FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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for civil society

Focus group discussions are facilitated discussions, held with a small group of people who have specialist knowledge or interest in a particular topic. They are used to find out the perceptions and attitudes of a defined group of people. Focus group discussions can be applied at any stage of the project or programme cycle from design through to evaluation.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) are facilitated discussions, held with a small group of people who have specialist knowledge or interest in a particular topic. FGDs are typically carried out with between 6-12 people. They are normally based around a short list of guiding questions, designed to probe for in-depth information. Discussions typically last between one and two hours.

FGDs are often used to access the views of those who would not be willing or able to speak up at larger, group meetings. They may also be used to access the views of minority or disadvantaged groups, such as women, children or people with disabilities. This is possible because FGD groups can be comprised entirely of people from specific disadvantaged groups who would not find it easy to discuss their particular needs and opinions in a mixed setting. FGDs may also be used to access the views of people with expert knowledge or special interest in a topic. For example, an FGD group could be formed of community workers, district health workers or school liaison officers.

FGDs can be used at any stage of the project or programme cycle. They can be used at the design or planning stage to help shape a project or programme; they can be used during implementation to provide on-going feedback; and they can be used during reviews and evaluations. They are considered particularly useful for generating a large amount of qualitative information in a relatively short period of time.

FGDs are qualitative data tools, and are not appropriate for gathering quantitative data or producing statistical analysis. Instead, they are used to generate qualitative insights or produce direct quotes that can represent the views of the group concerned.

FGDs should not be associated with quantitative sampling methods. Time and resources permitting, a project or programme would hope to continue to carry out FGDs on a particular topic or question until saturation point is reached – that is the point at which no new information is generated and findings become repetitive. Where this is not possible projects or programmes have to plan for an appropriate number of FGDs based on the available time and resources. This is normally a matter of judgement and common sense.

How it works

There are a few common steps that are usually taken when designing and implementing FGDs (see USAID 2011). These are shown below.

STEP 1: Select the team to facilitate the discussions

STEP 2: Identify the groups and participants that will take part

STEP 3: Decide on the timing and location of the meetings

STEP 4: Develop a set of questions or a discussion guide

STEP 5: Conduct and record the focus group discussions

STEP 6: Analyse the data

STEP ONE

The first step is to **select the team** that will facilitate the discussions. It is normally considered good practice to have at least two people conducting FGDs. One person facilitates the discussion whilst the other takes notes. This makes it easier for the facilitators to observe the interactions between different group members, as well as recording what they say.

Ideally, a facilitator should know the local language. If this is not possible, an interpreter or translator may need to be used in addition to the facilitator and recorder. FGD facilitation requires skills and experience. It is therefore important to select facilitators with an appropriate level of skills, knowledge and training.

STEP TWO

The next step is to **identify the groups and participants** that will take part in the discussions. FGD participants should be from similar backgrounds, and should be able to discuss matters freely with each other. This is why FGDs are often carried out with separate groups. For example, older and younger women may need to be placed in different groups because younger women may be less likely to speak openly in front of older women. Or women may not feel free to discuss some issues in the same room as men.

Once the required groups have been identified, the participants can be selected. It is often useful to do this with the help of key informants in the community. Alternatively, some participants can be selected based of their expertise or special interest in a subject.

STEP THREE

The next step is to **decide on the timing and location** of meetings. FGDs generally last up to two hours. Wherever possible, they should be located in a convenient space where people can discuss matters in comfort and with some degree of privacy. If at all possible, FGDs should be carried out at a time that is most convenient to the participants, and interferes with their normal lives as little as possible.

STEP FOUR

It is normal practice to **develop a set of questions or a discussion guide**. Sometimes, this can be as simple as a checklist containing a few broad, guiding questions. 2-3 questions are normally considered sufficient for an FGD, as it is important to allow time for the questions to be discussed at length. Sometimes, discussion guides may be developed, containing notes of what to look for in the discussions, or suggesting different avenues for exploring the topic(s).

STEP FIVE

Once all the planning has been done the next step is to **conduct the FGDs**. Each discussion should start with a brief introduction, explaining the purpose of the session, and ensuring that participants know how information will be used. The introduction should also cover the processes that will be used during the discussions, and any ground rules.

Discussions are normally based on the checklist or discussion guides produced during the previous step. However, it is accepted that discussions may take different directions depending on the interests of the group. Wherever possible, it is important to try and ensure that discussions are not led by the facilitator, but instead are carried out between different members of the group.

Discussions should be recorded as they happen. This is much easier if there are two facilitators. Sometimes, audio recordings of the discussions are also made. FGD notes should be extensive, and should reflect not just the content of the discussions, but also non-verbal behaviour as well (such as facial expressions, changes in body language, etc.).

STEP SIX

The final step is to **analyse the data**. This can be done in two stages. After each individual FGD the facilitation team should review the transcripts of the discussions in order to identify any key themes emerging. Then once all FGDs have been completed, the data can be examined to look for common trends and patterns.

If there are many groups then an additional step might be to identify people from different groups who would be willing to meet at a different time to discuss similarities and differences in findings from across the groups.

Strengths and weaknesses

There are clear benefits associated with FGDs. For example, they are participatory methodologies that can fully engage different stakeholders in collecting and analysing information. Focus group interactions can enrich the quality and quantity of information generated through M&E processes, and in some cases the discussions can reveal ideas or solutions for particular challenges and problems. And, in general, FGDs can generate insights more quickly and cheaply than key informant interviews or surveys.

However, there are times when FGDs are not appropriate, or when facilitators need to take particular care. Some of these are described below.

- In some cultures, and on certain topics, people are more comfortable expressing themselves freely in groups than on their own. In other cultures, and for other topics, the opposite is true. Facilitators should know beforehand which topics can safely be covered within a focus group and which cannot.
- FGD facilitators need to be sensitive to the hierarchies and power differentials within the group. It is important that the facilitator does not allow discussions to intrude on areas of sensitivity or controversy.
- There can be great disagreement if groups are not homogenous, so it is important to form groups of people that are comfortable discussing issues with one another.
- FGDs can be time-consuming to plan and implement, and the findings may be difficult to analyse. FGDs are resource intensive as at least two facilitators are normally needed for each session. FGDs are harder to facilitate than individual interviews, so facilitators need skills and experience.

- As stated earlier, FGDs are qualitative methodologies and should not be used on their own when statistical analysis is required. FGDs should not be subject to statistical sampling methods, and should not be used to generate quantitative indicators.

Some do's and don'ts of FGDs are contained in the table below.

Some Do's and Don'ts of Focus Group Discussions

Do...	Don't...
• Hold the FGD in a comfortable place, where there will be no interruptions. • Create an informal atmosphere so that participants feel comfortable. • Select participants to ensure equality and trust between group members, and between members and the facilitator. • Ensure understanding and agreement within the group at the start around the purpose of the discussions. • Respect the right of all participants to speak and be listened to. • Agree an open and transparent method of recording the discussion, such as flip charts.	• Don't allow your own personal biases to prevent you from being objective in listening to, and observing, participants. • Don't get into arguments with participants or seek to dominate the discussions. • Don't allow discussions to continue if it is clear that some participants are uncomfortable. • Don't allow one or two participants to dominate the discussions. • Don't develop too many questions or areas of enquiry – two to three guiding questions should be enough. • Don't allow the discussions to go on too long, past the point where participants become tired

Further reading and resources

Two other relevant papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with interviews and surveys and questionnaires. To access these papers directly, click on the relevant links below

Interviews

Surveys and questionnaires

Short, practical guides for using FGDs can be found in the INTRAC book *Sharpening the Development Process*: *A practical guide to monitoring and evaluation,* page 86, and in the USAID produced document *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips: Conducting Focus Group Interviews*. This document is available from the following website address: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadw110.pdf.

References

- USAID (2011). *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips: Conducting focus group interviews.* Number 10.

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