



PUBLIC POLICY DIALOGUE & ADVOCACY:
PRACTICAL RESEARCH

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PUBLIC POLICY DIALOGUE & ADVOCACY

PRACTICAL RESEARCH METHODS

1. Introduction

This handbook, *Practical research methods*, is designed to help you learn how to investigate policy, tax, regulatory and other issues that concern productive sectors of the economy, including business umbrella organisations and their members. Research constitutes Step 2 in the Five Step Approach to Advocacy (see Foundation Module: Introduction to Advocacy). The handbook introduces you to quantitative and qualitative research methods and to writing research proposals and reports. By the end of the handbook, you will:

- Understand the importance of undertaking research so that you can engage more effectively in dialogue and advocacy;
- Be familiar with a range of quantitative and qualitative research techniques;
- Know how to structure a research proposal and report research findings;
- Be ready to apply newly acquired research skills to substantive issues; and
- Be equipped to understand and assess the quality of research reports prepared by others, especially important if you are commissioning others to undertake research on your behalf.

This handbook can do no more than introduce you to the basics. If you do not yet have research experience, do not try doing it on your own! Link up with an experienced researcher or research team to gain experience. Even then, teamwork is preferable to doing it alone!

Moreover, you should note that some relevant research techniques have not been included in this handbook, including cost-benefit analysis (though there is a BAN factsheet on cost benefit analysis) and value chain analysis: if you are interested in agriculture and horticulture, understanding global value chains (GVC) is crucial though this may be helpful for other sectors as well (and a BAN factsheet on this topic will be available soon).

2. Research methodology



In studying a problem, we must shun subjectivity, one-sidedness and superficiality.



Mao Zedong¹

2.1 Introduction

Before examining different ways of doing empirical research, we need to grasp the basic principles of research methodology. There is often confusion in the use of the terms *research methodology* and *research methods*. We take *methodology* to mean the way we go about conceptualising research problems and *research methods* to mean the practical tools used in addressing research problems. We begin with a discussion of methodology before looking in more detail at some of the various methods used in quantitative and qualitative research.

2.2 Deductive versus inductive reasoning

All research is grounded in explicit or implicit understandings of how we perceive and interpret reality.² Science distinguishes between deductive and inductive reasoning. 'Hard' scientists create models and conduct experiments to test hypotheses derived from theories using deductive reasoning. 'Soft' scientists (that's us) more modestly address research problems by asking research questions and then collecting data to try to 'answer' them, which is more inductive and does not assume *measurable* causality. While you are expected to collect as much quantitative (numerical) data as possible, the research you are likely to undertake is still largely qualitative. Asking the 'right' questions is an essential component of good research.

With *deductive* reasoning, a researcher tests a theory by collecting and examining empirical evidence to see if it is true. With *inductive* reasoning, a researcher first gathers and analyses data, then constructs a theory to explain her findings

For a more detailed explanation see iga.fyi/rm01

In practice, researchers employ both deductive and inductive reasoning. While you may start your study with some vague sense of the important variables and how they relate to each other (deductive), doing empirical fieldwork may reveal new important variables which challenge your initial assumptions and make you revise your causal model (inductive).

2.3 Causes and correlations

¹ Central Committee General Office 1961. 'Excerpts from Comrade Mao Zedong's Statements on Investigation and Research', Confidential Office print, 4 April

² If you're interested in the philosophy of science, a good starting point is the work of Karl Popper, for example: www.tkpw.net

While 'pure' scientists strive to measure causal relations between discrete variables, social scientists are more likely to examine the strength of correlations between variables, using the concept of statistical probability. Descriptive statistics are the basis of quantitative research, as explained below.

Causes and correlations

In daily life we tend not to distinguish very clearly between causality and probability. For example, my friend is a heavy smoker, but he is not particularly worried about the health risks involved in his habit, arguing that his mother was a heavy smoker and she lived to be 93...

Generally, relationships between variables are not self-evident. A may vary in some significant way in relation to B, but does A cause B, B cause A, or are A and B both caused by C (or any number of other variables)?

2.4 Primary, secondary and applied research

Primary research is undertaken by universities and academic research institutes and think tanks and professional researchers. They set out to create new knowledge (and to challenge existing knowledge), though in the case of universities or research institutes may have no practical implications in mind.

There may be a need to undertake some primary research, for example, to report on the challenges faced by members in their work or to understand their viewpoints. However, most business associations will rely much more on secondary research to support their dialogue and advocacy. Secondary research sums up what is known on the basis of a thorough and balanced review of available evidence synthesised from other sources. This research aspires to tell a plausible story rather than to create new knowledge or understanding of the world – and needs to be applied to your particular issue, so do not generate vast amounts of irrelevant figures. If by chance you do generate new insights that might stimulate further primary research, then good for you!

Be aware that much apparently academic or primary research contains hidden (unstated) biases that should disqualify it from being described as such. This can also be true for applied research.

2.5 Sources

The first step in starting any research project is to read as much as you can on the chosen subject. If you know little or nothing about the sector or issue at hand, then you will have a lot of reading to do. Make sure you understand basic technical terms and issues in the sector you are studying. For example, if you are looking at a commercial crop, you will need to grasp the basics of its cultivation, processing and marketing (costs, risks, measurements, constraints...) as well as the policies, regulations and agencies that influence it. If you are looking at the taxes paid by companies in a certain sector you need to understand what the taxes are for and how they are calculated.

Generally, there will be too much information available on your chosen topic for you to assimilate, so you will have to be selective in your background reading. So:

- Read the executive summaries of long reports before deciding whether you need to go into the full report. Do not aspire to read long reports from cover to cover, unless this is the basic source of information for which you have been looking.
- You are likely to find literature addressing your research sector from global, regional (e.g. Africa-wide) and country perspectives. Prioritise your reading in reverse order (country first) unless you are addressing international trade or global value chains.
- If you have a document in electronic format, use the 'Find' facility to look up key words and use the text highlight feature in Word as a way of taking notes. No need to print anything!

Once you have understood the basics concerning your research topic, you can begin to formulate research questions.

Much or most of what you need to understand a new sector can be downloaded from the internet, for example, from official and private sector websites, *Wikipedia*, on-line newspapers and academic sources. Remember, however, that material from the internet is not necessarily accurate or trustworthy. Aim, as far as possible, only to rely on data from sources that you think will be reliable and aim, too, to triangulate your data by using multiple sources.

2.6 Objectivity

If you want to be taken seriously, you should avoid bias and examine all points of view dispassionately. This is easier said than done, since we all have ideological and emotional preferences and prejudices, and these may creep into our research without us realising it. A first step towards objectivity is to be self-critical and examine your own beliefs and assumptions.³

While academic publications are more likely to produce *valid* and *reliable*⁴ numbers than other sources of information, never take numbers as more than approximations, including the numbers you produce yourself! Be particularly wary of numbers (or opinions) produced by insiders, who may have a vested interest in distorting 'the truth'. Some sources, particularly the media, often suffer from innumeracy and bias, so be critical and selective in what you quote. Though academic papers are often difficult reading to those not familiar with a particular discipline, they are important starting points for empirical studies, since they at least strive to be 'objective'.⁵

³ One popular philosophical view is that there is no such thing as objectivity.

⁴ Validity and reliability are not the same! Validity 'refers to how well a scientific test or piece of research actually measures what it sets out to, or how well it reflects the reality it claims to represent.' Reliability 'refers to the repeatability of findings'. If data are valid, they must be reliable. However, if a test is reliable, that does not mean that it is valid.

⁵ The question of objectivity is ultimately philosophical. What we should aim for is balance and fairness (looking at all sides of an argument before making an informed, impartial judgement). Not surprisingly, this is easier said than done.

2.7 Research ethics

Research involves taking up considerable amounts of people's time for which they are not compensated. You depend on them more than they depend on you. Few of those interviewed or consulted are likely to benefit directly from your research findings. So take time to express your sincere gratitude to your focus group participants and respondents for their co-operation.

Do not quote respondents without permission. Stress anonymity from the outset.

You should be scrupulous in selecting which issue on which to lobby and on whose behalf. Would you work (say) for a tobacco-growers' association or a coal-powered energy plant? Or a business association with members of dubious ethics and business practices (child labour, environmental pollution...?) Or institutions that may not play a very constructive role in economic development?

Resist at all costs efforts to turn your research project into a deal, whereby sharing the proceeds of the assignment is negotiated in exchange for guarantees that the report will be accepted by the funding agency whatever its quality.

Finally, it is unethical to propose budget lines for activities which are not actually undertaken. For example, field visits, surveys and focus group discussions significantly increase the total budget. Exaggerating the cost or extent of these activities actually undertaken is also unacceptable. The reader of the report can easily see through such strategies since the data from these tasks is either shallow or completely absent. If you run some FGDs, the reader will expect to see extensive quotes and a list of participants, with dates and locations appended.

3. Quantitative research methods



Quantitative methods express the assumptions of a positivist paradigm which holds that behaviour can be explained through objective facts.



William Firestone⁶

3.1 Quantitative research methods

Methodology is how you try to understand and interpret the world. Research methods are the techniques and tools used to collect and classify information or data. The data you collect constitute⁷ the evidence that hopefully enhances your understanding of the world. The conventional distinction used in social and economic research is between *quantitative* and *qualitative* research methods. Quantitative research is based on statistics. Statistical analysis is an important research technique designed to establish the direction and strength of causal

⁶Firestone, W.A. (1987) Meaning in method: the rhetoric of quantitative and qualitative research, *Educational Researcher*, 16(7), pp 16-21, doi.org/10.2307/1174685

⁷ Technically, data are plural, (one datum two data) but the use of data in the singular is widespread.

relationships between variables (e.g. $A \rightarrow B$). Statistical analysis, including multiple regression, is the basis of *econometrics* and other quantitative economic research. Qualitative methods and techniques are common in anthropology, sociology and political science. Research for advocacy can make good use of survey techniques, for example, in reporting farmers' views on different crop marketing arrangements.

Be aware that issues are often more complicated (or complex) than they may first appear; competing 'explanations' for observable phenomena may both have claims to validity, without telling the whole story.

3.2 Surveys

Note that this section is not an introduction to survey methods and will not provide you with the tools to undertake a survey. If you decide that a survey is essential for your task, read the BAN factsheet on surveys and, ideally, seek professional advice.

Get to know the technical terms used in surveys. Some terms are defined below.

Some basic survey terminology

- **Population.** The group (usually of people) from which you plan to choose your sample. (See statistics below)
- **Sample.** The sub-group of the population you select to investigate. Samples can be random (every member of the population has the same chance of being selected) or non-random (the population is stratified and the samples taken from the sub-groups).
- **Respondent.** The person selected to be interviewed (also *interviewee*, *subject*).
- **Variable.** Something that can be measured and compared. Dichotomous variables include sex (gender) and all questions with Yes/No answers. *Categorical* variables include occupation. *Continuous* variables can be measured in discrete units (for example, age, height, weight). Education can be measured in years or in categories (Primary, Secondary, Higher, Technical).
- **Case.** A unit of your sample, normally a person. If you interview 100 people in your survey you can number the cases from 1 to 100.
- **Code/coding.** The options respondents can choose from. (Example: Code 1=Yes; Code 2=No; Code 3=Don't know).
- The codes used should be established by **pre-testing** and revising the questionnaire or using well-established protocols.
- **Interviews.** In a survey the enumerator interviews the respondent using a questionnaire. Telephone interviews are only feasible for a limited number of questions. Self-administered (e.g. postal) questionnaires dispense with an interviewer altogether.
- **Closed versus open-ended questions.**⁸ Closed or **pre-coded** questions give alternative responses from which to choose. Most of your questionnaire should be pre-coded so as to facilitate **data entry** (transferring questionnaire results into a computer-analysable format). There should be an 'Other' code for responses that are not covered by the options provided.

⁸ Types of questions are discussed in 'The Ultimate Guide to Effective Data Collection', Chapter 5.

Surveys collect data that can be quantified (e.g. '60 per cent of respondents said they considered all or some of the police to be corrupt'), but such surveys are not quantitative in the same sense as, say, labour force participation surveys or balance of trade data, which are not reducible to subjective views. Knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) surveys may help clarify issues for business lobbying purposes. A single survey can include questions probing all three dimensions:

Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which countries are members of the East African Community? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open-ended question (score 0-6)
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who benefits most from foreign aid? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government officials or ordinary citizens?
Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which marketing channel do you use for your main cash crop? (1. Sell directly to customer/processor; 2. Sell to trader/middleman; 3. Sell via cooperative union); 4. Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closed questions preferable if options known and agreed (refer 'pretesting')

Writing questionnaires is an art that takes time to master.

If you are studying a business association with a substantial membership, you may consider surveying all or some of the members (see also **interviews** below). To do this, you will need the agreement of the management, who are more likely to give you access to their members if they see the point of the survey. You could involve them in formulating key questions. To improve *response rates*, the survey should be endorsed by the management or clearly undertaken on their behalf.

Short questionnaires are recommended for your purposes (you are not writing a PhD thesis).

Hopefully, most members will have email addresses. If only half have email and half don't, then sampling the 'haves' may introduce a significant *sampling bias* (to be avoided). The same applies to telephone interviews, though to a lesser degree.

Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) will help you to undertake an on-line survey, but do not try it from cold, and do not expect a high response rate unless you have worked hard to interest respondents.

3.3 Using statistics



*There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.*⁹



This is *not* an introduction to statistics! Hopefully, you have studied statistics at some level; if not, you are advised to do so sooner rather than later! Statistics are of importance for socio-economic research and analysis. They allow you to say sensible things about a large population on the basis of a relatively small sample.

- '*Population*' means different things in different contexts. For a demographer, a population is the number of people living in a particular place or with

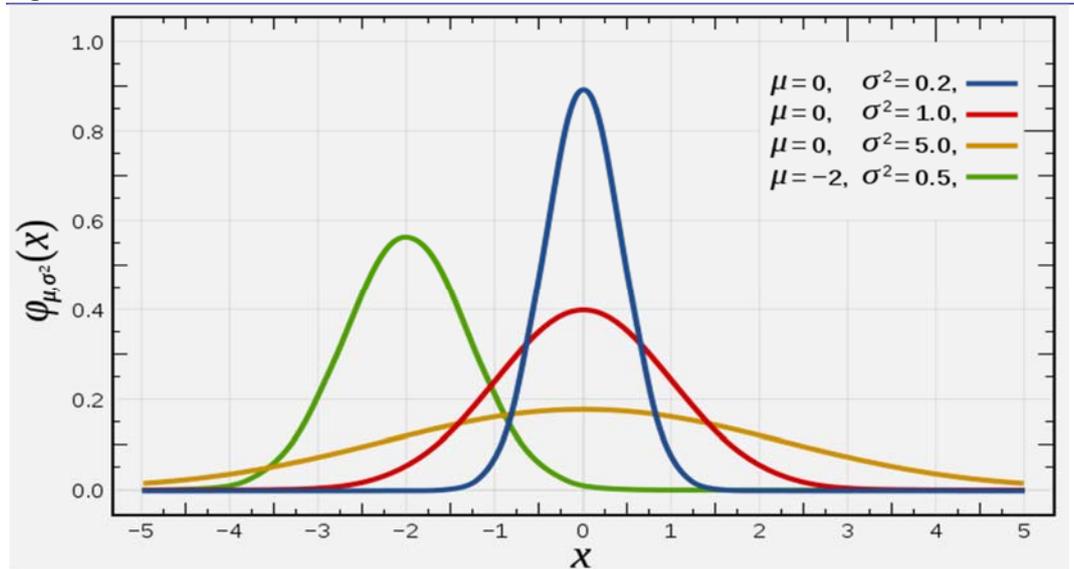
⁹ Aphorism attributed by Mark Twain to Benjamin Disraeli

particular characteristics. For a statistician, a population is any group of people (or animals, companies, NGOs, or football teams...) that is the object of a systematic study. See BAN factsheet on sample populations

- *Sample size.* Formulae for determining your sample size can be found in Business Advocacy Fund, 'Determining Sample Size', see BAN factsheet on sample sizes. Larger samples are more likely to be representative than smaller ones but are obviously more costly. The more variable (irregular) your population, the larger the sample size required to achieve a 95 per cent confidence level. Ninety-five per cent is the usual *confidence level* for social surveys. For a population of 1,000 with a 50 per cent degree of variability, you need a sample size of 286 to have a 95 per cent chance that your sample accurately represents the population.
- Often your sample size is determined more by the resources available for the survey you intend to undertake than by the desired degree of confidence in the results. Very small samples are unreliable since they are unlikely to be representative, depending on the variability of the sample population.
- If you plan a national survey it will have to be *stratified*, for example, by county. Since Kenya's counties are very variable, for example, in terms of population densities and income levels, stratifying them into relatively similar groups is a complex task.

'Measures of central tendency': means, medians and modes. The *mean* of a distribution is its average value. The *mode* is its highest value or values (two modes = 'bimodal'). The *median* divides the sample into two halves. If a population has a 'normal' distribution, the mean, median and mode are the same. Medians are more useful than means when there are outliers (extreme cases) in the distribution.

Figure 1: Normal distribution



Some guidelines on statistics:

- Remember that most statistics are approximations, not exact measures. Quoting figures to one (or more) decimal places suggests that we have

measured things with a high degree of precision, which is rarely the case. Round numbers up or down (from 5 round up, up to 4, round down).

- State orders of magnitude. Don't cite actual percentages, for example when summarising a table. Make approximations: 52% = 'just over half'; 62% = 'more than three out of five'; 74% = 'almost three-quarters'.
- Working with large numbers. The larger the number, the more meaningless it is to you or me. You know what you can buy with \$1,000, but how much is a hundred billion? How many containers can you fill with a trillion shillings? To make large numbers more meaningful it is useful to compare them to something concrete, such as a government budget, number of large aircraft or luxury cars or treated bednets that can be bought with that amount. Be especially careful in translating values between currencies, Kenyan shillings and US dollars for example, where horrible errors are routine.
- Finally, numbers are often made up, misquoted or out of date. Exercise caution in citing official figures on levels of production, consumption, trade, GDP, et cetera.

4. Qualitative research methods



One of the most persistent requirements in modern social science has been that scientific knowledge should be quantitative



Steinar Kvale¹⁰

4.1 Qualitative research methods

Social science is too inexact to use maths and statistics in the way natural scientists do. It is generally not possible to do experiments to test hypotheses. So social scientists are forced to use more qualitative methods. This does not mean that they are not interested in collecting and analysing quantitative (numeric) data. On the contrary, without some numbers, most of our investigations would be very limited.

The research you are likely to undertake for business advocacy purposes is qualitative in the sense that it will not be possible to demonstrate causality (A→B) in any rigorous ('scientific') way. It is therefore imperative to make the best case possible on the basis of the available evidence, including your own. The aim is to produce a plausible story or 'narrative', that: (1) identifies the key issues and actors; (2) looks at each group of actors in terms of their (known or assumed) incentives (see 'agency' below); (3) explains interaction between key actors noting areas of cooperation and conflict; and (4) suggests ways to address problem areas based on (1) to (3) above.

¹⁰ Kvale, S (1994) Ten standard objections to qualitative research interviews, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 25(2), pp. 147-173. The author is defending interviews as a legitimate research technique, to which many have objected.

4.2 Interviews

Structured or semi-structured interviews, especially with 'key respondents' are likely to constitute a major source of information in your research. Do not seek out key respondents until you have a good grasp of the basic issues facing the sector you are researching. You need to be fully up to speed on your topic so that you can ask the right questions, interpret the responses, and follow up with further pertinent questions.

You will increase your chances of arranging to see a key respondent if you are introduced by another key player, for example, in the business lobby for whom you are working.

While it may seem important to talk to the 'top' people, this may not always be desirable – or feasible. Mid-level staff often have the information for which you are looking and will be easier to pin down for an interview.

Often what you want to know is of a sensitive nature, and officials will be reluctant to confide in you. Keep the most sensitive issues to last, by which time your interviewee may have begun to trust you.

It may happen that one respondent is ready to 'spill the beans' on a rival or competitor. But be careful to cross-check with other players (see 'triangulation' below) before you repeat what you have been told, since it could well be biased.

In general, do not over-personalise your report by naming respondents or making it obvious who they are. 'Donor agency desk officer', 'senior manager, textile exporting company'... will do.

Structured or semi-structured interview protocols are guidelines that should not be followed rigidly. As long as the respondent is addressing key issues of interest, let him/her talk. If the respondent wanders off the point, bring him or her back to the key issues as politely as possible. Do not record meetings without the respondent's consent. Ask whether it's okay to take notes. Otherwise write up the conversation from memory *immediately* after the interview.

Do not be afraid to ask the interviewee to repeat a point you did not fully grasp. Ditto for important claims s/he makes that you intend to cross-check after the interview ('So you think...').

BEWARE! Where conflicting interests are at stake, the main protagonists will often exaggerate to make their case more persuasive! If key relations between the main players are informal and unstated, you will have difficulty sorting out 'the truth'. The quantitative data that you need to make your case may also be incomplete or distorted. For example, cross-border trade within the EAC is often informal and sometimes illegal (khat, bhang, goods with an import/export ban).

Mix your methods

There is no single method, quantitative or qualitative, that is superior to any other: different methods, and combinations of methods, are appropriate for particular topics and assignments, and not for others. All methods have their strengths and limitations. Mixed methods are often the best.

4.3 Focus group discussions (FGD)

FGDs are a good way to assess the concerns of small-scale producers, special groups or citizens in general. Ideally, FGDs will give you insights into specific issues concerning local populations. FGDs are a good source of opinions and experiences that can be quoted to liven up a research report. If FGDs are a key part of your planned research, then read the BAN factsheet on focus group discussion and seek professional help. Remember, however, that focus groups are not a substitute for a survey and you cannot expect to be able to isolate statistical inferences from the discussion.

4.4 Participatory research

This type of research turns the 'researcher' into a participant in the sector s/he is studying. For example, one researcher became a member of a *taarab* orchestra in Tanga and wrote a thesis about the politics of popular music in Tanzania. Since you are unlikely to become participant observers, we will not delve deeper into what is involved.¹¹ Note, however, that some organisations talk about participatory research when what they actually mean is that they want staff or board to be intimately involved in the planning and the implementation.

4.5 Case studies

Much of our research consists of (or includes) case studies. Case studies can give you deeper insights into the detailed workings of a company or other organisation than (say) a survey of a number of companies. To do a meaningful case study you need to have a firm understanding of the *wider institutional context* in which the company or organisation you are studying is embedded. One of the drawbacks of case studies is that you have no basis for generalising your findings to the rest of the relevant population. There is no reason why a case study should not be part of a mixed methods research project; indeed, mixed methods can be very useful.

4.6 Triangulation

One way of strengthening your story line is to show where different components of your research seem to agree. The process of verifying results with other information is referred to as 'triangulation'. For example, a key respondent may express a strong view on a crucial issue. Is this view supported in the literature? Do other respondents agree or disagree? Could you include the issue in a FDG?

NB: If different sources come up with incompatible results, you are obliged to say so!

¹¹ Bergold, J. & Thomas, S. (2012) 'Participatory Research Methods: A Methodological Approach in Motion', *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 13(1), www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1801/3334

5. Writing proposals and reports



It is impossible to speak in such a way that you cannot be misunderstood.



Karl Popper ¹²

5.1 Writing a research proposal

Proposals and reports should be as short as possible (see *parsimony* below). Research proposals should contain the following sections:

- Background and rationale
- Research questions
- Methodology
- Personnel
- Budget

Here are some notes on each component:

5.1.1 Background and rationale

From where does your research interest come? Why should someone want to fund your research project? Who wants to know what you want to find out? These issues are addressed in the first section of your proposal. If you work for a sector advocacy/lobby organisation, the issue or problem to be researched may be a recent policy change that impacts negatively on your members, typically to do with taxes. Or it could be the way in which policies are being interpreted, implemented or ignored by the tax authorities, regulators or local governments. These problems could be potentially harmful to your members or could already be having more or less serious effects on the industry. A final source of a research proposal could be your own or a collaborative initiative based on what you consider important emerging issues that deserve a close examination even if they are not among your current lobbying priorities. Convincing someone to finance research of this type will probably be more difficult than in cases where the research concerns your organisation's and its members' interests.

How much background should you provide? While we understand very little without some grasp of history, too much background breaks the parsimony rule, and should be avoided. So how much essential historical background should be provided? If you are dealing with a recently initiated policy, tax or regulatory issue, you can keep it short. If the issue is more deeply embedded, a longer background section is recommended.

¹² Popper, K. (2002) *Unended quest: an intellectual autobiography*, London: Routledge (p29)

5.1.2 Research questions

In section 2.2, we distinguished between research questions and hypotheses, and argued that the former are preferable since you do not start out with a firm understanding of the dynamics of the issue you are addressing, and are not undertaking an elaborate academic study. You approach the task with an open mind. As you read, you get an idea of who is doing what to whom in your chosen sector and how to proceed to address your research questions. This process may lead you to modify, abandon or ask more/different questions.

5.1.3 Methodology

Earlier, we reviewed research methods and methodology. Researchers routinely list the research methods (techniques) that they plan to use in their study in their 'methodology' section. For example: 'We will undertake a survey and FGDs.' While this approach has the merit of being brief and (hopefully) honest, it does not address the issues of your overall research strategy or reasons why you consider (say) a survey to be useful in addressing your research questions. You should briefly outline the discipline or disciplines, theories and concepts that inform your approach. Without some idea of the intellectual underpinnings of your study and the rationale for the concepts that you employ, you will be practising the art of 'abstract empiricism', randomly collecting data with no idea of how to make sense of it or draw meaningful conclusions from it.

5.1.4 Personnel

Do not be a loner! Research is a collective effort, even if you are in charge. Whereas some assignments are better carried out by a single researcher, more often than not team-work is a better option. There are people who specialise in surveys, participatory research, focus groups and so on. Do not be over-ambitious and try to do everything yourself. You should also not team up with too many others: too many cooks, etcetera. The ideal number for a research team will, of course, depend on the size and nature of the assignment. If, for example, you need to set up an interactive data-base you are better served by employing an expert for this task than trying to do it yourself (unless you are the 'expert').

5.1.5 Budget

Cost your budget in the currency in which you are going to be paid. Your budget consists of fees, which can be itemised in days at specified daily rates, and costs, in particular travel and subsistence. Funding agencies have their own rates for out-of-station travel and subsistence. Find out what these are before presenting a budget. Surveys are by far the most expensive type of research.

5.2 Writing a research report

A good piece of research tells a story ('narrative') linking events and actors over time. Here are some more guidelines:

- It is important to describe the impact of the issues on the private sector and the potential impacts of the various solutions proposed for the government;

- The conclusions of your report must be supported by (derived from) the evidence presented;
- Research reports should offer a range of solutions, with the advantages and disadvantages of each clearly stated. If only the favoured solution is discussed, you give the impression that the evidence has been gathered to support that solution and is therefore biased;
- Solutions must be costed and the benefits explained;
- Reports should not assume that the answer automatically lies with the government. For example, self-regulation by the private sector may be a preferred solution, but it has to be negotiated with government.

5.2.1 Structure

Reports are often poorly structured so the reader has to work hard to separate key facts from background. Too much background is given in the main text rather than in appendices. Key points are often underemphasised. Here is a possible structure for your report:

Preliminary material	Title Table of Contents Acknowledgement (of those who have helped) Summary
Body of report	Introduction Background and literature review Methodology Results Discussion Conclusion Recommendations
Supplementary material	References or bibliography Appendices/Annexes/Acronyms

Short reports can dispense with a Table of Contents. The summary is often called an Abstract in academic writing, but it is more than that. Do not simply lift sentences from the main report. Summarise enough of the report such that a busy policy analyst will get all the key messages. The methodology should be short, with details (such as FGDs/interviews held (location, dates, participants), acronyms, et cetera) in an appendix or annex.¹³ Numbering sections and sub-sections is important for ordering your report, but do not go overboard! Three levels are probably enough! As usual, consistency is vital.

5.2.2 Presentation

A consistent and professional presentation gives the reader a good impression. Their absence makes you look sloppy. Some of the basics (for both proposals and research reports):

¹³ When do you use an appendix as opposed to an annex? A bibliography or annex?

1. Short, sharp sentences are better than long, rambling ones. Avoid sub-clauses (lots of commas).
2. Spelling, grammar and punctuation must be accurate and consistent.
 - When there are options, decide on one and stick to it. Examples: percent, per cent or %? USD or US\$? Note that BAF has developed its own style guide.
 - How are references presented in the text? (See below). When do you use 'single' and "double" quotes?
 - Check your computer's spelling corrections carefully – you could select the wrong option by mistake.
 - The appropriate use of colons (:), semi-colons (;), commas (,) and dashes (- -) is not always self-evident, but is very important. At least be consistent!
 - Decide whether your spelling is UK or US (what's the house rule?). If you are quoting, do not change the spelling to fit in with your chosen option;
 - Do not use capital letters haphazardly, including in headings;
 - Check that your verbs accord with your subjects (singular or plural)!
 - Adopt simple and consistent layout (paragraph lengths, breaks between paragraphs, headings, fonts, indents, right alignment...);
 - Avoid jargon: use language that is simple to understand. If unsure, define terms in a footnote or in brackets in the text;
3. Do not include irrelevant, obvious or unnecessary information;
4. Do not spend much time describing your sample in the body of the report. Sample characteristics can be reported in an appendix, along with the rest of the methodology. Tables based on the survey should always quote the sample or sub-sample size (N=).
5. Do not write out large sums (of money, volumes) in full. Try not to quote decimal points: most numbers are approximations, not exact measures.¹⁴
6. Number from one to ten can be written, numbers from 11 onwards can be kept as numbers. Do not write out numbers and then repeat them in brackets.
7. Try not to over-use the passive voice, which avoids the question of agency (see below). For example, 'It was decided...' Who decided? The GoK? Parliament? The CEO? Be as specific as you can. Also try to avoid personification: 'Kenya' is not an actor, nor is 'Nairobi'. That's journalists' jargon! An exception to this rule is to avoid the first person singular or plural. Here it is legitimate to use the passive voice, for example: 'it is concluded' rather than 'I conclude' or 'we conclude'. You can also use the third person: 'the research team concluded...'
8. Use figures, charts, text boxes, pie-charts and tables to break up the text. Get someone to teach you how to do these. Consider photos and cartoons as important research materials. You may consider commissioning a cartoon to make your point. Do *not* produce pie-charts for bivariate variables such as gender. Don't allow your graphics to take up too much space. Do not allow Microsoft to design your charts!

¹⁴ Citing two decimal points implies measurement accuracy of one hundredth of one per cent!

9. *Timelines* are a very good way of summarising information chronologically. They help the reader understand the unfolding of a story line and the causality involved.
10. When talking about causality, for example, explaining the poor performance of a sector, do not list half a dozen plausible causes, especially when they are 'lack of' this or that, with no attempt to prioritise or order.

5.2.3 Literature review and sources

A comprehensive literature review is a must. If there are major references, particularly recent ones, that you have missed, then you leave yourself open to criticism, for instance, by those contesting your conclusions or your professionalism.

While most sources can be freely downloaded, academic journals and other commercial sources generally charge for full access to their publications. If you do not have a budget for such costs, you may have to get an academic friend to download materials for you using a subscription to the major academic publishers. You do not want to fail to access key sources just because you cannot afford to pay! BAF may be able to advise you.

Your review should be chronological and thematic. The themes selected should reflect the concerns of your study.

You complete your review with a summary of what is known, what is disputed and what needs to be further examined.

All sources are potentially useful, including unpublished so-called 'grey' materials, and articles from newspapers and magazines.¹⁵ All sources should be fully referenced, including 'personal communication' (with date).

Brevity is important if you want people to read your literature review. Stick to the main points and avoid unnecessary detail.

5.2.4 Length

Parsimony. Less is more. Focus. Do not repeat yourself. Be prepared to delete text (just because you spent time writing it, doesn't mean you have to keep it). Nobody wants to read a 100-page report, so keep yours to the absolute minimum to provide the necessary information and analysis. You get points for *quality*, not *quantity*. You can reduce the size of your reports by:

- Summarising rather than going into details—for example, government legislation, policies and strategies;
- Referring the reader to sources on issues and theories;
- Background/history is very important, but keep it short and focused;

¹⁵ Some researchers look down on the press as a source of information. Whilst journalists often write nonsense, get things wrong or are paid to say what they say, newspapers and non-print media are nevertheless a rich potential source of information that can add substantially to the credibility of your report. Still you need to be very selective in which articles you cite. One obvious rule of thumb is to seek out articles by authors with an established reputation. Some academics qualify, many do not.

- Making executive summaries short and sharp;
- Appending/annexing materials, including methodology, terms of reference, and statistics.

5.2.5 Agency and incentives

Definition: Agency is 'the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.'¹⁶

It is imperative that you identify the key actors and their agendas, both official and unofficial, so that a real-life picture emerges. Without identifiable actors, you cannot tell a convincing story!

One useful approach that addresses agency directly is political economy.¹⁷ Political economy analysis (PEA) tries to describe the relationship between the political and business centres of power, and to understand how resources are mobilised and distributed to create and maintain a peaceful political order and avoid violent conflicts.¹⁸ The *incentives* faced by politicians may have little or no long-term economic rationale, though they may make short-term political sense. Other actors often have agendas that are not fully articulated, or that can be challenged with 'alternative facts'. Whenever possible, judge people by what they do rather than what they say.

5.2.6 Formality and informality

Formality and *informality* are important concepts that relate to the way agency is expressed. Although our discussion assumes that we are working with government officials in ministries, departments and agencies who have well-defined responsibilities and lines of command, important decisions are often taken informally on the basis of non-transparent lobbying. Informal lobbying may be resorted to by one or more important members of a business association, by a non-member, or possibly by someone with no direct involvement in the association's activities. For example, traders in commodities that are also (or could be) produced locally such as sugar, wheat flour, edible oils and rice, may lobby informally for duty-free imports or for low duties. Powerful lobbyists may be capable of overriding the formal decision-making process in which you are involved, to your great frustration!¹⁹

The greater the level of informality in government decision-making, the more difficult it is to influence policy, regulation and taxes through formal lobbying mechanisms. Unclear legal mandates between different agencies and rivalry over the control of a sector or sub-sector may also serve to make your job more

¹⁶ See: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/agency>

¹⁷ PEA is not the only discipline concerned with agency. Others include political science, sociology and anthropology.

¹⁸ This is called the 'political settlement.' Kenya has a major problem here, which regularly reaches crisis point during election times. This has major economic consequences. See: David Booth, Brian Cooksey, Frederick Golooba-Mutebi and Karuti Kanyinga, 2014. 'East African prospects - An update on the political economy of Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda', ODI/Gatsby Charitable Trust. February

¹⁹ For Tanzanian examples, see Tanzania Private Sector Foundation 2017. 'Political Economy Analysis - 2016: How the political economy of Tanzania influences the business enabling environment'

difficult. The stronger the MDA you are dealing with in terms of personnel, commitment and mandate, the easier it will be to engage in meaningful advocacy and lobbying.

5.2.7 References and quotations

Different authors use different conventions. Decide on the reference style you want to follow and stick to it. Consistency is important.

All references in the text should appear in the 'References' section, and vice versa.

Keep track of your references! Write a reference for all materials you review in real time. Write out the reference in full. Consider keeping all references in a separate file. Looking up a reference that you have misplaced can be very tedious.

A reference in the text contains the name of the author (excluding first name) followed by the date of publication (and the page number if you are quoting), for example: (Irwin 2010: 45). The full reference can be in a footnote, an endnote, or in the references section. It is annoying to look for a text reference in the reference section and not to find it. It is also annoying to find references in the reference section that are not in the text.

These days most sources can be downloaded from the web, so you can add the link to the reference.

Use "double quotations" for quoting direct speech and 'single quotes' for quoting from text. Short quotations can be included in a sentence. Longer quotations should be indented in separate paragraphs. These longer quotes need not contain quotation marks since the formatting indicates that this is a quotation.

Quote sources consistently and honestly (e.g. if your quotation of one author comes from another, cite both).

5.2.6 Recommendations

Most authors include recommendations in their report. While this is normal practice, it is also possible to write up recommendations separately, for example, as a policy brief.

Recommendations flow from the findings of your study. They are justified on the basis of the evidence that you (and other studies) have unearthed. If you have presented alternative courses of action emerging from your research findings and examined their implications, there may be no need for recommendations.

If you choose to make recommendations, they should be limited in number, address priority actors and issues, and be implementable. If implementation depends on certain preconditions being in place, these should be clearly spelled out. In particular, what are the (new) incentives proposed to support the recommendations?

6. Some final tips

- Generally, try to avoid black and white, either/or reasoning. Most issues are more complex than we think.
- Avoid drawing premature conclusions from your analysis of a particular topic simply because you think you know the answer. Do not dismiss views which do not correspond to your own without careful consideration.
- Be self-critical – don't wait for others to do it for you! If you are unsure of your conclusions, say so. If there's a need for more research – say so. If some parts of your report are stronger than others – say so (and say why). If you're not self-critical, how do you expect to improve?
- Reports should be completed on time and revised promptly. Reports take a long time to be produced, sometimes over a year. Consultants are often slow to produce revised versions following comments. Some reports never reach a final version, but stall at the draft stage.
- If in doubt – ask for advice! Better to admit you don't know than to pretend that you do and have others point out your weaknesses!

Further reading and further information

- Social science theorising and methodology are hotly contested areas, with one major division between the advocates of quantitative and qualitative methods. The approach taken in this training is that our research efforts are largely qualitative but that, if carefully undertaken and grounded in real contexts and events, can yield powerful results for business advocacy.
- On questions of scientific methodology the best authority is still Karl Popper. See his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1957).
- For a 'realist' approach to policy, programme and project evaluation see: Ray Pawson & Nick Tilley 1997. *Realist Evaluation*, Sage Publications Ltd. (latest update 2014)
- Also using a 'realist' approach to qualitative research involving 'grounded theory' is: Nick Emmel 2013. *Sampling & choosing cases in qualitative research: a realist approach*, Sage Publications
- On case studies employing the concept of 'process tracing' see: Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Belfer Center Studies in International Security
- On global value chains see: Peter Gibbon and Stefano Ponte 2005. *Trading Down: Africa, Value Chains, and the Global Economy*, Temple University Press.
- Some more reading suggestions are contained in footnotes. Further readings on topics discussed in this handbook are readily available on the internet.



This series of advocacy competence handbooks – divided into modules and units – is intended to support business membership organisations (BMOs) to engage in public private dialogue and to advocate improvements to the business environment. You are free to use the units and other materials provided that the source is acknowledged. The handbooks are all available at businessadvocacy.net.

Module 7: Research methods

This handbook provides a brief introduction to research methods which will help you identify or prepare compelling evidence that you can use to assist in the preparation of policy positions and when you engage with government in dialogue and advocacy.

The Business Advocacy Network is an initiative of Irwin Grayson Associates and can be found at businessadvocacy.net. IGA can be found at irwingrayson.com and contacted at david@irwin.org. You can follow David Irwin on twitter at [@drdaavidirwin](https://twitter.com/drdaavidirwin).

