



## 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**

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



Method Criteria	Surveys	Life History based Qualitative Work	Participant Observation	Case Studies	PLA
Probability of enhancing downwards accountability to poor groups and communities	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	High
Ability to capture the multidimensionality of poverty	Low	High	High	Medium	Very High
Ability to capture poverty impact at different levels- individual, household, community	Low	High	High	Low	High
Human resource requirements	Specialist supervision, large numbers of less qualified field workers	High-skilled practitioners who are able to analyse and write up results	Mid-skilled practitioners. Long time commitment. Need good supervision	Mid-skilled practitioners. Need good supervision	High-skilled practitioners
Cost range	Very High to Medium	High to Medium	Medium to Low	Medium to Low	High to Medium
Timescale	Very High to Medium	Medium to Low	High	High to Medium	Medium to Low



## 4.5.2 *When are certain methods appropriate?*<sup>2</sup>

### **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

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Herbert and Shepherd (2001)



- 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