

Oral history interviews (OHIs)

Participatory research methods for sustainability – toolkit #5

When addressing land use related sustainability issues, looking to the past can contribute an important layer of information. For this, oral history interviews are a useful approach, especially when written sources are not available or do not adequately reflect the views of certain relevant social groups, such as the practitioners directly involved in a certain land use. This toolkit provides an overview of how to use and implement oral history interviews.

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The way humans shape and interact with their environment is closely linked to different aspects and dimensions of sustainability as changes in land use practices related to, for example, forestry, agriculture, settlements or resource extraction impact socio-ecological systems. Information on past land use, the context in which a specific practice evolved and was performed, and the resulting sustainability outcomes are therefore of high relevance. Information on past land use and its development can be found in various source types, such as statistical information, pictorial sources, written documents or historical maps. The main additional value of oral history interviews (OHIs) is that they provide firsthand information from the people starting, performing, witnessing or abandoning specific land use practices.

OHIs were traditionally part of anthropological methods. But in the 1940s, American historians began using them to fill information gaps due to incomplete official documentation in federal archives (Wierling 2003). Conducting OHIs soon developed

into an important approach in the disciplines of history, especially in contemporary history (“Zeitgeschichte”), history of everyday life (“Alltagsgeschichte”) and microhistory. OHIs are often seen as a tool for capturing “the history from below”, with the ability to show changes and persistence in everyday living conditions, as well as gaining information on social groups that are usually omitted in historical documents or to whom these only refer to from a third person’s perspective (Schaffner 2013).

Over the last 30 years, OHIs have increasingly been used in various interdisciplinary approaches such as studies on land use and landscape change (e.g., Li et al. 2017, Riley and Harvey 2007). Written documents or statistical information contain information about the occurrence or regulations of, for example, a particular agricultural system, but lack information and traditional knowledge on the spatio-temporal pattern of the actually performed practice, such as the intensity, seasonality, necessary equipment, skills and workforce and certainly on the experienced social and market context. For example, in a study of traditional forest use in Switzerland, the systematic use of OHIs highlighted the gap between the regulatory forest law requirements and the on-the-ground practices, which are shaped by local demand and power relations (Stuber and Bürgi 2012).

In this series, we aim to alert GAIA readers to useful toolkits for participatory research methods in sustainability science. If you would like to contribute a toolkit description, please contact gaia@oekom.de.

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Procedure

Conducting OHIs is not a narrowly defined research method, but has to be adapted to the particular research goal of a given project/case study. Typically, a research protocol includes the following steps:

Research goal

The specific research goal and topic largely determines the role and functions of OHIs in a given project. The following main objectives for working with historical sources in sustainability research can be combined and linked within a specific project:

- **Preserving cultural heritage:** Cultural heritage, which encompasses traditional knowledge and hence the wisdom and experience entailed in a particular land use practice as well as the resulting cultural landscape, deserves to be documented and preserved. A full and complete picture of all necessary steps and procedures of a practice and tradition can only be attained by asking the respective practitioners, for which OHIs can be a useful method. This is especially true when the actors' internal view and self-interpretation of these practices are included.
- **Understanding patterns, processes and pathways of socio-ecological systems:** Current patterns, processes and pathways in contemporary socio-ecological systems are the result of interacting natural processes and anthropogenic activities including potential time lags. Interpreting present conditions therefore requires knowledge of past developments. OHIs provide detailed information on the anthropogenic activities and their impact as well as on natural events, which might not be sufficiently documented in other source types. Additionally, information on specific institutional contexts and socio-economic conditions in which a certain practice or activity was developed, including aspects of social justice, can be collected in OHIs.
- **Informing policy and management:** If policy and management measures are developed in a co-design process, historical information from an actor perspective, as derived from OHIs, is an asset. It is therefore advisable to cover topics in the interviews which are of relevance to the various groups involved in policy development. Furthermore, if a project aims at informing policy and management directed at transformative change towards sustainability, questions on specific sustainability outcomes of land use practices must be included in the OHIs.

Interview type and sampling approach

Specifying the research goal is the basis for the decision on the type of OHI to be conducted. We distinguish between OHIs conducted as expert interviews, which focus on specific aspects of land use (practices) and narrative interviews, which are of a more exploratory character (Wierling 2003). Finding interview partners is greatly facilitated by local knowledge, existing contacts, cooperation with study partners or institutions such as local history societies, professional associations or city councils. Depending on the requirements regarding target group, additional interviewees can thereafter be found by snowball sampling.

Interview situation

In general, OHIs are conducted according to standard interview practices, which include the following points (see also Wierling 2003, pp. 105 ff.): To adhere to the ethics of interviewing, informed consent must be obtained prior to the interview. Important aspects include informing interviewees about the research project,

declaring the degree of anonymity and referring to the fact that interviewees are free to choose which questions to answer and when to end the interview. It is advisable to let the interviewee choose the location where the interview will take place (e.g., at home or in a café), to ensure that the interviewee feels comfortable. Riley and Harvey (2007) have shown that it can also be valuable to conduct interviews outside, directly on the land one is talking about. To be able to pay full attention to the interviewee and the conversation, it is generally advisable to record the interview. Depending on the situation, filming the conversation can also be a useful option. The interviewee must always give consent for recording or filming.

Postprocessing

During postprocessing the OHIs are usually transcribed. The recording as well as the transcription should be anonymized in correspondence with the informed consent given. The further use of the OHI transcripts is closely linked to the specific research goals, hence there are a variety of analysis options, such as qualitative content analysis or discourse analysis, which can either deliver the desired insights in themselves or be used to inform broader approaches such as grounded theory. As a final step in a transparent and fair data collection process, an appropriate form of sharing the knowledge and insights gained through OHIs with the interviewees should be determined (box 1).

Skills and resources needed

Usually, a recorder/video set-up is the only technical resource needed. Depending on the purpose of the interview, the necessary quality of the equipment may vary between a professional recorder/video set-up and the recording option most phones are equipped with. For transcription and analysis, qualitative coding programs such as *MAXQDA*, *NVivo* or *QCAmap* (open source) can facilitate the workflow. Recently, voice-to-text programs have also become more advanced, so one can also consider pre-editing the interview in this way and then correcting the transcripts manually. However, strong dialects and mumbling voices of the interviewees can make manual transcription the better choice. If researchers lacking a social science background intend to conduct OHIs, acquiring basic knowledge of social science approaches is strongly recommended (e.g., Moon and Blackmann 2014).

Strengths and weaknesses

- A key strength of OHIs is that they add a bottom-up perspective to historical sources that depict only what was considered important by the issuing authority. This is further important in terms of social justice, as it means that less-heard voices can be recognized and taken into account.
- OHIs can be valuable in regions or for topics for which no other historical sources are available.

BOX 1: Assessing the history of forest uses by asking the forest users

Non-commercial forest uses are rather poorly documented in written sources, although they are of great relevance for forest development. To better understand the factors that shape the diverse forest structures in the Swiss alpine valley of Avers, which is characterized by impressively mighty tree individuals of Larch and Scots Pine trees, OHIs were conducted with elderly long-term inhabitants to complement information taken from various other sources. The results of the study were presented in a publicly available report (Bürgi and Lock 2022) as well as at a well-attended evening event jointly organized with the municipality. The presentation was followed by a reception, which enabled various interactions between the scientists involved and the valley inhabitants (figure 1). It was remarkable to see how much feedback of personal appreciation the report and the information evening triggered in the local population. The project and research process strengthened a shared esteem and respect for the cultural heritage entailed in these forests and its ancient trees.

FIGURE 1: Interviewees, their families and the wider population of the study region attended the presentation of the study results, followed by a reception organized by the local farmer women association.



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- The temporal scope of OHIs is limited by the age of the interviewee, although some extension is possible by including not only the interviewee's own experience, but also their knowledge of the experiences of the previous generation.
- The information obtained with the help of OHIs reflects the respondent's recollection of a particular topic. It is important to be aware that memory is always a construct, which is a mixture of individual perception and societal discourse. Additionally, what is told in an OHI is influenced both by how memories are stored and by the context of the interview itself (Abrams 2016, pp. 78 ff.).
- Oral history interviewing is a time-consuming technique, including planning, conducting, transcribing and analyzing the interviews.
- The interview situation can yield challenging moments, for example if traumatic memories are reproduced or interviewees constantly change the subject. In such moments it can be wise to take a break and possibly resume the interview another time.

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