



SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE FORMATIVE RESEARCH DECISION TREE

Nutrition programmers can use this tool to select one or more research methods when gathering information needed to design any nutrition SBC program or activity.

Research to “form” or shape program activities is called formative research. Formative research answers programmatic questions necessary to achieve quality social and behavior change (SBC) program design, such as: Why do people practice a behavior or not? What are people willing and able to do in their context and how? Who influences them?

After [prioritizing behaviors](#),¹ answer the questions above by reviewing existing information. Fill any information gaps through formative research.

Using the decision tree on page 3 (figure 1), follow these steps to select research methods that answer your research questions:

Step 1. Design research questions.

Step 2. Select methods.

Step 3. Select participant groups and places to include in the research.

Step 1. Design research questions.

This is a critical first step. Ask—

- what people do
- why they do the behavior (what prevents or supports action)
- how to improve practices.

Answering “why” and “how” questions with program participants helps you understand specifically how to refine priority behaviors and the factors preventing or supporting these behaviors. Use the [Factors That Influence Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Behaviors](#) tool² to consider the range of factors to cover in the research questions. Design research questions that are specific to participant groups. Be sure to consider meaningful “segments” or sub-groups of the people who practice priority behaviors and the people who influence them.



What Is a Segment?

A segment is a group of people defined by characteristics that affect nutrition outcomes. Characteristics used to define segments are those that are expected to predict differences in the priority behaviors, such as geographic area, rural or urban residence, age, interests, or values.

Remember the What, Why, and How

When designing research questions, take into account what you already know based on available data. As shown in the decision tree, first consider “what” is happening in the context, such as which priority behaviors are practiced. If you know that, the next question is “why” these behaviors are being practiced. The answers will help you start to understand the systems, services, networks, and other factors that influence the behaviors. Once those questions are answered, the focus will be on “how” those influences could be leveraged to help people.

Focus on the specific behaviors and factors expected to influence behaviors in this population. For example, if you are aiming to improve women’s dietary diversity, asking the question, “What are causes of malnutrition?” will not provide you with specific information. Instead, you could ask:

- “What are women currently consuming?”
- “Why are women making these food choices?”
- “What options are available?”
- “How can women increase consumption of a particular locally available food?”

Step 2. Select methods.

Use figure 1 to select methods to answer your research questions. There are many types and methods of research. Some types help to better define the behaviors (“what?”), while others illuminate the factors that affect them (“why?”) and identify specific actions that people are willing and able to do (“how?”). Programs often use only a few exploratory methods although these may not be the best ways to answer the actual research questions or may be better when combined with other methods. See table 1 for tips on each type of method.

Step 3. Select participant groups and places to include in the research.

Specify the population segments and types of people to include in the groups, in accord with the research questions.

To analyze the research for use in an SBC strategy, use the tool [Using Research to Design a Social and Behavior Change Strategy for Multi-Sectoral Nutrition](#).³

Figure I. SBC Formative Research Decision Tree

Do You Know...

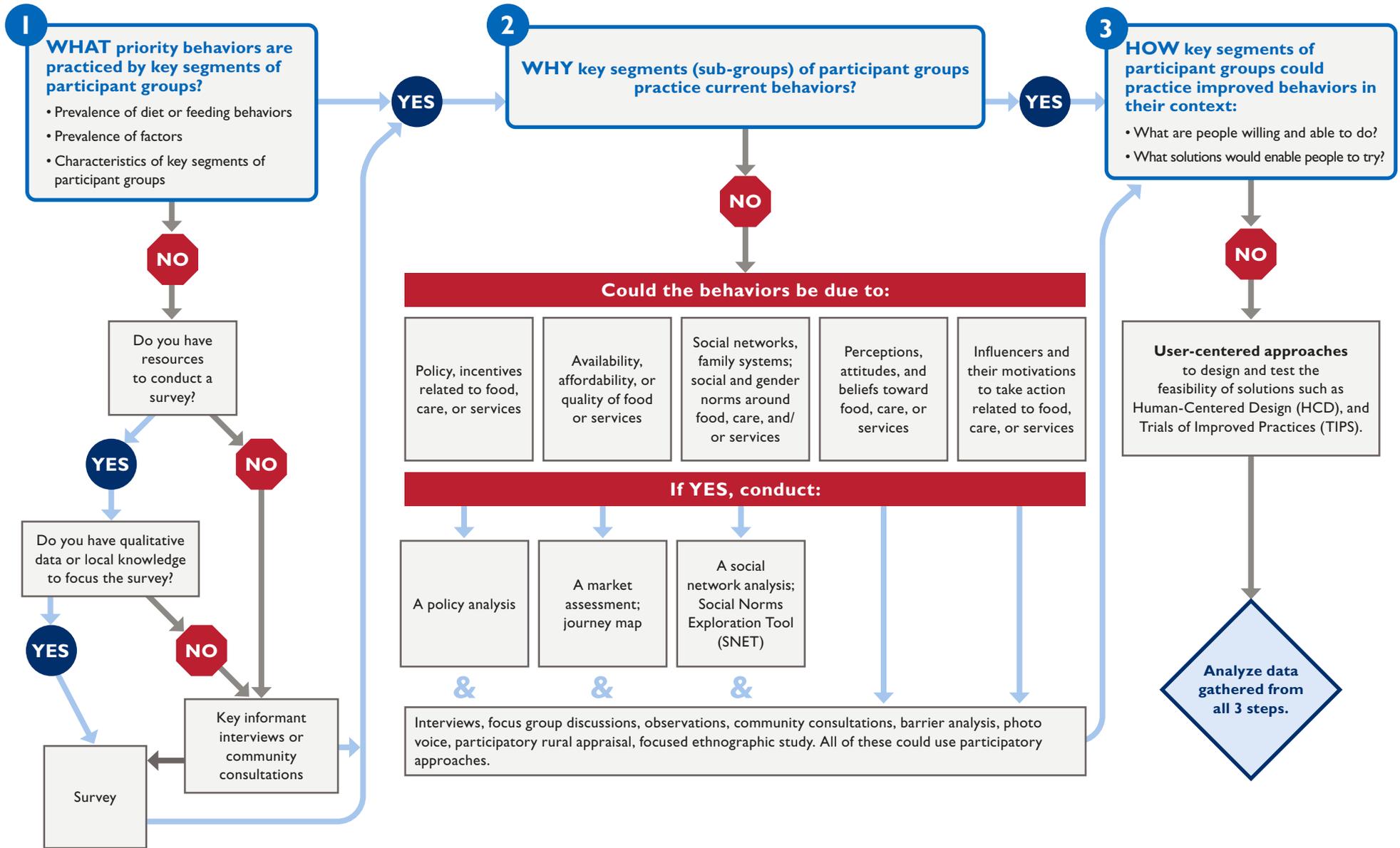


Table 1. Formative Research Method Considerations

Method	Type	Purpose	Things to Keep in Mind	Additional Resources
 WHAT priority behaviors are practiced by key segments of participant groups?				
Dietary Analysis	Quantitative	To obtain information about the nutritional adequacy of a woman's or child's diet or estimate adequacy of a particular nutrient.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually based on dietary information obtained during a dietary assessment. • Requires familiarity with nutritional science and experience calculating nutrition requirements and composition of foods. 	ProPAN ⁴
Surveys	Quantitative	To generally quantify conditions and estimate prevalence of behaviors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys can include demographic information and data on nutritional status and priority behaviors and the factors that prevent or support the behaviors. • Can be used for audience segmentation. 	Global Diet Quality Project⁵
Also consider methods under the WHY section below for qualitative data.				

Method	Type	Purpose	Things to Keep in Mind	Additional Resources
 WHY do people practice current behaviors?				
Barrier Analysis	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To identify barriers of behavior change among a specific target audience, comparing those people who do the behavior with people who do not do the behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful when there are clear differences between people who do the behavior and who do not. Requires a large sample, so this needs more resources than other methods, but less than standard surveys. 	Barrier Analysis ⁶
Focus Group Discussions/ Group Interviews	Qualitative	To understand why people practice behaviors and the variation in community-wide expectations for nutrition behaviors in general (not for individuals), and to generate local solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be participatory. Often part of other methods and helpful when looking at family dynamics, social and gender norms, and solution generation through intra-group dialogue. These require facilitation skills. Challenges include avoiding a tendency for all to agree with the dominant people in a group. Can include projective techniques using free listing, ranking, or story completion. 	How to Conduct Formative Research Focus on Families and Culture ⁷ FGD Guide pg 33
Focused Ethnographic Study	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To get information on conditions and nutrition behaviors using ethnographic methods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses multiple data gathering methods, including open ended questions and techniques drawn from cognitive anthropology, such as “free listing” and pile sorts and social mapping exercises and scenarios. Broken into short modules, each of which focuses on a specific issue. 	The Focused Ethnographic Study ‘Assessing the Behavioral and Local Market Environment for Improving the Diets of Infants and Young Children 6 to 23 Months Old’ and Its Use in Three Countries ⁸

Method	Type	Purpose	Things to Keep in Mind	Additional Resources
 WHY do people practice current behaviors? (continued)				
In-Depth Interviews	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To understand why people practice behaviors, or what prevents and supports action, and the variation in people's perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often used within other methods. • Useful when participants are more willing to share views and behaviors in private. • Helpful when looking at family dynamics, social and gender norms, and beliefs related to nutrition behaviors. • Can include journey maps and projective techniques such as pile sorts and storytelling. • Can include paired interviews, with adolescents, for example. 	How to Conduct Formative Research ⁹ Annex I Conducting Formative Research on Adolescent Nutrition ¹⁰ Interview Guide pg 34
Market Food Environment Assessments	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To obtain information on the availability and costs of different foods or potential food options in the diet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat in different seasons or interview sellers on variation in cost and availability. 	Methods, Tools, and Metrics for Evaluating Market Food Environments in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, June 2021 ¹¹
Observations	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To understand what is happening now, including potential differences between reported and observed behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be participatory. • Useful for practices that are not conscious, i.e., market shopping or responsive child feeding. Can be used to create journey maps. • Can be time consuming to collect. 	Sample: pg 56 Handwashing observation

Method	Type	Purpose	Things to Keep in Mind	Additional Resources
 WHY do people practice current behaviors? (continued)				
Photo Voice	Qualitative	To collectively produce knowledge by reflecting on and discussing community issues through small group discussions of photos.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory method that enables people to record and reflect about their community's strengths and concerns. • Able to "voice" and represent individual perception. • Intensive time commitment of participants with weekly meetings over months. 	Photovoice: A Methodological Guide ¹²
Political Analysis	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To understand the legal, policy, and economic frameworks and unwritten interests that drive government, civil society, and private sector actors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use to understand motivations and incentives for policy change. 	Political Analysis ¹³
Social Network Analysis	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To map and understand the patterns of relations among people and among groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be participatory and use visual methodologies to ensure participation by low-literacy groups with differing social perspectives 	Full article: Moving From Theory to Practice: A Participatory Social Network Mapping Approach to Address Unmet Need for Family Planning in Benin ¹⁴
Social Norms Exploration Tool (SNET)	Qualitative	To engage community members using rapid, participatory learning exercises to explore social norms that influence nutrition behaviors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes interviews and group discussions. • Participatory, rapid assessment. • Useful to identify and understand influencers or reference groups who hold in place social norms, the unwritten rules of behavior. 	SNET ¹⁵ Sample: SNET Annex 2

Method	Type	Purpose	Things to Keep in Mind	Additional Resources
 HOW can people practice priority behaviors in their context?				
User-Centered Methods to design solutions and test the acceptability and feasibility of solutions.				
Human-Centered Design	Mixed qualitative and quantitative	To develop solution to problems by involving the user perspective in all steps of the problem-solving process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be participatory. • Useful to generate local solutions to a specific challenge or recommended behaviors. 	Design Kit ¹⁶
Trials of Improved Practices	Qualitative	To test how participants can make changes and learn what specific actions participants are willing and able to do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful to refine specific actions to promote. • Useful to generate local solutions to recommended behaviors. • These require time for repeated visits with each participant. 	Designing by Dialogue ¹⁷ TIPs Guide Pg 36

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