Building IA Resilience through Advances in Qualitative Study Design

Summary of World Café Session (IAIA23, May 11, 2023)

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Introduction

Many jurisdictions are adopting next generation sustainability-oriented IA frameworks that require wider consideration of the social, health and well-being, cultural, economic, and equity implications of proposed developments (Hacking & Guthrie, 2008; Gibson et al., 2016; Sinclair et al., 2018). IA has long prioritized quantitative approaches for predicting and evaluating potential biophysical impacts, but many of the impact areas identified by sustainability-oriented IA frameworks are not easily nor effectively quantified. Subjectivity is inherent in a variety of these impact categories and value-based judgements are also inherent in the evaluation of impact significance, a fundamental component of IA. Delivering effective impact assessment within the broadening scope of IA, therefore, requires new, innovative, and rigorous applications of qualitative methods. Our research identified a list of qualitative methods available for IA; however, it also identified six needs and associated barriers that must be addressed if these methods are to meaningfully contribute to IA practice going forward. Our IAIA23 World Café session provided an opportunity to bring together global IA leaders to develop concrete strategies that address these needs and barriers in order to strengthen the contributions of qualitative methods in IA.

The World Café

World cafés involve small groups of participants engaging in conversations guided by specific questions related to the topic at hand. The method is considered an efficient way to cross-pollinate ideas amongst a potentially large group of people (Schieffer et al., 2004). Our 90-minute IAIA23 World Café session took on a modified "quick" format in which table groups rotated through six "stations," spending seven to eight minutes at each. At each station, participants were presented with discussion prompts related to one of the six needs for strengthening the effectiveness of qualitative methods in IA, as identified through previous phases of our study. With each set of discussion prompts, table groups responded to the question "What strategies will meet this need and/or overcome the barrier?" (see Appendix A for the discussion prompts). During each new rotation, table groups—approximately eight participants per group—either built on previous groups' discussions or posed new strategies of their own. A designated host remained at each table to update groups on the previous conversations, listen to the discussions, and record key points on large pieces of blank paper covering the tables. Participants were also invited to jot their ideas directly on the paper. Participants were given an additional eight minutes during the final rotation to work with the table host to review the discussion notes and identify key themes that had emerged at the station. The table notes were collected, transcribed, and the key themes are summarized below. The world café session received ethical approval from the University of Manitoba's Research Ethics Board.

Summary of Results

Below, we list some of the key discussion points and themes identified by the world café participants at each station. The six identified needs for strengthening the effectiveness of qualitative methods in IA are not mutually exclusive, but may be addressed through common strategies (e.g., the need for additional training was raised at several stations). The full set of discussion prompts provided during the world café are in Appendix A.

Station #1

The need: Elevating the perceived value of qualitative methods in IA.

The barrier: IA is still largely dominated by a biophysical, quantitative "culture" and qualitative methods are often perceived as less valid or scientific than quantitative methods.

Potential strategies to address this need include:
- Developing policy guidance and repositories of case studies/examples where qualitative methods added value to IA decision-making processes.
- Enhancing confidence in qualitative information by rigorously and consistently applying qualitative methods. This requires the transparent documentation of qualitative methodological procedures.
- Using rigorous qualitative analysis procedures and resisting the temptation to force qualitative data into quantitative frameworks.
- Enhancing qualitative methods skills, interpretation, and certification. Training IA practitioners in qualitative methodologies should start in university (e.g., teach qualitative methods in IA courses).
- Developing standards for qualitative methods.
- Recognizing that qualitative and quantitative is a false dichotomy (not quantitative vs. qualitative); rather, they are synergistic/complementary. There is a need to better link/harmonize "hard" and "soft" data. Mixed methods approaches can promote qualitative methods and their ability to add value in validating outcomes.
- Collaboratively developing method design from the earliest stages of IA (early planning/scoping). This can include co-developing methods with communities when appropriate and identifying/agreeing on appropriate methods with decision-makers.
- Avoiding relegating qualitative/social science data to appendices of IA reports. They should contribute to the core findings.
- Experimenting with different ways of communicating the outcomes of qualitative analysis.
- Having change agents/champions working within academia and other institutions. Steering committees or panels for IA are well-placed to champion the use of qualitative methods in IA.

Station #2

The need: Enhancing qualitative research skills and training in IA

The barrier: Insufficient qualitative research expertise to meet the broadening scope of sustainability-oriented IA.

Potential strategies to address this need:
- Building awareness about decolonizing methodologies and practices.
- Empowering and building capacity within communities. There is a need to invest in communities, not projects. This includes long term support/funding for employing a well-trained person/team with qualitative skills in each community (not on a project-by-project basis). This person/team could also teach and further build capacity within their communities.
- Regulators and IA professional associations (e.g., IAIA) providing training on qualitative methods for IA practitioners. Certifications/micro-credentials could be developed, but there is also a need to recognize that certification in technical aspects of qualitative methods does not equal expertise. There are additional skills and characteristics required of IA practitioners who use qualitative methods in IA, including confidence, deep listening, humility, being learning- and relationship- oriented, cultural sensitivity, and language/communication skills.
- Enhancing qualitative skills also requires leadership, sufficient budgets, and resource allocation (particularly from decision makers).
- Ensuring qualitative research expertise is available at regulatory agencies and big consulting firms (particularly among those who work in collaboration with community researchers).
- Developing mentorship programs for new IA professionals. This is particularly important for staff working with communities (e.g., senior staff telling a story about the time and experience needed to become familiar and accepted within the community).
- Developing (shared) resources, such as case study examples, guidance documents, and improved policy that facilitates qualitative methods.
- Building awareness and deep understanding about circular processes (between projects).

Station #3

The need: Using qualitative methods to meaningfully influence IA processes and outcomes.

The barrier: Current IA practice and constraints can disincentivize the use of, and experimentation with, qualitative methods in IA.

Potential strategies to address this need:
- Shifting IA paradigms (turning IA "upside down and inside out"). This paradigm shift requires opening up the process, using bottom-up approaches, emphasizing people and places, emphasizing trust and relationships in communities, bringing in a

- wider range of voices, employing citizen science, and shifting from project-centric to ecocentric approaches.
- Considering, encouraging, or requiring qualitative methods early in the IA process (e.g., during the early planning phase). Terms of reference (ToR) should support the use of qualitative methods, including by being more inclusive (co-developed), re-thinking definitions, broadening ToR scope, and using a more interconnected perspective (e.g., using language of connection, rather than valued components).
- Allowing flexible timelines and suitable budgets to ensure appropriate time for relationship building and proper application of qualitative methods.
- Decision-makers acknowledging/reinforcing the legitimacy of qualitative methods. Actions could include legislation/policy changes to require the use of qualitative methods; developing policies, guidance materials, and templates for qualitative methods and methodologies (e.g., frameworks that harmonize/show complementarity between quantitative and qualitative methods); case studies that demonstrate the benefits of qualitative information for decision-making; and, improve internal capacity for understanding and critically examining whether practitioners and proponents have carefully applied qualitative methods and rigorously analyzed the data.
- Practitioners building their capacity to understand qualitative methodologies and methods, including the benefits qualitative information can have for proponents and impacted communities (e.g., improved well-being). Suggested actions include: developing training and guidance materials on qualitative methods (including on qualitative rigour and ethics); qualitative methods training for quantitative scientists; and, resisting trying to quantify qualitative information.
- Using inclusive methodologies and integrate OCAP (ownership, control, access, and possession) principles.
- Using qualitative methodologies that are fit-to-purpose, based on level of assessment (project/strategic levels), time, and scalar fit.
- Finding champions in client organizations who can highlight the value of qualitative findings to their colleagues.

Station #4
The need: Consistent implementation of standards for qualitative methodological rigour in IA.

The barrier: Lack of recognition of, or inattention to, established standards of methodological rigour in qualitative research in IA. An enduring notion that results must be quantified to be valid.

- Educating and capacity building on qualitative rigour and ethics for practitioners and government decision-makers. Continue to promote/educate on the importance of qualitative methods and how much they have to offer. Additional resources could be posted on government websites (e.g., the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada's practitioners' guide).
- Both decision-makers and communities need to trust the methods. Methods should be flexible and co-developed. Regulators need to integrate qualitative information and weave it into IA approval. Trust influences participation.
- Implementing validation measures (e.g., peer-review/external-auditing, verify interview transcripts through audio playback, following-up with participants to verify accuracy of interpretation)
- Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all. Methods must be tailored to the local context. When working with Indigenous communities, each community's standards need to be respected.
- Clearly explaining/documenting methodologies and ensure clear communication.
- Triangulating different data sources and methods. This can help deal with uncertainty.
- Having people with a qualitative background/training to do the work.
- Ensuring the right questions are being asked from the beginning.

Station #5
The Need: Greater community and Indigenous inclusion, leadership, and control over information gathering processes.

The barrier: Current IA structures mean that certain players often have the greatest power in decisions about IA processes and methods, which can lead to an emphasis on quantitative data.

Potential strategies to address this need:
- Increasing use of community- and Indigenous-led IA. Communities should have the chance to design methodologies for IA. The trend of increasing Indigenous-led IA either in parallel to other IA processes or as a standalone process (i.e., either delegating part or full IAs) is a good step forward; however, how these IAs inform decisions is still largely controlled by government. Ensuring these IAs inform decision-making and is acted on/accepted by decision makers is important. Transparency and accountability to demonstrate how community studies informed decisions is also vital.
- Building community capacity, particularly at the strategic level (i.e., before/outside/above individual IAs), in ways that facilitate self-determination. This includes more investment into training and preparing young people to work on lands issues, developing capacity to participate in IA as equals (not just reacting to individual IAs), and wider inclusion/representation in decision-making *within* communities.
- Involving communities in design of the conceptual model underpinning an IA and on methods/methodologies from the earliest stages, with transparency about how community input/perspectives influenced the approach. Cooperative, not hierarchical, governance is needed.
- Recognizing worldviews and power structures. Practitioners need to position themselves and be aware of their own framings and worldviews. Non-Indigenous practitioners' framings are likely different from Indigenous Peoples' and other participants framings; without reflection, power and information asymmetries will remain a problem.
- Spirituality and respect for spirituality and Indigenous worldviews is important to inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in IA.
- Qualitative methods require trust and relationships. Relationships must be developed between outsiders and communities.
- Indigenous people and perspectives must be represented in government agencies, consultancies, and proponent companies.

- Abiding by OCAP (ownership, control, access, and possession) principles and FPIC (free, prior, informed consent – including veto power). Deeper, richer data comes from communities; they must retain control of this information. It is <u>not</u> inclusive to "take" information from communities.
- Shift away from a project-centric paradigm towards an eco-centric paradigm.

Station #6
The need: Adequate attention to ethical considerations when using qualitative methods to involve people in IA processes.

The barrier: A lack of clear ethical standards and protocols for using qualitative methods in IA practice risks harm to individuals and communities who contribute information, knowledge, and concerns to these processes.

Potential strategies to address this need:
- Developing professional standards, which could include a model code of ethics for professional associations to adopt that would be binding on their members. This could include ethics training (e.g., requirements for annual ethics coursework).
- Avoiding top-down strategies. Instead, co-developing ethical standards (including with communities). Considering governance by regional co-advisory boards/executive councils to ensure regional values are included (context matters).
- There have been a history of risks, breaches, limitations to confidentiality, and lack of accountability mechanisms around control and access to the data (e.g., litigation means limitation to confidentiality; land and land use data released publicly). When working with Indigenous Peoples, ensuring protocols for data confidentiality are co-developed with, owned, and monitored by, Indigenous Peoples.
- Working within an "ethical space of engagement" (Ermine, 2007) and taking trauma-informed approaches to IA processes and engagement.
- Focusing on trust and relationship building.
- Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), and ensuring that ethical standards account for Indigenous rights.
- Demonstrating the rigour of methodology (avoiding "bad" science, data collection); transparency and context to data/information and how it was gathered.
- Ensuring informed consent, negotiating how information will be used (informed by bottom-up protocols)
- Considering non-human data and ethics.

Conclusion
Our study, including findings from the world café, demonstrated that while there is a good foundation from which to enhance the use of qualitative methods in IA, there is still much to be done to ensure they are used and applied effectively. The outcomes presented above establish a myriad of opportunities for moving forward. They also indicate that all IA actors—governments, practitioners, proponents, researchers, professional associations, non-governmental organizations, and communities—have a role to play in ensuring the use of robust qualitative methods and strengthening their application. The world café notes will be analyzed further and synthesized with our previous study findings in a separate publication. For a copy of our final report, please contact the session chairs at the emails above.

References
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Appendix A: World Café Discussion Prompts

At each station, participants responded to the question:
- **What strategies will meet this need and/or overcome the barrier?** Be as specific as possible! What concrete actions should be taken? Who should take them?

Station #	Station content
1	**The need:** Elevating the perceived value of qualitative methods in IA.
	Demonstrating the value qualitative research brings to making IA more inclusive, accessible, and people-based. Practitioners need to stop trying to force quantification and see the inherent value of qualitative methods (Survey response)
	The barrier: IA is still largely dominated by a biophysical, quantitative "culture" and qualitative methods are often perceived as less valid or scientific than quantitative methods.
	I feel the biggest challenge is mindset—bias against qualitative methods. Practitioners feel the need to quantify the outcomes to make IAs valid. (Survey response)

	The need: Enhanced qualitative research skills and training in IA
	Impact assessors often come from a natural science background and are not familiar with social science methodology […] There must be a focus on including qualitative methodology—in mastering, applying and analysing it. It results in really rich data. (Survey response)
	The barrier: Insufficient qualitative research expertise to meet the broadening scope of sustainability-oriented IA
	There are currently not enough qualified practitioners to meet the demand created by the new IAA [Impact Assessment Act of Canada]. Practitioners with a foundation in qualitative data collection and analysis techniques are not necessarily a given, and it reduces the rigour that should be applied to analysis and outcomes. (Survey response)
3	**The need:** Using qualitative methods to meaningfully influence IA processes and outcomes.
	Using the research purposively to meet the aims at relevant stages of impact assessment (Survey response)
	The barrier: Current IA practice and constraints can disincentivize the use of, and experimentation with, qualitative methods in IA.
	The bottom line is that in a cost-competitive situation, you wind up trying to do it as cost effectively as possible and that leaves absolutely no room for experimentation […] And you've got this huge, huge inertia that's keeping the system going the way it is and doing a research project on new qualitative methods isn't really going to have any effect on that until such time as things like terms of reference change, budgets change. (Interview)
4	**The need:** Consistent implementation of standards for qualitative methodological rigour in IA
	…qualitative data is as rigorous and as reliable as quantitative data as long as you follow the rules, as long as you do what is expected of you as a qualitative researcher. There are different rules, they are different methods, but there should be an equal amount of rigour in the research. (Interview)
	The barrier: Lack of recognition of, or inattention to, established standards of methodological rigour in qualitative research in IA. An enduring notion that results must be quantified to be valid.
	I think there is a deficit of esteem in qualitative work among the "numbers" people who make the decisions. In part this is from a lack of recognition of the methodological underpinnings and norms/markers of quality in such work. (Survey response)
5	**The need:** Greater community and Indigenous inclusion, leadership, and control over information gathering processes.
	…empowering impacted parties themselves to conduct this research, rather than having them be the subjects of research by a third party (Survey response)
	More acknowledgement that qualitative research methods should be culturally appropriate and led by Indigenous peoples is needed (Survey response)
	The barrier: Current IA structures mean that certain players often have the greatest power in decisions about IA processes and methods, which commonly leads to an emphasis on quantitative data.
	Right of the way you have a formal role [...] they do what they do, and it feels to focus on the things that the people, the government agencies responsible, which is about physical environments and quantitative data. On the outside looking in are Indigenous people and any other interested Canadians and they're in the small circles. And those circles… that focus of power really needs to shift. (Interview)
6	**The need:** Adequate attention to ethical considerations when using qualitative methods to involve people in IA processes.
	Ethics!! It is so important to ensure that those conducting qualitative research participate in some sort of ethics approval or have an ethical requirement to ensure that the data is collected and used in an ethical matter (Survey response)
	The barrier: A lack of clear ethical standards and protocols for using qualitative methods in IA practice risks harm to individuals and communities who contribute information, knowledge, and concerns to these processes.
	…impact assessment practitioners may not have any experience applying qualitative methods to the IA process. Without oversight, these practitioners can harm people and communities. (Survey response)