



# INTERVIEW METHOD: AN EXAMPLE<sup>1</sup>

## Interviews as a tool for exploring land-sea interactions: the Estonian case study

### Background

Interviewing is a qualitative research method, which often is used at the scoping stage of different planning processes and can help in disclosing the land-sea interaction (LSI) issues to be addressed. Qualitative research methods (including interviews) can contribute the following aspects to the spatial planning process (Gaber 1993):

- Seek to understand human behaviour from the social actor's own frame of reference,
- Provide 'insider' perspective and subjective interpretations of the ongoing,
- Provide a process-oriented approach in engaging with actors,
- Supplement with uncontrolled situations and observation,
- Can create discovery-oriented, descriptive, exploratory, and inductive focus,
- Gather rich and deep data that can fill gaps of quantitative research,
- Provide multiple ungeneralisable single and holistic case studies,
- Assume a dynamic reality.

The notion of an 'interview' refers to an interactive process where a view and/or an understanding about the issue of conversation emerges from an interactive dialogue between two or more people. Interviews are often used as part of case study design, which includes several registers of empirical data (e.g. observation, policy documents and narrative stories) for connecting (triangulating) different viewpoints on situations and ongoing processes. Thus, the case study can include several methods and datasets in understanding the phenomena of coastal-marine planning.

There are two strategies for the selection of cases and interview samples (Flyvbjerg 2006):

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- Random selection to avoid systematic biases in the sample (e.g. survey design). The sample size is decisive for further generalisations. Aside from a wide random sample, there is an option to use a stratified sample, which allows for generalisations about certain subgroups within the population.
- Information-oriented selection. The aim is to maximise the utility of information from small samples and single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content. Here cases can be selected by picking extreme/deviant cases, maximum variation cases, critical cases, or paradigmatic cases.

The interview type (Lepik et al. 2014) is characterised by the following features:

- Structure and standardisation of interview.
  - An open interview has just main keywords for conversation.
  - A semi-structured interview follows main formulated questions but allows flexibility.
  - Fully standardised interviews try to follow exactly the same questions with all interviewees.
- Individual or group interviews. Conversation with one person or many people.
- Interview with a participant or expert-interview. This may also modify themes and vocabulary used in conversation.
- Media and situation of an interview. Face-to-face conversation or via IT-platform. Interview situations in an office, cafeteria, etc. or situations where the conversation takes place near/in environments or places under conversation.
  - A walk-along interview can also be used (Carpiano 2009) capturing opinions, meaningful places and emotions of interviewees on the move.

The selection of the most suitable interview type would depend on the case study focus and questions in analysing LSIs.

### **Implementation of the method in the case study**

In the Estonian case study, interviews were used to gather information on tensions experienced and values related to coastal tourism and coastal accessibility as part of mobility. This method also provided input for building explorative scenarios. The focal point in preparing the structure of the semi-structured interview to approach LSIs and interfaces was the concept of landscape stewardship including knowledge, motivation and care (Peçanha Enqvist et al. 2018).

Small-craft harbour related values and contested seashore accessibility were chosen as essential land-sea mobility interfaces to be included into the interview structure and for the selection of first interview

partners. The topics of the designed semi-structured interviews included a wider approach to tensions between planned coastal spaces and coastal landscape value experiences. Some interviewees got selected because of their involvement in harbour dynamics and in coastal village union's initiatives. The second group of interviewees were specialists of local authorities of four case study coastal municipalities. Two interviews with municipalities were postponed because of COVID-19 disturbances, and this delay allowed to include additional questions about some aspects of the pandemic next to the thematic scenarios. It means that the sample included expert (group) interviews with representatives of the coastal municipalities (usually two or more experts participated in the conversation), individual MSP planners, as well as interviews with community members.

In the expert interviews some thematic visual materials (e.g. an area map on the office wall) were involved, which triggered questions during the conversation. Thus, the structure of the interview slightly depended on the situation and interviewees, but usually the main semi-structured themes got addressed in the conversation. Therefore, some flexibility in conducting semi-structured interviews was useful. The use of visualisation (e.g. drawing on maps) can considerably contribute to thematic conversations about LSIs. For example, this way of engagement was partly used in talking with coastal fishermen in the SustainBaltic project<sup>2</sup> (Printsmann & Pikner 2019).

Altogether 12 interviews were conducted, two of which were carried out via an IT-platform. Additionally, two walk-along interviews were planned to allow more rich reflections on coastal surroundings and ongoing processes. Unfortunately, these could not be conducted. Each interview lasted about an hour, conversations were recorded and later transcribed using an IT-tool and edited based on the conversation recording. The transcribed interviews were preliminarily systematised based on their main themes to allow for further analyses with more elaborated thematic coding. This case demonstrated that conducting qualitative interviews can be rather time consuming and it is crucial to take that into account in project/study planning.

The results of the semi-structured interviews were used in elaborating the thematic scenarios on coastal tourism, addressing some values and tensions on coastal planning in case study chapters, and formulating relevant questions in the thematic survey for inhabitants and enterprises.

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<sup>2</sup> SustainBaltic – ICZM Plans for Sustaining Coastal and Marine Human-ecological Networks in the Baltic Region. Interreg Central Baltic project, September 2016 – February 2019. <https://maritime-spatial-planning.ec.europa.eu/projects/iczm-plans-sustaining-coastal-and-marine-human-ecological-networks-baltic-region> and <https://sites.utu.fi/sustainbaltic>.

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