Research and Evaluation

The Ethnographic Action Research Approach

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Research and Evaluation

Ethnographic action research is a methodology, which provides a flexible and adaptable approach to gather knowledge about community media centres, their users and wider communities. The methodology is based on combining two research approaches: **ethnography** and **action research**.

Ethnography is a research approach that has traditionally been used to understand different cultures. An ethnographic approach ensures that project development takes place within a broad understanding embedded in local contexts and needs.

Action research is a research approach used to promote new activities through new understandings of situations. It is based on a cycle of *plan, do, observe* and *reflect* – and this enables the collection of rich research data through an ethnographic approach to be fed back into project activities on an ongoing basis.
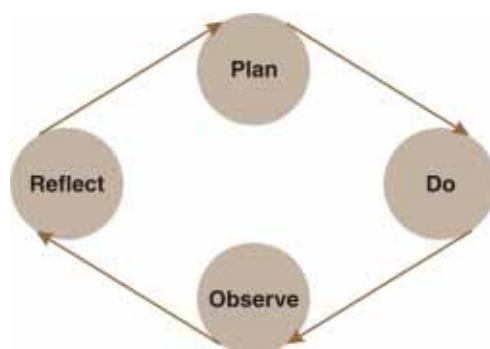
In this chapter we present an outline of ethnographic action research. For a full guide to the approach we recommend *UNESCO's Ethnographic Action Research: A User's Handbook* (Tacchi *et al.* 2003).

Why do research?

The *ethnographic action research* approach encourages CMCs to develop a 'research culture' as a part of their routine. The research itself is always aimed at helping the CMC to develop and to work more effectively in its local context.

Underlying the research process are four key questions that need to be addressed throughout the life of CMCs:

- What are we trying to do?
- How well are we doing?
- How are we trying to do it?
- How can we do it differently/better?

What are we trying to do?

The answers to the first question will establish the *purpose* and *goals* of your project.

Every CMC takes a direction and tries to produce outcomes, e.g., defining the purpose of a CMC publicly identifies what the CMC is there for and defining specific goals of a CMC helps it to stay on track. These goals can be used to assess whether a CMC has been successful. In other words, goals describe what should happen as a result of the CMC's work.

How are we trying to do it?

The second question turns goals into specific plans. How is your CMC trying to achieve its purpose and goals in its day-to-day operations? It requires an awareness of:

• your own CMC's activities

• the ways in which you are attempting to achieve your purpose and goals on a day-to-day basis, as an organisation, and in relation to stakeholders, including the communities you serve

• an awareness of your CMC's internal structures and systems, including the ways in which you use the resources of the CMC.

How well are we doing?

The third question demands a realistic and researched *evaluation* of how your CMC is working to achieve its purpose and goals, through reflection and self-awareness, and through researching those whom you are trying to impact.

Your research will uncover how well you are doing according to your local communities, local users, project staff and volunteers, donors and other external agencies.

How can we do it differently/better?

Informed by your research findings, the fourth question requires a re-evaluation of your purpose and goals, a review of your processes and practices, and an analysis of your effectiveness, achievements and shortfalls. It requires renewed planning and actions that will draw on the research, reflection and evaluation undertaken and improve the overall effectiveness of your CMC.

Beyond these four questions there are more specific questions that will need to be asked as the CMC develops. Ethnographic action research will assist you in raising these key questions and in defining more specific questions appropriate to your CMC and its purpose.

What should you research?

Instead of focusing on individual media technologies and their 'impacts', an ethnographic approach implies that we should look at the whole structure of communication and information flows in people's ways of life:

• the kinds of communication and information activities they do (or want to) carry out

• the communication resources at their disposal and how they understand the way these resources can be used

• the social relationships and institutions through which they are communicating.

Once we have built up this bigger picture, it is far easier to understand the impacts and possibilities of a particular medium, and how communications fit into the other things that people are doing. This is about placing particular media and media uses within a broader '**communicative ecology**'.

In the case of CMCs, focusing on the complete picture (communicative ecology) and on social networks and pathways (information flows) is important. Often we are dealing with new media that do not yet have a fixed form. We need to, and can, adapt them to local ways of communicating. Moreover, in the case of multimedia, we have to bring together media with different histories and institutions, creatively adapting them to make something new, effective and – importantly – locally relevant and appropriate.

Ethnography

Ethnography literally means to 'write or represent a culture'. Ethnography is traditionally based on long-term engagement in the field of study, or 'field site' (i.e., your CMC and its community). A key method is *participant observation*, where the ethnographer participates in the society or culture being studied (i.e. lives amongst those people) yet retains an analytical or observational position so that through reflection and analysis the ethnographer can describe and interpret the subject of the study. An ethnographer looks for patterns, describes local relationships, understandings and meanings. Ethnography takes a 'holistic' approach to the subject of study – that is, the ethnographer looks at the whole social setting and all social relationships.

For our purposes, an ethnographic approach aims to make sense of the complete range of social relationships and processes within which a CMC is doing its work. They include:

- the immediate circle of workers and active participants – how they are organised, how they carry out their work, how the CMC fits into their lives

- the users – their everyday lives and ways of doing things (both in the CMC, but also in their families, friendships, social networks, jobs and so on)

- the wider social context of the project – (e.g., social divisions within the community, language issues, local economy, social and cultural resources, power relations and institutions in the community)

- social structures and processes beyond the community – (e.g., infrastructure, government policies, economic developments).

The key to ethnography is that we focus on understanding a specific place, in detail and in its own terms.

Ethnography fits very well with action research because it is all about understanding how your particular community and your particular project work together.
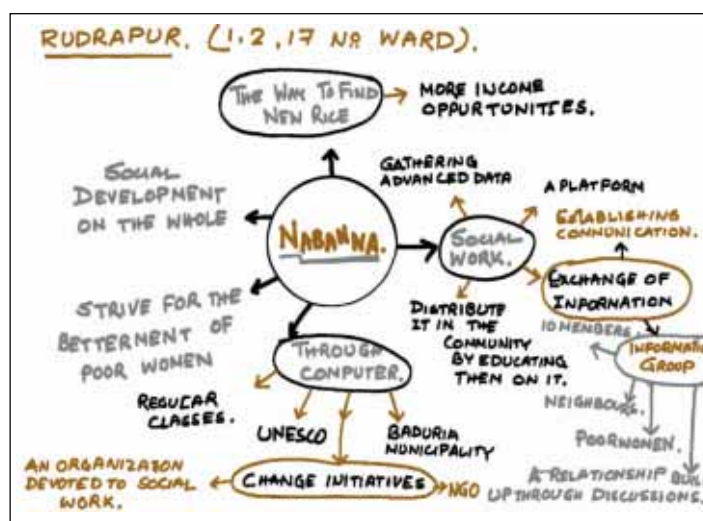
Action research

Action research depends on the way you continuously plan your research in relation to the needs of your CMC. The aim is to build up a **research culture** in your CMC where research and documentation is an integral part of its daily operation. Everyone contributes to and learns from research; it is discussed at your meetings; staff and volunteers think about research when planning any activities.

Ethnographic action research involves the production of knowledge through well planned, structured and self-aware methods. All participants in a CMC can contribute to the research, feeding back their thoughts and observations and actively engaging with the research process. People generate enormous amounts of knowledge in the process of doing their work and generally call this 'experience' or 'instinct'. But if you gather and document this knowledge and reflect on it, is also good research.

The social mapping done with the community of Nabanna in India

Example 1

Budhikote is a large village of 750 houses, with many outlying smaller villages. The Namma Dhwani CMC combines cable radio, radio programme making, computers and Internet. It is strongly connected to 15 well established women's self-help groups (SHGs), as well as drawing in people from the general population.

The CMC used the following methods to carry out their social mapping:

• Because the SHGs are so important to their work and to the community, they studied these groups by doing group exercises, interviews with individual members and taking field notes on their meetings. They also used the same methods on a few SHGs, which were not connected to the ICT project. All these methods looked at issues of poverty (including people's perception and definition of poverty), at media use and at the social problems that concerned the community.

• Many low-income people are not in SHGs. Namma Dhwani therefore organised their mapping into two categories: organised low-income (SHG members) and non-organised low-income groups. For the latter, they organised group exercises with neighbours, they did household interviews with non-SHG members and interviewed men (husbands of SHG members, but also men from other families).

• The CMC interviewed community people who had a special knowledge of the area: teachers, health workers, social workers, religious leaders, the operator of the cable network, and local council members.

• CMC staff made sure that they covered all sectors of the population – e.g., households of different religions, castes and occupations, selected outlying villages and Budhikote village itself. Not only are all these groups important to the project but also representative of different levels of poverty, media use and ways of working with the project.

• They conducted a survey of 130 households in Budhikote and a neighbouring village, with a very large questionnaire requesting information about family finances, education, media use and much more.

• They kept extensive field notes on the life of the village: public events and dramas; observations of where people met and communicated (e.g., wells, tea-shops, street gatherings during power cuts); and everyday use of the CMC.

• The CMC did regular broadcast research: during a radio broadcast the staff and volunteers would walk down a few streets to see what programmes each household was watching or listening to, and have a chat with many people along the way about their media use.

• They also mapped Namma Dhwani itself by drawing an organisational chart to visualise how the organisation works, who does what, and how the CMC involves community members in managing and running the project?
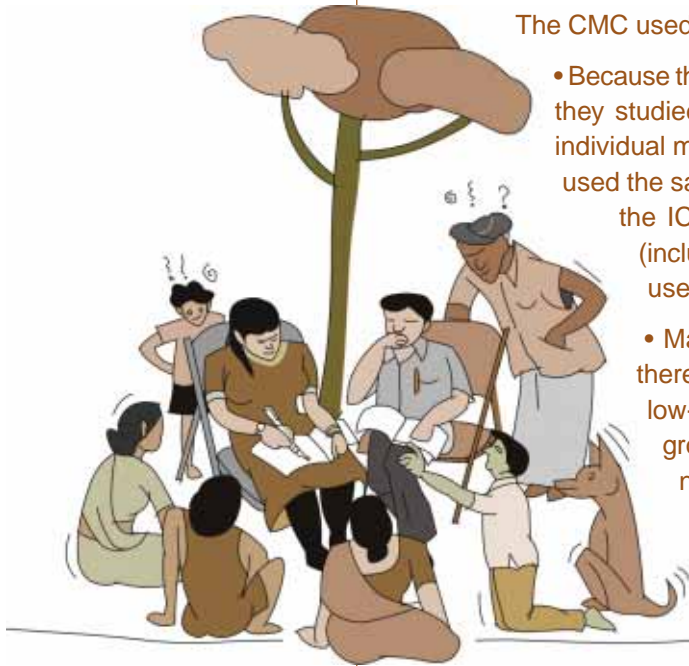
Being part of the research process, for CMC participants, may simply involve taking a different attitude to what they already know and sharing this knowledge with others. You can encourage CMC participants to reflect on what they and their colleagues are learning. All of this turns the activity into action research: they can reflect on the work of the CMC, learn lessons from it and think about how to develop it or replicate it.

Broad and targeted research

You will undertake both *broad* and *targeted* research in carrying out ethnographic action research.

• Broad research (social mapping and contextualising)

The overall aim of *broad* research is to build the 'bigger picture' of the CMC and its social context by using a range of methods to build a rich understanding of the CMC and its context.

As you can see from Example 1, there are a variety of objectives for this kind of research; it is broad in its scope. It depends on the community that you want to map. In fact, although you want to plan your social mapping, you will also want to keep adapting it in terms of what you are discovering. In the case of Budikote, they started by focusing on the self-help groups, but then realised that they were missing other groups of people who might be quite different.

In general, the objectives of social mapping might include the following specific objectives:

- the gathering of local demographic and statistical information
- a description of communication and other service infrastructures
- building an understanding of the local communicative ecology
- building an understanding of local information and communication needs
- the identification of stakeholders
- the mapping of relationships
- a reflective examination of the CMC and its structures and processes.

You may want to add more objectives depending on your context.

Member of Radio Primerisima, Nicaragua, talks to striking miners

• Targeted research

Targeted research can be used to focus on specific issues that have emerged from broad research, on particular groups within your target communities, or on particular aspects of your CMC's work. From your broad research you would have identified some of the main issues and areas of work that are appropriate and/or important to explore for your CMC's development. You would then need research targeted specifically on these themes or issues.

You might, for example, want to explore why certain groups in your local community do not engage well with your CMC, or why others do. You might want to explore what these groups aim to get from your CMC and whether they think they achieve this. Targeted research can be undertaken on a number of different issues throughout your project's life. The same issues may be researched more than once as the CMC and community involvement keep growing.

In essence, targeted research should have a clear focus – it should aim to answer specific questions such as 'why do young women fail to take advantage of the services we are offering them?' or 'what do the young women who use our project facilities feel about us and what do

they gain from the services we offer?' In this way you will obtain information that you can then feed back into your centre activities and improve the appropriateness of your services.

As you can see from Example 2, targeted research can involve investigation of specific themes, specific kinds of people, political processes, and specific actors in the process, particular groups of men or women. These focuses are ones that are important for the project's development and for further developing a rich understanding of the centre and its local context.

Example 2

In Budhikote, the researcher gradually focused on three major themes. This focus arose from both the social mapping and from the development of the CMC itself.
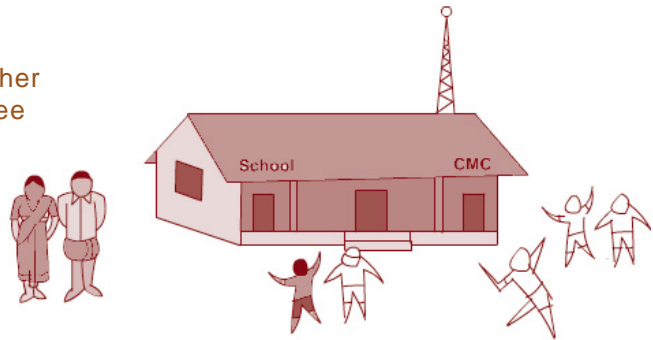
1. Education – how to work with schools: their mapping showed that parents were ambitious for their children's education but very concerned about the low level of educational resources. At the same time, Namma Dhwani wanted to work more closely with the schools in order to bring their more informal teaching methods into the curriculum.

They started a project in which pupils and their teachers would make radio programmes a part of their school work and broadcast them on Namma Dhwani. This 'experiment' would need to be carefully researched: the researcher can make extensive field notes about the development of the project; interview teachers, pupils and parents about their experience; study the programmes that are made; observe and document classroom activities – and much more.

2. Governance and local politics – social mapping showed that, particularly through the SHGs, people were becoming very articulate about local problems but their relations with political bodies like the Panchayat (local council) were confused and unsatisfactory. A main aim of Namma Dhwani is empowerment: being aware of one's rights and acting on them.

Therefore, they decided to focus research on local political processes by, for example, studying Panchayat documents (their accounts and information systems); the flow of information between community and Panchayat; what issues were important to people and how they organised themselves to act on them.

3. Organised versus non-organised poor – this theme was present from quite early in the social mapping, as the researcher realised they were working more closely with SHG members than anyone else. Aside from needing to know about other kinds of people for the purposes of social mapping, she also became very interested in the differences between organised and non-organised poor people. For example, why were there only two Muslim women in all the 35 SHGs in Budhikote? And what difference did this make for the other Muslim women? Men saw the benefits of SHGs very clearly but so far had not been able to organise themselves in similar ways. Again, why? And could research help find a way to organise them?

In the case of both Muslim women and village men, targeted research involved in-depth interviews as well as observation to understand their place in the community and how they related to each other and the rest of the village.

The research process

The research process needs to be repeated regularly throughout the life of the CMC. We can think about this process in the following terms:
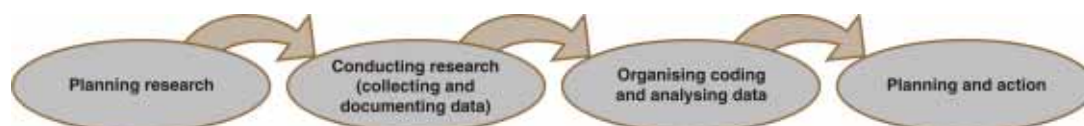
Guidelines for matching research methods to data needs

You need to select the most appropriate methods and techniques for your CMC research project or evaluation study.

Avoid the single-method solution

As a general rule, there is strength in having more than one method in any study. Some methods are clearly better suited to certain kinds of data and social situation. Reliance on a single method, usually a questionnaire survey, inevitably reduces the richness of the data and the possibility of crosschecking information. Data on how people use equipment is better observed than data obtained from an interview — why people wanted to use the equipment and how they felt after the experience can only be found out by asking them.

Match the method to the available human resources

The time and resources available to the research project and particularly, the availability of trained researchers and field workers are important considerations. Only researchers with specific training in design, coding, and analysis can effectively implement the methods.

Other methods are more robust in their application, such as observation, performance reports, and self-assessments. Group techniques require a skilled facilitator in leading group discussions. Questionnaire surveys are often more difficult to design than most people believe but field assistants with limited training can effectively carry out a well-designed survey instrument in the field, and a well-designed survey instrument is the key to good data collection.

Match the method to the type of data needed by the stakeholders

Assess the type of data needed by the various stakeholders. At the local level, highly statistical information is probably less useful than the more in-depth, qualitative kind that enables education and learning. However, potential investors in telecentres and international donors may require data with provincial or national validity, so a good sampling design is crucial. This may require financial data with statistical significance. The mix of stakeholders and their information needs will influence the research design, sampling strategy, and mix of methods.

Excerpted by **Laurent Elder** from Assessing Community Telecentres, Guidelines for Researchers, Ottawa: IDRC, 2000.

Each strand of your research should follow this process, and you might have more than one research strand happening at any one time.

You must go through this same process in both broad research and targeted research.

Planning research

In any research-related activity, there are fundamental questions to address prior to carrying out the research. This is especially so for participatory research approaches such as ethnographic action research. Participants will only engage fully with research activities and give the time and human resources required if they understand its purpose and can recognise the benefits.

Collecting and documenting data

The need for research planning applies to both *broad* and *targeted* research. The selection of methods and participants is also a part of the planning stage. You then conduct that research, using and adapting the methods you have chosen as you go about the collection of data.

You may find the need to use an alternative research method while you are collecting data. **Use more than one research method to strengthen the validity of your findings.**

It is very important to ensure that you document your data thoroughly. You might conduct a fascinating set of in-depth interviews supplemented by participant observations - but this data will be lost and useless if you do not *write it all down*. You will forget most of what you found out or perhaps only remember the bits that interested you at the time. You will not be able to code and analyse your material properly because it is all in your head and other people will not be able to read the details of what you have learned.
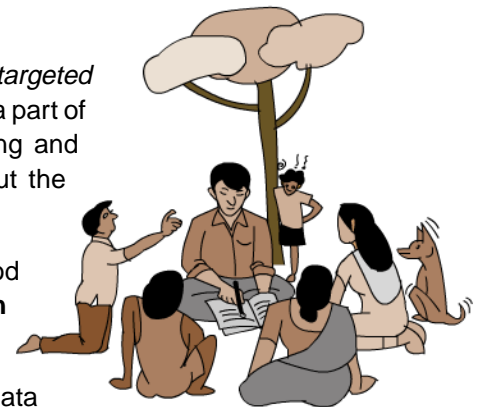
Organising, coding and analysis of data

You must be disciplined and organized, both in the way you carry out the collection of data and the ways in which you manage it. Avoid cutting corners because those tasks are time consuming. Instead, organize your documents and long passages of text to prevent spending long hours finding your way around them.

Make sure that you label all the data you collect with basic information such as date, time, place, who was there, etc., and file them systematically.

Analysis is a continuous part of the research process, not something you leave until the end of research when all the data is gathered. You start to think about analysis as soon as you have collected some data. In ethnography, we spend some time each day reading and thinking through our material in order to:

- see what interesting and significant issues are emerging
- develop ideas and interpretations that we can pursue through further research
- explore ideas across *all* the different kinds of material we are gathering.

In this kind of analysis, you are normally looking for common themes, ideas, issues or questions that are emerging across your research methods. This is one reason why documentation is

essential: it is impossible to analyse your material properly unless it is on paper or in electronic, image, or audio form.

Coding. In the example given, formal education is important to the interviewee, an issue that is also important to your CMC. By writing the phrase 'formal and informal education' on your interview notes, right next to this part of the interview you will start a process known as 'coding'. In other words, you are simply labelling interesting sections of your notes with appropriate 'codes'.

Using 'codes' will allow you to quantify the importance and relevance of issues in your community as in the example above. In this case, once you have completed 'coding', your next step might be to look over your other interview notes and transcripts to find other discussions of 'formal and informal education'. You also look over your field notes, questionnaires and any other material, such as diaries. You also look at the material that your users have produced in your project such as websites, or drawings, and at how they relate to different styles of learning. What do all these things tell you about 'formal and informal education'?

You will then move on to *organise* and *explore* your data in terms of particular 'codes'. This allows you to look at all of your material in terms of significant themes or ideas. In ethnographic action research, much of the work of analysis is done through coding, organising and exploring your data. As your research develops you will explore many more codes in this way, building up an increasingly detailed understanding of your CMC and community.

On the basis of your coding and analysis you will think of new ways to develop your research and relate your research to your CMC. For example:

- you might want to interview some teachers at local schools or private computer schools

- have a group discussion with some users of your centre

- add a question about informal education in your feedback form or questionnaire

- discuss this issue with project workers or bring it up at the next staff meeting

- suggest ways of organising your training courses so that they address issues that came out of your analysis.

Planning and action

You now have all this data, gathered through different methods, you've organised it according to codes and themes; next step – what do you do with it?

You can draw out some pertinent findings and recommendations for your CMC and you may identify areas where you need to do further research. You will need to look at:

- what you have found out and how you might apply this to your CMC's development

- how to deepen your understanding about the issues you have explored, and what other issues you need to explore.

You can write reports from your analysis and disseminate your research findings widely. This is an evaluation of your project's work, what it has achieved, and importantly, its strengths and weaknesses. Your research approach will allow you to ground this evaluation in the wider

For example, in one interview you find some discussion about education and learning. This interviewee has been taking computer classes at your centre. Although she enjoys the informal style of teaching at your centre, both she and her parents worry that it is not 'like school', and therefore might not be as worthwhile. Moreover, you do not give out diplomas or certificates like private computer schools, and so her parents question whether they should pay a fee for your classes.

social context in which your CMC is working, and you will be able to describe direct and indirect benefits that your CMC has delivered in great detail. Research is a valuable resource and it places your CMC in a good position to decide improvements on its performance.

Armed with your findings, your CMC can *plan* actions, it can then *implement* them, and you can *observe* and *reflect* on how they work or do not work. On completion of each research cycle, you are equipped with a better understanding of what is possible and how your CMC might achieve such possibilities.

Further information on ethnographic action research

Tacchi, J., Slater, D. and Hearn, G. 2003. *Ethnographic Action Research: A User's Handbook.* New Delhi. UNESCO. http://cirac.qut.edu.au/ictpr/downloads/handbook.pdf

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