4.5 Choosing which methods to use

Herbert and Shepherd (2001) suggest that before embarking on an impact assessment study, the researchers ask themselves the following questions. The questions below can be usefully adapted for any type of poverty-oriented research.

- What are the objectives of the impact assessment? Is it about 'proving' impact or 'improving' the project or service?
- How complex is the project, what type is it (blue print or process), what is already known about it?
- What information is needed?
- When is the information needed?
- How is the information to be used and by whom?
- What level of reliability is required?
- What resources are available (time, money and human)?
- Who is the audience of the impact assessment study?

Quantitative research methods can be used to collect data which can be analysed in numerical form. They pose the questions who, what, when, where, how much, how many, how often? Things are either counted or measured or a set questionnaire is used. Answers can be coded and statistical analysis used to give responses in the form of averages, ratios, ranges etc (Gosling and Edwards, 1995). See Gosling and Edwards for an introduction to using surveys. Qualitative research methods provide greater flexibility and pose questions in a more open-ended manner. This can make analysis and synthesis more difficult.
4.5.1 Strengths and weaknesses of different methods

Different research methods then, have different strengths and weaknesses which need to be taken into account when deciding which methods best suit particular research objectives. Table 3 gives more information.
Table 4: Strengths and weaknesses of key impact methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method Criteria</th>
<th>Surveys</th>
<th>Life History based Qualitative Work</th>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
<th>Case Studies</th>
<th>PLA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coverage (scale of applicability)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative-ness</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of data standardisation, aggregation and synthesis</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to isolate and measure non-intervention causes of change</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to cope with attribution</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to capture qualitative information about poverty reduction</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to capture causal processes of poverty and vulnerability</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to capture diversity of perceptions about poverty</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to elicit views of women, minorities and other disadvantaged groups about poverty</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High - if targeted</td>
<td>Medium?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to capture unexpected negative impacts on ‘the poor’</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to identify and articulate felt needs</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of participation of ‘the poor’ encouraged by the method</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential to contribute to building capacity of stakeholders with respect to poverty analysis</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Go to Methods Toolbox at: [www.chronicpoverty.org/page/toolbox](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/page/toolbox)
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Case Studies</th>
<th>PLA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Probability of enhancing downwards accountability to poor groups and communities</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to capture the multidimensionality of poverty</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to capture poverty impact at different levels- individual, household, community</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resource requirements</td>
<td>Specialist supervision, large numbers of less qualified field workers</td>
<td>High-skilled practitioners who are able to analyse and write up results</td>
<td>Mid-skilled practitioners. Long time commitment. Need good supervision</td>
<td>Mid-skilled practitioners. Need good supervision</td>
<td>High-skilled practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost range</td>
<td>Very High to Medium</td>
<td>High to Medium</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
<td>High to Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timescale</td>
<td>Very High to Medium</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High to Medium</td>
<td>Medium to Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5.2 *When are certain methods appropriate?*²

**Sample Surveys are appropriate when:**

- The intervention affects large numbers
- Accurate estimates of impact are required
- Statistical comparisons must be made between groups over time and/or between locations
- Delivery/implementation mechanisms are operating well, thereby justifying investment in the assessment of impacts
- The target population is heterogeneous and it is difficult to isolate the factors unrelated to the intervention

**Rapid Appraisal and/or PLA are appropriate when:**

- The intervention is promoting participatory principles in (re)-planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation
- An understanding of motivations and perceptions is a priority
- One of the purposes of the study is to assess whether or not felt needs are being addressed by the intervention
- The impact of community-based organisations or other institution building activities are of importance
- There is a need to understand the quality of the data collected through surveys
- There is a need for contextual studies before designing more complex monitoring or impact assessment exercises (e.g. case studies or surveys)

**Participant Observation and/or Case Studies are appropriate when:**

- An understanding of motivations and perceptions is a priority
- Other methods are unlikely to capture the views of women, minorities and other disadvantaged groups
- One of the purposes of the study is to assess whether or not felt needs are being addressed by the intervention

² Source: Herbert and Shepherd (2001)

Go to Methods Toolbox at: www.chronicpoverty.org/page/toolbox
The impact of community-based organisations or other institution building activities are of importance

There is a need to understand the quality of the data collected through surveys or rapid appraisals (e.g. causal processes of poverty)

There is a need for contextual studies before designing more complex monitoring or impact assessment exercises (e.g. before carrying out rapid appraisals or before designing a survey)

**Sample Surveys are usually not appropriate when:**

- An intervention affects a small number of people
- Policymakers are mainly concerned about the outcomes of the intervention e.g. how many people use the health clinic?
- Implementation is recent and untested and it is likely that the way in which the intervention is implemented will have little impact in the present time
- The purpose of the assessment is to study complex activities or processes (e.g. the development and operation of community-based organisations in poor communities)
- The purpose of the assessment is to document easily observable changes in the physical environment or other tangibles
- The purpose of the assessment is to understand whether or not the intervention is meeting the felt needs of the beneficiaries

**Rapid Appraisal and/or PLA are not usually appropriate when:**

- Interventions are relatively un-complex, in which bounded locations are not units of analyses (e.g. health centres serving a wide catchment area)
- Indicators of impact are uncontroversial and negative impacts are unlikely
- Standardised and statistically representative generalisations for large and diverse populations are regarded as the sole priority
- Participation of beneficiaries is not a priority

**Participant Observation and/or Case Studies are usually not appropriate when:**

- The intervention is small and ‘uncomplicated’ providing a specific service or limited intervention which is unlikely to affect community dynamics beyond a few specific effects (e.g. diseases specific health facilities or campaigns)
- Bounded locations are not units of analysis
• Indicators of impact are clear and easily measurable or assessable (by survey or rapid appraisals)
• Indicators of impact are uncontroversial and negative impacts are unlikely
• Information is needed quickly, and standardised, statistical representative generalisations are regarded as the sole priority