



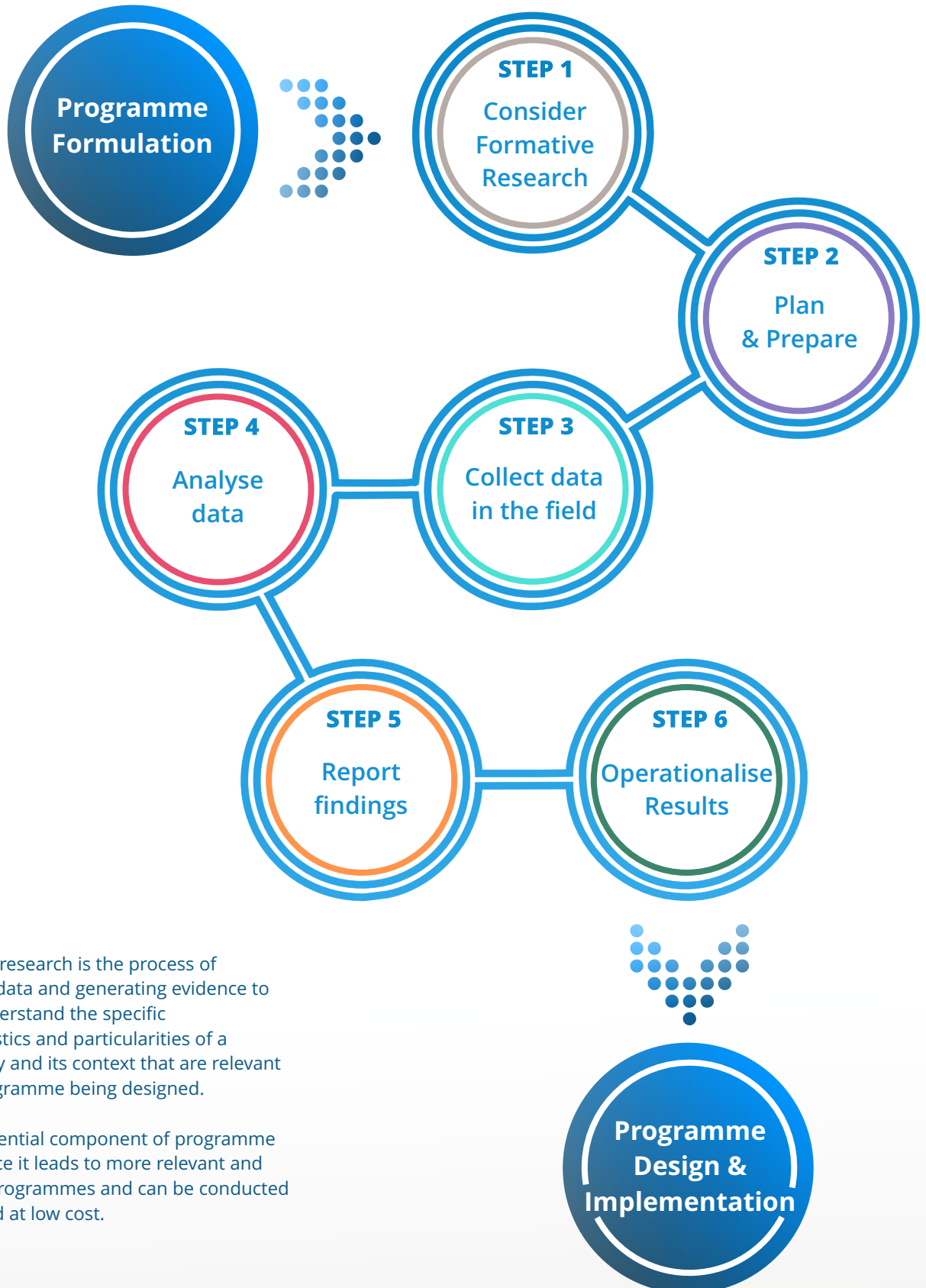
World Food Programme

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Formative Research: How do we do it?

Anthrologica

This is a summary of key considerations in relation to commissioning, developing, and using formative research for more effective programmes. It provides a step-by-step guideline for the practical application of formative research methodology in the development context. It is based on good practice and draws on specific learning from formative research conducted by World Food Programme (WFP) to support transformative school-based programming in Colombia and Haiti.



Formative research is the process of gathering data and generating evidence to better understand the specific characteristics and particularities of a community and its context that are relevant to the programme being designed.

It is an essential component of programme design since it leads to more relevant and effective programmes and can be conducted rapidly and at low cost.

Considering formative research

Define the objective:

The objective of the formative research will depend on the intervention and the general objective of the programme that you want to implement. You need to consider **what socio-behavioural data** you need to construct an integrated package or programme that **responds to the needs of the communities and puts them at the centre**. Understanding the context in which the intervention is going to be implemented will provide useful data to identify behavioural barriers and local resilience mechanisms to inform the design of programme activities. It will also provide the **baseline measure** to later determine the impact of the interventions or programme itself.

Assess the existing evidence:

Doing a **rapid desk-based literature review** should provide a solid foundation for the planned research. It is important to assess existing information, drawing on published literature, secondary and grey literature, programmatic documents, and other qualitative and quantitative data. The review should also include internal information and data generated from your own organisation's previous interventions and programmes, as well as those of relevant implementing partners. It is also important to compare different sources of information to build as complete a picture as possible and identify knowledge and information gaps. You may find that there is literature available, but that it is not relevant for the context or population groups you have targeted or that it is outdated. It can therefore be valuable to complement a review of published sources with **key stakeholder and beneficiary consultations**.

Define the research question:

The **core or primary question** is the question around which you will centre your research. It will guide the who, where and when of data

collection. The research question should be concise, straightforward, and specific, supported by a set of **sub- or secondary** questions if necessary. It is important to frame the research question correctly as it can influence how you do the research.

In the midst of Venezuelan migration crisis, a formative research study was conducted in Colombia, in order to generate baseline data related to aspects of discrimination, violence and xenophobia in selected schools where WFP was planning to provide school meals to Venezuelan and Colombian children. These insights yielded the foundations for the design of a social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) strategy where the school feeding programme was seen as a platform not only for nutrition or social protection but also for promoting inclusion and preventing xenophobia and discrimination in the school environment.

Formative research in Haiti had two key research questions: (a) Which gender issues are pertinent in the School Feeding Programme; and (b) What opportunities does the School Feeding Programme have to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through its activities?

Where to look for information:

Search **bibliographic databases**: (e.g. Web of Science or Google Scholar). A simple key word search of topics and/or titles is enough. Familiarise yourself with the Boolean operators and how these databases work.

Search other **institutional databases** (e.g., UN Agencies, Centre for Global Development, Reliefweb, Wellcome Trust, Donors, IDS GSDRC and K4D) and humanitarian media (e.g., The New Humanitarian, SciDevNet).

Use internet **search engines**, (e.g., Google) for grey literature and media resources.

Plan and prepare

Develop a research plan:

Once the objective of the formative research has been defined, you can start developing the actual plan for its implementation. It helps to be pragmatic: the research should deliver actionable and timely results, and therefore the plan should ensure that all activities are **relevant, feasible and necessary**.

The potential research **participants should be involved throughout the whole process**, including the design phase, data collection, analysis and validation of findings, interpretation and operationalisation of the evidence base, and implementation of strategy and interventions.

You will need to **map** the main stakeholders and population groups, considering not only your primary beneficiaries but also secondary groups that might be involved in decision making or have an influence on your primary audience's attitudes and behaviours. Other important stakeholders will include programme implementers (who will be using the findings of the research) and monitoring and evaluation experts (who will be tracking programmatic indicators).

Logistical and operational fieldwork considerations:

Preparing for fieldwork in advance should **maximise time and resources** for data collection.

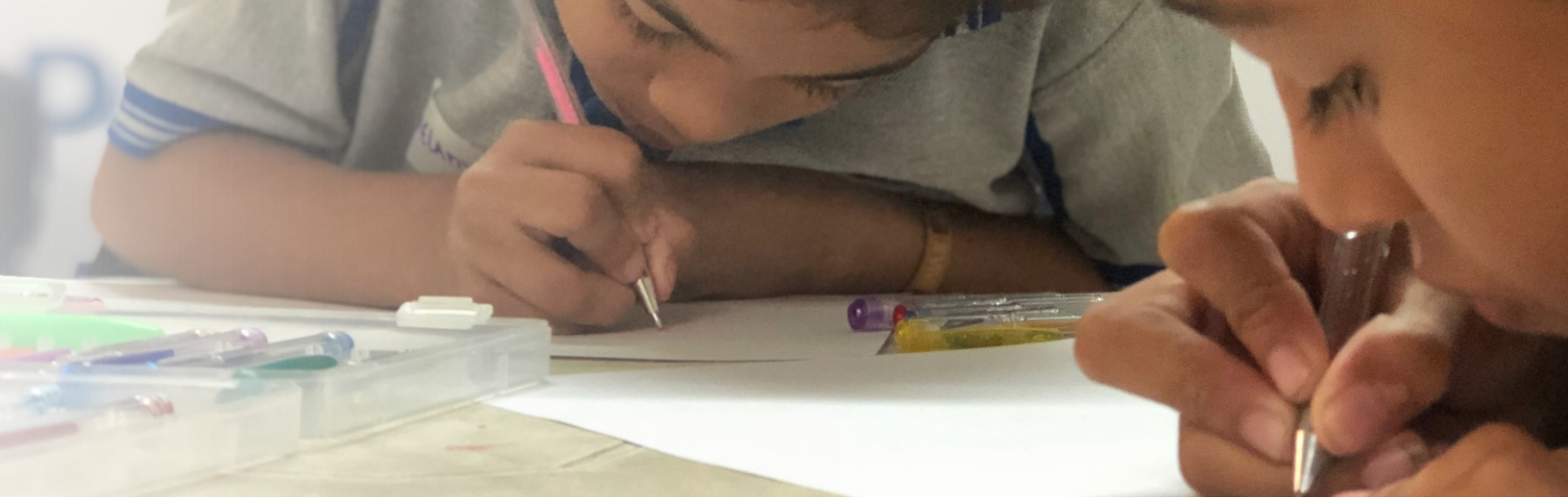
Logistics must also be planned, including how the research team will travel to field locations and access research areas, where they will stay, when and where participants will be engaged and for how long, what refreshments should be bought and offered to participants, security considerations, political stability, relevant weather conditions such as risk of floods, etc. Challenges and potential risks will always exist when conducting research in the field and will

vary according to the context. It is important to maintain a degree of **flexibility** to respond to emerging situations, to identify and anticipate potential risks and limitations before starting data collection, and to have measures in place to mitigate issues that arise. Particular attention should be given to risk mitigation when conducting research in humanitarian or emergency settings.

Fieldwork in Haiti was challenging for both the research team and participants due to limited infrastructure and resources in some research locations. Ways to mitigate challenges should be carefully considered before going to the field, and there should be flexibility to respond to emerging needs. Arrangements should be made in advance to avoid unnecessary disruption and to create an environment in which participants are made comfortable and can concentrate.

Your research plan should include:

- Purpose of the study
- Methodology (including defining research questions, desk review, stakeholder mapping, sampling, tool development, training, analysis, and reporting)
- The tools themselves
- Research team
- Logistics of fieldwork
- Consent forms
- Quantitative analysis plan (if relevant)
- Timeline (against the different phases outline in the methodology)
- Budget



Define the methodology and design the research tools:

The amount and type of data to be collected should be carefully considered. The methods must be aligned with the research objective and question(s). It can be effective to combine **qualitative** and **quantitative data**, so a **mixed methods approach** is often the strongest. Data collection tools should be carefully designed with the research participants in mind and tailored to different population groups and stakeholders.

In Colombia, researchers applied a mixed methods approach combining quantitative methods (surveys) and qualitative methods (focus groups discussions, interviews, informal conversations, participatory observation etc.). Question banks were carefully designed by a multidisciplinary team and included questions related to school feeding, nutrition, discrimination, xenophobia and integration. The tools were tailored specifically to different groups (e.g., students, parents, teachers, etc.) and adapted for different ethnicities to be sensitive and appropriate.



Key considerations when designing data collection tools:

- Include **demographic questions** in your data collection tools. These questions provide context for the other data collected and allow you to describe your participants. This enables you to better analyse the data for all population profiles included.
- Pay attention to the **wording** used in the tools. Think about how ideas are conveyed and questions formulated.
- **Pilot test all tools** in the field before data collection starts and make any required adjustments to ensure they are fit for purpose. Make sure you engage community members in the design and validation of the data collection tools.
- Conduct your research in the **most appropriate language** for the research participants, and carefully consider both translation and interpretation.
- Engaging **children or youth** requires specific considerations, in terms of the research tools and language used, how they are approached and invited to participate, and related to ethical issues including informed consent and assent.
- Depending on the objectives of the research, consider **participatory, creative and visual methods**, such as drawing, role-play, photo walks and storytelling. These can be highly enabling and a helpful way to generate data that leads to actions that are community-led.
- Be aware of what is being asked from participants in terms of their **time and emotional investment**.

Additional ethical considerations:

It is crucial that all research is developed in accordance with accepted **principles of research ethics**. It may be necessary to secure formal ethical approval from an independent review board. Key ethical considerations include how to approach informed consent and assent, how to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, how to safeguard participants during the research process and ensure they are referred to appropriate support services if necessary, and how to securely store data and make sure it is used as intended. There should be transparency about the purpose of the research and mechanisms in place to ensure accountability of the research team. The researcher should be bound by the ethical obligation to **'do no harm'**, to protect research participants and to act responsibly. This humanitarian principle is undisputed and should always be adhered to.

Build the research team:

A strong and efficient research team must include individuals with the appropriate combination of **technical knowledge** and **practical skills** to accomplish the purpose of the research. If a third party will be engaged to design and/or conduct

the research, the research team should not only possess the necessary expertise but also be trained and aware of WFP's mandates and protocols. It can be challenging to find local researchers with the precise skills or experience in applying qualitative research methods, but technical capacity can be built through **skills and competency training** at the start of the research process.

The research team in Haiti included an international independent consultant brought in to lead the research, and a field team comprising local researchers. Members of the local team had varying levels of technical knowledge and qualitative research experience; however, they had other capacities that added significant value to the research process. For example, one of the team members was an actor who had previously worked with youth on sporting activities, and had excellent motivational and facilitation skills; this helped him to build rapport with the students. Varied local expertise can bring the research to an even higher level of community engagement while at the same time building local research capacity. Additional long-term returns were also seen in terms of capacity building when some of the local researchers were employed again by WFP.

In Colombia, university students were trained as research assistants and prepared for data collection in the field. WFP's SBCC, protection and gender specialists provided specific training on inclusive language, gender approaches, child safeguarding, psychosocial support for interacting with victims of armed conflict and violence, and other sensitive issues.



The ideal research team will have:

- **Good technical skills** in the research topic (e.g., in nutrition, gender, social protection, health, etc.) but also ability to **build rapport** with participants. The ability to engage with participants may be just as important as some technical capacity. The optimal team will have a combination of both.
- Previous **experience conducting formative research** and using relevant methodologies and tools.
- **Expertise in operationalising findings** to strengthen programmes, strategy and policy.
- **Local knowledge and cultural proximity**, including speaking local languages when required. This is particularly relevant in sensitive contexts where issues of trust and access to research sites and communities are challenging.
- A combination of **'insider'** and **'outsider'** perspectives. While local knowledge is important, researchers should also be able to be objective and unbiased.
- **Good interpersonal communication skills**. Researchers should be able to carefully consider how research participants will be approached and engaged in the study and how to handle sensitive issues. You may consider specific training for your research team to increase some capacities and ensure they adhere to corporate standards and policies, given that they will represent your organisation when conducting the research.

Collect data in the field

Ensure adequate use of methodologies and tools:

At this stage of the process, you will implement the research tools that have already been designed. It is important to make sure that the methodologies are applied correctly in order for them to be effective and to avoid bias. A flexible and responsive approach to data collection works best. In qualitative research, data collection must not be an extractive one-way flow of information, but **participatory and action based**, constituting a two-way learning relationship that has the potential to engage and empower participants.

For qualitative studies, researchers often select participants because they fulfil certain criteria and are likely to contribute useful data to the research (purposive sampling) or because they are available and willing to participate (convenience sampling). The **sample** is usually smaller than in quantitative research, and is not always inclusive or representative of the research population. This is acceptable as long as the sample size and demographics of participants are clearly stated in reporting. Through smaller qualitative studies, it is possible to gather very rich data about what people think and feel and why they behave in certain ways, although it is unlikely that you will be able to draw statistical conclusions from the findings. This is why it is useful to pair

qualitative research with quantitative research. In quantitative studies, research participants are usually randomly or systematically selected to be representative of the research population. Depending on the purpose of your research and programme, **key variables** such as sex, age, gender and ethnicity will have to be considered to ensure an inclusive and representative population sample.

Usually, for qualitative research activities like interviews and focus group discussions, it will be possible to **audio record** the sessions if the participants agree. You should complement sound recordings with field notes, where you can document observations of the participants and the field site. After the session, **transcriptions** of the recordings will need to be made to enable analysis. This can be very time-consuming, so make sure to factor sufficient time for this into your work plan. If time is short, it may be acceptable to listen to the recording and note important points, rather than transcribing word-for-word. It may also be necessary to **translate** the transcriptions, if analysis is to be carried out in a language other than the one used for the research activities. Quantitative data sets also need to be **cleaned** before they can be analysed. This means identifying and correcting or deleting incomplete, incorrect, inaccurate or irrelevant parts of the data so that they don't distort the results.





Key considerations when collecting data:

- **Participatory research** gives communities the opportunity to play an active role in the research and therefore in decisions that affect their lives.
- It is important not only to engage with participants who are the **key intended beneficiaries**, but also to engage other groups who may influence **decisions and behaviour, and the surrounding environment**.
- Creating a **trusting environment** in which participants feel able to share their insights and experiences openly and honestly is imperative. As noted above, creating a safe and secure space for data collection is important, and researchers must have good interpersonal and emotional skills.
- Taking **field notes** is highly recommended. These are observations made by the researchers during or immediately after the data collection activities. They can include written notes, recordings, pictures or drawings. This is an additional source of information, providing complementary observations that can be key for the analysis phase and can help illuminate nuances in the data collected.
- Continuous **quality assurance** should ensure the rigour of the methods employed and the quality, reliability and relevance of the data being generated. Multiple team members and participants should be engaged in reviewing the quality and validity of data.

Step 4

Analyse the data

The data generated should determine the analytic approach. The raw data can be coded into a preestablished thematic framework that follows the key research questions (**deductive**), or you can allow the themes to emerge from the data (**iterative**).

After coding the data comes the analysis. There are numerous methods of analysis, and the same data set can be analysed in several different ways or in a combination of ways.

Quality assurance should be done independently by different team members, and if there are any inconsistencies in the coding, analysis or interpretation of findings, these should be discussed and resolved.

Both the **analysis and the findings should be validated** by the various stakeholder groups engaged in the research, including community members. Recommendations should be based on the evidence generated by the research and should be clearly actionable. Regardless of the

approach taken, **sufficient time** for data analysis must be factored into the research plan.

In Colombia, researchers applied a mixed methods approach combining quantitative methods (surveys) and qualitative methods (focus groups discussions, interviews, informal conversations, participatory observation etc.). Question banks were carefully designed by a multidisciplinary team and included questions related to school feeding, nutrition, discrimination, xenophobia and integration. The tools were tailored specifically to different groups (e.g., students, parents, teachers, etc.) and adapted for different ethnicities to be sensitive and appropriate.

Step 5

Report the findings

How the data, analysis and findings are presented should be determined by the final **audience of the report** (internal use, donors, private sector, etc.) and its ultimate **goal** (what do we want to achieve). Formative research can be written up and packaged in a variety of ways, and the same study can lead to **multiple different outputs** (e.g., long-form report, short white paper, infographic, advocacy document, PowerPoint presentation, video or animation, etc.). All reporting should be clear, free from

jargon and produced in a timely manner, particularly if it is for **global public good**. Ideally, the research will be reported in a way that is easy to digest for a variety of stakeholders and will include **concrete recommendations and actions that are grounded in evidence** and mindful of existing policies and organisational structures.

Step 6

Operationalise the results

Formative research should be considered as an **integral component of effective programming** – when done well, it provides or strengthens an evidence base to inform the design, implementation, adaptation, monitoring and evaluation of a programme. Evidence can be translated for different audiences to foster **cooperation and coordination**, including between government line ministries, private sector, civil society, community-based organisations, and individuals. It is imperative that **findings be operationalised** in a timely, realistic and feasible manner, and that related actions be consistent and underpinned by the evidence generated through good quality

research. Continuous monitoring of the activities implemented will also contribute to successful results.

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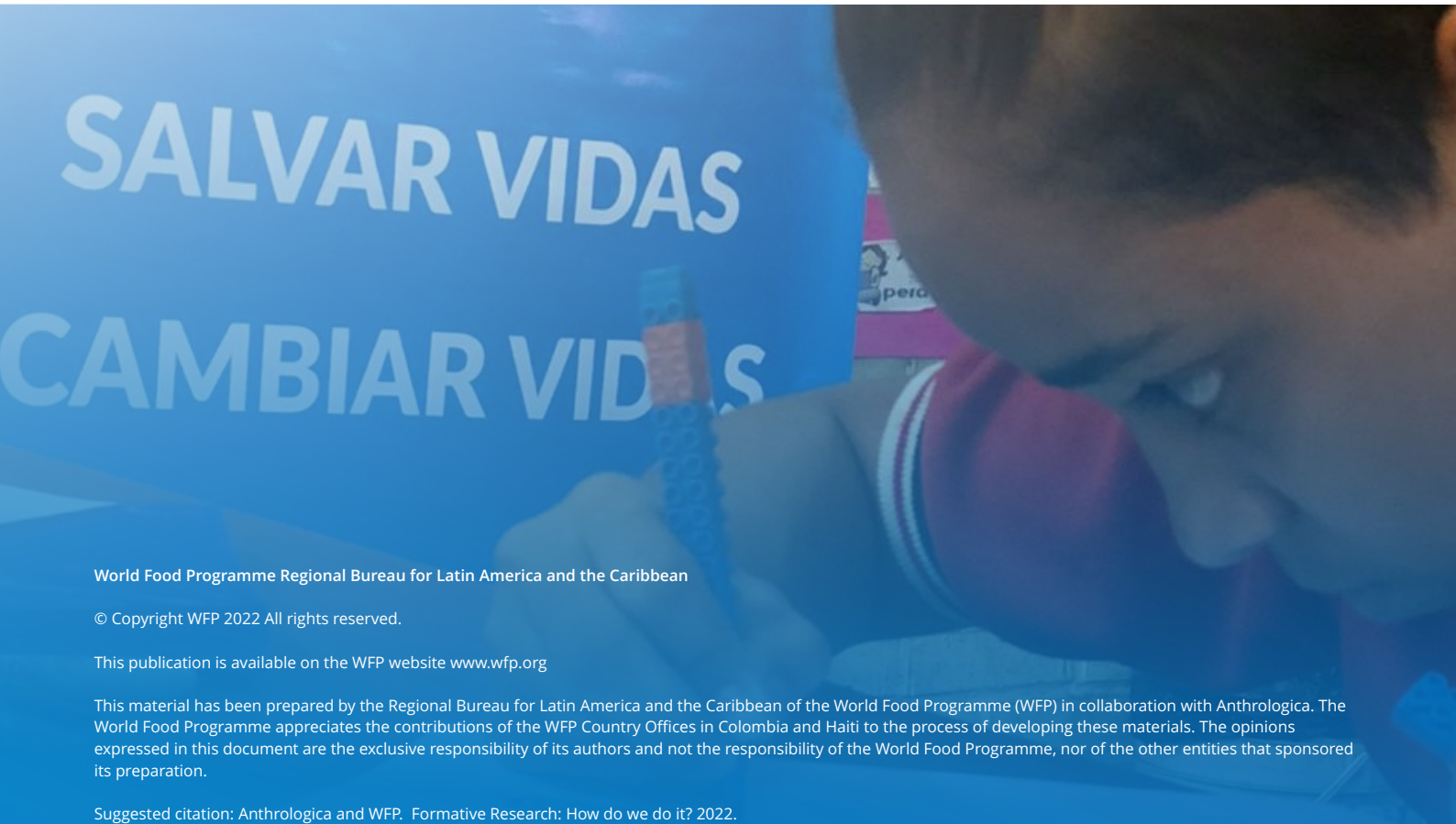
Conclusions

Formative research helps us to **better understand the interests, attributes and needs** of different population groups and community members. It facilitates **two-way communication with communities**, enabling a deeper exchange of understanding about the context in which a programme will operate, putting people at the centre and ensuring that communities are engaged from the beginning in the co-design of programme elements.

In short, when successfully designed and implemented, the formative research process can **build community ownership of a programme**, making it **more inclusive, sustainable and effective**.

The evidence generated can be used to **improve programmes by making them more relevant and accessible** to the intended beneficiaries. It can also help identify any additional needs and/or barriers that may not have originally been considered or covered by the programme, and can help understand and address unintended consequences of programming (both positive and negative). Formative research should also underpin the **creation of meaningful Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) strategies** aimed at transforming behaviours and social norms for positive change, and it can be a catalyst for effective public policies.

Through the research process itself, programmes can become **more transparent and accountable**, and **organisational visibility can increase**. Findings can be used to build and strengthen alliances with current or potential partners and donors, and can help identify opportunities for future interventions.



World Food Programme Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean

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