

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY FOR PATHFINDER - TRACKER

Pathfinder is an "add-on" study to a research project (host study) that maps out research cycle processes to identify key obstacles the host study faces, such as those related to skills gaps, technological infrastructures, data systems and tools. Critically, it seeks to help identify solutions to overcome these obstacles based on knowledge and best practices.

Pathfinder's dynamic is the use of a [Tracker](#) to organise the activities carried out in the host studies. The tool includes mapping deadlines, challenges and limitations, potential, lessons learned, tools and skills needed for each of the stages of the host study, namely research planning; data management and access; data analysis; results and impact; and stakeholder involvement.

Filling in the "tracker" to be as faithful as possible to the stages of the host study benefits from data production and collection methods, together with the team that developed (or is developing) the study. In this way, qualitative research is an excellent strategy for obtaining the necessary information about the host study.

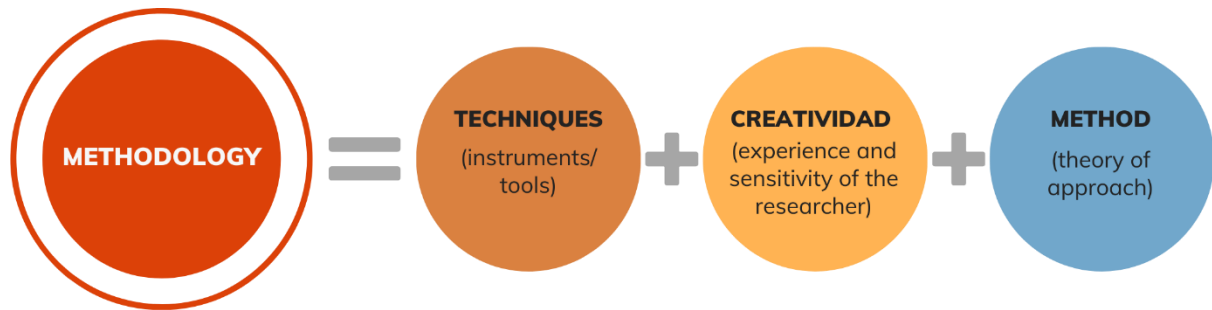
Read more about the qualitative methodology adopted by [Vacina Maré Pathfinder](#) and [Birth in Brazil II Pathfinder](#).

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

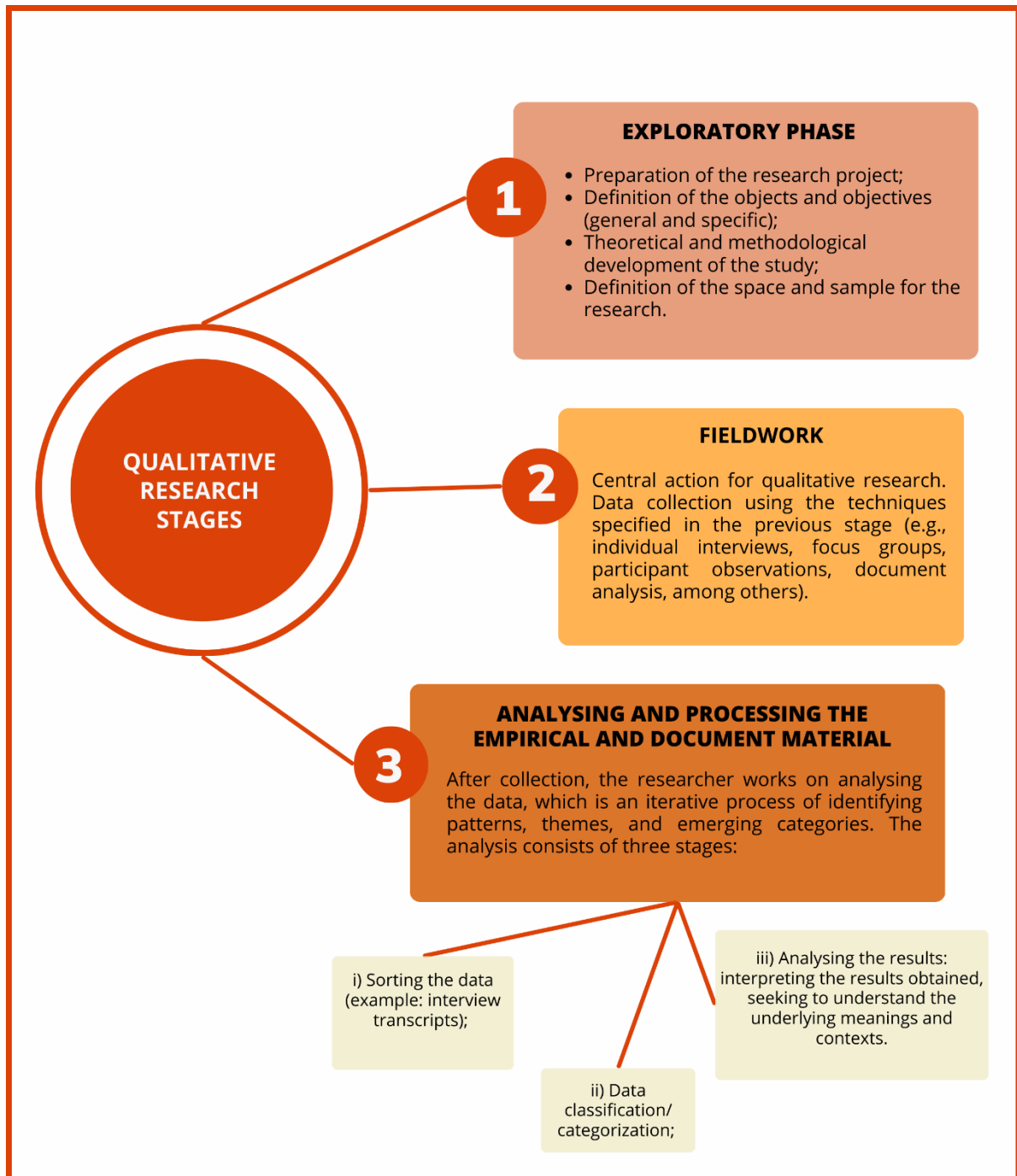
Qualitative research is a methodological approach applied in various areas of knowledge and aims to investigate complex and subjective phenomena. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to measure and analyse data using statistical tools, for example, qualitative research focuses on interpreting and understanding social reality through meanings, motives, contexts, perspectives, and experiences [1]. Thus, qualitative research can be used to:

- Explore complex phenomena;
 - Understand individual perspectives;
 - Describe contexts and processes;
 - Generate hypotheses and theories;
 - Evaluate programmes/ interventions.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



The methodology of qualitative research involves a few stages:



TECHNIQUES FOR PRODUCING DATA IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Various techniques can be used to carry out qualitative research, the choice of which will depend on the type of study, the research objectives, and the specific context in which it will be carried out. Some possible techniques that can be used:

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DOCUMENT ANALYSIS	PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION	ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION	ACTION RESEARCH	INTERVIEW
This data collection and interpretation method focuses on documents as primary sources. In this context, documents refer to any written, printed, visual, or audiovisual record that contains information relevant to the research. These documents can include texts, reports, photographs, videos, letters, diaries, and official records, among others.	The researcher actively participates in the environment or group being studied, observing and recording behaviour, interactions, and cultural practices. In this case, the main working tool is the field diary.	Used to create a more informal and egalitarian environment, allowing participants to share their experiences and points of view. One of the aims of this technique is to implement and socialise knowledge and exchange experiences from the perspective of building and reconstructing new knowledge on the subject.	Involves collaboration between researchers and participants to understand and improve a specific situation or problem.	This data collection method seeks to understand and interpret social phenomena in an in-depth and contextualised way. In qualitative interviews, researchers conduct direct interactions with participants, using open-ended and semi-structured questions to explore their experiences and points of view on a topic.
	DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH		LIFE STORY	
	Uses ethnographic techniques to study online behaviour and interactions in digital environments.		The researcher interviews individuals to understand their life trajectory, experiences, and significant events.	

Interviews and observation are considered the main techniques for carrying out fieldwork in qualitative research. However, triangulation, which is the combination of different data sources, collection instruments, and analyses, can strengthen the validity and reliability of results in qualitative research.

Here, we will present in detail the most appropriate techniques for Pathfinder:

1. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS;
2. ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION;
3. INTERVIEW.



Document analysis involves interpreting written, visual, or auditory documents as data sources. Documents can include texts, images, audios, videos, and reports, among others. This approach allows researchers to investigate and understand events and social, cultural, or historical phenomena from existing sources. Document analysis in qualitative research is flexible and can

and can be adapted according to the specific nature of your study. This approach provides a valuable perspective, allowing researchers to explore contexts and phenomena in depth because of existing documents, and is especially useful when they are rich in detail. However, researchers must be aware of the possible biases in the documents and understand the context in which they were produced.

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS FOR ANALYSING DOCUMENTS

1. **Selecting the documents:** choose the relevant documents; these can be articles, letters, official records, reports, publications, photographs, or videos, among others.
2. **Familiarising yourself with the documents:** read or analyse the documents to familiarise yourself with their content. Understand the context in which they were produced and what information can be extracted from them.
3. **Coding:** identify emerging themes, patterns, categories, or concepts in the documents. Assign codes to these elements to organise and categorise the information. This can be done manually or with the help of qualitative data analysis software.
4. **Triangulation:** compare information from different documents to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. Triangulation helps corroborate findings, reducing possible biases.
5. **Interpretation and Contextualisation:** analysing coded data in depth, seeking to understand the underlying meaning. Contextualise the information from a macro perspective to extract more profound insights.
6. **Reporting the results:** document and report the document analysis results clearly and coherently. Highlight key findings, evidence, and insights that contribute to the understanding of the host study's activities.

WHAT IS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH??

Roundtable discussion is a participatory and collaborative approach that allows participants to share their experiences, knowledge, and perspectives on a given topic. In qualitative research, this method allows the most dynamic exchange of

ideas. To achieve the aim of the roundtable discussion, it can be planned and conducted based on thematic axes presented to the participants through thematic questions.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO HOLDING ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION:

1. **Draw up a flexible script:** prepare the discussion script according to the content of the tracker. It can be guided by the qualitative questions in the tool's categories and/or activities. There may be a script for each roundtable group; evaluate it according to the profile of the participants and the time available. Also, keep the script flexible and adaptable to the reality of the host study so that the conversation flows naturally and fulfils the mapping process (see [Appendix 1](#)).
2. **Select the participants:** identify the people who will be invited to take part and how many groups there will be, on average between 6 and 12 people. They should have relevant knowledge or experience about the topic under discussion. Consider diverse perspectives and experiences to get a comprehensive view of the subject.
3. **Setting:** Roundtable discussions can occur in informal spaces, such as living rooms or community environments, ensuring everyone listens to each other. They usually last a maximum of two hours or until all perspectives have been addressed, as long as the time limit is agreed at the outset. Icebreakers can be used to facilitate group interaction, and coffee can be served to welcome participants as a way of making the atmosphere more welcoming and relaxed. The meeting can also be held remotely, but it requires more skill from the moderators to ensure that everyone participates and has the space to express their perceptions.
4. **Facilitating the roundtable:** at the start of the session, the purpose of the roundtable should be explained, as well as the basic rules of interaction and the aim of creating a cosy and respectful environment for exchanging ideas. It is recommended that three people take part in the meeting to fulfil the following roles:
 - 1) Group mediator (lead the round of conversation based on the script);
 - 2) Rapporteur 1 (taking notes of the participants' speeches and producing a report with general observations);
 - 3) Rapporteur 2 (relate the participants' answers to the tracker, signalling to the mediator if any topic remains to be addressed).
5. **Closing:** check with the rapporteurs if any critical aspects were missed. Present information on how the data will be processed and used, guaranteeing anonymity, and thank them for participating.
6. **Record and analyse the data:** during the roundtable discussions, it is important to record the discussions by audio or video (with the participants' permission) and/or with detailed notes. After the meetings, transcribe the recordings and organise the information collected. Use qualitative analysis techniques, such as coding and categorising the data, to identify patterns, emerging themes, and insights.

For the discussion groups to run smoothly, it is essential to establish some rules and regulations for coexistence, such as:

→ Only one person speaks at a time;
→ Mentioning your name before each speech to register your voice;

→ Parallel discussions should be avoided so that everyone can hear each other;
→ No one can dominate the discussion;

→ Everyone has the right to speak their mind;
→ Confidentiality must be maintained.

WHAT IS AN INTERVIEW IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

The interview is a privileged communication and fieldwork technique. It is also through interviews that research based on life narratives

(life history, biographical stories, or ethnobiographies) is carried out. Depending on their organisation and structure, they can be classified as:

1. Opinion poll (closed, fully structured questionnaire);
2. Semi-structured (combines closed and open questions, provocations that trigger dialogue);
3. Open or in-depth (broad topic, open questions);
4. Focused (centred on just one specific point);
5. Projective (uses artistic or multimedia resources to introduce the topic).

Whatever type of interview is carried out, it is important to create a **cosy and safe environment** for the interviewees to share their experiences. In the case of Pathfinder, the semi-structured interview is a recommended technique for collecting data as it combines aspects of structure and flexibility. Unlike a fully structured interview, where all the questions are predetermined, the semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to

explore topics of interest more openly. It is a dynamic approach, so it can be adapted according to the interaction with the participants. This provides a more prosperous and deeper understanding of the phenomena studied in qualitative research. In Pathfinder, the interview can be an opportunity to go into detail about some of the points of the tracker or roundtable discussions with key people from the host study.

STEP BY STEP FOR CONDUCTING SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS:

1. **Planning:** identify the objectives of the research and the general questions you want to address in the interview; develop a set of topics or thematic areas that will be covered during the interview from the tracker categories; and structure a script of open-ended questions that can be adapted as the conversation evolves (see [Appendix 1](#)).
2. **Opening and Introduction:** introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the interview, ensuring confidentiality and informed consent; create a cosy atmosphere to encourage the interviewee to share their experiences and perspectives.
3. **Flexibility and Exploration:** start with broader questions to allow the interviewee to approach the topic freely; be prepared to adapt the questions based on the answers received, exploring areas that arise naturally during the conversation; use open language, avoiding over-directing the answers.
4. **Key Topics:** make sure you address the key topics identified during the planning of the interview in accordance with the tracker; use the previously prepared questions as a starting point but be ready to go into greater depth or modify them as necessary.
5. **Active Listening:** demonstrate active listening, show genuine interest in the interviewee's answers; ask follow-up questions to clarify or further explore the answers provided.
6. **Closing:** allow the interviewee to share any additional information you deem relevant; provide a summary of the main topics discussed; offer the opportunity for the interviewee to ask questions or provide feedback.
7. **Transcription and analysis:** transcribe the interview to facilitate analysis; use qualitative analysis methods such as coding to identify patterns, themes, and insights.

SOME TIPS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PATHFINDER

The number of roundtables and/or interviews will depend on the specific demands of each host study and should be adjusted to the point where the information is sufficient to fill in the Tracker;

Both the roundtables and the interviews should be organised along thematic axes relating to the categories or activities of the tracker (research planning; data management and access; data analysis; results and impact; and stakeholder involvement). These categories and activities are the guidelines for drawing up the scripts and for selecting the participants for each of the meetings;

When conducting qualitative research, obtaining formal consent from the participants (see [Appendix 2](#)) for both participation and authorisation to record and/or film (see [Appendix 3](#)) is important. Keep in mind that a copy of the consent form should be signed by the person responsible for the Pathfinder project and handled to the participant;

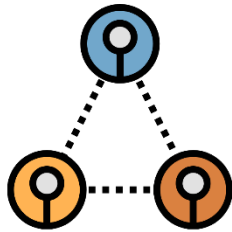
Before starting a roundtable and/or interview, it is essential that the mediator/facilitators introduce themselves, explaining each of the roles they will play;

It is important that there is a presentation of the Pathfinder project and the "tracker" to delimit what is being mapped and that all participants are on the same page;

It is important that the participants introduce themselves and briefly explain their role in the host study;

After systematising and analysing the material produced in the qualitative research, it is recommended to hold a final round of discussions to present what has been systematised and for the host study team to validate the findings for the tracker.

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL FOR FILLING IN THE TRACKER USING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH



The **triangulation** of techniques in qualitative research, such as document analysis, roundtable discussions,

and interviews, is powerful in obtaining the information needed to map the host study through the tracker.

Document analysis provides a first approximation through work plans, research projects, reports, and additional materials such as websites, articles, etc. Even so, as it is impossible to capture all the information about the activities associated with each tracker category in the document analysis, the roundtable discussions make it possible to access complementary information and even identify key people to interview. This sequential process can be implemented iteratively until the tracker is completed and/or the information captured about the host study is saturated. To do this, it is essential to **determine the level of detail desired in the mapping, ensuring that the proper techniques allow you to capture the data in need.**

Especially in the case of mapping retrospective studies, the process of stimulating memories is necessary so that the participants, both in the roundtable discussions and in the interviews, can recall the experiences corresponding to each category/activity in the tracker. Part of the process of evoking memories is to bring up similar experiences, as well as compare and correlate them with other themes.

In this sense, it is the mediator's role to guide the conversation to explore the most relevant themes, preventing people from getting lost and failing to answer the main questions of the mapping. In doing so, it is essential not to restrict the natural flow of information and the organic way it arises.

To exhaust the possibilities of a participant's contribution, you must allow them to organise their thoughts, but also ensure that there is a **minimum structure so that the information is effectively transmitted and understood.**

The challenge of correlating the interviewees' speeches with the categories and activities that need to be answered in the tracker underlines the **importance of triangulation**, not only of the **techniques** used but also of the **data** obtained in the qualitative research. At this stage, the interpreter's task is to extract the necessary information from the speech to understand what is said and meant. The aim is to translate the speech into an appropriate meaning, using terminology that is both relevant and understandable to audiences other than those directly involved with the host study. Finally, the last challenge is synthesis, the task of **summarising the information comprehensively** so that conciseness does not detract from understanding the process being mapped through the tracker.

This toolkit is written by Laís Martins Costa Araujo, Soraida Aguilar, Letícia Marinho, Larissa Pruner Marques and Flávia Thedim Costa Bueno based on their experiences of setting up Pathfinder Studies at Fiocruz (The Global Health Network Latin America and the Caribbean) and with the collaboration of the Health Data Research Global (Agklinta Kiosia, Sally Boylan, Matthew Retford, Anne Wozencraft), icddr,b (Saimul Islam) and The Global Health Network - Oxford (Aashna Uppal, Frank Kagoro).

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APPENDIX 1

SCRIPT FOR THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION AND/OR INTERVIEWS

Date of meeting:

Moderator:

Rapporteur(s) 1:

Rapporteur 2 (tracker):

Start time:

End time:

Duration:

Location:

Number of participants:

Participants

Demographic data (for each participant):

Name (optional) or pseudonym:

Institution (optional):

E-mail (optional):

Gender (optional): *[you can provide pre-defined options]*

Age (in years):

Race/colour (optional): *[you can provide pre-defined options]*

Schooling (highest level): () No formal schooling; () Elementary school;

() Secondary school; () Higher education (undergraduate); ()

Specialisation/Postgraduate; () Master's degree; () PhD

INTRODUCTION:

1. Presentation of the moderator and explanation of the purpose of the roundtable discussion;
2. Presentation of the host study;
3. Presentation of the Pathfinder and the host study "Tracker" to clarify what is being mapped to ensure all participants are on the same page:
 - a. Concept
 - b. Objectives
 - c. Tracker (if necessary, hand out a printed version of the categories and activities to support the discussion or keep it projected)
4. Brief introduction of the participants and explanation of the importance of their experiences and opinions for the Pathfinder.

RULES AND REGULATIONS:

Establishing basic rules for the roundtable discussion:

1. Only one person speaks at a time;
2. Side discussions should be avoided so that everyone can hear each other;
3. No one should dominate the discussion;
4. Everyone has the right to say what they think;
5. Confidentiality must be maintained.

CONSENT: Obtaining informed consent for participation and authorisation for recording and/or filming. The consent form must be signed individually by each participant.

Examples of questions that stimulate conversation and can be used throughout the discussion:

- Could you provide more details about this?
- Can you give a specific example?
- Why do you believe this?

Depending on the participant's role in the host study, approach the questions in the axes adapting to each category or activity of the Tracker.

Introductory questions:

- What is your personal experience with the host study?
- What are your initial perceptions of the host study?

Thematic axis 1. Competences:

(Quality needed to carry out a particular activity, such as communication, organisation, leadership, negotiation)

- What skills did you develop and improve during the host study/Pathfinder category/activity?
- What tools (programmes, dashboards, websites, software) were necessary for the host study/Pathfinder category/activity?

Thematic axis 2. Challenges and Solutions:

- What are/were your main concerns, challenges, and/or barriers concerning the host study/Pathfinder category/activity?
- What ideas or solutions did you have to solve the challenges related to the host study/Pathfinder category/activity?

Thematic axis 3. Tools and resources developed:

(Instruments developed to facilitate an activity, e.g., tutorial/manual, spreadsheet, dashboard, website, apps, among others).

- Were there any tools you developed and/or improved for the host study/Pathfinder category/activity?

Thematic axis 4. Impact:

- How do you assess the impact of the host study on the target audience?
- How do you think the host study is perceived by the scientific community, managers, institutions, and society in general (adapt according to the host study)? Why?
- Have there been any unexpected or unplanned results that you consider relevant?
- How does the host study affect your daily life or the lives of people around you?
- What are the long-term implications of the host study for society in general?

Thematic axis 5. Lessons learnt:

- What were the main lessons you learnt from participating in the host study?
- Can you compare your work with other professional activities? What are the similarities and differences?
- If you could go back, what would you have done differently in the host study?

- Based on the experiences gained in this host study, what future actions do you think would be beneficial for similar projects?
- Considering all that has been discussed, what message or advice would you like to share with future teams carrying out similar projects?

CLOSING:

- Moderator to check with rapporteurs if there is any Pathfinder category and/or activity not mentioned in the talk, as well as the following items not directly addressed in the questions above: Interdependence of activities; Resources and time; Cost; Level of complexity.
- Check with participants if they would have any further comments or experiences, they would like to share.
- Acknowledgement the importance of everyone's participation.
- Provide information on how the data will be processed and used, assuring anonymity, confidentiality, etc.

APÊNDICE 2

TERM OF FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT (TFIC)

You are being invited to participate as a volunteer in the Tracker filling stage of the Pathfinder Project of the host study _____, in which you participated. Please read this form carefully and calmly, taking the opportunity to clarify your doubts. If you have any questions before or after signing it, you can clarify them with the researcher. You will not be penalised or harmed if you do not agree to take part or withdraw your consent at any time. The Pathfinder Project will be carried out under the responsibility of the researcher _____, subject to the following aspects:

Objective and justification: the project aims to map the process of the activities carried out in the host study's research; identify solutions to address barriers in the data cycle/health research that are shared openly with the community, increasing equity and best practice and reducing duplication of knowledge; accelerate the data cycle/health research for the host study and enable the generation of new evidence, data, and ideas.

Confidentiality: The confidentiality and privacy of the information you provide will be guaranteed. The answers given in the interviews will be used exclusively by the project and, therefore, will not be identified in the results. It should be noted, however, that the data will be analysed within the study's scope, respecting the content's integrity and confidentiality. If your report or parts of your answers are included in the documents resulting from the research, we will not openly mention your name, position, and/or institution. However, there is a possibility that readers will identify you based on your unique experiences and/or direct participation in the establishment of agreements in the border region.

Inclusion criteria: People who work and/or have worked in the host study.

Voluntary participation: Participation is voluntary, i.e., it is not compulsory, and you have full autonomy to decide whether to participate, as well as to withdraw your participation at any time. You will not be penalised in any way if you decide not to consent to your participation or to withdraw from it.

Procedures: Volunteer participants will be given any clarification and information about the project and the methodology adopted at any time. Their participation will consist of an individual or group interview guided by a semi-structured script. The conversation/interview will be recorded (audio and/or video) and transcribed, and the relevant comments will be used throughout the Pathfinder project. You will also be asked to answer questions about essential personal characteristics (such as age, gender, level of education, etc.).

Storing the data and material collected in the project: The transcripts will be stored in digital files, but only the researchers will have access to them. At the end, all the material will be kept in a repository.

Risks and discomfort: During the interview, the risks of your participation are minimal and may consist of discomfort or embarrassment due to the content of the questions. However, as an unprecedented piece of research, this thesis can contribute to democratising access to information and knowledge in the field of international cooperation in health.

Benefits: The interviewee will not receive any direct benefits from taking part; however, the results of the practices developed will be made available.

Consent to participate: I agree to the terms of participation in the study described above. I have been duly informed of the research objectives and procedures. The researchers have assured me that they will provide any further clarification I may require during the study and that I have the right to withdraw from participation up to one month before the publication date, without my withdrawal implying any damage to my person, and that I will be guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of data relating to my identification, as well as that my participation in this study will not bring me any economic benefit.

Contact: If you have any questions about the project, please contact the researcher [name].

Address: _____;

E-mail: _____

I declare that I have understood the project's aims and benefits and received a copy of this form. I freely and spontaneously give my consent to take part.

Participant's information

Name: _____

Telephone contact: _____

E-mail: _____

Signature: _____

Responsible researcher's information

Name: _____

Signature: _____

[City/Country], [date], [month], [year].

APÊNDICE 3

TERM OF AUTHORISATION FOR USE AND DISCLOSURE OF VOICE AND IMAGE

Participant's information

Full name:

Identification document:

E-mail:

Name of event: Pathfinder Project

Date of event:

I hereby authorise, for all legal purposes, the use of my image and voice in photos, recordings and filming resulting from my participation in the event specified above, and the reference to my name, which constitutes a moral right, must always be respected.

The images, voice, and presentation may be displayed in the partial and final reports of the event, in its audiovisual presentations, in publications and disclosures made available in open access, through the portal, profiles on social networks, and Repositories, as well as other information and knowledge dissemination systems.

The authorisation specified herein is free of charge and for an indefinite period. As this expresses my will, I declare that I am aware of, agree with, and authorise using my image and/or voice under the abovementioned terms.

[City/Country], [date], [month], [year].

Participant's signature: _____