



Qualitative Program Research QualPRO

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What Is QualPRO?

Recognizing the urgency of expanding the use of rigorous qualitative methods in social science research on development programs and policies, BIGD has assembled a unit dedicated to Qualitative Program Research (QualPRO).

┌ The QualPRO unit aims to bring in advanced, new-generation qualitative research methods, train young talents, and use BIGD's deep local knowledge and strong connection with organizations like BRAC to conduct high-quality research on development programs and policies that matter.

The unit's primary focus is to explore programmatic questions and needs, ranging from program designing to operational research to process evaluation.

Through our Young Researchers' Fellowship (YRF) program, we recruited eight Trainee Research Associates (TRAs) in 2022 for QualPRO and provided them with six-month-long theoretical and practical training on different aspects of qualitative research.

The ultimate aim of QualPRO is to help researchers and practitioners better understand the realities of their people of interest. This will inform the design and adaptation of development programs and policies for effectiveness. This understanding will also enable researchers to develop sound theoretical models and bring

nuance and informed explanations of the outcomes in quantitative studies.

The QualPRO “Method”

The goal of generating insights to support intervention design and identifying gaps in existing designs is distinctly different from the target of generating evidence on the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions.

Comprehensively grounded in social science theory and research practices, QualPRO will incorporate qualitative methods such as participatory and ethnographic research to conduct research that is inherently formative: it will improve our understanding of program design and the factors that contribute to the success of social and economic interventions. QualPRO is also intended to be iterative, not only contributing

to the formation/formulation of development programs but also their continuous and seamless improvement over each iteration.

Why QualPRO and Why Now?

In recent decades, impact evaluation using quantitative methods like randomized controlled trials (RCTs) has become the most influential category of social science research on development programs and policies. The emphasis on qualitative research has somewhat diminished in the process. However, arguments are compelling for using rigorous qualitative methods in empirical social science research, on their own and as part of mixed-method studies, especially now. Rapid change is the defining characteristic of our time.

Phenomena like climate change, environmental degradation, digital revolution, and globalization are constantly and profoundly changing every aspect of life everywhere. Understanding these constant changes is essential for finding solutions to pressing problems like poverty, inequality, and injustice. Such understanding can only come through nimble yet deep qualitative enquiry, which can provide useful insights for designing and adapting solutions, as opposed to quantitative evaluations, which tend to be expensive, lengthy, and more inclined to answer the “what” question instead of “how” and “why.”

Domain knowledge is indispensable for developing sound theoretical and analytical frameworks, as well as for better explaining the outcomes in quantitative studies. And developing domain knowledge requires intimate qualitative reflection. It also sharpens the necessary nuance for explaining any social phenomenon by becoming more empathetic through close interaction with the subjects of research. In a 2022 paper titled “Can Economics Become More Reflexive? Exploring the Potential of Mixed-Methods,” World Bank economist Vijayendra Rao explains, with examples, how development economics can benefit from using well-designed mixed methods. He argues that it can generate *cognitive empathy*, as defined by Mario Luis Small, among the researchers by reducing their distance from the subjects of their research, who are most likely to be from very different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

Domain knowledge is also becoming invaluable for cutting-edge research methods like causal modelling, a method borrowed from computer science and promoted to the social sciences by the eminent computer scientist Judea Pearl. With the advancement of computing and the explosion of digital data, causal modelling—the prediction of causal relationships in a system—is likely to become a powerful tool for impact evaluation. In causal models, variables are the building blocks, and the appropriate variables can only be found

through careful observation and understanding of the system of interest.

Also, in the age of digital data science, powerful techniques like natural language processing, which is becoming more powerful every day, can be used to analyze a vast amount of qualitative data, in the form of narratives, to generate insights, something that was impossible until recently.

Finally, a rigorous qualitative examination is an ideal method for process evaluation—close, qualitative observation of how the outcomes come about. It can help design effective interventions. It can also validate the outcomes of impact evaluations; after all, the validity of a program or policy impact depends on the extent of its fidelity of implementation.

By utilizing its deep local knowledge and networks, invaluable connection with BRAC, and accumulated expertise and global research network in both qualitative and quantitative research, BIGD is in a unique position to unleash the power of qualitative research on development programs and policies.