operas played a crucial role in exercising their imaginations, experiencing a range of emotions, thinking about issues of freedom and restriction, and so on. What was it about this

romantic media content that allowed it to play such a role in their lives?

Understanding media content will involve a range of methods: talking with people (in interviews and informal conversations), observing people using media (do they dance or sing when listening to music?), and becoming familiar with, and analysing, the content yourself.

### **Media content in the project:**

Develop a comprehensive list of media content available through your project. Do not ignore some content because it is not valued by you or your project. For example, in the case of internet, you should think about *any* kind of information or communication: email, chat, games, websites, paintings and digital photographs, posters and other objects on the walls of your centre, print outs, and so on. Also think about what people do with different content: Is there a difference between the content they consume and the content they produce? For example, for some people music is something they consume only, for others it is something to produce, or – in between – there are those who collect music, actively make selections and then burn them onto CDs.



Collect samples of different content produced & consumed around you. They help you chart your project's course.

Similarly, do people make a strong distinction between what belongs on their own websites as opposed to what they want from websites they surf? How does content 'move' across the different media your project offers, and 'move' out to other media in the community? For example, information found on a website or CD might become part of a radio programme or newsletter, or be communicated by telephone or word of mouth to other people: *track* some media content to see where it goes, and how.

### **What material to collect?**

You should try to collect a sample of each of the different kinds of media content that are produced, and notes or samples of the different kinds that are consumed. This is also an important part of documenting the history and development of your project.

For example, in Chennai, a self-help group started using a computer to do simple drawings, focusing mainly on writing their names on screen and changing the font and colours. A little later, they started making more complicated drawings, incorporated clip art, and assembled them in PowerPoint, rather than Paint. When it was shown that you could have a sequence of drawings in PowerPoint, they got the idea of putting together the drawings done by the all the members, so these could be displayed. But, of course, using the same idea they could use their drawings, in sequence to tell a story: will they? Keeping a record of their content would allow you to research how their engagement with the computer developed over time.

You might want to think about collecting the following content:

**Radio:** Schedules; a selection of programmes that represent the main types; a list of the kinds of music that was played; letters and phone calls from listeners.



**Internet:** Websites made by users; samples of emails sent and received; logs of chat; lists of downloads (music? films? software?). Try to find out what content people have surfed for – you can do this by talking with them, observing them and looking at browser ‘histories’ which list what sites were visited, when and – in some cases – how frequently.

Web printouts, downloads, ‘paintbrush’ samples, etc are not merely content for documentation. Each one tells a story...

**Computer use:** What software did people use (word-processing, games, graphics, sound)? What did they do with each? (get samples)

### **What to look at?**

Analysing media content is a huge area of research, and you can look at many different aspects of any piece of content.

Firstly, you will probably want to look at any piece of content as a *text*. In everyday language, a ‘text’ usually refers to a book or other printed material. However, in media analysis, a text is any media content: a website, a radio programme or a piece of music can all be studied as ‘texts’.

When you are analysing media content as a text, you look at how it is organised or constructed, examining all the different elements that make it up. Look at:

- ✱ Its style (eg, modern, traditional, commercial, serious, etc)
- ✱ Use of words and language (is it in English or local language?, does it assume an educated consumer?, who does it seem to be addressing, and how?)
- ✱ Use of images and sound (including things like typefaces)
- ✱ Graphic devices (eg, how is the website organised? how do you navigate it?)

Secondly, media content is not just a text to be analysed. They are things that actual people make and use. They can have different intentions, understandings, interpretations and uses. Part of understanding media content is looking at how people understand this content: two people might understand or use the same website in quite different ways. You will need to talk with them and observe what they are doing.

Finally, an important set of questions concern the *value* of different media content to people. People will sometimes say that computer games are too frivolous; or that music is important yet dislike FM commercial music; or that the most important kind of content is information rather than communications (like email or chat). What kinds of content do they value and why? What is the basis of these value judgements?

### **Example**

In an ICT project for young Muslim women in Delhi, a girl showed the researcher her sketchbook. Interestingly, the content mixed influences from many different sources: some sketches had the style and content of Disney cartoons, some were from Hindu mythology, some from Muslim history, some looked like advertisements from magazines. A few of the pictures illustrated a story, written with others at school, about a young Kashmiri woman whose lover was killed in the conflict. A group of the girls



got together to draw the whole story and then tell it in a sound file. Later, a technician helped them to make an animated film, combining their images and narration, in Macromedia Flash.

This story says a lot about the range of media influences on girls who seemed to have little contact with life outside their homes, and about their interest in many different cultures. It also showed how they could develop this interest, and their interest in story telling, across several different media forms, from a notebook up to animated film.



ICTs allow for alternative, empowering expressions of creativity

## 5.8 Questionnaire surveys

Surveys have a lot of prestige in older social research traditions because they have a reputation for being more 'scientific'. Moreover, some donors and NGOs insist on them. The idea is that by asking standard questions of a carefully selected sample of people, you will get a more accurate picture of the whole community. If you are only interviewing a few people, how can you be sure that they are representative of the rest of the population?

While this issue is important, ethnographers often feel that surveys sacrifice depth and interest in order to achieve this accuracy. People often interpret the same standard question in quite different ways; or the questions do not relate to the way they think about the issues; or they leave out all the important thoughts and feelings of the people who are surveyed.

However, rather than dismiss surveys, most ethnographers would say that survey research can have a part to play. The most important point though is that surveys should be *part* of the overall research strategy rather than having a particularly privileged place.

Surveys are useful for the following purposes:

1. *Representing* the wider population within which the project is working: eg, What are the different information/communications needs, patterns, resources, skills, etc of people in the different socio-



economic groups? What are they interested in? What problems concern them?

2. *Generalizing* safely from other methods: eg, in-depth interviews are richer and generate more questions and material; however, you can only do a limited number of these. A survey can suggest (though never verify on its own) whether interview findings might be applicable to a large part of the population.
3. *Ensuring* that research includes both users and non-users of the project, or of the media being studied. And that research looks at media that are not included in the project.

It is essential that you think carefully before deciding to do a survey – they involve a lot of time, expense and complication. So you need to be sure that you know why you are doing it, how you will do it and what you hope to achieve. Too many projects carry out surveys without taking note of any of these aspects because they feel they are more ‘scientific’ or because they believe their donors will expect a survey.

We strongly recommend a simple, common-sense approach that integrates surveying into your overall research plan, and would never recommend conducting a survey without first thinking carefully about why you are doing it and what kinds of information you are trying to elicit (remember the importance of research planning).

- ✱ Write up a short questionnaire that includes basic information that you need to know about everyone you are surveying. An example is given below, but be sure to adapt it to your own situation. It is likely to include basic ‘demographics’ (age, sex, employment of all household members); language and religion; household income; some questions about media use; some questions about education and health.
- ✱ It should be short: perhaps 15 minutes to answer all questions.
- ✱ Pilot (try out) the questionnaire with a small number of people to make sure it really is appropriate for getting at the kind of information you are seeking,

and adjust it according to this experience. You will probably want to revise the questionnaire – some important things might be missing; or some questions might not be useful or sensible.

- \* As your interview programme develops, you will probably find that you have more of some kinds of people than others: eg, more women than men, or more of one religion or caste than another, or more town people than villagers. Or you may feel that you have simply talked to too few people and are uncertain whether what they have told you would be more generally true of other people.
- \* Questionnaire surveys are a quicker way than interviews to get information on a larger number of households, but you will not achieve the same kind of depth.
  - a. Work out a strategy for selecting a *sample* (see below)
  - b. 'Administer' the survey on the selected households. You can (and should) retain an element of interviewing if at all possible: leave plenty of space on your questionnaire to record conversations and comments that do not fit into the standardized questions.

If you are unable to do the surveying yourself, and are using volunteers or other researchers to do it, be *very careful* to train them thoroughly, explaining exactly what all the questions mean and how you want them to record answers. It is crucial to go to several households with each of them and do the survey together so that you are absolutely sure they understand the process.

- c. Keep monitoring both the sample and the results to see how they compare with what you learned from other methods.

## **Sampling**

A *census* means administering the same questionnaire to *everyone* in a 'population' (a community, state or nation).

This is normally impossible and unnecessary, except in very small villages.

In a *survey* you aim to select a *sample* from the whole population, a selection of individuals or households that will represent that whole population – ie, that reflects the proportions of men and women, different classes or ethnicities, and so on. Suppose there is a population of 1000 households in your village and 10% of those are Muslim (100 households). If you do a survey of 100 households then 10% of those should be Muslim (10 households).

In classic survey work this is achieved by some kind of random sampling: you have a list of the total population (usually a census, electoral roll or telephone book). You then randomly choose a sample from this population. However, this is often impossible or inappropriate in fieldwork, particularly in rural areas. Firstly, no complete enumeration is available, or you can not go from that to actual people. Secondly, one is often dealing with very small, or very fragmented, populations.

The essential point, again, is to select a sample that represents important aspects of the population: it should reflect such key features as different ages, genders, ethnic groups, and social classes; and it should do so in proportion to their number in the overall population. You can do this in a common-sense way, and do it in relation to what you know from your other ethnographic work:

1. Aim for a sample size of about 100-150: that is the limit for most researchers in projects, and higher sample sizes rarely add a great deal to your knowledge.
2. Think about what you have learned from your other methods about the important social divisions in your community. These are likely to be things like income level, religion or ethnicity, perhaps also caste. You might also need to include a sampling of different occupations (eg, agricultural workers, shopkeepers and government employees).

Location might also be an important factor: e.g., there may be a large town or village surrounded by

several outlying villages, all with different compositions. Or in a town there might be different kinds of populations in different areas.

In fact, quite often the most effective way to select your sample is simply to choose a street or road from each of the different kinds of areas (or town areas plus a couple of outlying villages), and go door to door doing your survey.

3. Get the best estimate you can of the proportions of these social divisions in the total population. These are often quite rough or out of date, but do the best you can: what is the proportion of, e.g., Muslim or Hindu households, of agricultural workers, and so on. As you do your surveying (often, as above, on a location basis) keep monitoring the proportion of these different kinds of households in your sample.

### ***Survey questionnaire design***

An example of questionnaire is included below from the ICT project in Sri Lanka. Remember that you need to carefully plan your survey and the questionnaire and think about what you are trying to find information on. The example questionnaire was developed by the Sri Lankan project to gather general broad information on the population's media, information and communication practices. Pilot the questionnaire thoroughly and train any survey assistants so that they completely understand what is required, and are all carrying out the survey in the same way.

Include 'demographic background' – number, age and gender of people in household, household income and income sources, languages and religion, geographical location, educational levels, literacy. Think carefully about the kinds of information that you want to relate their media-specific answers to. For example, you may want to be able to say something about the media uses of different age groups, different religions, and so on.

The classic, number-oriented survey aims to have completely standardised questions, with answers in a standard yes/no

format, numbers, or points on a standard scale. Data from the survey may be more manageable and useful if at least a large proportion of the questions can be coded. The illustration below does not include codes but these can be added as appropriate to local context. Pre testing is generally useful to fine tune codes. Further, you can also leave space in the questionnaire for more open answers that cannot be categorized so easily.

**Example of a Survey Questionnaire**

**Introduction**

We are conducting a survey for UNESCO. The objective of our survey is to find out how people use media in this area. We want to find out what kind of media you use and what kind of information that the people of this area require.

**General**

- 1. How many people live in this household?
- 2. Details

Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Level of Education

- 3. What is the monthly income of this household, roughly?

4. What religion is observed in this household?
5. What is the main language spoken?
6. Does anyone speak English?
7. What are the other languages spoken?
8. How do the members of this household find out about the following...
  - a. Jobs and work
  - b. Special religious or social events in your community
  - c. Vegetable/rice buying/selling prices
  - d. Market information (for the sale of your products)
  - e. Dealing with health problems
  - f. Information about farming and land
  - g. Information about issues relating to law
  - h. Dealing with public officials
  - i. Government information (EPF/ETF, issuing of Birth/Death Certificates, Housing)
  - j. Daily bus/train schedules
  - k. Government grants/benefits
  - l. Local/national news
  - m. International news (the war in Iraq)
9. Do you have friends, relatives or other people you want to talk to regularly but who live outside the community?
10. How do you usually communicate with them?
11. How would you like to communicate with them?
12. What kind of information do you find most difficult to get?
13. Have any members of your household done the following in the last month/year?



	How many members have done the following in the last		Where?
	month	year	
Sent or received a letter			
Listened to radio			
Watched TV			
Read a news paper			
Made a telephone call			
Read a magazine			
Used the internet			
Read a book			
Used a computer			
Used a mobile phone			
Sent or received an e-mail			
Travelled to Colombo			
Travelled to Bandarawela/Badulla /Moneragala/Mahiyangana			
Looked at a website			

14. Does your household own a

- a. TV
- b. Telephone (Landline, Mobile)
- c. Computer
- d. Internet connection
- e. Radio

15. What is the 'internet'?

16. What might you use internet for if you had access to it?

17. What is e-mail?

18. Do you have any friends, family or neighbours who use e-mail or the internet?

## Radio

19. Do any members of your household listen to UCR?
20. How often?
21. What programmes?
22. Do you know what Knowledge Societies are?
23. Is any one in this household a member of a Knowledge Society?
24. What other radio stations do household members listen to?
25. What do you think radio is most useful for?
26. What is the use of UCR? Why do you think it is called a 'community radio'?
27. What do you most enjoy on radio?
28. Have anyone in this household ever heard 'internet' or 'website' being mentioned in any of the programmes of UCR?
29. What are those programmes? Are they useful/interesting to you?
30. Did anyone tell you that UCR is going to establish IT centres?
31. What would you use these facilities for?

## Analysis

Survey research comes with a vast battery of statistical techniques for analysing the numbers that a survey produces: 1. summary statistics (means, averages, etc) that allow you to summarise all the data in a few numbers; and 2. statistical tests, which allow you to see whether hypotheses are borne out by the data. The latter depend on random sampling, and are on the whole completely invalid if the conditions of randomness have not been met. As indicated above, this is rarely the case in fieldwork. The former are improved by randomness, but – as long as one is clear about the limits and conditions of one's sampling – can still be used validly to summarise what the survey has found. And given that this is just one method you are using among many, you will be in a good position to know how accurate your survey findings are.

In most cases, the bulk of your analysis will be summary figures broken down in terms of social divisions. For example, you might find that 60% of the households in your survey have cable TV, which might be interesting. But you might also find that when you break this figure down, only 20% of those in an ethnic minority have cable, or that the percentage is – contrary to your expectations – roughly equal for both richer and poorer households. That would of course be interesting, and would probably prompt you to do more interviews amongst the ethnic minority, or amongst poorer households, to see what lies behind this result.

## **5.9 Published information and documentary material**

Not all of the research can or need be done by you personally. There is usually a lot of published material, often statistical, and usually from government sources. Some of this will be information about your immediate locality, but much of it will be national or regional (state or district level) information. Both might be useful or essential for understanding either the broader context of your project, or for understanding features of your locality.

You will probably find material on:

**Demographics** - the basic features of the population, like total size, and distribution of ages, occupations, ethnicities, etc. Your source might be a national census, or figures published by local councils or state governments.

**Economic information** – figures on income and expenditures, trade, economic sectors (trade, industry, agriculture and service), government spending and borrowing. Again the figures are likely to come from government sources, usually a statistical office.

**Social indicators and welfare provision** – this is likely to be information on health and education, as well as figures on the provision of transport, electricity, water and so on, provided by those ministries concerned.

The bulk of this information will come from local, state and national government sources – which you can access directly, or through libraries and, increasingly, the internet. However, it is also good to contact relevant NGOs as well as academic information resources (such as university libraries). Internet searches will also generally turn up statistics published by organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, UN, Ministries, non-governmental organisations and others that are often very useful to compare your local situation to other countries and regions.

Finally, not all published information is statistical. It is also important to know about relevant policies and regulatory frameworks. For example, does your country have a national telecommunications or ICT policy? Does your State have one? Who is the minister responsible? And how is the policy implemented? You can often get such policy documents through a relevant ministry or through the national telecom company. Similarly, you could get information on broadcasting and other media policy.

Whatever published information you collect, the important thing is to use it critically and carefully. Although you might have a healthy scepticism about government information, statistics in particular are often terribly persuasive, and too easy to rely on. Always look at how the data was collected, and why. **Do not simply accept, for example, the official definition of poverty – look at how it is defined and how it relates to what you are finding out about poverty.** Similarly, as we described above, statistics on internet access or phone use might not bear much relation to what you have actually been observing. Or a hospital may be said to serve a certain geographical area, but your work shows that many people cannot access services because transportation is problematic, or the cost of the services are too high.

These official statistics can give you a useful reference point and background, but you need to fit them into the bigger picture you are building up, just like any other research method.

## 5.10 Feedback mechanisms

Organisations automatically generate a lot of information about themselves as part of the very process of carrying out their business – for example, they produce financial accounts which give an economic picture of the project, or radio schedules and log-books.

Some of these make good research materials as they stand: to understand your projects you should look at its accounts, annual reports or reports to donors, job descriptions, minutes of meetings, and so on.

Other feedback mechanisms can be introduced or – where they already exist – can be developed into rich research tools. Many of these tools are obvious and are already used by projects; they often only need to be made more systematic, and to be analysed and integrated within the research process. Such feedback mechanisms also make your project more participatory.

For example:

- \* Feed back forms – try to ensure that these are an integral part of a user's visit to the project (eg, by making them part of logging-in to computers, or signing up for classes). Make sure that the questions asked are carefully considered and targeted within the overall research process.
- \* Computer logs and browsing histories - can be rich sources of data that tell you what websites have been visited when and how often.
- \* Log-books – set up simple and non-intrusive ways for project workers to record their main activities, the kinds of people they have dealt with, and so on. Logbooks often list only the most basic information about activities through the day; it takes only a little more information to make it a rich source.
- \* Visitor's books and suggestion boxes - can be available and participants in your project should be encouraged to use them.

These various feedback mechanisms are a normal part of the functioning of organisations. The idea is simply to learn from, and develop, the ways in which your project documents itself.

### ***Example of feedback from project participants***

At the project in Sitakund, Bangladesh, the researcher tried a very open approach. At the start of the project, he simply asked new participants to write a paragraph about their impressions of the centre – whatever they wanted to say. Here are three of the responses:



Explore how existing feedback systems (suggestion forms, log books) can develop into research resources.

#### ***Note 1***

First of all I entered the room where a computer class was going on. Then I took a chair & sat on it. Then listening to these discussions I found it very troublesome. But after listening to the discussion for a few minutes it occurred to my mind that may be I do not understand in the middle of a class but slowly I'll be able to understand everything. I also learned the names of different parts of the computer but I could not remember the names. But my hope is that if I study the learning of the class at home I'll be able to remember everything. But in the class I loved that they let me switch on the computer & switch it off. Okay, I'll learn the name of different parts of the computer later. I must thank Debu da for all these. At the end I liked the computer room very much because there is also an electronic fan in it.

#### ***Note 2***

Coming for the 1st computer lesson I first met Debu bhai. He talked to me very sweetly & told me to take a chair & sit. After sitting I learned the basic idea about computer what it is, what it does, how all these things I learned at the beginning. I liked this idea very much.

Then what appeared to me to be very good is to see the computer to be organised in a very nice way. And the neat & clean room. I think if there is a flower tub beside each computer & it would have been better. And on four walls four big posters, like posters of awareness raising, artistic posters, awareness raising posters to send children to school, child marriage etc. If the room is decorated with these posters it would be very good, I think.

At the end I'll say I liked the first day very much. Although I felt a little nervous at the beginning I felt good later.



### Note 3

#### Likings:

1. Nice, healthy & noise free environment.
2. Higher & qualitative class room.
3. Beautiful, neat, clean & tidy room.
4. Good & qualitative teaching & a very nice & polite teacher.

#### Disliking:

I didn't dislike anything here. But at first I felt a little bit nervous.

#### Feedbacks:

1. If some good sceneries are attached on the walls of the centre.
2. If some steps are taken for the poor & talented boys afterwards.



In this example, a very open-ended approach to feedback seemed appropriate for new and nervous participants. It also signalled to them that this centre was different from what they were used to: less structured and formal. The results were interesting: On the one hand, very specific (and unexpected) suggestions about the centre itself – posters and flowers. On the other hand, some insight into the kinds of people that were coming to the centre and how they responded to it (comments on cleanliness, tidiness, the electric fan and so on make sense in relation to the kinds of houses that the participants live in).

# 6

## Conclusion

Ethnographic action research is designed to provide a flexible and adaptable approach to researching and developing ICT projects. The ethnographic approach will ensure that project development takes place within a broad and embedded understanding of local contexts and needs. The action research component - the cycle of plan, do, observe and reflect - enables rich research data to be fed back into project activities on an ongoing basis. There is no 'right' way of applying ethnographic action research, in the sense that each project and locality will present different opportunities and challenges, and resources will vary. However, where it works particularly well is where projects have seriously attempted to develop a 'research culture', to own and take part in research and to see it as an inclusive, useful and participatory activity.

It is also designed to be a transferable methodology - its use is not limited to projects that use ICT for poverty reduction in South Asia. Further uses, adaptations and applications of ethnographic action research will help to develop it further and build a coherent and useful bank of knowledge about ICTs in a range of settings - as long as the basic principles of ethnography and action research are preserved.

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