

Practical questions for *International Comparative Research*

Chapter 1: Defining and mapping international comparative research

Moving from the general to the particular and from theory to practice, you will need to address a number of questions about your own approach if you are planning to embark on an international comparative research project:

1. Why do you personally want and need to do international comparative social research?
2. How do you expect your reasons for undertaking international social research to impact on the research process?
3. What is the research context for your project (postgraduate/post-doctoral research, EU Framework Programme project, research council award, government funding, other)?
4. What is your role in the project (lone researcher, research assistant, coordinator, partner)?
5. What research and personal skills, competencies and experience are you bringing to the project (topic, discipline, linguistic and cultural knowledge, previous experience of working in international contexts or organizations, and/or with other team members)?
6. In what ways, if any, has the discussion in this chapter changed your understanding of international social research?

Chapter 2: Disciplinary approaches to comparative research in international settings

In addition to the reflective questions, you may want to consider the following more practical questions when you are planning to embark on an international comparative research project:

1. Are you aware of the literature from different disciplines on your research topic?
2. Have you considered combining disciplinary approaches? If so,
 - 2.1 Which are the disciplines that you would feel comfortable working with?

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2.2 Which disciplinary approaches other than your own do you think would make the most useful contribution to your project and why?

Chapter 3: Project design in international comparative research

The questions listed below are intended as a checklist that can be used in designing your own research project and selecting the most appropriate methods. You should find it useful to address these questions when you are writing up your research methods. See also [International Social Research Methods Case Studies](#).

1. Research topic or theme

- 1.1 What is the topic or theme of your research project?
- 1.2 Why have you selected this topic?
- 1.3 How relevant is the topic in different contexts to policy, academic debates and wider public debates?
- 1.4 How specifically or generally is it defined?
- 1.5 How much research has been carried out on the topic in different countries or societies?
- 1.6 What expertise is available on the topic in other countries or societies?
- 1.7 Does the proposal adequately justify the choice of the research topic?

2. Aims, objectives and research questions

- 2.1 What are the aims and objectives of the project?
- 2.2 Are the aims and objectives explicitly international and/or comparative?
- 2.3 What are the research questions?
- 2.4 Are the research questions explicitly international and/or comparative?
- 2.5 What are your methodological objectives:
 - 2.5.1 Are you seeking to examine or test a hypothesis?
 - 2.5.2 Is the aim primarily to produce a description of a phenomenon?
 - 2.5.3 Are you aiming to generate theoretical insights?
 - 2.5.4 Are you aiming to achieve all three of these objectives?
- 2.6 To what extent are the questions relevant or do they make sense in all the countries or societies under study and for the researchers with whom you are working?
- 2.7 How do your research questions (together with epistemological and theoretical underpinnings) shape your research design and determine the choice of methods?

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2.8 If you have several different research questions, each with different aims, have you considered the need for a research design that calls for several different methods?

2.9 Are the research questions relevant, substantial and tractable?

3 Rationale for the research design

3.1 Is the rationale of the design theoretical or pragmatic?

3.2 Is the selection of countries, cases and units for comparison properly justified?

3.3 How many units of analysis are you planning to select for comparison?

3.4 What are your criteria for selecting the mix of comparators (most similar, most different, membership of international organizations)?

3.5 Are you planning to match cases on particular dimensions?

3.6 What size of unit are you selecting, and how are the units delimited?

3.7 Are you subdividing each unit with reference to variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic status and ethnicity?

3.8 If your research design requires access to particular groups, individuals or organizations, what plans are you making to ensure access?

3.9 Does your research design explicitly take account of the comparative policy dimension?

3.10 What are the implications of your selection of comparators for the research design, methods and findings?

4. Rationale for the research methods

4.1 Does your project involve secondary analysis of published and grey literature, and international statistics?

4.2 Is the review of the literature fully exploited for each unit of comparison?

4.3 Are you planning to collect new data using large-scale surveys, case studies, longitudinal studies or mixed methods studies?

4.4 What are your reasons for selecting these methods?

4.5 How will you ensure the comparability, validity, reliability and quality of your data?

4.6 How will you train researchers who are less expert in some of the methods proposed?

4.7 What latitude will you have to adapt your methods and the timetable in the course of the research?

4.8 How are you planning to integrate the data from the team members and different methods?

4.9 How will you ensure that knowledge about the 'bigger picture' in international

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research will inform your understanding of your particular research focus?

4.10 How will you monitor and review the research process?

5. Auto-critique of methods

5.1 Are the research design and methods appropriate given the aims and objectives?

5.2 Are the methods clearly defined, rigorous, feasible and adequately justified?

5.3 Are the data sources to be used in the research explicit and the choice justified?

5.4 Have the potential problems in accessing the data been carefully assessed, and has access been secured?

5.5 How have issues of standardization of national datasets across countries been resolved?

Chapter 4: Defining and analysing concepts and contexts

When embarking on an international comparative project, you will need to address a series of practical questions concerning the key concepts that underpin the research.

1. What theories and concepts will you specify in the research protocol, and how have they been arrived at?

2. What assumptions are you making about the relevance of concepts in different contexts?

3. How well will the concepts you select translate across disciplines and cultures?

4. Are they conceptually, functionally and/or semantically equivalent across the units of comparison?

5. How will you ensure that team members have a common understanding of key concepts in the research?

6. How will you deal with issues of equivalence of concepts and variables across units of comparison?

7. How will you bring to bear conceptual perspectives in the research design, data collection (equivalence and comparability) and analysis?

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8. How will you deal with issues of measurement equivalence and overcome bias to maximize data reliability and validity?

9. Which contexts are most relevant to the concepts you are examining and why?

Chapter 5: Combining methods in international comparative research

The questions below are intended to assist you in planning an international comparative research project drawing on multiple methods.

1. Are you intending to use multiple methods strategies in your project?

2. Which methods are you intending to combine?

3. How will you argue the merits of combining different methodological approaches in presenting your research design?

4. What precautions will you take to avoid the problems raised by combining methods?

5. In the analysis, how do you plan to integrate the data collected at different levels (macro, meso and micro) as a result of using different methods?

6. How will you deal with contradictory or discordant findings in a project using multiple methods strategies?

Chapter 6: Research and policy in international settings

The questions below are intended to assist you in planning and carrying out policy-relevant international comparative research projects.

1. Is policy relevance a requirement of the body commissioning your project and, if so, who are the stakeholders?

2. To what extent are your objectives, research design, methods, data sources and analytical techniques dictated by your funders?

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3. What arrangements have you made to ensure effective communication with your sponsors?
 4. If your aim is to use international comparisons to identify the potential for policy transfer, what criteria have you used in selecting comparators?
 5. Do you and your team members have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the relevant institutions and systems in the countries you are comparing?
 6. If you are investigating the potential for policy learning, can you answer the following questions about the exporting and importing countries:
 - 6.1 Why is the policy needed in the importing country?
 - 6.2 Where can policy makers look for examples of good practice?
 - 6.3 How is the relevant policy organized, funded and delivered in the exporting country?
 - 6.4 Did the policy achieve the desired outcome?
 - 6.5 Why did the policy work (or not)?
 - 6.6 What lessons can be drawn about the experience for cross-border transfer?
 - 6.7 What adaptations will the importing country need to make before implementing the policy?
 7. How will your sponsors use the findings?
 8. Will you be able to publish the findings, with due acknowledgement, or will they be embargoed?
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Chapter 7: Managing international comparative research

Putting the theory of research governance into practice is a challenging exercise; the following practical questions are designed to provide a checklist for managing international comparative research projects. You can also refer to the [International Social Research Methods Case Studies](#) (particularly Sections 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.11 of the Framework) to find out how other researchers have dealt with the issues raised in this chapter.

1. Supporting international comparative research projects
 - 1.1 What sources of background information and secondary data are you drawing on in preparing the research proposal?

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- 1.2 Which funders or sponsors are you intending to approach and why?
 - 1.3 If you are approaching more than one funding body, how will you need to adapt the proposal for different funders?
 - 1.4 What problems do you expect to encounter in applying for funding, and how will you deal with them?
 - 1.5 What level of resourcing are you seeking (duration, budget, scope and scale of the research)?
 - 1.6 What are the contractual arrangements stipulated by the funding body (duration of funding, staged payments, scheduling of meetings, room for negotiation, reporting requirements)?
 - 1.7 What are the requirements of funders concerning the number and nature of partners and/or units of comparison, and the distribution of project management responsibilities?
 - 1.8 How do the requirements of your funders or sponsors influence and constrain the scope of the project (choice of the research topic and question, team structure, research design, units of comparison, methods, findings and outputs)?
 - 1.9 To what extent is funding tied to policy relevance and policy impact, and are you expected to address policy issues in the research?
 - 1.10 How much leverage will you have in making changes to the research design and methods in the course of the project?
 - 1.11 What are the support staff needs (research, administration, translators, trainers) for the project?
 - 1.12 Do you expect to receive support from your institution? If so, will you be charged for it against your project budget?
 - 1.13 Are you planning to engage a project manager?
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2. Project coordination and team building
 - 2.1 Will you be managing the project by yourself; together with a home team; in conjunction with researchers from other institutions in your own country and/or across sectors; or in conjunction with partners and/or key informants based in other countries?
 - 2.2 Will you be acting as the overall project coordinator?
 - 2.3 How many people does the team include and what is the mix in terms of status, time available for the project and length of contract?
 - 2.4 What is the disciplinary mix of team members, and to what extent is it determined by the funders, the research questions and the methods to be used?
 - 2.5 What research skills and competences do you and your team members need to have?

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2.6 What are the expectations of researchers from different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds in terms of the objectives, research design and methods to be used in the research project?

2.7 What are the implications of team size and composition for the organization of work 'packages', venues, timing and duration of meetings and budgeting?

2.8 What strategies are you putting in place to manage communication, meetings, the division of labour, deadlines for submitting deliverables at various stages in the project, the final report and the dissemination of findings to different audiences?

2.9 What arrangements are you making to deal with researchers from different disciplinary, linguistic and cultural backgrounds (intellectual traditions, methodological preferences, contentious concepts, attitudes to authority, cultural bias, time-keeping, drafting of reports, institutional demands)?

2.10 How far are team members involved in the choice of research design and methods, and in their development in the course of the study?

2.11 How are junior researchers being accommodated and encouraged?

2.12 How will team members who lack experience in writing reports, writing in English or in using particular research methods be supported and trained?

2.13 If your project involves fieldwork, who will conduct it and how will they be trained?

2.14 What languages do team members speak, and what is the common language?

2.15 If English, what are the implications for the research process, and how are they being managed?

2.16 Do you personally have in-depth knowledge of the languages and cultures of the units of comparison?

2.17 Who will write up the data analysis and findings, draft and edit reports?

3. Ethical and professional standards

3.1 What are the legal requirements with regard to ethical standards in the countries, societies or cultures where the research is being conducted, and in applicable international law (conflicts of interest, data protection, permissions, libel, intellectual property, procurement and confidentiality)?

3.2 What arrangements are you making to ensure that these requirements are met?

3.3 What arrangements are you making to avoid social and personal harm (discrimination, consent)?

3.4 How will you ensure that researcher and other forms of bias will be avoided?

3.5 How are you planning to check for accuracy, consistency and comprehensiveness in data collection, reporting, analysis and interpretation?

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3.6 How are you planning to validate the findings?

3.7 How will you organize the analysis, interpretation and validation of data to ensure that your findings are objective, robust and accessible to the relevant target audience?

3.8 How will you ensure that your findings meet the requirements of different target audiences?

3.9 How will you deal with any findings contested by team members or which are unexpected, contrary to received wisdom and/or likely to be unwelcome to funders and stakeholders?

3.10 If your brief was to examine the potential for policy learning and policy transfer, what strategies will you employ to ensure that your findings are feasible and applicable?

3.11 How will you assess the extent to which you achieved your project's aims and objectives?

3.12 How will you assess the research process, the impact of decisions taken during the research design and implementation stages in the research and any adjustments made in the course of the research?

3.13 How will you deal with the effect of any bias from the disciplinary and intellectual traditions, and research cultures of the team members on the findings of the research?

4. Disseminating findings

4.1 What are the requirements of your sponsors regarding acknowledgement of their support and release of the findings?

4.2 What are your dissemination strategies?

4.3 Who will be your target audiences (academic, policy, media, other stakeholders at local, national and international level)?

4.4 What strategies will you employ to ensure your project and dissemination plan takes account of the perspectives of different policy stakeholders?

4.5 How will you demonstrate accountability to funders?