



Case Study Module

This module will help project staff in designing and conducting a case study.



Search for
Common Ground



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THIS MODULE INCLUDES:

Contents (Direct links clickable below)	Interactive Pages (i.e. Worksheets) will help you...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ What is it?➤ What is it for?➤ Who should be involved?➤ Advantages & Disadvantages➤ When should it be used?➤ Costs, skills & time required➤ How to use it?➤ Additional Resources	

What is it?

A case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident... It allows the investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events—such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries.”¹ **A case study, in other words, is a story about something unique.**

Tip: Case studies are multi-perspectival analyses. This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them; they give a voice to the voiceless.



Case studies are interested in contextual conditions in which something unique has occurred, often from the perspective(s) of the people who experienced the unique phenomenon. It is primarily a qualitative inquiry, though quantitative methods may be used for data triangulation and verification.

What is it for?

The case study methodology may be used for a variety of purposes: it may provide the baseline measurements of a particular issue or event in a specific context, provide a glimpse into the process of change within an individual or community as part of monitoring efforts, and it can also be a method of project evaluation. *A key attribute of the case study is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what results.*

An **exploratory case study** is aimed at defining the questions and hypotheses of a subsequent study or at determining the feasibility of the desired research. Fieldwork and data collection are frequently undertaken prior to defining the final questions and hypotheses. These studies are often considered a prelude to other social research projects, including case study methodology—hence “exploratory.”

¹ Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Second Edition, Applied Social Research Methods Series Volume 5 (London: Sage Publications, 1994), p. 3.

Example

Conflict assessments conducted prior to launching a new programme or project can be considered exploratory case studies: the aim is to determine the feasibility and/or potential options for an intervention in the context.

A **descriptive case study** presents a complete description of the phenomenon within its context.

An **explanatory case study** presents data bearing cause-effect relationships—explaining how events happened and are connected.

Example

Descriptive and explanatory case studies are the most likely designs for evaluation purposes. Ideally, a case study evaluation design would utilise a combination of both to examine not only the phenomenon (the project and its outputs, outcomes and impacts) in its context, but also, if possible, attribute causation and/or correlation so as to highlight and enhance best practices.

Within the case study approach to evaluation there are at least five different applications. Keep in mind, however, that case study evaluations must conform to Search’s Evaluation Guidelines (see [Evaluation Guidelines](#)).

1. **Explain** the causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies;
2. **Describe** an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred;
3. **Illustrate** certain topics within an evaluation in a descriptive mode;
4. **Explore** those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes;
5. **“Meta-evaluation”**—a study of an evaluation study.²

Who should be involved?

Keep in mind that the following varies by project, context, and personnel:

Project manager, DME Coordinator and staff and relevant **stakeholders** should all agree on the subject to be investigated, the methodology by which data will be acquired, coded and analyzed, conclusions of the report and the report’s distribution strategy.

² Yin, “Case Study Research,” p. 10

The **DME Specialist** in the DC office can be used as a resource or facilitator for the initial discussions and review the case study research plan.

Advantages & Disadvantages

Advantages	Disadvantages
Allows for thorough in-depth analysis.	Focuses on only one causal relationship, leaving out potential others.
May contribute to establishing causal relationships between interventions and their immediate results.	Difficult to generalise to other situations.
Incorporates various research techniques within one focused case study, which strengthens the credibility of results.	Cannot establish with pure certainty pure causality between specific interventions and positive changes on a large scale (impact).
Tends to provide strong evidence to support causal relationships between specific interventions and specific outcomes and/or impacts.	

When should it be used?

Case studies are often used when there is a unique or interesting story to be told. They may also provide context to other data, such as quantitative data, thus offering a more complete picture of what happened and why.

Listed below are some possible utilizations of case study methodology for field staff:

Reporting to Donors, Stakeholders, HQ and the Media

Is there a particularly interesting story or anecdote from project implementation that you

Tip: Case study methodology is particularly useful for:

- “How” and “why” questions
- Discovering important contextual conditions
- When the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear



think other people should know about? Given the frequent emphasis on voices and perspectives, case study methodology can be a good tool for reporting that story, and why it is special and/or unique, including its implications, to wider audiences.

Example: Reporting to Donors, Media and HQ

Is there a particularly moving example of transformation or project success? This might be, for example, an individual who has made tremendous strides towards transforming conflict within their community. You might, then, prepare a set of interview questions for the individual and some of the people s/he interacts with to better understand how and why the individual was able to transform a specific situation.

Deep Monitoring

If you have quantitative data that suggests successes or problem areas in program implementation, and you want to dig underneath this broad, generalized data to look at “how” and “why” change did or did not occur, the use of case study methodology can provide supporting documentation to answer these questions.

Example: Deep Monitoring

While implementing a community empowerment and political participation project in several communities, you notice that one community in particular is not performing on par with the others. Attendance to trainings, workshops and other project activities is low, the participant return rate and knowledge retention is low. A case study of that particular community might help you better understand why the project is not as successful as it could be.

Assessment and Evaluation

Case study methodology employed for assessment allows you to dig deeper into the situation in which you are working, or seek to work, to better understand existing capacities and dynamics.

Example: Assessment

You are preparing a country-wide intervention in a country you have not worked in before. Do communities X and Y, in the eastern region of the country, experience similar conflicts and dynamics as communities A and B, which are in the north? Why or why not? How should the intervention be tailored in order to accommodate these needs and dynamics? What are the key considerations in each of these communities, and how and why do they differ?

Case study methodology employed for evaluation has similar utilizations: why did project implementation exceed expectations in community X in comparison to the other targeted communities? What are the main differences between community X and the other targeted communities that allowed community X to exceed project goals, if any? Was the project implemented differently in community X, and if so how did this affect the outcome in community X?

Costs, skills & time required

Cost

A case study may involve travel to places where the impact of certain interventions can be measured. It also involves the cost of using a computer and printing materials used for conducting interviews, focus groups, and other research methods.

Skills required

The researcher needs familiarity with various qualitative research methods (such as interviews, focus groups, document review, and observations³). The lead researcher should have at least some formal training or experience in such research and data collection methods as interviews, focus groups and observations often require certain levels of skill and experience.

Time required

The time required to conduct a case study varies based on the situations. However, in most cases, conducting a case study will require scheduling various times for interviews, observations, focus groups, etc. A minimum of at least 2-3 days are usually required to gather case study data, and 2-3 days for analysis and report writing.

³ For more information on qualitative data collection methods, see: Dawson R. Hancock and Robert Algozzine, *Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginner Researchers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

How to use it?

This section provides step-by-step directions on conducting a case study:
(Direct links clickable below)

[Step 1: Identify the situation](#)

[Step 2: Design the case study](#)

[Step 3: Conduct the study](#)

[Step 4: Analyse results](#)

[Step 5: Composing the study](#)

Tip: A research design is an action plan for getting from “here” (questions) to “there” (answers).



Step 1: Identify the Situation

To use a case study, a situation needs to be identified in which you have the following elements:

- 1) specific needs or issues of certain individuals or groups
- 2) allocation of several activities (intervention) to address these issues
- 3) change in the need or issue as a result of the intervention (result, outcome or impact)

Step 2: Design the Case Study

There are five components of research design that are particularly important for case studies:

1. the study's questions;
What question do you seek to answer with the case study?
2. its propositions, if any;
Your hypothesis of why something occurred;
3. its unit(s) of analysis;
What is the “case”?
4. the logic linking the data to the proposition;
Linking qualitative and quantitative evidence to your hypothesis
5. the criteria for interpreting the findings;
How will you know if your hypothesis was correct?

But keep in mind, not all of these points will be included in every case study. For example, an exploratory case study, such as in assessment may not have a proposition.

Questions

The topic of investigation should guide your questions. For example, if you are conducting context and conflict assessments, you want to understand the key driving forces, dynamics and root causes of the conflict and the context, as well as their synergies. “Defining the research questions is probably the most important stage in a research study, so patience and sufficient time should be allowed for this task.”⁴

Tip: Explore potential research questions with your fellow researchers. This will help you narrow down your topic, and help ensure the research team is “on the same page.”



Your question should, furthermore, point you towards sources of data. Continuing with the above example of conflict and context assessments, you might decide on a mixed-methods design that collects and analyses qualitative and quantitative data: the prevalence of violence, for example (quantitative) and how people experience that violence (qualitative).

You may consult the DME Specialist in Washington, D.C. to ensure you have properly constructed the questions defining and guiding your research.

Propositions

Each proposition, the question posed by your research, should direct attention to something that will be examined in the scope of the study. For example, if you are conducting an evaluative case study, you might ask: How and why did this project work in this context? These questions not only frame the context of the study, but also point to where to look for relevant evidence, for example in project documents.

No question may be posed however if you are conducting an exploratory case study—but the study should still have some purpose.

Example

You want to use a case study research design in order to investigate *how* a particular war-torn community *decided* to reconcile with the past. The case, then, is the decision making process of that community in deciding to reconcile with the past. You might, therefore, pose the following questions: How did X community *decide to reconcile with the past*? What factors influenced their *decision*? What challenges did they face in their *decision*?

⁴ Yin, “Case Study Research,” p. 7

Units of Analysis

The unit(s) of analysis should define what the “case” is. For example, if you are doing a case study of an ethnic tribe then the unit of analysis is that tribe. The study’s propositions should guide the researcher to relevant sources related to the units of analysis.⁵ Continuing with the above example of a group, if a study is interested in how economic relations have affected relations between Tribe A and Tribe B, then relevant sources to the analysis might include economic data, levels of conflict between the two tribes, perceptions of the “Other,” etc.

It is important to ensure your units of analysis are clearly, and correctly, identified. For example, if your unit of analysis is a small group, the members of that group (unit of analysis) need to be distinguished from those who are not (the context).⁶ Specific time boundaries are also needed to define the beginning and end of the case. Consult a DME specialist in the DC office for further help identifying the most appropriate units of analysis.

Tip: The unit of analysis is related to the initial research questions. If your questions do not lead to the favouring of one unit of analysis over another, your questions are probably too vague or too numerous—and you may have trouble conducting your case study. (Yin 1994 p. 23)



The same study may involve more than one unit of analysis. For example, a case study might be about a country program, but the analysis might include outcomes from individual projects as subunits for analysis.

Single- or Multiple-Case Designs

Each case study should be tailored to investigate the proposed phenomenon of study. Towards this aim, a case study may examine a single case, or multiple cases. Each design, single- or multiple-case, has its applications. Listed below are guidelines to help you decide which research design is **most appropriate** for your proposed study. You may also consult a DME Specialist in the DC office for guidance on your research design.

The single-case design is often used when you want to test, challenge or build on a well-formulated theory. The single-case design can also be employed when you are investigating a unique, extreme or representative phenomenon, an in-depth study of

⁵ Ibid, pp. 21-25.

⁶ Yin, “Case Study Research,” p.24.

which may yield new insights and knowledge. Finally, a single-case design may also be used for revelatory purposes: the phenomenon of study was previously inaccessible to investigation.⁷

This design is likely to be used for reporting to HQ, donors and the media: it investigates a unique or interesting story from project implementation. The single-case design might also be used for a country assessment, such as exploring the possibilities of an intervention. If, however, you are conducting an assessment for a project to be implemented in multiple communities, a multiple-case design may be more appropriate: it allows in-depth investigation and comparison between the targeted communities so that the intervention can be tweaked, if need be, in order to be more effective.

The same study may contain more than a single case study; this is called a **multiple-case design**. For example, a project might be the overall unit of study, with each project site (the locations where the project was implemented) serving as case studies. “The decision to undertake multiple-case studies cannot be taken lightly. Every case should serve a specific purpose within the overall scope of inquiry.” **Each case must be carefully selected so that it either (a) predicts similar results or (b) produces contrasting results but for predictable reasons.** Generally, evidence from multiple-case designs are considered more compelling, thus the study is regarded as more robust. Within the multiple-case study design it is important to develop a rich theoretical framework which states the conditions under which a particular phenomenon is likely to be found as well as the conditions when it is not likely to be found.⁸

Linking Data to Propositions and Interpreting Findings

Unfortunately, these two final components of case study design are the least well developed. There are a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods for analyzing data, and it is important to choose a methodology which best suits your inquiry, as well as your strengths as a researcher. Similarly, there is no precise way to interpret the data: it must be done in a manner which best suits the research inquiry.

Step 3: Conduct the study

To obtain as complete a picture of the participant as possible, case study researchers can employ a variety of approaches and methods. These approaches, methods, and related issues are discussed in depth in this section.

⁷ Yin, “Case Study Research,” pp. 38-41.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 45-46.

Method: Single or Multi-modal?

To obtain as complete a picture of the participant and/or the situation as possible, case study researchers can employ a variety of methods for the collection of data. Some common methods include interviews, protocol analyses, field studies, and participant-observations. Keep in mind that your research question should point towards certain methods over others.

Case studies may employ single or multiple methods of data collection. *Using more than one method strengthens the reliability and validity of the study.* The use of multi-methods is called “triangulation.” The findings from each method can be held up to those of other methods to compare and look for strengths and weaknesses in the data or the data collection process.⁹

Participant Selection

Case studies can use one participant, or a small group of participants (for example, ten people). However, it is important that the participant pool remain relatively small. The participants can represent a diverse cross section of society, but this isn't necessary.

Often, a brief “case history” is done on the participants of the study in order to provide researchers with a clearer understanding of their participants, as well as some insight as to how their own personal histories might affect the outcome of the study. These personal histories can be useful in later stages of the study when data are being analysed and conclusions drawn. Again, this may or may not be necessary in your case study; consult a DME Specialist in the DC Office for further guidance on this issue.

Data Collection

Case studies are likely to be much more convincing and accurate if they are based on several different sources of information.

It is important to note that in case studies, as in any qualitative descriptive research, while researchers begin their studies with one or several questions driving the inquiry (which influence the key factors the researcher will be looking for during data collection), a researcher may find new key factors emerging during data collection. These might be unexpected patterns or issues which become evident only during the course of the research. While these may not directly affect the researcher's guiding

⁹ Colorado State University, “Writing Guide: Case Studies,” Writing@CSU, Colorado State University, accessed 8 November 2010, <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/research/casestudy/index.cfm>.

questions, the new variables may become the basis for new questions asked at the end of the report, thus linking to the possibility of further research.

Step 4: Analyse Results

As the data is collected, researchers strive to make sense of it. Generally, researchers interpret their data in one of two ways: holistically or through coding.

Tip: Tip: Since coding is inherently subjective, more than one coder is usually employed. It is important to establish agreement amongst researchers on the coding system.



Holistic analysis does not attempt to break the evidence into parts, but rather to draw conclusions based on the data as a whole. However, case study researchers commonly interpret their data by **coding**¹⁰, that is, by **systematically searching data to identify and/or categorize specific observable actions or characteristics**. These observable actions then become the key variables in the study. Sharan Merriam¹¹ suggests seven analytic frameworks for the organization and presentation of data:

1. The role of participants
2. The network analysis of formal and informal exchanges among groups
3. Historical
4. Thematical
5. Resources
6. Ritual and Symbolism
7. Critical incidents that challenge or reinforce fundamental beliefs, practices and values

There are two purposes of these frameworks: to look for patterns among the data and to look for patterns that give meaning to the case study.

Data analysis is often an intensive, time consuming process. Riding the global information technology revolution, qualitative and quantitative analyses have become

¹⁰ Coding is not covered in-depth here; for further information on qualitative coding, see: Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, (New York: Sage Publications, 2005); University of Texas at Austin, "Evaluate Programs: Coding qualitative data," Instructional Assessment Resources, University of Texas at Austin, accessed 02 March 2011, <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/assessment/iar/programs/report/focus-QualCode.php>; Dr. Sonja K. Foss and Dr. William Waters, "Coding Qualitative Data," *The All-But-Dissertation Survival Guide*, accessed 02 March 2011, <http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com/News/020603.htm>.

¹¹ Sharan Merriam, *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1988).

easier with the development of computerized analysis tools. A variety of programmes specialising in qualitative analysis are available: [NVIVO](#), [ATLAS.ti](#), [Kwalitan](#), and [MAXQDA 2007](#).¹²

Step 5: Composing the study

In the many forms it can take, “a case study is generically a story; it presents the concrete narrative detail of actual or at least realistic events, it has a plot, exposition, characters, and sometimes even dialogue.”¹³ Generally, good case study reports have the right combination of extensive description and analysis.

The following elements should, in general, be included in the final composition of the case study:

1. The “case”, or the problem
 - a. Identify the case
 - b. Explain why the case is important
 - c. How was the case identified?
2. Steps taken to address the case; for example, the intervention.
3. Results
4. Challenges and how they were met
5. Implications to relevant fields of study
6. Lessons learned from the case study

Authors typically address each step of the research process and attempt to give the reader as much context as possible for the decisions made in the research design and for the conclusions drawn. This contextualization usually includes participants’ backgrounds, the process of data collection, and the meaning and limitations of the coding system employed.

Case studies often include the reactions of participants to the study, or to the researchers’ conclusions. Here researchers may identify significant variables that emerged during the research and suggest studies related to these. Case studies may also often outline the implications of the study’s conclusions for the professional field or context.

¹² Note that many of these programs require purchasing, though some offer free program trials; SFCG does not own any of these programs.

¹³ John Boehrer, “Teaching with Cases: Learning to Question,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, Volume 42, 1990, pp. 41-47.

Additional Resources



The following resources are particularly good for the development of case studies.

Colorado State University, "Writing Guide: Case Studies," Writing@CSU, Colorado State University, accessed 8 November 2010,
<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/research/casestudy/index.cfm>.

Craig Zelizer, "Guide to Conducting and Disseminating Research," Peace and Collaborative Development Network, accessed 8 November 2010,
<http://www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org/profiles/blogs/guide-to-conducting-and->

Dawson R. Hancock and Robert Algozzine, *Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginner Researchers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Second Edition, Applied Social Research Methods Series Volume 5 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 1994).

_____. *Applications of Case Study Research*, Second Edition, Applied Social Research Methods Series Volume 34 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2003).

