

4-5-2021

Data Collection in the Field: Lessons from Two Case Studies Conducted in Belize

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Recommended APA Citation

Kongsager, R. (2021). Data Collection in the Field: Lessons from Two Case Studies Conducted in Belize. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(4), 1218-1232. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4744>

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Abstract

There is a vast load of literature concerning how data collection can be conducted. This literature provides guidelines and recommendations on how data collection might be done, however, only a very limited part of this literature describes in detail how data actually are collected in the field. This paper is intended to be an example, where the methodology is explained in detail to assist and inspire other researchers, on their way to conduct interesting and important research. The data collection and fieldwork described in this paper were conducted to complete two case studies in Belize, Central America. The core of the paper is data collection methods applied in these case studies, which include selection and arrangement of interviewees, and conducting the interviews, and how secondary information was obtained. It also includes the considerations related to timing and fieldwork locations, and thoughts on positioning, power, and ethics related to the fieldwork conducted.

Keywords

fieldwork, qualitative, interview, Belize, climate

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Data Collection in the Field: Lessons from Two Case Studies Conducted in Belize

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There is a vast load of literature concerning how data collection can be conducted. This literature provides guidelines and recommendations on how data collection might be done, however, only a very limited part of this literature describes in detail how data actually are collected in the field. This paper is intended to be an example, where the methodology is explained in detail to assist and inspire other researchers, on their way to conduct interesting and important research. The data collection and fieldwork described in this paper were conducted to complete two case studies in Belize, Central America. The core of the paper is data collection methods applied in these case studies, which include selection and arrangement of interviewees, and conducting the interviews, and how secondary information was obtained. It also includes the considerations related to timing and fieldwork locations, and thoughts on positioning, power, and ethics related to the fieldwork conducted.

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Introduction

There is a vast load of literature concerning how data collection can be conducted (e.g., Bryman 2008; Creswell 2014; Flick 2017; Grimen & Ingstad 2007; Guest et al. 2013; Kumar 2005; Marshall & Rossman 2016; Pole & Hillyard 2016; Schatzman & Strauss 1973; Wolcott 2005; Yin 2018), however, only a very limited part of this literature describes in detail how data actually are collected in the field. Most of the methodological literature provides guidelines and recommendations on how it can be done, but in the end, the researcher must make the most decisions, as these have to be done in regard to specific research questions and the context in question. Nevertheless, this paper does not advocate for method books to be more precise and concrete, as that would be difficult, and make the fieldwork process too rigid, which will lead to less inspiring publications. To carry out fieldwork should not be done by following a strict recipe. However, the less experienced researcher (including me when I conducted the fieldwork described in this paper) is operating in the dark. Thus, examples, where the methodology is explained in detail, can assist and inspire other researchers (experienced and inexperienced), on their way to conduct interesting and important research. This paper is intended to be one of those examples, and the intention is to let the reader into the workshop of one researcher in an attempt to inspire other researchers to conduct fieldwork and hope they too will share their methodological experiences in detail, as have in Angelsen et al. (2011), Meyer (2001) and Robben and Sluka (2012).

The smaller considerations (e.g., how a researcher approaches potential interviewees in rural settings) are very seldom elaborated on in the method books and rarely described in the method sections in the scientific papers due to lack of space. For instance, the method books on how to conduct a qualitative interview (e.g., Kvale 1996; Rubin & Rubin 2011; Spradley 1979; Taylor & Bogdan 1998; Valentine 2005; Weiss 1994), which is a part of the data

collection described in this paper, very often provide generic guidelines, but few specific approaches. As a result, methodological considerations, including the rational (and irrational) decisions made before, during, and after data collection in the field are seldom presented in the literature. Consequently, data collection is a craft that researchers must obtain by experience, and sometimes with a trial-and-error approach, which not always is desirable, as it can ruin the data collection. This paper is an attempt to address this shortage by providing an illustrative case.

The core of the paper is a description of data collection methods applied in two case studies. These include selection and arrangement of interviewees, and conducting the interviews, and discussion about how secondary information was obtained. To set the scene, the first section outlines the two case studies. I follow by describing my considerations related to timing and fieldwork locations in these studies. The paper concludes with thoughts on positioning, power, and ethics in relation to the fieldwork in question.

Outline of the case studies

The data collection and fieldwork described in this paper were conducted to complete two case studies, Kongsager and Corbera (2015) and Kongsager (2017), in Belize, Central America. The author of this paper is Kongsager, and I am a Danish geographer who conducted the fieldwork in Belize, which was a part of the work I did during my years as a PhD fellow at the UNEP DTU Partnership. My main interest concerning research back then and now is how remote communities handle the inescapable consequences of climate change, especially in areas with limited resources and without empowerment to make systemic changes to better their situation.

The scientific content of the case studies is outlined in the next paragraphs. Interested readers can locate further information in the case studies, and the case area is likewise depicted in the case studies. Belize was selected because of its history, its extraordinary ethnical diversity, and because Belize is one of the less-studied countries, and, most importantly because Belize fulfilled the academic selection criteria for studying the linking of climate change adaptation and mitigation in tropical forestry and agricultural settings, which was the main focus in these studies.

Kongsager and Corbera (2015) revolves around the need for committed action to deal with climate change, which requires reducing greenhouse gas emissions, i.e., climate change mitigation, as well as dealing with its ensuing consequences, i.e., climate change adaptation. To date, most policies and projects have promoted mitigation and adaptation separately, and they have very rarely considered integrating these two objectives. In Kongsager and Corbera (2015), we developed a multi-dimensional framework (inspired by Kongsager et al., 2016¹) to explore the extent to which climate mitigation forestry projects bring adaptation concerns into their design and implementation phases, using three Belizean forestry projects as case-study material. We demonstrated that linking mitigation and adaptation has not been possible, because the mandate of forest carbon markets does not incorporate adaptation concerns. The projects' contribution to forest ecosystems' adaptation, for instance, by reducing human encroachments and by increasing ecosystem connectivity, has been limited. The projects' contribution to improving local livelihoods has also been limited, and projects have even been contested by neighboring communities on the grounds of tenure conflicts and food security concerns. Furthermore, the projects' mitigation potential is constrained by their poor additionality and lack of rigorous enforcement. We concluded that the integration of mitigation and adaptation in Belize's carbon forestry projects remains a laudable but elusive goal.

¹ Kongsager et al. (2016) was written before Kongsager and Corbera (2015)

Consequently, we requested climate change donors to refrain from providing support to narrowly designed projects and we urged them instead to promote more holistic and territorial-based approaches targeting both mitigation and adaptation goals.

Kongsager (2017), studied climate-smart agriculture (CSA), which is proposed as a necessity, as the agricultural sector will need to adapt to resist future climatic change, to which high emissions from the sector contribute significantly. Kongsager (2017), which was an exploratory case study based on qualitative interviews and field observations, investigated the barriers to making a CSA-adjustment in maize production among Maya communities in southern Belize. The adjustment is alley cropping, which is a low-input adjustment that has the potential to result in both climate change adaptation and mitigation benefits and to enhance food security. The findings showed that a CSA-adjustment in small-scale maize production in Maya villages in southern Belize is possible in principle, though several barriers can make the overall climate-smart objective difficult to implement in practice. The barriers are of a proximate and indirect nature, exist at different spatial scales, and involve various levels of governance. The barriers are shown to be land tenure, market access, and changes in the traditional culture, however, these barriers are not homogenous across the villages in the region. To break down the barriers an overall district-level strategy is possible, but the toolbox should contain a wide variety of approaches. These could happen, for instance, through alterations to land tenure and the land taxation system nationally, enhancement of the agricultural extension system to ease access to knowledge and input at the district level, and support to a less complex governance structure at the village level.

Timing and fieldwork locations

The fieldwork took the form of two separate trips to Belize between January 2013 and March 2014, during which numerous different locations were visited (Figure 1). I selected different fieldwork areas in order to address the research objectives, and I will briefly explain the considerations for selecting the base locations. I started with a reconnaissance trip around Belize (e.g., Belmopan, San Ignacio, Mountain Pine Ridge, and Punta Gorda) for two weeks in January 2013, which had two aims. The first was to examine the feasibility of conducting the research by assessing the availability of the requested information, for instance, by checking the willingness and openness of expected interviewees, like government officials and farmers, to participate and answer the specific research questions. This was done as some issues might be controversial or sensitive. Together with earlier Belizean studies, the information gathered was used to select specific case study areas and focal points for the papers, which were later developed into the research tools for the more prolonged period of fieldwork.

The primary fieldwork lasted for almost seven months (Table 1). The duration of the fieldwork, with considerable time spent in the areas investigated, was based on the prescriptions of Stake (2005), who argues that qualitative case study research involves “the main researcher spending substantial time, on-site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (p. 242). For logistical reasons, the fieldwork was conducted from three different bases: central, northern, and southern Belize.

Figure 1

Locations visited during fieldwork in Belize. The “projects” are those studied in Kongsager and Corbera (2015).

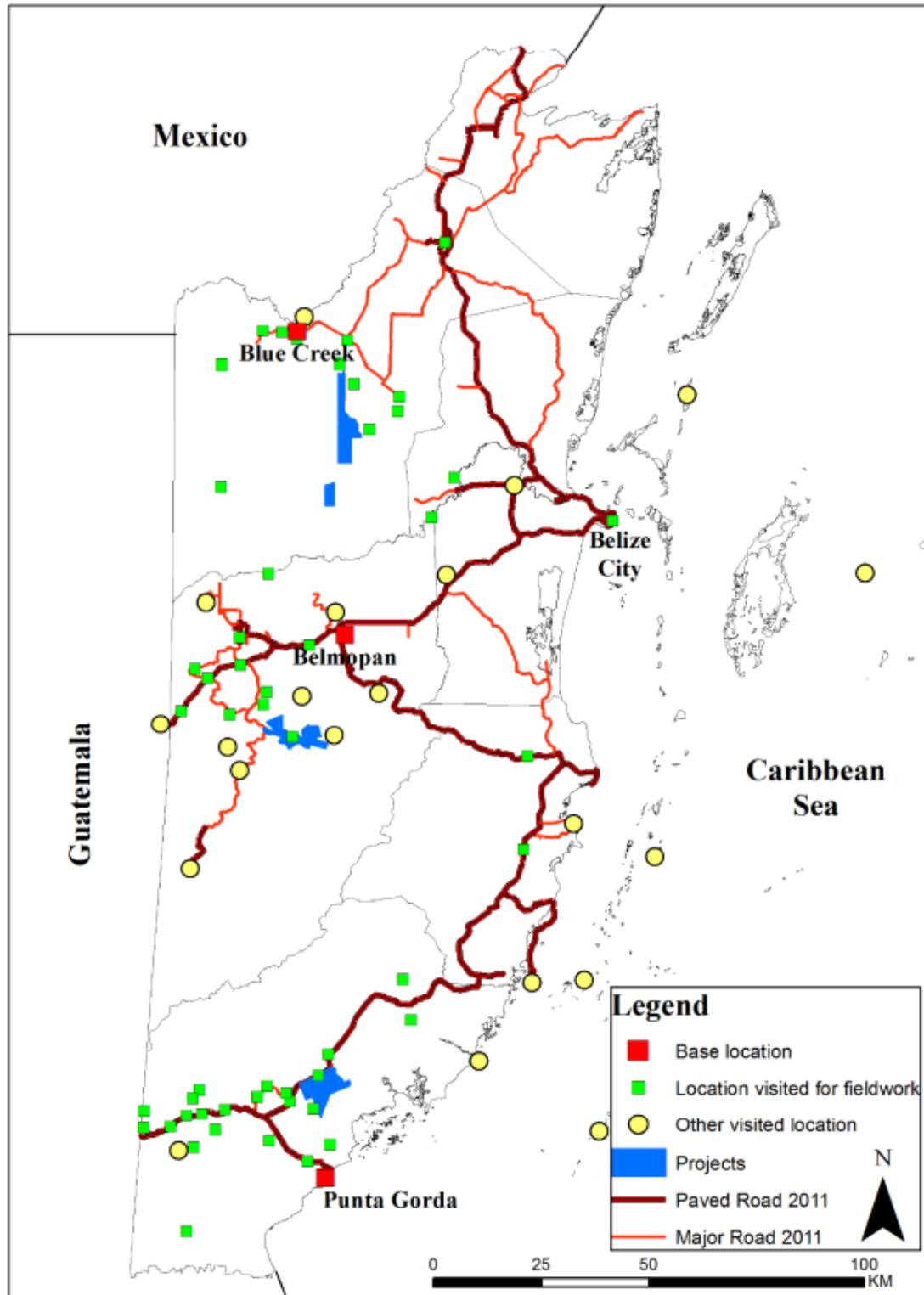


Table 1*Main fieldwork (205 days): spatial and temporal frames, and main aims*

<i>Spatial frame: Base locations Town (District)</i>	<i>Temporal frame: Start and end date</i>	<i>Purpose (location)</i>
<i>Belmopan (Cayo)</i>	8/8-2013 → 8/11-2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative interviews (Belmopan, Belize City, San Ignacio, Gallon Jug, Succotz, Mountain Pine Ridge, Yalbac, San Antonio, Central Farm, Belize Int. Airport) • Village surveys (El Progreso, Upper Barton Creek) • Other areas visited (Spanish Lookout) • Project areas visited (Bull Run) • Visited citrus processing plant (Pomona) • Presentation of work (Belmopan)
<i>Blue Creek (and Orange Walk Town) (Orange Walk)</i>	8/11-2013 → 29/11-2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative interviews (Blue Creek, Orange Walk Town, San Felipe, San Carlos) • Village surveys (San Felipe, San Carlos) • Other areas visited (Indian Church, Indian Creek, La Milpa, Reinland) • Project areas visited (Rio Bravo) • Visited chicken slaughterhouse (Tres Leguas) and papaya plantation company (SE of Rio Bravo)
<i>Punta Gorda (Toledo)</i>	30/11-2013 → 26/2-2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative interviews (Punta Gorda, Maya Mountain Research Farm, Eldridgeville, San Jose, Naluum Ca, Jalacte, Crique Sarco, Blue Creek) • Village surveys (Indian Creek, Pine Hill) • Maya villages visited (Crique Sarco, Trio, Blue Creek, San Jose, Jalacte, Big Falls, Indian Creek, Naluum Ca, San Antonio, San Felipe, Silver Creek, San Miguel, San Pedro Colombia, San Vicente, Santa Elena, Santa Cruz, Golden Stream) • Other area visited (Maya Center, Cockscomb Jaguar Basin, Belcampo, Maya Mountain Research Farm, Placencia, Monkey River) • Project areas visited (Boden Creek) • Visited chocolate-processing facility (Punta Gorda) and banana plantation and packing facility (Logans Bank) • Community meetings (Crique Sarco, San Jose, Jalacte) • Presentation of work (Punta Gorda)
<i>Belmopan (Cayo)</i>	26/2-2014 → 28/2-2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative interviews – cross-checking findings and initial conclusions (Belmopan, Central Farm)

For the first three months, we (i.e., my wife, two children, and I) lived about ten kilometers west of the capital, Belmopan. I chose to start here, as the official Belizean governmental institutions are located in Belmopan, as are most NGOs. Besides, organizations and people not located in Belmopan visit the capital frequently, and meetings can be arranged. However, day trips from Belmopan to several places, such as the former capital (Belize City: 1 hour NE of Belmopan), were made regularly to conduct interviews. Furthermore, one of the three projects studied in Kongsager and Corbera (2015) could be reached on day trips from there.

The following month, we moved to Orange Walk District, where the main base was the Blue Creek Mennonite community. This base was chosen because it is near one of the three projects studied in Kongsager and Corbera (2015), and because the Mennonite communities in this area are the driving factor for deforestation on the land buffering the protected Rio Bravo Conservation area. The greatest amount of time was spent in the Spanish-speaking communities buffering Rio Bravo, where I observed livelihoods, especially farming and forest utilization, and where village surveys in San Felipe and San Carlos were conducted. Lastly, I was given private guided tours at the largest chicken slaughterhouse (in Tres Leguas) and papaya plantation and packing (SE of Rio Bravo) facilities in Belize, to absorb additional information about large-scale farming in the country. The fieldwork this month was complicated by flooding, which was caused by the highest rainfall in 25 years and made several areas isolated and inaccessible.

For the last three months, our base was Punta Gorda in Toledo District in southern Belize. This part was mainly devoted to spending time in Maya villages, particularly Crique Sarco, San Jose, and Jalacte, and to interview farmers and informants about Maya farming and their livelihoods in general. Much time was also spent in Punta Gorda, the district capital, which has the main organizations working in the villages. Furthermore, Punta Gorda holds the only market days in the region, which attracts people, including potential interviewees, every week. One hour from Punta Gorda is the third and last of the projects studied in Kongsager and Corbera (2015), which was visited, with village surveys being conducted in Indian Creek and Pine Hill. The rainfall was still extraordinary for the season, which made some isolated villages inaccessible. For instance, after I had postponed visiting the Mennonite community Pine Hill for two months, I decided to use a mountain bike to make the last part, as the car would probably have become stuck on the muddy road. I already had been pulled out twice in other locations during fieldwork, which was very troublesome.

Information for Kongsager and Corbera (2015) and Kongsager (2017) was collected continuously and in parallel during the fieldwork. However, the emphasis for the first four months was on Kongsager and Corbera (2015), and in the last three months on Kongsager (2017). This was done because potential interviewees did not necessarily live in proximity to the areas of investigation. For instance, a key informant who wrote his master's thesis about conservation in southern Belize ten years earlier now lived in northern Belize. Thus, for logistical reasons he was interviewed in November before I moved south. This was the situation with several interviewees, and many were interesting and knowledgeable with regard to the themes of both papers, which was why they were interviewed on both issues. These interviews were separated into two parts, but not with an equal emphasis on both, as the interviewee often had forest/conservation (Kongsager & Corbera, 2015) or agricultural/Maya (Kongsager, 2017) as the main area of knowledge.

Data collection methods

To answer the research questions drawn up in Kongsager and Corbera (2015) and Kongsager (2017), multiple data-collection approaches and techniques for different specific purposes were used. Even though personal observations and literature provided a lot of background information and topics to explore, it was semi-structured interviews that proved the key to obtaining the necessary knowledge to grasp the complexities and interrelationships being investigated. This was mainly because semi-structured interviews are designed to capture the intangible aspects imbedded in the questions, such as inclusion in conservation projects in a certain cultural and political context. Therefore, the emphasis is on this part in the following, but first I provide a paragraph on how the interviewees were selected. Additional information, such as interviewees' affiliations and the number of interviewee encounters, can be found in the two papers.

Selecting interviewees

The Environmental Research Institute (ERI) at the University of Belize (UB) was contacted before I arrived in Belize the first time, and ERI helped provide the first important contacts during the first stay. The reason to go through ERI was that they are the leading institute related to the topic of my research, and because I wanted an unbiased first point of contact, which I believed to find at a university, and the UB is the only university in Belize. The second stay also started well concerning contacts. From the first visit, I had a list of 20-25 candidates to be interviewed, which I had divided into three categories: (1) shall be interviewed, (2) potentially, and (3) long shot.

I had rented a house outside Belmopan for the first three months, which by coincidence was the house of the former head of UNDP in Belize, who had formerly taught social sciences at the UB and was now working as an independent consultant. He was a Dutchman, married to a Belizean (who was working at UNDP), and he had lived in Belize for the majority of his life. For these reasons, he had extensive contextual knowledge and an enormous network with researchers at the UB, government officers and leaders in ministries, independent researchers and consultants, employees and leaders in NGOs, etc., which he gladly shared with me. He also knew many of the potential interviewees' educational backgrounds and previous engagements, which was very beneficial. Belize is a small country with relatively few people that hold a higher education, which is why many have a past in other institutions and organizations where I also interviewed people. On occasions some interviewees were willing to inform about their experiences from previous work, thus providing information that was difficult to obtain from the current employees, as they were unwilling to provide that kind of information. I assessed him to be neutral with regard to the research, reliable and independent, and he was also companionable, reflective, and articulate, which gave rise to many informal conversations about Belize which clarified many of the issues in the research. However, the conversations with him and his wife are not directly apparent in the papers, as they mainly provided contextual information and contacts.

The overall idea in selecting interviewees was to obtain as broad a range of people who were knowledgeable about the issues as possible, while at the same time choosing interviewees from a diverse set of affiliations. This was done to cover the topics as broadly as possible and to obtain information about potential incongruences between the different groups and affiliations. Furthermore, both internal and external interviewees were needed in order to examine whether they had different views on the research issues. They were selected deliberately, meaning that individuals who would best help to understand the research problem and the research questions were selected (Creswell 2014, p. 246). Potential interviewees were not chosen for their statistical representativeness, but for their knowledge, opinions, and accessibility. However, some were selected because they represented a certain organization or group, for example, those who were directly involved in the projects in Kongsager and Corbera (2015) or persons from organizations working in the Maya villages in Kongsager (2017). The process was a daily visit to the mentioned list of candidates to be interviewed, where I noted comments and added/deleted/rearranged candidates, based on the conducted interviews and my thoughts around these interviews, together with the thoughts that came up during the reading and writing I had done that day. I also consulted my contacts at the UB, my supervisor, and my co-author (Esteve Corbera at the Autonomous University of Barcelona) about which perspectives I had to uncover, to obtain as many viewpoints on the cases as possible.

Other informants were less obvious and were traced through other people through snowball sampling, that is, respondents being identified by previously interviewed respondents – a beneficial method to use when people are challenging to locate and access (Valentine, 2005). Using this approach, I achieved contact with almost all the desired interviewees. Some declined or did not answer to start with, but they were later *persuaded* to participate, though a few (i.e., two international auditing/validation companies referred to in Kongsager and Corbera, 2015) proved impossible to get in contact with. I stopped collecting interviews when the issues became saturated, that is, when fresh data no longer sparked new insights or revealed new properties (cf. Creswell, 2014, p. 89). However, this was a cumbersome approach to use, especially in the beginning, as one does not know the *image* or the number of *pieces* of the *puzzle* one is collecting. Moreover, the orientation in a case study does change during fieldwork as new topics emerged, which is the flexibility and thus the strength of this approach, but as noted by Yin (2009) slippage from the original research question can at the same time open up a space for criticism (p. 52). Thus, I had to control the situation and keep the research on track,

which is why some individuals were interviewed more than once. New topics emerged, and I had to return to some interviewees to obtain clarifications or ask for their knowledge about the new discoveries.

Arrangements for the interviews

Interviews were arranged by sending a request by email, in which I introduced the topic, the purpose of the interview, and myself. Next, the date and location were arranged by email (or phone). In many cases, I sent a reminder to them the day before, especially if I had to travel a long way; in some instances, I traveled 2-3 hours each way on forest roads. The interviews with white-collar workers mainly took place in their offices. However, some were conducted in restaurants (over lunch or dinner) or their private homes. I always came to the location they had selected to make it as convenient for them as possible. The majority of interviews were conducted in privacy and face to face, but I did some on Skype, as the extreme rain in 2013 made several areas inaccessible for long periods, or else because the interviewee was traveling or lived abroad.

Interviews with farmers and people working in the field (e.g., field stations) took place in the field, that is, in the forest, on farmland, along the road, in plantations, at a market, or in farmer's houses. These interviews were conducted face to face, and the number of people present during my interviews was kept to a minimum because I realized that the interviewee became more reluctant to speak when others were present. I favored having these interviews in the field for several reasons. Interviews in the field benefitted from being more concrete, directed towards specific and directly observable matters, with farmers, for instance, explaining their fields (e.g., crops, spacing, and challenges) and agricultural practices (e.g., the shifting cultivation pattern). I also realized that farmers and foresters liked the interview situation in the field, where the researcher has less control and where the researcher-interviewee relationship seemed more equal.

The semi-structured interviews

I always started the interviews by explaining that I was a PhD student and presented the main topic. I also guaranteed anonymity (i.e., no names would be used in the final products of the research without their approval). In some cases, I had to explain that my research was not intended to result directly in a development project or similar, but that I was hoping that the work would be beneficial for the Belizean Government or donor organizations when it came to targeting their initiatives. I then invited the interviewee to tell about their affiliation, educational background, and their work, and how they were related to the topic. This was followed by some clarification regarding definitions and understandings of key terms, especially the terms 'adaptation' and 'mitigation'. Then I started with questions from the interview guides that I judged fitted the interviewee (in accordance with their affiliation, education, location, position in the organization, and knowledge of the village or topic), meaning that the interviewee was presented with certain parts from the interview guides. For instance, the meteorologist was asked questions about weather patterns and climate change, and the forester about the impact of weather and climate on the forest.

Regarding Kongsager and Corbera (2015), the guide contained all the topics I needed answers on, whereas in the case of Kongsager (2017) this was more open because the idea was that a conversation about the suggested adjustments should reveal the potential barriers. The interview guides were partly inspired by the literature, project documents, and the initial scoping mission. As well as the interview guides, I used other tools like visual aids (maps, satellite images, a seasonal calendar), transect walks, and field visits to guide some interviews.

For instance, satellite images of the three project areas in Kongsager and Corbera (2015) were used during the interviews to visualize and identify boundaries, access roads, forest types, and buffering villages.

Secondary sources of information

Collecting a range of secondary sources and records, such as reports and books, which are inaccessible (online and hardcopy) from abroad was a very important additional activity during fieldwork. These documents² became accessible during interviews or by showing up in official offices (e.g., UB, Statistical Institute of Belize, Belize National Meteorological Service, and Forest/Agricultural Department), NGO offices, and field stations. This information was mostly used to estimate rough national and district trends because the confidence in this locally gathered information was assessed as weak due to collecting and handling procedures. The documents and information I knew of before traveling to Belize, I asked for through emails, which in most cases were unsuccessful. However, when I made requests in person, people were often very helpful and provided the needed information. Belize is a relatively small country, so locating information is fairly easy as often only one office holds the particular information I was looking for. In a few situations, the strategy was to ask the interviewee or a contact to retrieve the information if I assessed that a *gatekeeper* was needed to obtain that particular information. Not that this information was classified information, but it just needed, for example, a person willing to spend a little time to dig it out of an archive.

Other sources of information and networking

Observations in villages, markets, fields, and forests daily were another method of acquiring contextual information, for instance, information about house construction; available food in the small local shops; willingness to talk to outsiders; food available close to the houses; access to transportation; encounters with protected animals; and encounters with people with shotguns or extracting timber in a strictly protected forest. As Robbins (2012) comments, even though this kind of information is difficult to imbed in the analysis or papers, it is irreplaceable in acquiring an overall understanding. Some speak about these secondary activities and observations during fieldwork as “learning from below” and refer to it as “hanging out” (Wainwright 2011, p. 230). In these case studies, it provided insights including, how the traditional houses make sense in the heat; how to store corn without getting weevils in it; seeing buses with workers from San Felipe coming into Blue Creek every day (which says a great deal about why San Felipe is not a village of farmers any more); or, the origin of products at the market (often Mexico, even though similar products were produced locally). Many of these personal observations were supplemented by informal conversations with the individuals present, which facilitated access to valuable information. Other informal conversations in churches, private homes, sports fields, restaurants and bars, preschools, and tourist locations added further information.

We as a family participated in social gatherings where information was obtained in an informal way and networking happened. For instance, we participated in a baseball match with the Mennonites in Blue Creek and the celebration of Independence Day in Belmopan, as well

² Among the information gathered was national population and housing census data; agricultural statistics of yields and production of crops at the district level; statistics on quantities of livestock at the district level; monthly precipitation and temperature figures for the investigated areas (historical and projections); education statistics; and farm-level information on orange and cacao production.

as a party for the Swedish ambassador for Central America.³ On my own, I simply met people, for example, by providing lifts or when biking around Punta Gorda. The relatively informal circumstances at these encounters provided an atmosphere of confidence where information was shared in both directions. Furthermore, the informal encounters gave me an opportunity to explain the objectives of my fieldwork, which led to some contacts and showed me who was connected. The latter aspect was important in a small country like Belize, where many of the interviewees knew each other, which can affect the fieldwork both positively and negatively. For instance, it had a negative impact in one situation, where I too late became aware that two leading figures I was in contact with were a married couple, and information was running ahead of me, which made a particular NGO increasingly reluctant to share information or to give interviews. In another situation, it had a positive impact in the sense that many of the persons I had already interviewed opened the gate to additional interviews that could have been hard to obtain on my own as *another unimportant PhD student from the North*.

Many of these happenings occurred by coincidence, for instance, when my wife got into a conversation at a carwash with a Mayan woman, whose father had worked for the British as a development officer in Crique Sarco (one of the main Maya villages in Kongsager, 2017) in the 1960s. I later interviewed him, which would not have happened without this coincidence, as I was not aware that he was still living in the area. Another almost unbelievable coincidence was that one of my project areas in Kongsager and Corbera (2015) was formerly owned by a Danish managed company, which, given the closeness in nationality, provided remarkable historical information about ownership, land use, and land fertility. The last coincidence I will describe here occurred because my wife and children went to church in Blue Creek (Orange Walk District) while I was doing interviews in the other villages. The Mass on this particular Sunday was in Low German (Plattdeutsch), which is impossible to understand, even for my High German-speaking wife. A young woman offered to translate. Later, at a private dinner, I discovered that she was married to the owner of the land buffering one of the projects in Kongsager and Corbera (2015), which we visited together, where he provided extraordinary information about, for example, land use, land ownership, and illegal logging. Without this coincidence, I would probably not have found out who owned the most important piece of land for my research in that area, because land ownership information in Belize is controversial and, therefore, difficult to obtain. The lesson learned is that coincidence is a part of fieldwork, but coincidences only happen to those who are present and curious.

In general, the personal observations and information from informal encounters revealed the power structures within society and delivered useful contextual information that could only have been obtained through my long-term presence in the country in the company of my never-ending curiosity. Furthermore, this kind of information was valuable for my general understanding of the areas investigated, and it fed into discussions with interviewees.

Recording and notes

All the semi-structured interviews conducted in offices, homes, restaurants, etc. were recorded with a small digital recorder, which I asked permission to use (except one interviewee who refused). In a few cases, I found that the presence of the recorder prevented the interviewee from speaking freely, and it might have resulted in withholding information. In the field, not all interviews were recorded, as walking, rain, and noise, among other things, made it troublesome. Notes were taken, however, no matter whether the interview was recorded or not, but if not recording the notes was more thorough. On many days I had a long way to go back

³ We were invited because the husband of the owner of our children's preschool in Belmopan was the Swedish consul.

to the base, and while I was driving, I used the time to voice-record observations, reflections on an interview, or to note that earlier interviewees had to be seen again to obtain their views on a newly emerged topic. Further, when unexpected information appeared, new questions were merged into the interview guides to cross-check the information. This emergent design, in which research regularly evolves, is characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell 2014, p. 186), and exercising adaptability and flexibility are among the important strengths of the case study design (Yin, 2009, pp. 70-71). Back at the base, I had time in the evening or the following day to reflect on and make an initial analysis of the interviews, which was done simply by listening to the recordings and reading the notes, as well as by discussing issues and findings with the people in my daily social sphere. All the notes were entered into Word documents, one for each paper, which was divided into topics to start with, but where new topics emerged continuously. Some topics later merged, while others were separated into several new topics. During this process, I also checked if my data was coming closer to a point of saturation.

This dynamic structure in these documents functioned as an ongoing discovery, and the process of analysis, in which themes were identified, and concepts and propositions developed (cf. Taylor & Bogdan 1998, p. 141), was well underway. However, I had to take care in this process not to lose the overview and perspective of all the qualitative data (cf. Kvale 1996, p. 176), which certainly happened to me momentarily. To prevent this, I had integrated into the Word documents featured descriptions of the components within the broader research questions and the data needed to address each component, which I returned to regularly to keep the data gathering on track.

Positioning, power, and ethics in fieldwork

The role of the researcher has been the subject of discussion by many scholars (e.g., Oliver, 2003, pp. 3-25; Kumar 2005; Grimen & Ingstad, 2007, pp. 287-291; Briggie & Mitcham, 2012; Creswell, 2014, pp. 92-101, pp. 187-188), who agree that the researcher has an impact on the research, as they engage with the people being studied as people and not simply as respondents to research instruments (Bryman, 2008, pp. 24-26). Furthermore, as human beings we are always somewhere, we perceive the world from a particular point of view, and we give expression to a certain and necessarily incomplete world view (Shweder, 1991, pp. 18-19). Consequently, I, with my personality, age, gender, ethnicity, political standpoint, life philosophy, and educational background, influenced the approaches and findings (cf. e.g., Creswell, 2009, p. 191), especially as all fieldwork data used in the papers was collected and analyzed by me. There could be a bias through, for example, my sympathy for an underdog group (e.g., smallholders in these papers). Furthermore, the author brings some aims, expectations, hopes, and attitudes with him/her to the field, which influences what he/she sees and how he/she sees it, and which together with issues of trust and power influence the product. Therefore, neutrality and objectivity do not exist in social science studies, and value-free research is an illusion (Bryman, 2008, pp. 24-26). Hence, in reflecting on my fieldwork, an important question is to consider what positions I (and my interpreters) had while conducting the fieldwork, and how these positions affected my understanding of the study area.

Above all, research was conducted in accordance with international ethical standards⁴. For instance, I had no previous experience with any of the communities and interviewees that could influence the research, and the fieldwork funding bodies did not influence the structure

⁴ My local context does not require a statement of third-party approval that secured to conduct a study (e.g., Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects) – universities and colleges in Denmark do not have boards that review the ethics of methodical approaches, unless it encompasses experiments with humans and/or animals. Thus, researchers in social science, like in these case studies, resort to the recommendations and guidelines outlined in the literature on research ethics and philosophy of science.

or content of the publications. Furthermore, I obtained consent from respondents before the interview and explained to them who I was, what their participation would involve, the nature of the research, and how the data would be used and later published. Interviewees were also informed that data would be protected from any authority or NGO in Belize, which was important for the responders in the villages, as some questions were of a sensitive nature – especially in Kongsager and Corbera (2015), which discusses illegal activities like poaching and logging in protected areas. I avoided any harm or undue intrusion to respondents to the best of my abilities, as I had to consider the consequences of the respondents' participation in the research and ensure that they would not suffer hardship because of their involvement (cf. Kvale, 1996). This is also why the specific identities of respondents have been anonymized in the papers, though their names can still be identified in the raw data.

All the interviews with people working in multilateral organizations, projects, NGOs, the public sector, farmers' organizations, and academia, were well-off in Belizean terms, so issues of power were minor. However, trust certainly played a role in these interviews, as it emerged that interviewees became more willing to share information during the interview or in subsequent meetings as trust was formed. This spoke in favor of longer interviews, where there was room for conversation on topics outside the research area as well. I also tried to use intermediaries to recommend me or mentioned some of the people I had interviewed in order to break down potential mistrust. In a country that is visited by few researchers and where limited research is conducted by educational institutions, some people, even the educated, have a hard time understanding what a PhD student from Denmark is doing in Belize. Some thought I was working for the Forest Department or an NGO to start with, which could have influenced their agenda and thus the answers they gave. However, additional explanations and handing out my business card were in most cases enough to convince people of my intentions.

In all the villages, I obtained permission from the chairperson to talk to the villagers and to visit the fields. The main issues in my research, my intentions in coming to the village, and how the data would be handled were explained. Furthermore, villagers were informed that my activities would not be disruptive and that I was not coming with a development project or similar, which was mentioned to avoid raising any expectations. However, I often mentioned that my research would hopefully be noticed by institutions working in Belize, and in that way benefit the villages indirectly. The interviews in the villages and on farms had the same issues relating to trust as mentioned in the paragraph above, such as a fear that information would find its way back to public administrative offices like the local tax department. As I did not stay for long periods in the villages, because for logistical reasons I had decided to use base locations, trust had to be acquired by having a friendly attitude. This was simply done by smiling at and greeting anybody and engage in small talk about anything. The topic 'differences between Denmark and Belize' was especially effective in generating trust, as workers from, for example, a Forest Department or an NGO hardly had extensive knowledge about Denmark. In some conversations, the motives and aims of my research became secondary, as the interviewee wondered more about issues like my personal activities and hopes, a factor also noticed by Taylor and Bogdan (1984, p. 86). In addition, the lengths of stays in villages are two-sided, as long-term stays, with the possibility of growing into a locally understood role, both limits and enlarges the researcher's opportunities (Cohen, 1984, p. 222).

In some villages (those further away from the major roads) my presence caused some stir, which reminded me that I was a White westerner, but through process, people began to understand that I was not working for a development project or a government agency. After successive visits people recognized me, and my harmlessness was noticed, which increased their willingness to speak. However, I was still a stranger, as became evident in, for instance, an incident where I walked into the mountains behind a Maya village to track down some farmers to interview and to investigate their maize fields. Two Maya women and their children

were hiding because they were scared of me but laughed and became helpful when I explained my business for being there. On another occasion, a person in the same village had seen me together with someone (to whom I gave a lift) from the local NGO, who was disliked by some, as the NGO was trying to conserve areas they wanted to farm. He refused to talk to me because of seeing this and spread his untruthful discovery to a few others. The damage was minor, but it made me more careful about who I should be seen with, and I constantly emphasized my independence as a researcher. To indicate independence (and for family reasons), from time to time I brought my wife and children to join me in the villages, which also was a fantastic icebreaker with people. It made me appear harmless, and while I was conducting interviews around the village, the local villagers would often invite my family inside the houses (e.g., to learn to make traditional tortillas); also, whenever I returned to these locations, they instantly asked if my family was around. However, this approach should be used with care for many reasons. For instance, some villagers might feel intimidated by a whole family, and there may be considerations with respect to the safety of family members in exposed areas.

Lessons learned

In this final section, I will try to summarize some of the lessons learned. One of the main lessons, as described previously, is that coincidence is a part of fieldwork, but coincidences only happen to those who are present and curious. Thus, stay curious all the time during fieldwork, as invaluable information will arise – and often when it is entirely unexpected. During this process, you have to go down several dead-end roads, before you find the right way, but there is, unfortunately, no signs at the main road that will tell you if this side road is a dead-end road. The same goes for the people you meet. At first, you might consider someone as being unimportant concerning your research but giving a few minutes for a small informal conversation with a stranger, might be the best minutes you spent during fieldwork. Later, this person could turn out to be the right gatekeeper to immeasurable contextual information and provide access to important contacts. Finally, always have a plan B. No good research has been conducted, not even by the professor you admire, without some larger changes. Key informants will turn you down, you will experience some problems with logistics, and weather might also play a trick on you – which all are issues manageable for the well-prepared researcher that have thought of alternatives.

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Article Citation

Kongsager, R. (2021). Data collection in the field: Lessons from two case studies conducted in Belize. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(4), 1218-1232. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4744>
