SERIES
CAPACITY BUILDING LEARNING MODULES

Planning and Running a Research Project

IPIS

PREFACE

In recent years IPIS has published several publications in collaboration with local African organisations. Such cooperation has allowed us to share know-how from over 30 years of research experience while benefitting from our partners' networks and understanding of local issues.

Although IPIS' research assignments are often limited to a few months, we are increasingly trying to improve our working relationship with organisations and individual researchers in Africa. Through intense collaboration on specific reports, IPIS helps building the capacity of local researchers because the collaboration becomes an exercise. Furthermore, when a report is published, we help local researchers to gain access to stakeholders and interested publics in Europe and the US.

However, to ensure that our relatively short collaborations with local partners have a lasting effect on their know-how and skills, we have developed a series of learning modules. IPIS teaches the most relevant of these modules during 1-3 days workshop organised at the outset of a new research project. The subsequent execution of joint research guarantees that the partners can immediately practice the skills they have acquired through the workshop during a relevant exercise.

'Planning and Running a Research Project' is the basic module. The text you currently hold describes the most important dos and don'ts when preparing and writing a report. More specialised modules, focussing on particular types of research or specific research skills build on this module and are more suitable for advanced publics.

'Planning and Running a Research Project' explains how to execute a research project by zooming in on its three major phases. The first is preparation and planning. The second is conducting the actual research and analysis. In a final phase the analysis and conclusions are written down in a report. For each of these phases we give essential advice and practical tips. In a workshop setting, we alternate the theory of this little handbook with practical customized exercises.

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Preparation and planning

A research project needs both practical and conceptual preparation. The former involves decisions on timing, resources and other logistical issues. The latter implies defining the subject of the research, the research objectives, target group, research questions etc.

The preparatory phase usually follows one of the two scenarios below:

1. A client drafts a terms of reference for a research assignment. In some cases the client drafts these terms of reference in the framework of a specific agreement between himself and your organisation. In other cases, the terms of reference are distributed among several organisations who can decide whether they want to tender for the assignment.

2. Your organisation drafts a research proposal and raises funds for its execution. It can happen that negotiations with possible donors precede the drafting of such a proposal.

In both cases a research proposal and terms of reference need to be drafted. They can be considered as a written report of both the logistical and conceptual preparation and planning of the research project.

Conceptual planning

Delineation of the subject of the research

It is obviously important to think through which issues the research will focus on (and which not). The research design needs to be limited in space, time and theme. Be specific when defining your research design. An important challenge when running a research project is to avoid tackling too many issues when researching/drafting.

> **Example:** *Your research will focus on the current production of and trade in tin, tantalite and tungsten in Eastern Congo (DRC).*
>
> *From the statement above we understand that the research is spatially limited to Eastern DRC. One could further specify the precise provinces (North Kivu, South Kivu, Maniema...). Concerning time, you will be looking at the current situation. Consequently you will not provide a historic overview of the subject, although you may consider including data from the past four years. Finally, the central theme is the production of and trade in the 3T minerals. This is a broad theme with many dimensions. It is therefore necessary to further specify our theme.*

It is useful to do further delineation by formulating a number of questions. The following list of basic questions should be taken into account: who, what, why, when, where? Applying this to the example above generates the following questions:

Production of the 3T's:

- Who is producing tin, tantalum and tungsten? Artisanal miners, mining companies...
- What is being produced where? For example, 100 ton of cassiterite (tin ore) is produced monthly in Bisie.

- Why is there mineral production? Socio-economic aspects: very little employment alternatives, economic aspects: demand in the West and Asia etc.

- How are the minerals produced? Artisanal methods, semi-industrial methods, labour conditions etc.

Trade in the 3T's:

- Who is trading tin, tantalum and tungsten? Description of trading chains (for example 'comptoirs')

- What is being traded where? Quantities, trading centres (for example Njingala or Butembo) etc.

- Why is there mineral trade? Profit, conflict financing etc.

- How is mineral trade conducted? Cash/barter, transport means and routes, trade organisation etc.

In addition to the main theme, several sub-themes can be explored. You should also try to determine these beforehand.

> In our example possible sub-themes could be: legal vs. illegal production and trade; financing of armed groups and conflict; initiatives to increase transparency; etc.

Tip: It is very convenient to draft a preliminary table of contents at the outset of the research. If working for a client, you should try to agree on the table of contents. In that case, both parties know what they can expect.

Research motives

A passionate researcher is most likely driven by merely trying to satisfy his curiosity. However, this is obviously insufficient to justify a considerable investment of resources and time. Two types of motives should be driving research projects:

Knowledge motives

Essentially these are always related to a gap in the existing knowledge of the issue.

Motives regarding the research application

It is very important to consider beforehand how your research can/will be used. IPIS is used to conduct research that other organisations will use for specific lobby and campaign activities directed at policymakers. How will your research impact the issue it deals with and can it support other activities?

> Returning to our example: the production of and trade in the 3T's in Eastern DRC. What could be the driving motive behind such research? With regards to knowledge: the theme has not been researched; it has been researched a few years ago and there have been significant developments; it has been researched fairly recently but the analysis and conclusions are inconclusive or incorrect etc. With regards to its application: national/international regulation is being developed and needs to be based on solid knowledge and correct insights; the existing policies are based on wrong premises or insufficient knowledge;...

Target group

Who will be the audience of your output? Above we mentioned that lobbyists and policymakers would use it. It is therefore necessary to think at what level these operate: locally, provincially, nationally, regionally or internationally. Should the output be accessible to a wider public? In such case it should avoid too much technical details and focus on a few key messages (for example: reports by Global Witness).

Tip: try to identify the policymakers you want to reach with your recommendations when planning your research

Decisions on output

What will be the output of your research? In our example it is a classic research report. Other possible outputs include: an article for scientific publication, a contribution to a larger report, an audio/video report etc.

Tip: you should estimate the ideal length (number of pages) of the publication beforehand

Decisions on methodology

You are aware of your research motives and you made choices regarding research subject, target group and output. Now you need to decide on the methodology you will use to conduct your research. The key questions are which sources you should consult and how. Identifying all sources beforehand is impossible as new sources appear during the research process. Nonetheless you should prepare an extensive and relevant list mentioning:

1. Written sources such as books, reports, discussion papers, press articles etc.

    In our example these include reports of international NGO's (Global Witness, Enough Project, PAC, IPIS etc.), international organisations (World bank, ICGLR, UN Group of Experts etc.), Congolese administrations (CEEC, Division des Mines, SAESSCAM etc.) and local organisations (ASSODIP, OGP, CREDHO etc.).

1. people or organisations you should contact. In some cases, for example the author of a book, you will know who your specific interlocutor will be. In other cases, for example when contacting a ministry, you will be directed to a representative.

    When researching tin mining in the DRC you should try to talk to International and local traders, international and local activists working on the issue, officials of the Congolese mining administration etc.

How will you consult these sources? Usually you will start from a systematic search for written public sources on the internet by using certain key words. You will skim through the relevant publications in which you will find references to more publications. Those who have access to specialized –mostly academic- databases and/or libraries, should consult these too. Academic publications will also contain further references to related research. (IPIS offers a separate module that explains how to use specialised sources and source databases) If you have sufficiently defined your research subject, you will notice that after spending two or three days browsing through publications, you will have gathered most of the relevant sources.

Whether you limit yourself to desk research or spend considerable time interviewing people will depend on the availability of public sources, the geographic focus of your research and the location of key contacts.

In our example this is clearly necessary. You will have to organise meetings with mining officials, traders, local communities etc. It is better to meet these at their offices as they may provide you with documentation that is often not publicly available.

Practical preparation

You now know what you will study and how you should do it. Next, you will have to think about the time and means you will need. A timeline/planning and a budget are part of every research proposal or terms of reference.

Be specific when estimating time and budget. You should calculate the workload in terms of full one-person working days. Include one or more deadlines when (parts of) the workload should be finished. Be realistic when planning deadlines and factor in days you and your team will rest or work on other assignments. Your budget should be equally detailed and it should be organised under a number of separate items. The following costs are common in research projects:

- Personnel costs: full working days multiplied by the daily personnel cost
- Living expenses while travelling: generally known as 'per diems'.
- Transport costs: only long distance; travel within a city should be covered by the per diem.
- Other costs for logistics: specific for the research assignment. They include for example a visa but not a computer.
- Translation costs: if your report needs to appear in several languages
- Overhead costs: a fee for general office costs related to the specific assignment. For example telephone costs, printing costs etc. They usually vary between 5-8% of the total project costs

Your budget estimate should be reasonable. Exuberant costs will put off clients and they might question the motives of you and your organisation. On the other hand you should make sure that you include all necessary costs for successfully completing your research.

An example of a timeline (Box 1) and a budget (Table 1) of a possible IPIS project

Box 1: timeline

1. **April:** IPIS will collect all relevant existing data from its archives and from studies that are publicly available. (5 days)

2. **May:** In consultation with a selected number of academics, IPIS will develop a methodology to make solid estimates of gold production. It will take into account factors such as the inaccessibility of certain mines, seasonal fluctuations in terms of production and the sometimes time-consuming nature of trust-building with the various actor groups involved. (7 days), *deadline methodological manual: 31 May*

3. **June:** IPIS will conduct interviews at mining sites and mineral trade centres. (18 days)

4. **July:** From its offices, IPIS will gather data on the different tax regimes in neighbouring countries. IPIS will also summarize data on the production and trade of gold in those countries. This is desktop research. (10 days)

5. **August and September:** IPIS drafts the report and coordinates the language edit of the draft and translation of the final text. (15 days) *Deadline report in both languages: 7 september*

Table 1: Budget

Activity	Price/unit	Number	Total
1. Human resources			
1.1 Salary	days		
Preparatory work/coordination	50 €	12	600 €
Field work	50 €	21	1.050 €
Desktop research	50 €	10	500 €
Report writing	50 €	15	750 €
1.2 Per diems for missions Africa	60	21	1.260 €
2. Travel			
2.1 Flights to Africa	1.500 €	1	1.500 €
2.2 Flights within Africa	300 €	4	1.200 €
2.3 Visa and medication	300 €	1	300 €
3. Publication costs			
3.1 English edit and translation report in French	1.000 €	1	1.000 €
4. Subtotal			**8.160 €**
5. Overhead (7%)			**571 €**
TOTAL			**8.731 €**

The research phase

In the previous phase you prepared your research project in terms of both content and practicalities. You have decided what you will study, why this is needed, how your output will look and who should read your report. You and your client/funder have agreed on a clear planning, the personnel needed for the estimated workload and the available budget. You can now start with the actual research.

Above we explained the distinction between desk research and field research. For most research projects you will need a combination of both activities. To simplify our explanation we will pretend that both are distinct phases and that the phase of desk research ends before the phase of field research.

Phase 1: Desk research

Study of available literature

When getting acquainted with a certain topic you usually start by collecting available publications on the Internet. When you have no previous experience with the issue you can run a number of keywords through a simple search engine such as Google or Yahoo. Look in the search results for publications, usually PDF documents, on websites hosted on the .org domain. Download the publications and save them in a folder on your hard or flash drive. While you read them, make sure you screen them on references to other sources. You can find them in footnotes/endnotes but sometimes also within the text. Make sure to arrange your sources in an orderly fashion. It will save you a lot of time when you need to consult them at a later stage.

The biggest challenge when using such queries is to recognise inaccurate and biased sources. Experienced researchers usually can assess the reliability of a source while skimming through it. However, if you are new to a certain topic you will regularly need to critically revisit the sources you consulted during the initial stage of your research when your insight has grown.

A slower but safer alternative to the Internet search is trying to gain access to established networks of respected professionals working on related topics. More targeted than the Internet, such 'experts' can point you to reliable reading material. However, they tend to be busy and they may not always respond when you try to contact them. In addition, not every researcher is equally willing to help out a possible newcomer to his area of expertise. You should not get discouraged by such experiences as there are plenty of very helpful interesting people out there.

In our example some crucial keywords for Internet queries are:

People who could introduce us to the topic include experienced employees of the following organizations:

Tip: To enable easy access to the most relevant information you have gathered you should develop an information storage system with references. The best way is to cut/paste or summarize paragraphs of relevant information in an MS Word or MS OneNote document. The paragraphs should mention the original source for future reference. Ideally, you should structure this document along the (provisional) table of contents of your report. When your research progresses, you can use it as a working draft.

A thorough study of the existing literature is a necessity for your research. By familiarizing yourself with it you will gain personal knowledge of your subject. This will enable you to more easily identify the relevant bits and pieces of all the available information. In other words it will help you select the information you will need for your analysis.

Finally, the study of the relevant literature will enable you to identify knowledge gaps. Consequently you will formulate follow-up questions you can add to your initial list of research questions. While refining your research, you may also decide to drop some of the questions you had identified at the outset.

> For example: during your desk research you learn that mining in a certain area is suspended by the central government. Consequently you decide to focus your research on the reasons behind and the consequences of this suspension. Additionally, although a small group of miners continues to work, you choose to not pursue your research into the trading chains in this area because it is a marginal phenomenon.

Reaching out to relevant contacts

During the desk research phase it is allowed to leave your desk. During your research preparation you have prepared a list of key people you should contact. Some of them you will want to interview, others might have access to (written, photo, video…) sources you have not. You should now try to get in touch with them. It is always best to meet people in person and build some professional relationship. Obviously, you will not be able to meet with all of the contacts on your list. Some will not be available or willing to meet you while others live too far away considering your time and budget constraints. In such cases you will have to make do with exchanges over e-mail and telephone.

The easiest way to arrange a meeting is being introduced by a mutual contact. Usually, such an introduction will build a certain trust within your interviewee and make him talk more freely. Whenever you experience a good interaction with a contact you should therefore always ask him to put you in touch with other relevant people (Box 2).

If you intend to reach out to people you have never met with or spoken to before without having been introduced, you will use e-mail or telephone. You should first introduce yourself by e-mail (only in case both you and the contact have regular access to the Internet). Sending an e-mail allows you to properly introduce yourself and your intentions. It allows you to be a bit more formal, which will be expected within certain cultures and age groups or for specific functions. After you have introduced yourself via e-mail you can continue mailing or make a telephone call as a follow-up to arrange a meeting.

Box 2: The ideal sequence of a research

In an ideal case you will find one or two knowledgeable people who can introduce you to your topic. They will point you to some insightful written sources and possibly some other key contacts. You should then spend the necessary time studying the suggested publications and find additional ones –for example through an Internet search. When you have built up sufficient knowledge you can then take your research questions to other key contacts who will give you more specific information. Key contacts often have access to unpublished documents which they might share with you. The deeper you dig into the issue, the more exclusive the information you will gather. This will strengthen your analysis.

Tip: Create a database of your contacts. You can use a smartphone or a spread sheet or even a specific notebook. Whichever way you organize the database, make sure you make frequent backups.

Phase 2: Field research

Sometimes research questions cannot be answered from behind a desk alone. They will require you to spend time close to your research subject in the field. Thanks to your thorough preparation you dispose of the necessary tools to successfully complete such a trip:

1. From studying the relevant literature you have a good basic knowledge of the issues. For quick reference you have summarized the main information in a separate document.

2. You have prepared and refined a set of research questions that remain unanswered.

3. You have prepared a list of contacts you want to meet for an interview or to gain access to additional sources.

During your time in the field you will further develop and adapt 2 and 3.

Interviews

Your skills as an interviewer will improve through practice but there are a few basic techniques to take into account. Generally speaking the most rewarding but challenging approach is to strike a balance between allowing the interviewee the time to share whatever he wants to tell you while making sure he answers the questions you have. When you ask more general questions you will give the opportunity to the interviewee to raise certain issues himself. It is a good way to start the conversation, break the ice and get to know the person in front of you. After discussing some of your general questions you will have occasions to follow up with more specific questions. Continue to ensure that your interviewee has the space to give his own input –you want to avoid that your interview becomes an interrogation- while making sure you have asked all your important questions when the interview ends. Very useful in this respect is preparing a structured list of questions that will remind you of the answers you expect to find. Such a checklist should also contain a number of practical issues you hope the interviewee can help you with, such as introducing you to another contact or providing a confidential document.

Example of a checklist

When interviewing a mineral trader

General questions:

*   How is business? Is there still a lot of demand In Europe? Or Asia?

*   I have heard tin production is at a low. Miners are more interested in gold for the moment. What do you think?

*   Is the government helping you to run your business or are they complicating things?

Specific questions:

*   Which mines are you sourcing from? Is there a lot of production? How much?

*   How re the labour conditions at that mine? How is the security situation?

*   Do you buy in cash?

- Who are you selling to? Where is that company based?
- Who is your biggest competitor? Where do they buy from/sell to? How much?

Practical issues:

- Can I visit your depot? When?
- Can you put me in touch with the local chief of the area where your tin mine is located?
- Can I have a copy of your export data?

You should carefully take notes when conducting an interview. You do not need to write down everything but should include important details such as names, locations and dates. In the event that the interviewee or setting do not allow you to take notes, you should write down as much as you can immediately after.

It is very useful to reread your notes at the end of a busy day of interviews. Try to summarise the key information from them in the working draft where you have pasted relevant excerpts from your literature study. Try also to review your list of questions.

Logistics

When leaving the office for the field you should ensure to make the necessary logistic preparations. You will want to maximally avoid interference of logistical problems with your (mostly limited) research time.

It is not always necessary to book accommodation and transport in advance, but you at least to know which options are available and how to contact the people who run these services. Therefore, the two logistical priorities are access to cash and communication. These will get you (almost) everywhere. Make sure you have a working mobile phone, preferably with a local sim card, and a list of contacts, including some who can help you with practical issues. In addition, make a realistic estimate of how long your cash should last and ensure you have access to more before.

Writing and editing a report

At the end of your field research you will have gathered a lot of additional information that you will need to process and draft into a clear text. While doing this you need to take into account issues related to both the content and the lay out.

The contents

The most effective way to prevent your report from easy criticism is by making sure that you have your facts right. That said, a mere presentation of facts and figures is of little added value to your reader so you will also include an analysis of these facts. As a consequence you should avoid including too many facts that are irrelevant for your analysis and make a clear distinction between the facts you present and your interpretation of them.

An example to make this more concrete:

During our research on mineral trade in the Kivus, we also look into the links with mineral production in neighbouring provinces. We want to establish the nature and the extent of these links.

On the case of Katanga we write the following:

1. *Bukavu and Goma were previously the main exit points for tin and coltan from Katanga. Until late 2009, traders originating from, and operating through, North and South Kivu provinces dominated the minerals trade from the 'copper province'. Businessmen from the Bashi and Nande ethnic groups bought cassiterite and coltan from local miners, and transported it by air or road to Goma or Bukavu.*

2. *The dominant position of Kivu traders is reflected in the statistics of the Division des Mines in Kalemie, which recorded the shipping of 181 tonnes of coltan and 900 tonnes of cassiterite from or through Tanganyika district to the Kivu provinces between January–October 2009. Similarly, over 90 percent of cassiterite from Lomami district was transported through Kongolo to Bukavu from June–October 2009.*

3. Given their strong grip on the trade before, the Kivu traders strongly resent recent legislative measures to redirect tin and coltan exports through the Katangese towns of Kalemie and Lubumbashi. They perceive it as discrimination and "dictatorial behaviour" by the political and economic elite of Southern Katanga. They complain of "grave restrictions of our freedom of movement" and "violations of the Mining Code".

In paragraph 1 we draw a conclusion, based on our interpretation of the facts presented in paragraph 2. We have learned from several interviews that Kivu-based companies were the main traders of Katangese coltan and we have corroborated this assertion with available trade statistics. We have added another illustration of the importance of the trading links between Katanga and the Kivus in paragraph 3. The position of the Kivu traders is interesting to mention but we avoid presenting their opinions as our own. Moreover, we do

Tip: to help safeguarding the robustness of your findings you should have the contents of your report checked through the process of peer review. This involves contacting one or several people working on related issues and asking them to critically review the facts and analysis in your report. You can try to task peer reviewers to look into specific issues in which they are particular specialists.

not pursue the issue as analysing the conformity of provincial policy measures with national and international legislation is beyond our main research questions.

Many researchers fall into the trap of presenting their research as a mere list of facts devoid of any analysis. Readers tend to quickly lose interest in such writings because they get lost in the data. You should ensure that you present your facts/events/figures as an answer to the research questions you have outlined in the introductory part of your report. A clear report structure with telling titles and subtitles helps to highlight questions raised and answers given.

Formal aspects

Language

Other organizations and institutes, offering specific courses on report or article writing, are much more specialized in this than IPIS, especially universities and NGO's working on journalism. It is essential to bear in mind that your text and arguments need to be clear for your target group. Look at your draft from the target group's perspective and ask a potential reader to review it. An important part of ensuring that your text is accessible is to sufficiently explain technical terms. You should also avoid using very long sentences and try to limit paragraphs to a maximum of eight lines. Paragraphs are not separate headings. The reader should easily switch from one paragraph to the next without loosing the thread of your argument. Always have your text checked by a competent editor, preferably a native speaker. Language mistakes make a bad impression and devaluate your text as a whole. Finally maintain a neutral language. Avoid using exclamation marks, the unnecessary use of capital letters and very emotional words: labour conditions are not 'TERRIBLE' but 'dangerous' and 'unhealthy'.

For further information you should check the following websites and publications: list

Footnotes

You can use footnotes for two reasons: to give additional information on something and to add a reference to the source of your information. In the first case you should only consider including details that are relevant to the reader but impede the flow of your argumentation.

For example, while you argue that gold is widely available in the Kivu provinces you could add in a footnote that several other Congolese provinces, such as Bas-Congo, Maniema and Oriental Province have important gold deposits too.

Referring to sources is required when your information is very precise or controversial.

For example, when you mention mineral export figures in your text, you can refer to statistics of the Congolese mining ministry. However, when you describe Goma as the capital of North Kivu it does not need any citation as this is generally known and can easily be verified.

When you use a footnote to provide details about your source you need to be consistent in how you present these. References should include at least the author (or if unknown, the publisher), the full title, the date of publication and the specific page(s). When you refer to an interview you need to mention at least the name of the interviewee, his capacity and the date of the interview. For a website, the link is sufficient, provided that it takes you to the exact page.

Some examples:

Sometimes you cannot reveal your source although a reference is required. In such cases your reference should provide information about the credibility of your source while ensuring it remains confidential.

For example:

In general you should avoid using too much footnotes on the same page as this will result in a complicated page layout. For this reason some researchers prefer to use endnotes instead. However endnotes are difficult to use as the reader is forced to browse to another page. Consequently endnotes are less consulted than footnotes. Sometimes, publishers use a compromise solution by providing additional information in footnotes and references in endnotes.

Layout

The layout of your text should strengthen its contents. It should be clear, neutral and trim. You surely want to avoid readers questioning the credibility of your report because of uncareful lay outing. If you or your organisation have little experience with arranging texts you should keep the lay out simple. Stick to one font, increase the font size of titles and/or put them in bold. Avoid changing font colour and the use of 'exotic' fonts.

Should you have a bit more experience with word processing or other specialised programs you can consider inserting a number of objects in the text to make it lighter. Ensure though, that these objects are sufficiently relevant. They need to illustrate the contents of your text or contribute to it. The most common objects are photographs, tables, graphs and maps. All of these need a caption with a title and between brackets a reference to the source.

Bear in mind that you can still include objects which do not fit in the main text in the annexes. For example when you have obtained a 3 page list of mineral traders based in Goma.

Tip: Check the quality of non-text objects in the final version before publication both on the screen and on a printed version. A picture may look sharp on the lcd screen of your camera but not on a printout.

Structure

1. Structure of a 'classic' research report:

2. A complete research report should contain the following elements:

3. Front page: including a title and a date of publication

4. Colophon: showing a list of everyone who contributed to the report and their function. In some organizations reports are not attributed to individual employees. In such cases the report will be published without colophon.

5. Executive summary: a short summary of the whole report. It is usually only one or two pages long. It should be written with great care as it is often the only part of the report policy makers will read.

6. Table of Contents

7. Introduction: should briefly describe the research design (subject, targeted audience and motivation). Also, it gives a short preview of each chapter describing how it fits into the report as a whole. You can also explain your research methodology in the introduction or leave that a separate preface to the report (see below)

8. Methodology: MEER

9. Main text body: your research and analysis. This is the only part of the text where you can include detail and add extensive nuance.

10. Conclusion: the key findings of your analysis. A conclusion should never contain new facts and should only (concisely) repeat arguments you have already made in the main body.

11. Recommendations

12. List of abbreviations or acronyms: the list of abbreviations is a necessary tool for making your text accessible to the reader. You can add the list as a first annex.

13. Annexes

Your main text body should be in an advanced state, or preferably finished, before you start drafting the other parts.