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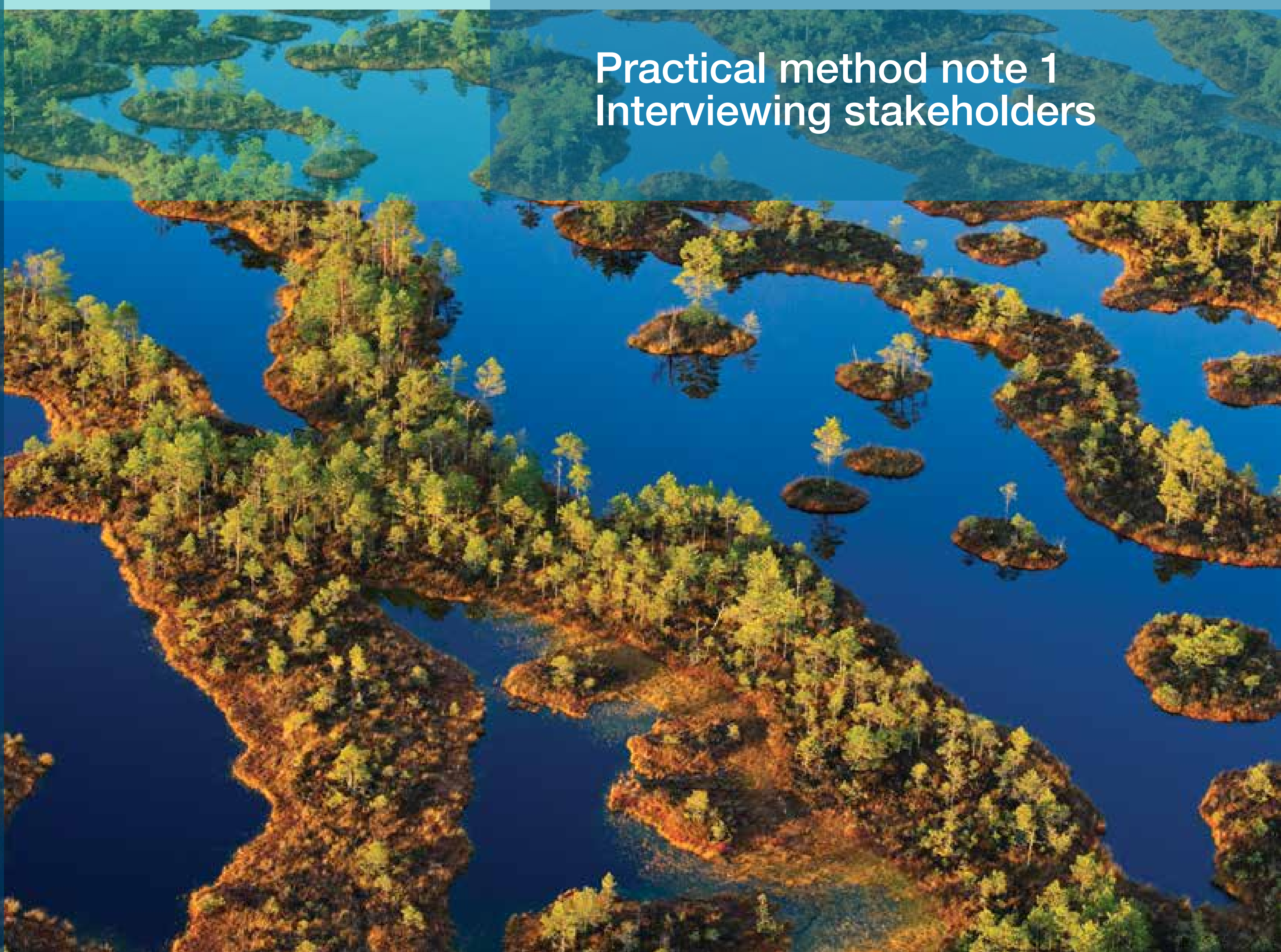
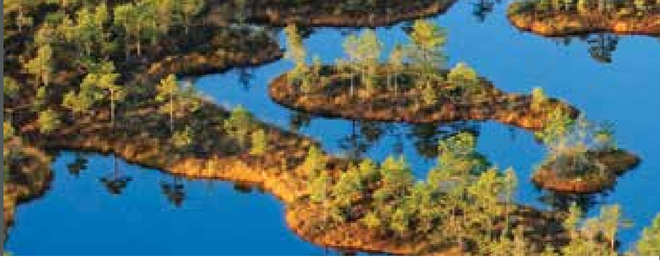
Annex 1

Practical method note 1
Interviewing stakeholders



PRACTICAL METHOD NOTE 1



INTERVIEWING STAKEHOLDERS

Sensitive and effective interviewing lies at the heart of stakeholder engagement, and is widely used in biodiversity research. Broadly speaking, there are two types of interview commonly used in biodiversity research: structured interviews; and semi-structured interviews. *Structured* interviews are usually based on questionnaires, although an interviewer may be given a number of open questions to ask as well (where the answers will be in narrative form). As such, structured interviews are typically a data collection method, and their impersonal, stilted nature does not make them well suited to engaging with stakeholders in two-way dialogue. What follows focuses on semi-structured interviewing, which is harder to apply, but if done well it has the capacity to engage stakeholders effectively in two-way dialogue.

Semi-structured interviews are a guided interviewing and listening tool in which only some of the questions and topics are pre-determined; other questions arise during the interview. The interviews appear informal and conversational, but are actually carefully controlled and structured. Using a guide or checklist, the research team poses open-ended questions and probes topics as they arise. Irrelevant questions can be dropped and new questions can be added as their importance becomes apparent

WHEN TO USE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The semi-structured approach is suited for doing scoping interviews at the preparatory or initial stages of a research project or during proposal development. They can be used to engage stakeholders in dialogue about potential research avenues and the issues and concerns most relevant to those likely to use the research. They are also commonly used to collect qualitative interview data during the data collection phase of research, which is then transcribed and analysed using various forms of content analysis.

HOW TO DO SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Becoming an effective interviewer takes practice, and comes more naturally to some personality types than others. Those who are naturally empathetic and outgoing in their personality typically find interviewing less daunting than others. However, many of the skills required can be learned easily, and honed with practice. The goal is for an interview to operate like a natural conversation. A successful interview will be highly engaging, and the person being interviewed will hardly even notice that they are being steered through the topics by the interviewer.

To use semi-structured interviews successfully, the following steps may be used:

1. The research team establish who they will interview (see Part 3 on stakeholder identification in this *Handbook*).
2. The interviewer develops a checklist of the information they want to cover, to ensure nothing is missed. To develop a comprehensive and relevant checklist, it may be useful to brainstorm with colleagues, prioritise through discussion and

then check with key informants from the local community.

3. Interviewers can practice interviews with each other and/or with a few stakeholders that they already know, to become familiar with the questions, and get feedback on their two-way communication skills.

4. The context or setting of the interview is important. Take note of the surroundings – whether it is an inappropriate time (e.g. food cooking or children needing attention). Is the interviewee sitting comfortably, and level with the interviewer and not seated too far distant from the interviewer? Be careful to use body language that is open, friendly and non-threatening.

5. Before recording an interview, ask permission. For most research funders, it will be necessary to provide a consent form. Record what is said and if possible what is not said (e.g. awkward hesitation or tension). Record who said what, and check notes with a colleague afterwards if possible. Where possible, use a voice recorder, but if necessary, only take brief notes during the interview. Immediately following the interview, elaborate upon the notes. By using a recorder (whether it is a tape recorder or a colleague taking notes), the interviewer is free to maintain eye contact and guide a conversation through each of the points on the check-list in the order that is most natural.

6. Sensitive interviewing depends on sensitive listening and questioning. Give eye contact and have an open attitude to what the interviewee says. Ask open-ended, non-directive questions, and probe responses carefully until the answer is fully understood.

7. Cross-check the responses: try and distinguish between fact (can be substantiated), opinion (a personal or group view on a topic), and rumour (unsubstantiated information from an unknown source). Cross-check and verify information with other sources. This can often be done by probing within the interview, asking why their information differs from that provided by others. If appropriate (depending on the level of confidentiality assured), discuss the information with stakeholders so that they can challenge the perceptions of the research team.

8. The points on the interview check-list should be flexible. New points can be added as their importance becomes apparent. Irrelevant points can be dropped. If the person being interviewed turns out to be an expert on a particular issue, the whole interview may concentrate on that issue in order to gain a greater depth of understanding (the interviewer would then be using the person as a ‘key informant’).

9. The people being interviewed should be able to ask the interviewer questions as well.

10. After the interview, the interviewer should critically reflect on the experience: which questions were effective or not? How could the context, body language, questions, etc., be improved?

11. If possible, analyse the information at the end of each day of interviewing.

The following table provides some examples of good and bad practice when conducting semi-structured interviewing:

GOOD PRACTICE	BAD PRACTICE
Introduce yourself respectfully and develop rapport	Start questioning immediately without developing rapport
Find out if the person has time to participate, or if it is possible to arrange a time later on	Start questioning without finding out if the person has time
Find a place where everyone is comfortable	Remain standing or sit in a position above them (e.g. if they sit on the ground do not stay standing)
Use open, non-threatening body language and give eye-contact	Use closed (e.g. crossed legs and arms) or threatening (e.g. towering over or pointing) body language or avoid eye-contact
Use a recorder or note-taker	Take all the notes yourself – it will prevent you engaging effectively with people, and you may not be able to decipher them later
Where possible, visit the places you are talking about and continue the interview there – this is likely to provoke deeper and more relevant questioning and understanding	Miss opportunities to learn in greater depth, even if it means spending more time
Allow the conversation to develop as naturally as possible, but maintain direction so that points on check-list are covered	Structure the interview around the order of your check-list points, for example “Now I would like to ask you about…”
Identify people who are particularly knowledgeable on certain points, and gather more detailed information from them	Miss opportunities to gather more detailed information from certain people for the sake of always covering all check-list points
Use open, non-leading, unambiguous questions	Use closed, leading or ambiguous questions
Review and record notes each night while they are fresh in your memory, and check relevance of check-list	Leave notes until you cannot remember what they meant or discover you should have asked more about an important issue

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BENEFITS OF LISTENING

Semi-structured interviews can be used to meet a variety of aims in stakeholder engagement. In the BIOSCENE project, interviews were an essential preparatory step prior to workshops where stakeholders were involved in developing and assessing scenarios (see scenario analysis practical method note 5). Stakeholders with widely differing perspectives were deliberately sought, and during the interviews they had the opportunity to fully express their views and provide a narrative of their experiences of agricultural decline in mountain areas. Listening to each participant express their thoughts at the outset of the project reduced tensions during subsequent stakeholder workshops. The interview data also provided essential information for the construction of scenarios.

BODY LANGUAGE

The following example is from biodiversity research conducted with pastoralist communities in the Kalahari desert, Botswana. In the upper image, the interviewer (on the right) is duplicating notes despite having a note-taker with him (on the left). Neither is giving the respondent eye contact, and the respondent is looking at the page where the interviewer is writing. The interviewer's paper is acting as a partial physical barrier between him and the respondent, and the body language is closed – head down and arms in. The respondent is sitting in a position that is lower than the interviewees, so he has to look up to them and they are looking down on him. In the lower image, the interviewer (centre) is not taking notes and so does not have any kind of physical barrier between him and the respondents. The body language is open – the interviewer is giving eye contact and his hands and arms are open in a non-threatening and welcoming gesture. All of them are standing so the interviewer is on approximately the same level as the respondents.

Examples of inappropriate (left) and effective (right) body language during interviews.

Annex 1 of “*The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook.* BiodivERsA, Paris (108 pp). © BiodivERsA, Paris, 2014”

The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook is available online at http://www.biodiversa.org/577

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