Case Study

What is it?

A case study is a description and analysis generated by a project and the context in which it has been developed. It collects and documents qualitative and quantitative data using a descriptive and narrative reconstruction of events.

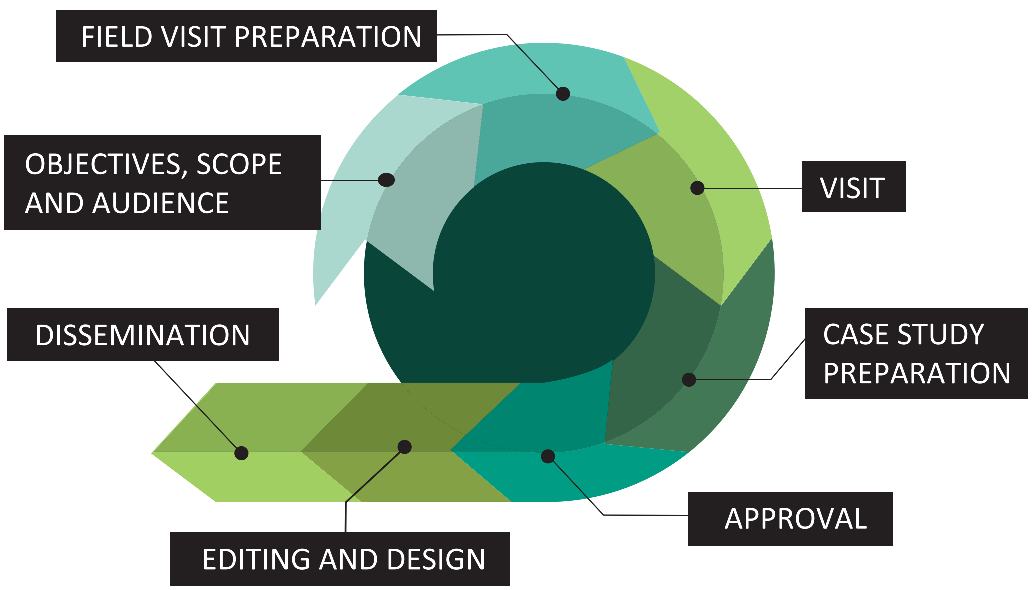
Case studies systematize experiences in order to understand why events unfolded in a certain way, what decisions were made, what concrete results were obtained and what lessons were learned.

The process of preparing a case study involves collecting and analyzing data and experiences. Since the selection, collection, analysis and presentation of data from various sources can be complex, it is useful to adopt a structured process when producing this type of knowledge product. There are two types of case study depending on the scope and length:

- A brief case study: 4-5 pages
- A detailed case study: 15-20 pages

These guidelines have been developed for the preparation of case studies on projects co-financed by the MIF, based on an interactive methodology that involves field visits and capturing opinions from the project's stakeholders.

The phases for the preparation of a case study are the following:



1. Definition of the scope and start of the case study

1.1. Understanding the objective

Early in the process of preparing the case study, there must be absolute clarity about the reasons for developing the case study. It is essential to understand

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the case study's audience, what needs to be achieved and how the case study will be used, in order to ensure that the study will be well-focused and will address the audience's needs.

Key Questions

Who has commissioned the case study? What is the focus of their work? What type of organization are they? Have they previously undertaken a case study? Are there principles or guidelines to be observed? How much time is available to produce the case study? How is it funded?

What do you intend to know and why? Is the organization preparing the case study primarily interested in a specific topic or area? Do they want to do only one study, or have more so they can compare and contrast? Do they want to consider the case study as a whole or focus specifically on certain aspects of it? Do they want to carry out an initial pilot study or experimental case before doing a comprehensive long-term study? Is the case study going to be developed from previous studies?

How will the information be used? Are the reasons for conducting the case study internal or external? Who is/are the audience/s of the case study? Is the case study meant to encourage learning? Share or showcase best practices? Explain? Show accountability? Document the status of the project? Highlight something from the study? Perform a comparative analysis? Who will share the results of the case study, and with whom?

What style and reach should the case study have? What channels will be used to present the case study? Should it be presented through storytelling? As a technical report? As lessons learned?

1.2. Selecting the cases or stories

The cases and stories to be examined should be selected once the reasons for producing the case study and its recipients have both been defined. The criteria for selecting cases and stories should be done according to the parameters established for the study's objective. A selection of possible cases could be done previously, and then judged according to the general and specific criteria of the study. General indicators may include the following criteria:

- Geographical zone
- Thematic area
- Size
- Coverage and scope
- Intervention methodology
- Results and impacts

If more than one case study is selected, a decision must be taken about whether they should be similar or quite different.

Access to information is a very relevant aspect to take into account during the selection of cases or stories. It should be considered in terms of availability of data, information, contacts and geographical accessibility.

1.3. Selection of the consultant responsible for the preparation of the case study

The role of the consultant is fundamental in the case study process . The considerations to be taken into account include: whether the consultants are internal or external in relation to the case study; to what extent they could be "neutral"; and whether an individual consultant or a firm should be hired. The selection of the consultant should be made depending on several criteria, including previous knowledge of the project, area or topic, prior experience, and proficiency in the language.

Whatever choice is finally made, one fundamental principle for all professionals developing case studies is to be receptive to learning from those with whom they are working. This attitude encourages the development of a process of mutual learning between "the researcher" and "the researched."

Documenting a case study also requires certain skills, such as:

- Knowing how to write
- Listening
- Knowing how to collect information
- Capacity for analysis
- Capacity for reflection

1.4 Preparation of a general framework

It is very important that the contracting organization and the consultant have a common understanding about what is going to be covered by the case study and the methodologies that will be used for data collection and review that best fit each person or group.

For this reason, the use of a standardized template could be useful as a guideline during the process of writing the case study, in order to ensure coherence in style and coverage. Different drafts can be produced, in order to ensure that all requirements are fulfilled, and also to ensure clarity and acceptance.

2. Preparation of the field visit

2.1. Documentary review

In this first phase, all existing documentation for the preparation of the case study should be collected and analyzed. This first exercise will allow the person responsible for producing the case study to get in-depth knowledge about the project.

The review should be as comprehensive as possible and rely both on published sources such as books, articles, and surveys, and unpublished materials, such as reports, evaluations, etc.

Sources of information:

- Project documents: Donors memo, mission reports, project status reports (PSR), intermediate and final evaluation reports, baseline, reports from the monitoring and evaluation system, technical visits, etc.

- Other knowledge products from the project.

- Relevant documents about the topic or context of the project, generated by external sources, that could be relevant in terms of additional information (publications, articles, books, surveys, etc.).

As a result of this review process, a first draft of the case study, with a maximum length of 2 pages, will be produced. This first document should be kept deliberately short in order to give a snapshot of what will be documented in the final case study.

Additionally, it is advisable to collect other materials and audiovisual products, in order to have an idea of the communication materials that could be collected during the visit. These materials could be audiovisuals (photos, videos, audio), media appearances about the project (news reports, videos), publications, brochures, posters, websites, etc.

It is important to document and include the sources of information used during the review, along with complete data of the source, publishers and dates, so that they can be consulted and verified later.

2.2 Establish relations with key contacts

Along with the development of the draft report containing the documentary review, key local, regional or international contacts should be identified. These contacts can be supplied by the organization that has commissioned the case study, and/or identified during the documentation review.

These contacts are vital because they will provide the necessary connections during field visits, provide access to sources of information and people to interview and also represent a major logistical support on the ground. At the same time, they can be consulted on various profiles of beneficiaries or stakeholders involved in the case study for the collection of evidence, examples, stories, etc.

It should be noted that to achieve broad participation of stakeholders, the acceptance of the case study and final disclosure through larger networks, it is essential to nurture and develop these connections. Their names and contact details should be carefully recorded and included in databases.

2.3 Identify consultants/specific support in the field

In some cases it may be necessary to seek additional support from local consultants. If you opt for this alternative, local consultants will need to receive a briefing and in some cases even training so they understand the objectives of the research and methodologies to be used to get the information. Local consultants can also be useful in the identification of documents, materials and sources of information.

2.4 Preparation of the methodology for the visit

The research methodology for a case study requires careful preparation. It could include methods such as:

- Questionnaires and surveys
- Interviews
- Documentation review
- Participatory observation
- Focus groups, workshops
- Life stories and testimonies
- Audiovisuals

No matter what methods are chosen for conducting the case study, certain ethical principles should be maintained, including:

- Consistently maintaining principles on the mode of carrying out the research
- Respecting the participants
- Being aware of the possible consequences of the research
- Respecting confidentiality/anonymity if requested
- Checking that the sources agree with how the information they have provided is being used

3. Field visit

3.1 Working with local contacts/consultants

Local contacts are key to the success of the case study. It may be necessary, for example, to ask local consultants to fill the gaps that remain during the drafting process of the case study and to facilitate access to additional information. Therefore it is very important to develop these kinds of relationships, involve them continuously and ask for them for their opinion on the data that come up.

3.2 Recording information

The primary goal of the visits is to confirm, adjust or reject the conclusions from the document review.

All information collected in the field should be carefully recorded with dates and data source. The accuracy of the data supporting the case study depends on it.

It may be useful to keep a diary of the visit, where observations, thoughts and impressions could be recorded on what is observed and heard.

It is also essential to find some room to reflect and think about the issues that may be included in the record.

3.3 Hold a workshop or meeting with stakeholders

At the end of the visit, it is useful to hold a brief workshop or meeting to discuss and clarify the results with the respondents and the key local contacts. This type of event can be used to compare the data, discuss different points of view and provide the first impressions of the study. Also, this type of meetings are useful for communicating to the participants that they are part of the development process of the case study/research. This kind of meeting does not need to last long, usually half a day is enough, and it is also recommended to have a limited number of participants.

4. Writing the case study

4.1 Triangulation and data synthesis

The triangulation of data is related to synthesizing data and checking the accuracy of the information collected. In a case study, this leads to comparing the research data obtained first hand in the field with secondary sources, such as more extensive documentation, statistics and other materials. The documentary review that was done ahead of time is very useful to compare with the results of the field visit.

In order to get a good triangulation and data synthesis, it is essential to have a good balance and some perspective. Decisions on how the data will be intepreted should be based on evidence, not opinions. It is also critical to be aware of the visibility or invisibility of certain people and groups, and assess whether they have been clearly considered in cross cutting issues such as gender, background, age, etc. During this process it could be useful to include a "peer review" (see below).

4.2 Writing and review of the case study

The case study should be written according to the template provided by the MIF, following a rigorous process of reviewing different drafts.

A case study should have the following structure:

1. Executive summary: The case study should contain an opening paragraph that clearly summarizes the content and scope of the case study.

2. Introduction: The introduction of the case study should provide key project information to contextualize the reader:

   » The economic, social, political and regulatory environment in which the project has been developed.

   » Background information and hypothesis to which the project responds. It is important to accompany the information with objective data and evidence.

- » The objectives of the project
- » The stakeholders involved in the project (executing agency partners, beneficiaries, etc.)

3. Body of the case study: This is the main section of a case study and includes:

- » Chronological description of the events, critical moments or milestones in the experience that is being analyzed
- » Description of the project stakeholders and the role they have played
- » Detailed explanation of the decisions taken and the results obtained
- » Identification of the causes of success or failure
- » Qualitative and quantitative evidence that supports the content of the case

This section should be written in narrative form, sequentially organizing the facts and explaining how they contributed to the conduct or outcome of the project.

It is advisable to use "storytelling" techniques in writing case studies, describing the project with the support of stories or personal experiences that evoke emotions and make the reader more easily connect ideas we want to convey. Testimonials and quotes from key stakeholders can be included to enrich the case study.

4. Conclusions: The goal of this section is to present the main conclusions of the experience analyzed, systematizing lessons learned and success and/or failure factors.

Lessons learned can be defined as the knowledge gained about a process or one or more experiences through reflection and critical analysis. The results of this experience or process can be positive or negative.

In documenting a lesson, the following considerations should be taken into account:

- » The lessons should express the relationship between the result of the experience and the critical factors or conditions that may have contributed to or hindered its success.
- » The lessons should help identify trends and cause-effect relationships for a specific context.
- » The lessons must suggest recommendations.

5. Appendices: To provide additional information to the reader, appendices with quantitative and qualitative information to support the study, methods and tools used to capture and analyze information, sources, interviews, etc., may be included.

The review process is time consuming. The following steps are recommended:

- » Perform an initial check with all those in the field whose comments have been cited in the study to ensure that they agree with the way their views have been used and shared, especially if they have been quoted directly in testimony or life stories. Often it is not necessary to send the entire document but only the parts that include their contributions.
- » Include the participation of "peer reviewers," who could be trusted colleagues or advisors. They should have some independence from the research and some knowledge on the goal of the case study, in order to be able to comment on it and hold a discussion. If a group of researchers is working together, a useful way to check their work is to exchange studies among them.
- » Maintain close conversations and share information with whoever commissioned the study to get feedback and comments and ensure that the work is adequately addressing the original objectives of the research.
- » In reviewing, employ a panel of experts in the topic or case study area, with capacity to comment in a critical way and confirm the results

4.3 Adapting the material to audiences

In order to assure that the information that has been collected is adequate, the needs of its different audiences should be carefully identified beforehand. The information can be adapted to an "internal public" such as beneficiaries, personnel and representatives of the organizations involved in the case, and to an "external public" such as donors, policy makers, media and the general public. Each of these groups will have different preferences regarding the format and presentation of case studies, for example, official reports, testimonials and stories with a dimension of personal testimony, statistical information, etc. The effectiveness of the case study as a learning vehicle is determined, finally, by the selection of the "correct" presentation and dissemination channels for each of these recipients.

To achieve material that is adapted to different types of audiences, it is very important that during the drafting of various sections of the case study, different types of materials that support different sections are included:

- » Infographics: Are there data that can be represented graphically?
- » Interviews: Could a section of the case study be supported with a short interview?
- » Images: What image or images best represent the section we are writing?
- » Testimonials: What testimonies could be chosen in order to enhance the presentation of the case study as a good practice?
- » Other resources (maps, graphics, illustrations): What evokes the paragraph we are writing?

5. Approval

Prior to its dissemination, the case study will require the approval of the contracting organization and by MIF´s specialist supervision team leader or by another approval process defined by the MIF.

6. Editing and design

Once the final text has been endorsed by all parties involved, it is highly recommended to send it to an editor/journalist who will proceed with reviewing and editing grammar and spelling errors. After finishing the editing process, the text should be sent to a graphic designer to format and design using the standard template provided by the MIF (which can be downloaded from the online toolkit).

After this step is completed, the aprroval of the MIF´s supervision team leader is suggested.

7. Dissemination

Dissemination is key to guarantee that the case study has reached the target audience. This step will require selecting and using the most effective communication channels to reach that audience. Moreover, the information acquired in the field can lead to a whole range of products that support the dissemination of the case studies.

7.1 Communication channels

Each communication channel requires a different format and message, therefore having different types of materials generated from the case study (images, testimonials, interviews, etc.) is important.

If we exclude traditional channels of communication and limit ourselves to digital media, the main channels that could be used are: the project website, blogs, social networks, web pages, specialized networks, newsletters and presentations (such as PowerPoint, Prezi).

7.2 Communications products resulting from case studies

As already noted above, testimonies and life stories are essential to supporting the communication of case studies. But in some cases they can also be used outside of the publication as material for posters, presentations, websites, social media outreach, etc. It is therefore appropriate to include a list of testimonies and life stories that the researcher deems relevant, whether or not they are used in the publication.

The interviews that were carried out during the field visit may also constitute, in themselves, material for publication independently on websites, magazines, etc. So it is important to make a list of the interviews conducted and the location of the material of the interview.

An audiovisual gallery is also a key product to support the publication, and it could also serve to illustrate other communication products and channels such as web, magazine articles, and presentations.

7.3 Measuring impact

It is important to have adequate tools to measure the impact of each dissemination action, and prove whether we are reaching the key audiences and to receive their opinions on the case study.

In order to achieve this, each communication channel should be accompanied by an indicator and/or tool to measure its impact.

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