# DATA COLLECTION CHALLENGES

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This essay is part of a series of papers commissioned by The Partnering Initiative through its Case Study Project to develop insights into the process of researching/writing partnership case studies as tools for change.

## Managing complexity

Cross-sector partnerships for sustainable development are complex. As a result there are a number of issues the case study researcher / writer needs to consider when trying to write and research a partnership case study. This paper provides some guidelines to practitioners collecting and organising data on these types of case studies. It is divided into two main sections; collecting the data and organising the data. Each of these sections provides an overview of the issue, suggests a procedure to assist in writing the case study on the partnering process and then explores potential challenges to the case study researcher/writer.

It is crucial to consider who the potential audiences for this material are and to keep them in mind when collecting and organising data. Case studies have a more diverse set of possible audiences than most other types of research.[1] At the partnership practitioners Case Study Workshop in February 2005[2] potential audiences of case studies that profile the partnering process were identified, as well as the various objectives for each of these audiences. The guidelines for collecting and organising the data discussed in this paper are focused at practitioners writing case studies that can be used and adapted for many different audiences and objectives.[3] They, and the issues and challenges discussed here, assume that there will be a multiple number of audiences and objectives for this material.

This paper does not aim to provide an in depth analysis of the different methods of data collection available to the case study researcher/writer, but rather to discuss the challenges and provide some guidance on the processes involved. The procedures outlined are not intended to be exhaustive, but to serve as a reference point for practitioners trying to capture the process of cross-sector partnering to help build their professional competencies and skills in this process.

## Data collection

The Bloomsbury English Dictionary defines data as: "information, often in the form of facts or figures obtained from experiments or surveys, used as a basis for making calculations or drawing conclusions". According to Yin data collection for case studies can rely on many sources of evidence.[4] Some of the main methods of data collection for partnership case studies are summarised in the table below.

| Source of Data | Examples in a partnership context |
| --- | --- |
| Contextual Data | Census, Films, Newspapers, Photographs, Policy Documents |
| Secondary Sources | Meeting Minutes, Memorandum of Understanding, Partnering Agreement, Reviews and Web Literature. |
| Primary Sources | Partners, Beneficiaries of the partnership, Partnership Broker, Staff of Partner Organisation |
| Adapted from Tool 5, *The Case Study Toolbook: Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change* | |

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[1] Yin, R (1994), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods,* p129.

[2] The professional practice development workshop: *Partnership case studies: What? How? Why?,* took place in Cambridge in February 2005. The workshop was run by The Partnering Initiative with SEED and Alcan and invited partnership practitioners to share their experience and build their skills on writing case studies.

[3] For an example of key audiences and objectives for partnership case studies see the Fit For Purpose tool in the Case Study Toolbook.

[4] Yin, R (1994), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods,* p78.

## Procedures for collecting the data

The process for collecting data for a case study aimed at profiling the partnering process can be summarised in four steps as outlined in the table below.[5]

| Procedure | Summary |
| --- | --- |
| Conducting a scoping exercise | Usually desk research or literature review of materials in the public domain |
| Defining the purpose of the case study | Clarifying the objective and audiences for the case study in consultation with appropriate people |
| Identifying research methodologies | Planning the data gathering process including the types of information you want to collect and the techniques and sources to collect the data |
| Triangulating the data | Gathering the data from multiples sources  (see six sources outlined above) and verifying this data before publication |

Each of these procedures for collecting the data is explored in more detail below.

**Conduct a general scoping exercise**

The process of data collection begins even before the focus of the case study has been decided, as the case study researcher sets out to identify an appropriate partnership/project to profile. This first stage of data collection is usually desk research or a literature review of the materials available in the public domain, mainly secondary data. Following on from this a potential partnership for the case study should be identified. Even with support from the partners there can be a number of issues that influence the choice of the case study to profile, such as the region where the project is located; the particular issue it is set up to address or there may be some internal politics that suggest one project is more suitable than another. The case study researcher/writer needs to be aware of such issues and take them into consideration when choosing the project to profile.

After a project has been identified it is necessary to secure buy-in, both institutional and individual, from the parties concerned. In any partnership, individuals representing partner organisations may have divergent views on whether or not they want to be involved in a case study. It is important for a case study researcher / writer to clarify the level of willingness within the partnership for the case study work and, where possible, build genuine engagement prior to starting the case study process. This may mean arranging a number of one to-one meetings or other forms of contact and involve much listening and explanation prior to finalising the process design and starting the data collection work. Such preliminary work may add considerably to the time and costs involved. [6]

Once agreement has been achieved it is up to the case study researcher/writer to try and understand the context of the partnership, as this is likely to affect their research. An understanding of a partnership's historical, political, socio-economic and cultural environment is very important to the researcher. For a partnership to be understood by those external to it, it needs to be contextualised. The researcher can use a number of sources to understand a partnerships context including data such as newspapers and policy documents. Secondary

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[5] The process for data collection profiled here has been adapted from materials generated at the workshop *Partnership Case Studies: What? How? Why?* (February 2005).

[6] For more information on building agreement see page 26, *The Case Study Toolbook: Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change*, (2005)

sources such as partnering agreements, reviews and web literature and primary data sources such as partners, stakeholders and policy makers.

The case study researcher/writer should use their time before the site visit to collect data that will help identify the stage of partnering the partnership is currently at. [7] This will help identify emerging issues. It is important to emphasise that the case study can only be regarded as a 'snapshot' of that particular moment in time. The case study researcher/writer may want to ensure that the case study is dated as a partnership can change so much during its life cycle that what was captured at the time of writing may not be the same when it is being used in the future.

**Define the purpose of the case study**
Following on from a partnership/project being identified the researcher may contact the partners and stakeholders directly to solicit more detailed information about the context and nature of the issues to be examined. This is what Yin refers to as the case study protocol.[8] He argues the protocol should contain the following sections: an overview of the case study project; field procedures (including securing the buy in of both the institutions and individuals and identifying of key players/repositors of information) and case study questions to be kept in mind when collecting data. As discussed earlier it is important that the case study researcher/writer keeps in mind the potential audiences and objectives of the case study at this stage. Once clear about the objective/audience of the case study it will be easier to define the focus of the case study and anticipate what kind of data is needed and where to find it.

**Identify research methodologies for collecting data required**
Following the scoping exercise and definition of the purpose of the case study, the researcher/writer begins the formal process of collecting the data to be included. Successful data collection is driven by a clear statement of objectives. It is helpful to plan the data gathering process, including the types of information you want to collect and the techniques and sources you will use to collect it around these objectives.[9] It will also be useful to identify some issues typical to partnerships in crafting your questions and research methodologies. One case study writer discusses their data collection methods as:

> *My planned, and preferred, data collection method was through the review of existing sources of information (organisational website, brochures, reports, etc) and conducting interviews with the partners and key stakeholders, if possible. Once I came to understand that the organisation works mainly in rural areas, I included government policy in my literature review.[10]*

When deciding on an appropriate research methodology it is important to have a balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches. When collecting data for partnership case studies the approach is often qualitative. Yin argues that case studies can be based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence[11]. According to Stake a distinction between what knowledge to aim for fundamentally separates quantitative and qualitative inquiry. [12] He believes the distinction is not directly related to the difference between quantitative and qualitative data, but a

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[7] Tennyson, R (2003) discusses 12 stages in the partnering process. These can be summarised in four key phases including: scoping and building; managing and maintaining; reviewing and revising and sustaining/and or moving on. The case study researcher/writer should identify what phase the partnership fits in to at the time of writing.
[8] Yin (1990), p64-65.
[9] Naumes and Naumes (1999), p48.
[10] Extract from case study writer's log (September 2005).
[11] Yin (1994), p14.
[12] Stake, R (1995), p37.

difference in searching for causes versus searching for happenings. Stake argues that quantitative researchers press for explanation and control and that qualitative researchers press for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists. It is common for qualitative researchers to have a concern for validation of observations and to address this concern they should use the method of triangulation (see below). Some of the major criticisms of case study research are that it has traditionally been considered 'soft' research. However, Yin believes the 'softer' a research strategy the harder it can be to do[13].

In the *Case Study Toolbook: Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change* tool 5[14] is designed as a guide to the different data collection methodologies and potential sources of information available for the case study researcher/writer. This tool is designed as a reference for the data collection process and includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches. It is expected that not all of the information and sources will be required for all case studies aiming to capture the partnering process. The research methodologies listed in this tool include: questionnaire, surveys and checklists; interviews; review of documentation; observation; focus groups and workshops and reviews. This tool gives a summary of these methods and also lists some of the advantages and disadvantages with each of these methods.

**Triangulating the data**
As much partnership data emerges from a qualitative research approach it is therefore important that the information collected is verified. In qualitative research it is necessary to have protocols in the form of triangulation. Where at all possible information should be gathered from multiple sources and all facts need to be verified before publication (see table below).[15] This may be achieved by interviewing others within the same partner organisation or other key stakeholders. This process will often provide differing opinions, and even if this does not allow the information to be verified it does present the reader with alternative points of view, allowing them to determine for themselves the perspectives they want to accept. External sources also help in the verification process, especially published reports, interviews and articles. This material can be used to verify the material in the case study or present alternative views to the reader.[16]

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[13] Yin, (1994), p16.

[14] Tool 5, Data Collection: Methods and Sources in The *Case Study Toolbook: Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change,* to download a copy visit: www.thepartneringinitiative.org/casestudyproject

[15] Naumes & Naumes (1999), p50.

[16] Ibid, p51.

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                    Archival Records              Open-ended
                                                  interviews
     Documents

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     Observations                                     Focused
     (direct and       Structured interviews          interviews
     participant)      and surveys
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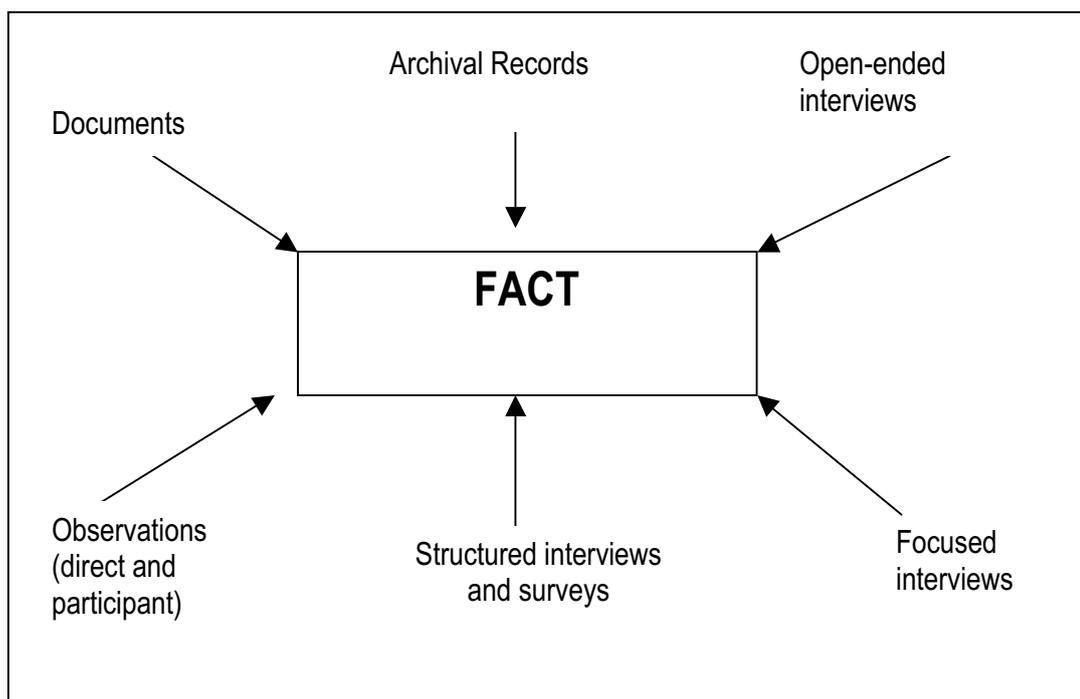
*Table - Convergence of multiple sources of evidence.[17]*

## Challenges of data collection

It is important for the case study researcher/writer to be aware of the potential challenges they may face when using different data collection methods for partnership case studies.

Some of the challenges that case study writers/researchers can face were discussed by partnership practitioners at the Case Study Workshop in February 2005. Most of the challenges discussed here assume the case study researcher/writer is collecting data on established partnerships rather than tracking a partnership from its inception.[18]

According to Yin the demands on the case study writer are far greater than those adopting other research strategies.[19] This is because the data collection process is not routinised. There is little room for a traditional research assistant; rather a well-trained and experienced case study researcher/writer is needed to conduct a high quality case study because of the continuous interaction between the theoretical issues being addressed and the data being collected. Such a case study researcher/writer is needed to take advantage of unexpected opportunities and to exercise sufficient care against potentially biased procedures.

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[17] Adapted from Figure 4.2, Yin (1994), p93.

[18] The material in this chapter is aimed at collecting and organising data on established partnerships. However, it is also important to consider data collection and analysis for tracking new partnerships and documenting these findings as they happen. The idea of tracking a partnership from its inception and the types of tools required to collect and analyse this data, to the authors knowledge have not be well tested. However, SEED focuses on tracking embryonic partnerships (visit www.seedinit.org for more information).

[19] Yin (1994), p55

One challenge is that the case study researcher / writer can miss certain learning if it is not documented from the beginning. Without processes and mechanisms in place for data collection it can be difficult to try and capture this accurately at a later stage of the partnerships life cycle. The partnership may also have already developed a certain character or personality of its own and the partnership mood at the time could impact the information. One case study writer captured this in her Log when she wrote: "I strongly believe that the current partnership mood has influenced the information in the case study".[20] Or the partnership's mood may vary depending on other factors, such as whether there is a shortage of resources, if staff have moved on or if there is any tension between different partners. These factors can provide a challenge to the case study writer on collecting data on an established partnership. The case study writer may also find it difficult to re-construct history. This can become particularly apparent to a case study writer if key staff that have been involved in the partnership have moved on and can't relay their information and knowledge on the process of partnering and what has taken place prior to their leaving the partnership.

Whether the case study researcher/writer is internal or external to the partnership they will need to establish their credentials as a case study researcher/writer. These credentials include: an understanding of their partnership skills, including the role a partnership broker may play[21]; the power balance between the partners and the researcher/writer and the importance of remaining impartial and unbiased. One case study writer outlined her approach to this challenge:

> *I am a facilitator rather than an assessor. I was not there to bring my opinions about what happened in the partnership at that moment. But I had to make them feel comfortable and safe about expressing their own ideas. In this way, the people of the community were open and honest with me, expressing their views and their visions…[22]*

Another challenge outlined by the practitioners at the case study workshop is the challenge of time limitations. The case study researcher/writer may find it difficult to understand the partnership in the amount of time they have. There is no doubt that the time will be restricted and this will impact how much they can really get under the skin of the partnership, the role of the partners and key stakeholders[23]. This is especially true for external case study writers who may know little about the partnership and need to learn more about the basics such as who all the partners are, the partnership's mission and activities and key stakeholders. This will restrict the time the writer will have to collect more detailed data to capture the process of partnering. As one case study writer wrote in their log:

> *It was difficult to gather people to reflect in groups. Four or five days there was not enough to understand how subjective these opinions are and at what point they are shared, or not shared with others involved in the partnership.[24]*

Alternatively the partners and stakeholders may not see the data collection process as a priority or they may just have too many other work constraints to give it the time it requires.

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[20] As part of the one year project *Exploring and Developing Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change,* case study writers were requested to submit a writer's Log capturing their impressions.

[21] A broker is a 'go-between' in building relationships between the partners.  He or she acts as an intermediary within or between different partners, guiding the process, interpreting one party to another or negotiating some kind of agreement.  A partnership broker performs a service on behalf of the partnership.

[22] Extract from writer's Log as part of *Exploring and Developing Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change* project.

[23] The term stakeholders is used here to refer to all who are involved with or affected by the partnership activity including staff, beneficiaries and donors, as well as partners and other key professional or community players.

[24] Ibid.

Funding also plays a key challenge for the case study. If there is a shortage of funding this may not allow the writer all the opportunities that would assist them in capturing the information they need. It could result in there being limited funds to visit key sites where partnership activities are taking place or not allow them the opportunity to meet with key stakeholders that can provide more detailed information on the partnership. Funding is often given in donor cycles, usually of two years, which limits the exploration of partnership processes and outcomes in particular. Some practitioners have suggested five-year funding cycles in response to this. Donor rules on reporting within rigid time spans have also been highlighted as restrictive. This lack of flexibility of funders is an additional challenge for data collection.

Another challenge around data collection is the need to be aware of those whose voices may be marginalised or excluded. Power imbalances often exist in partnerships and the researcher needs to be aware of this.

The case study researcher/writer needs to be aware of these potential challenges when gathering data on established partnerships.

## Organising the data

After the data has been collected and verified the case study researcher/writer needs to consider how they are going to organise the data. Naumes and Naumes outline the need for case study writers to follow guidelines for this process.[25] Issues such as what material to present, the focus and appropriate style and the audience all need to be considered. Case study writers/researchers are often confronted with large amounts of data, information and facts from a variety of sources. The selection of material to be included will be determined by the objectives and focus that drove the entire process, as well as the intended audiences. The dissemination process will involve the material being adapted for the different audiences and objectives.

### Procedures for organising the data

One procedure for organising the data collected can be summarised into four steps. These four steps have been outlined and summarised in the table below.

| Procedure for Organising the Data | Summary |
|---|---|
| Analysing the collected data | Undertaking a process of examining, categorising, tabulating and recombining the data |
| Establishing a chronology of events | Organising the case study data based on the sequence of events |
| Ensuring the data has been approved | Stakeholders and partners have approved the data collected including what it will be used for and where it is likely to be found |
| Reviewing and revising the data | A procedure of reviewing and revising the data is designed to maintain a high standard of quality |

Each of these procedures are explored in more detail below. However, it is worth remembering that when organising the data it is essential that the researcher/writer always return to the purpose and audiences of the case study.

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[25] Naumes & Naumes (1999), p91.

## Analysing the collected data

According to Yin the analysis of case study evidence is one of the least developed and most difficult aspects of writing case studies. Much of the analysis depends on the case study writer's own style of rigorous thinking along with sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations. Yin outlines that data analysis consists of examining, categorising, tabulating or otherwise recombining the data collected to address the initial focus of the case study.[26]

The components of a report must be organised in some way to constitute its structure. There are a number of structures a case study can take. Yin suggests six structures to help with the composition of the case study.[27] These include: 1. Linear-analytic structures, 2. Comparative structures. 3. Chronological structures. 4. Theory-building structures. 5. Suspense structures and 6. Unsequenced structures. When applying this approach to case studies that aim to capture the process of partnering a chronological structure for the report is likely to be most useful.[28] Here, the sequence of sections could follow the phases the partnership has taken.[29] Yin outlines one potential pitfall with a chronological approach to organising the data for the case study and that is that disproportionate attention is usually given to the early events and insufficient attention to the later ones .[30] He argues the case study researcher/writer will often dedicate too much effort composing the introduction, including its early history and background and leave insufficient time to write about the current status of the case. He makes the suggestion that to avoid this pitfall the case study researcher/writer drafts the case study backward with the section on the current activities being written first.[31]

### Get stakeholders and partners to approve the use of data collected

When case studies have been developed through field research it is crucial that stakeholders and partners have approved the data collected. It is up to the case study researcher/writer to determine how this is achieved (by email; at a face to face meeting; sending the entire text for approval or sharing the text and quotes that concern them). It is also crucial to explain to the partners and stakeholders what this data will be used for and where it is likely to be found. If on final review of the material those authorising the case study do not want parts of the material to be released it is possible to try and disguise the material. This can be done by making the material anonymous or turning it in to fictionalised case studies.

### Review and Revise

At the review and revise stage it might be useful for the case study researcher/writer to consider what the main issues are when collecting and organising the data on their case study. Some of these issues include: ensuring partners and key stakeholders were engaged in the scoping phase and defining its purpose; the range of audience and objectives have been considered; the appropriate data collection methods have been used; the data has been verified through the use of multiple sources and that stakeholders have approved the data that is used in the final case study.

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[26] Yin (1994), p102-103
[27] Ibid, p137.
[28] This is assuming the case study is profiling an existing partnership rather than a case study tracking a new partnership.
[29] As previously mentioned this could be based on the partnering cycle.
[30] Ibid, p139.
[31] Ibid

The points above are designed to help maintain a high standard of quality during the data collection and organising of data process. They are not intended to restrict the case study researcher/writer but to make the process as explicit as possible so that the data collected reflects viability and reliability and is worthy of analysis. Each case study researcher/writer will more than likely have their own additional points to add.

## Challenges with organising the data

Prioritising what is often a large amount of information can present a challenge to the case study researcher/writer. This can be particularly difficult in relation to some of the challenges mentioned above, particularly if there has been inadequate time to understand all aspects of the partnership and its activities, or there is missing data that can restrict the case study writer's knowledge about what information should be included in the final report.

Another key challenge for the case study researcher/writer is to try not to distort the data. As one case study writer said:

> *How to avoid distorting the data when trying to capture an accurate description of the process and mistakes that led to new actions was a challenge. In part, the case study process allows for the construction of data that represents the mutual interpretation of the interviewer and of the interviewee as the interview proceeds. Data is constructed with interacting interpretations made by the different interviewees.*[32]

One way to counteract this challenge is by triangulating the data (see above).

## Conclusions

This paper has covered broadly some of the issues associated with collecting and organising data for case studies that aim to provide insights into the process of cross-sector partnering.

One main issue that arises out of this paper is the importance of the case study researcher/writer recognising the challenges in collecting and organising data for partnering case studies. The paper also emphasises the need to follow a clear process to address these challenges and ensure that the case study is an accurate representation of the partnership and the relationships between the partners and stakeholders.

While there can be no definitive tools and guidelines to assist the case study researcher/writer collect and organise data for partnering case studies, this paper has suggested some suggestions that can be used as a base to be referred to and adapted to suit individual situations to help overcome the challenges outlined.

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[32] Extract from case study Log as part of the Case Study Project.

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