

Interviewing

Bronwen McDonald and Patricia Rogers

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Contributors: Greet Peersman

Reviewers: Nikola Balvin, Samuel Bickel, Karin Heissler

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UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti
Piazza SS. Annunziata, 12
50122 Florence, Italy
Tel: (+39) 055 20 330
Fax: (+39) 055 2033 220
florence@unicef.org
www.unicef-irc.org

1. INTERVIEWS: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Interviews are a commonly used data collection method in [impact evaluation](#), and there are many different options to consider when including them.

In the context of UNICEF impact evaluations, interviewees may be children, primary caregivers, advocates for children or other key informants. Interviewees can be chosen randomly or purposefully (or using a combination of the two), and they can be interviewed individually or in groups, face to face or 'virtually' (i.e., via an online medium). Interviews can be conducted in a structured, semi-structured or unstructured way. Responses can be recorded as audio, video, notes or codes, or using a computer. The range of analysis options includes: developing detailed descriptions of processes or life impacts; generating themes to summarize the data; or not undertaking significant analysis but instead using interview quotes to illustrate quantitative data.

This brief outlines key issues to consider in planning interviews for impact evaluation, taking into account the purpose of the evaluation, how interview data aim to complement other data for assessing impact, and the availability of resources. The brief provides specific advice on successfully conducting interviews with children, including how to address the particular ethical issues involved. The efforts required to plan interviews properly and conduct them well should not be underestimated.

Main points

1. Interviews are easy to do badly and hard to do well – good planning, adequate time and appropriate skills are required.
2. The type of interview should be carefully chosen to suit the situation rather than choosing a type of interview (such as focus groups) simply because it is commonly used.
3. Interviews with children raise particular ethical issues that need to be carefully considered and fully addressed.

2. WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE TO USE THIS METHOD?

There are five interrelated reasons for using interviews in impact evaluation.

1. Identifying changes that have occurred

Interviews – especially those that incorporate open-ended questions – can provide valuable information about changes that have occurred, including planned and unplanned, and positive and negative changes. They can also provide useful information about changes that cannot be readily measured. Since children and/or their primary caregivers are the main target audiences for UNICEF programmes and policies, their views on the results of such interventions are critical.

2. Helping to establish and explain causality

Interviews can help to establish the contribution of a programme or a policy to observed changes. For example, where it has been established that participants in a hygiene programme have subsequently shown improved health outcomes, interviewees can help to clarify the contribution of the programme to this change by providing evidence about intermediate outcomes (e.g., new knowledge acquired as a result of

the hygiene programme, and how this has influenced behaviour) and about other factors that might have contributed to the behaviour change (e.g., improved access to cleaning agents such as soap or ash).

3. Identifying lessons learned

Individual interviews and group interviews with programme teams and key stakeholders can be used throughout the duration of a programme to identify emerging impacts and/or how to improve positive results further using the available resources. Group interviews can be especially useful, provided that participants feel comfortable sharing information in the group.

4. Testing and adapting the programme's theory of change

An evidence-based programme [theory of change](#) (see Brief No. 2, Theory of Change) should be developed during the design phase of a programme, with assumptions identified. Interview techniques can be used to build a more robust causal theory as the programme's implementation progresses, and this may even trigger a redesign of the programme.

5. Synthesizing evidence from multiple data sources

Interviews do not only have to be about gathering information about activities and results. Group interviews with [key informants](#), in which evaluation data are presented and discussed, can be used to identify key themes and to test findings. These preliminary findings can be further tested or built upon in the additional, more detailed data analyses.

3. HOW TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS

Given the many different types of interview possible, there is a series of decision points to navigate when planning to use interview methods. The following list is not prescriptive or sequential, but should instead be thought of as a process with the potential for iterative steps, where making one particular decision might lead to the need to revisit an earlier decision.

It is assumed here that the programme has already been described and the data needed to answer the [key evaluation questions \(KEQs\)](#) already identified (see Brief No. 1, Overview of Impact Evaluation; Brief No. 3, Evaluative Criteria; and Brief No. 4, Evaluative Reasoning). Compliance with ethical and legal obligations is addressed in section 4. Strategies for analysis and for reporting results are outlined in section 6.



Key decision points when planning to use interview methods

Be explicit about why interviews are appropriate – in particular, why the data cannot be gathered through other, less intrusive means (e.g., use of existing data). This rationale for using interviews will guide decisions about the type of interview required.

Key decision points when planning to use interview methods

Decide who to interview

Identify who holds the information or opinions to be gathered, and how their consent and engagement will be obtained.

Trade-offs may be necessary when selecting interviewees. For example, selecting a stratified random sample that covers all sites may be the ideal, but the available time and resources may preclude this. Special considerations in the selection process may be necessary when interviewing people about particularly sensitive issues or under certain conditions (e.g., homeless people). Endorsement by local gatekeepers, or formal or informal authorities may also be necessary in order to succeed in engaging people in interviews.

There may be consequences for the generalizability of the findings if certain individuals cannot be included in the interviews. The evaluation report should document any such limitations.

Decide on the interview type

Decide on the appropriate combination of individual and group interviews, and whether these will be conducted face to face or virtually.

Individual interviews provide the necessary privacy to elicit insights that might not surface in a group dynamic. They are also good for revealing personal or unique experiences, which will add to the understanding of the range of experiences of an intervention.

Group processes can provide the opportunity for participants to build on each other's views and even reach a consensus position. Group work requires particularly skilled facilitation, however, to ensure that the findings are truly representative of the group as a whole and not just the dominant voice. The composition of the group – in terms of role vis-à-vis the intervention, or in terms of characteristics such as age or gender – is also a critical issue. Sometimes it can be useful to first interview the separate subgroups and then bring them together for a full group interview, where ideas and perceptions can be shared and responded to.

Face-to-face interviews allow the interviewer some control over the environment in which the interview takes place. An additional advantage is that being on site may allow the interviewer to observe many other things or take photos/video as well.

Technological methods for interviewing include the use of telephone conferencing and video conferencing using webcams (for example, Skype or GoToMeeting). Such methods can increase the opportunity to interview people in more remote locations or in areas where security issues prevent researchers from travelling.

Examples of specific interview techniques for groups

Focus group discussion: While this term is often used for any group interview, it refers specifically to a discussion among people of similar status who are asked about their opinions on and/or experiences of a certain issue or concern in order to understand the dimensions and rationale.

Key decision points when planning to use interview methods

ORID interview: A specific facilitation framework for a focused group interview, which begins with objective questions (what the group knows), followed by reflective questions (how people feel), then interpretive questions (what this means) and, finally, decisional questions (what should be done).

Nominal group technique: Participants generate ideas in small groups and then share them in a 'round robin' (one at a time from each group, in turn) before discussing and choosing the best option.

Structured interviews: Every individual or group is asked the same questions in the same order and in the same way. This is appropriate where the information required can be tightly specified and where there are concerns that respondents might answer differently if the interviewer provides additional information.

Semi-structured interviews: Some questions are predetermined but new (follow-up) questions are also included, based on the information obtained during the interview. An interview guide is used to ensure that the same topics are covered and the same format followed with each respondent. This is often appropriate in an impact evaluation when there is considerable clarity about the information required but also a need to remain open to learning about new issues, like unintended impacts and contributory factors.

Unstructured interviews: None of the questions are predetermined, and instead topic areas and themes guide a conversation that allows the interviewer to pursue follow-up and new lines of discussion. This format is appropriate in an exploratory phase where it is unclear what issues should be covered.

Multiple sessions may sometimes be needed to obtain in-depth information, for example, to understand informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words.

If interviewing children, the interviewer must be able to create a child-friendly atmosphere that promotes fun (where appropriate) and which provides a safe space for children to talk. It might be appropriate to use techniques such as drawing, role play or mapping and then discuss these in an interview.

Good interviews usually seek both quantitative and qualitative information, and use a combination of closed and open questions. **Closed questions** have predetermined answers, for example, yes/no or a rating out of 10. **Open questions** typically involve asking questions that begin 'Why...?', 'Why not...?' or 'What is your opinion...?' and encouraging interviewees to answer as they feel appropriate.

Interview questions should be phrased neutrally and clearly encourage respondents to share either positive or negative opinions or experiences. As with questionnaires, interview questions must be clear. It may be possible, and indeed useful, to include more complicated questions, as

Decide the level of structure of the interview

Decide on the interview questions

Key decision points when planning to use interview methods

Interviews provide the opportunity for follow-up clarifications or to elicit further details. This, however, must be weighed up against the need for more experienced interviewers, or for more in-depth training of interviewers, to ensure consistency across interviews.

It is important to draw on the lessons learned in constructing interview questions (or questionnaires/surveys) to avoid common mistakes and to maximize the validity of the responses.¹

There is no single best way to sequence the questions. Some experts recommend asking first for demographic data (e.g., age, gender, race, etc.) because these details are straightforward and can help respondents to ease into the interview; others recommend that such details are requested at the end to avoid respondents feeling that they may have to justify their responses according to their demographics.

Interviewers can have a significant influence on the quality and nature of data collected through interviews. Characteristics such as being self-aware, empathetic and non-judgemental, and the ability to listen actively all come into play. Interviewers' skills and characteristics should be carefully identified, including whether there is a need for gender balance in the team, and processes for reference checking established. In general, better information is gathered when the interviewer and respondent relate well. For example, using interviewers who know the local language and are familiar with the local culture should be considered where possible.

Where translators are needed, it is important to ensure that they have adequate knowledge of relevant terms and understand the need to translate the details of what is being said, not just the main points.

It is possible to capture answers:

- using pen and paper
- on a tablet, mobile phone or personal digital assistant
- by making an audio or video recording
- using Livescribe, a paper-based computing platform that allows writing and recording for later uploading to a computer, which then synchronizes the notes with the audio
- using a computer programme (e.g., some methods such as concept mapping are supported by their own specific software).

The interviewer may take notes or respondents may be asked to record their own answers. Audio or video recording offers the interviewer the advantage of being able to concentrate more on the actual conversation. Groups may be asked to summarize and record their views as part of the facilitation process.

Decide who should conduct the interview

Decide how to capture data

¹ For advice on question construction, see: Patton, Michael Quinn, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, third edition, Sage, Newbury Park, 2002; and Taylor-Powell, Ellen, 'Questionnaire Design: Asking questions with a purpose', Cooperative Extension, University of Wisconsin–Extension, Madison, 1998.

Key decision points when planning to use interview methods

Recording requires special permission from the respondents. This permission should be sought explicitly as part of the informed consent (see section 4, below).

Quality assurance procedures are checks built into the questions, the interview process or the management of interview data that allow for errors to be identified as soon as possible so that timely corrections or adjustments can be made.

Quality assurance procedures should include:

- the process for piloting and adapting, where necessary, interview questions (see also below)
- appropriate training of interviewers, including specific directions to the interviewer (see below) on how to proceed with the interview process and content (e.g., when and how to apply questions about the health of children under five in a household)
- a requirement for interviewers to record any issues or unexpected circumstances that they think may have affected the responses (e.g., inability to provide a private space for interviewing a child in a household) and how these should be addressed by or discussed with fieldwork supervisors
- identification of logical inconsistencies in the data (e.g., if members of a household are unemployed, no income should be recorded). Such errors should, ideally, be identified right away (if not by the interviewer, then by the fieldwork supervisor) to allow the interviewer to go back to the interviewee to double-check or obtain further clarification or justification.

Establish quality assurance procedures

Plan the interviews as a mini project. Work out costs, roles and responsibilities, risk management, timings, ethical issues and legal checks, and include all of these in the project management of the evaluation. Decide how respondents will be acknowledged, what feedback they will be given, whether their expenses will be paid, etc., and consider how to make the interview a constructive experience for the interviewee.

It is also important to plan specifically how the interviews will proceed, including:

- a setting and timings to suit those being interviewed
- how much compensation (if any) is paid to participants
- how the interview is introduced, including the purpose of the interview, the rights and freedoms respondents have to respond or withdraw, and provisions around privacy and permission to record the interview
- what information is covered and when (this is critical for group interviewing)

Finalize the plan



Key decision points when planning to use interview methods

- how the interview is concluded, including what feedback will be provided.

Piloting is critical for improving not only the interview questions but also the interview processes, to avoid capturing answers that are less than useful and wasting respondents' time and efforts. Piloting should include checking:

- how different respondents understand the questions
- the complexity of the questions
- the accuracy of the answer sets for closed questions
- interviewees' ability to follow the sequence of the questioning
- the quality of any translation involved
- the management of the interview (i.e., how interviewers introduced themselves, asked for informed consent, etc.)
- that quality assurance procedures are functioning properly.

Respondents in the piloting phase must be selected from the pool of people who qualify for participation in the actual study.

Consider producing a 'dummy' final report to check with key stakeholders that this is in line with what they expect from the actual evaluation report.

The interviews and quality assurance procedures can now be implemented according to what has been planned. It is important to stay alert to any emerging issues or logistical challenges, however, which may prompt revisions to the plan. This may also involve, for example, adding further questions to an interview schedule and/or adding more interviewees.

4. ETHICAL ISSUES AND PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS

Interviews raise particular ethical issues in terms of four key areas, especially where children are involved as interviewees or interviewers.

1. Potential harm or benefit

Interviews should only be done when there is a reasonable expectation that the information obtained from them can be used and is likely to be of benefit.

Potential sources of harm should be identified and the risk of their occurrence reduced. Negative consequences may arise if:

- non-participants (i.e., the wider public) find out who has participated and, even worse, what was said
- a disclosure made by a participant in a group interview later rebounds on that participant
- a clumsy interviewer upsets an interviewee, making them feel useless or worse.

Every participant should leave an individual or group interview feeling that they have made a worthwhile contribution and that their feelings and/or status have not been compromised in any way.

Where there is the potential for an interview to cause trauma, plans must be in place to provide backup support. In some instances, for example, where violence or abuse is discussed, counselling of interviewees, and interviewers, may be required.

A particular area of concern is interviewing about sensitive topics. Interviewers need to guard against implying that people *must* talk about private matters. At the same time, they should also prevent people from speaking too openly in situations of violence or poor social control. These dangers are brought to the fore more by interviews than by any other data collection technique.

There is also the need to fulfil specific legal obligations, including any legal obligation to act to protect children if evidence of sexual abuse is uncovered in the interview.

Planning for interviews must include identifying potential risks and reducing their likelihood of occurring, and developing action plans to respond appropriately if necessary.

2. Informed consent

Seek informed consent from all potential respondents – or, in the case of children, their parents or caregiver(s) – to participate in the interview, to record the interview and to take photos (if applicable). All potential respondents need to be clear about why the interviews are being undertaken and any potential consequences of being involved. There should be no coercion and participants must be free to withdraw at any stage.

Interviewers should revisit informed consent during the interview process, especially when procedures are involved that may not have been fully understood when consent was initially asked for. For example, when blood is to be taken to test for anaemia as part of the interview process, consent should be asked for again; it should not be assumed that this has been granted because the participant has consented to be interviewed.

3. Privacy and confidentiality

Be clear about what is being promised and ensure that it can be delivered. If interviewees are promised that they will not be identified, they must be interviewed in a private space and their involvement in interviews may need to be kept private. Responses may have to be aggregated and paraphrased to avoid inadvertent identification of the sources, and care should be taken when providing context such as the role of the individual quoted. It is not possible to promise confidentiality when conducting group interviews.

4. Payment and compensation

Interviewees should be reimbursed for their expenses and acknowledged for their contribution. Requirements for confidentiality may, however, limit the ability to acknowledge participants, for example, where it is important not to disclose the identity of the key informants. In some cases, it may also be appropriate to compensate interviewees for their participation. UNICEF does not have a specific policy on compensation for participation. Whether or not compensation is an appropriate strategy should be discussed with UNICEF's national counterparts. Any compensation provided should not unfairly favour one group over another, distort responses or bias the results in any other way.

5. WHICH OTHER METHODS WORK WELL WITH THIS ONE?

Interviews are likely to be a useful component of most impact evaluations, when used in combination with other data collection methods. Interviews can be used with any design option ([experimental](#), [quasi-experimental](#) or [non-experimental](#)). They can be used to further develop a theory of change or to test it.

Interviews can be used in parallel (at the same time) with other methods or in sequence, where information from one data type is used to inform further data collection (see box 1).

Box 1. An example of sequential methods

When investigating the experiences of different groups of participants, interviews can be used in a sequential fashion as follows:

1. Conduct a **document review** to explore existing knowledge about the attributes of the population in question.
2. Hold **semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews** with key informants to identify some basic groups.
3. On the basis of step 2, form some **focus groups** where each group represents a defined category, and test whether these categories hold and what are the attitudes and aspirations around a specific service.
4. On the basis of step 3, design and implement a **structured interview with a statistically significant but randomly selected sample** to further confirm the findings and to add some quantitative dimensions to the categories.

When interviews take place face to face, there is an opportunity to collect additional data that is deemed to add value for what is generally a low additional cost (e.g., extra time). For example, an interviewer can observe the presence or absence of issues of interest such as the availability of books in the household or soap in the school toilets at the time of their visit to ask the interview questions. The interviewer may also be able to take certain measurements (e.g., distance to the nearest available water source) provided that consent to do so is obtained.

6. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Data from interviews should be analysed in terms of the KEQs (see Brief No. 1, Overview of Impact Evaluation) and the theory of change (see Brief No. 2, Theory of Change). As with any qualitative data, it is often useful to code sections of data in terms of categories that relate to these [conceptual frameworks](#) as well as to demographic data about interviewees. The data should be analysed to produce initial answers to the KEQs. The initial answers should then be further developed by searching for disconfirming evidence (examples that don't fit the pattern) in existing data and in additional data collected following this initial analysis.

Specialist computer packages to support the systematic analysis of qualitative interview data include NVivo, MAXQDA and HyperRESEARCH. Training to use these tools well may be expensive and difficult to access, however. It is possible to use paper or spreadsheets to analyse only small amounts of data, but it is difficult to be as systematic in the analysis approach and recording as when using specialist software.

The evaluation report should not provide summaries of the interview data separated from other data sources used in the evaluation. Instead, ways of presenting interview data may include:

- illustrative quotes
- a consolidated timeline of events or sequence of processes
- summaries that paraphrase what was said
- frequency tables and graphs showing numeric summaries of the data after they have been grouped
- tables that show differences between groups in terms of what was said, for example, identifying the different community needs identified by male and female interviewees.

Results should be presented in response to the key evaluation questions. When reporting interview findings it is important to include a statement of the limitations of the methods used, details of the lessons learned about these methods, a description of the people who participated (without compromising their privacy) and an appropriate acknowledgement of the participants' contribution.

7. EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICES

The impact evaluation of the child-friendly schools² in Moldova used a quasi-experimental design and focused on an intervention that integrated the five principles of the child-friendly school:

1. inclusiveness
2. efficiency
3. a safe, protective and healthy environment
4. gender equity and friendliness
5. family and community involvement.

The evaluation is a good example of the combining of qualitative and quantitative data, which were collected through interview and other methods.

Interview methods:

- a structured interview (using a questionnaire) to seek the views of 116 teachers and 360 students using closed questions
- separate focus groups with students, parents and teachers
- semi-structured interviews and consultations with key informants.

Non-interview methods:

- [observations](#)
- [document analysis](#).

Good practices in the methods used included:

- The interview methods were designed, tested and revised after a document review was completed.
- The limitations of the methods used were clearly reported and ameliorated as much as possible.
- The findings from the different types of interviews and other data collection methods were well integrated, to tell the overall story, and addressed the purposes of the evaluation.
- A 'validation' workshop was held to check the findings with key stakeholders.

² Velea, Simona, and CReDO (Human Rights Resource Centre), *Child-Friendly Schools, External Evaluation Report of the Child-Friendly School Initiative (2007–2011), Republic of Moldova*, Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova/UNICEF, 2012. See http://www.unicef.org/moldova/CFS_EN_PRINT.pdf.

The evaluation report included annexes that contained the structured interview questionnaires as well as the interview schedule for the focus groups. The latter clearly showed how the different stakeholder groups required different questions. By splitting the groups into students, teachers and parents, the evaluation team was able to more effectively obtain views from each of these groups.

8. EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGES

Interviews procedures may be undertaken badly at each of the stages outlined previously in section 3.

Poor choice of interviews as a data collection method: Interviews are included even though they are unlikely to provide useful information, for example, where those being interviewed don't have adequate knowledge about a programme because of high staff turnover.

Poor sampling: Interviews only include participants who can be contacted easily, who have been recommended by service providers or who have a positive view of a programme. This can systematically exclude those who have been unable to access the service or who have not found it useful, for example, those in remote areas or from excluded group.

Poor environment for interviewing: There is inadequate privacy in the venue chosen for interviewing, which reduces the quality of information shared and/or risks the safety of interviewees.

Poor interviewing technique: Ineffective interviewers and translators do not encourage people to give detailed answers that provide rich descriptions of their experiences and opinions. Ineffective translators fail to give people enough time to talk or encourage them to continue. Ineffective translators provide rough summaries of what people have said rather than communicating their detailed comments.

Inadequate recording: There is no audio or video recording, even where this would have been possible, so useful information about intonation, emphasis, hesitancy, body language and exact wording is lost. Notes from the interview are not written up immediately after the interview, so much of the detail is forgotten and what is recorded is heavily influenced by the interviewer's preconceptions.

Inadequate analysis: The analysis consists only of a search for 'themes', which is uninformed by the theory of change or other conceptual framework. There is no transparency about why certain categories have been used or how data have been categorized. There is no systematic analysis of patterns across sites or groups, nor a search for exceptions to observed patterns.

Inadequate reporting: Data from interviews are analysed and reported separately from other sources of data. Quotes are included without any indication of whether these are typical or exceptional.

9. KEY READINGS AND LINKS

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GLOSSARY

<u>Conceptual framework</u>	<i>A system of concepts, assumptions, expectations and theories that structures the research/evaluation by identifying the research variables and their relationships. It assists with identifying the problem and framing the research questions/KEQs. Related terms: theoretical framework. See: theory of change.</i>
<u>Document analysis</u>	<i>Systematic analysis of the content of relevant documents for research and evaluation purposes. See: content analysis.</i>
<u>Experimental design</u>	<i>A research or evaluation design with two or more randomly selected groups (an experimental group and control group) in which the researcher controls or introduces an intervention (such as a new programme or policy) and measures its impact on the dependent variable at least two times (pre- and post-test measurements). In particular RCTs – which originated in clinical settings and are known as the ‘gold standard’ of medical and health research – are often used for addressing evaluative research questions, which seek to assess the effectiveness of programmatic and policy interventions in developmental settings.</i>
<u>Impact evaluation</u>	<i>An evaluation that provides information about the impacts produced by an intervention. It can be undertaken of a programme or a policy, or upstream work – such as capacity building, policy advocacy and support for an enabling environment. It goes beyond looking only at goals and objectives to also examine unintended impacts.</i>
<u>Key evaluation questions (KEQs)</u>	<i>High-level (macro level) evaluation questions about overall performance, which the evaluation should aim to answer. KEQs are derived from the purpose of the evaluation.</i>
<u>Key informant</u>	<i>Research/evaluation participants who are likely to be well informed about an issue, and willing to answer without bias.</i>
<u>Non-experimental design</u>	<i>A type of research design that does not include a control or comparison group and/or does not include a baseline evaluation. Thus, several factors prevent the attribution of an observed effect to the intervention. See: experimental design, quasi-experimental design.</i>
<u>Observation</u>	<i>Watching something and taking note of anything it does/anything that happens. Participant behaviour may be recorded in quantitative (e.g., real-time coded categories), qualitative (e.g., note-taking for case study) formats, or by special media (e.g., audio or video recordings).</i>
<u>Pilot study</u>	<i>A small scale study conducted to test the plan and method of a research study.</i>
<u>Quasi-experimental design</u>	<i>A research/evaluation design in which participants/subjects are not randomly assigned to treatment/intervention conditions, but in which comparison groups are constructed by statistical means. It differs from the (classic) controlled experiment by not having random assignment of the treatment/intervention.</i>
<u>Theory of change</u>	<i>Explains how activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts. It can be developed for any level of intervention – an event, a project, a programme, a policy, a strategy or an organization.</i>