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# GUIDE TO FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

microREPORT #138

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## **DISCLAIMER**

The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

# I. INTRODUCTION

## DEFINITION

A focus group is a planned, facilitated discussion among a small group of stakeholders designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.

## USES

Focus groups are good for initial concept exploration, generating creative ideas, testing ideas and determining differences in opinion between various stakeholder groups. Focus groups are often used as a means of triangulation with other data collection methods. They are not effective for responding to general questions, building consensus or making decisions.

## ADVANTAGES

Focus groups are relatively inexpensive and the format is flexible, allowing participants to question each other and to elaborate upon their answers. Guided discussion in focus groups more closely captures the spontaneous give and take of social interaction that goes into opinion formation, which is lost in a structured interview. The method is relatively simple, allowing participants to readily grasp the process and purpose. When the power differential between the participants and the decision-makers is great enough to discourage frank participation, the focus group provides the security of a peer group.

## DISADVANTAGES

The multiple voices of the participants, as well as the flexibility in process structure, results in limited researcher control over the focus group process. Sometimes group expression can interfere with individual expression and the results may reflect 'groupthink.' Alternatively, if facilitation is poor and/or the group participants are not well selected, the results of the discussion may reflect only the views of the most dominant participants.

# II. OVERVIEW AND LOGISTICS

## OVERVIEW

Focus groups typically consist of 7-10 people drawn from a population that the researcher is interested in. It is best to select a group that is relatively homogenous in order to reduce inhibitions and facilitate interaction. It is also important for the discussion moderator to create an environment where everyone is expected to participate and no perspective will be favored. The moderator poses some open-ended questions to guide the discussion, taking notes and recording the session so that the information can be analyzed later.

## TASKS

Administrative tasks include:

- preparing and sending information materials to participants
- organizing logistics (location, equipment, catering, travel arrangements, etc.)
- set up and clean up after the event
- distribution of per diems/reimbursement of travel costs

Research tasks include:

- preparing questions

- recruiting potential participants in the focus groups
- recording proceedings
- analyzing data
- preparing report

## **FACILITATION**

Ideally, either two moderators or one moderator and an assistant should be available to facilitate the focus group. Moderators should be mentally alert, free from distractions, skilled at listening to others in group situations, and able to listen and think at the same time. Time management is another essential skill, in addition to the related ability to note when a topic has been exhausted and further discussion will yield little new information.

## **LOCATION**

Select a location that is easy to find, minimizes distraction, provides a neutral environment and that ideally facilitates sitting in a circle. For very narrow topics, focus groups usually last only an hour or two. However, if the topic is more complex, a longer workshop may be needed with multiple sessions so that the group can focus on various sub-topics. Each session should not exceed two hours.

## **INVITING PARTICIPANTS**

When inviting someone to a focus group discussion, identify the sponsor, the general topic and the purpose of the research. Stress the value to you of obtaining her/his insights. If a stipend or refreshments will be provided, mention this. Provide any relevant written materials in advance.

## **COLLECTING DATA**

Tape recorders are invaluable for focus group discussions however they are prone to pick up background noises. The microphones should be set up prior to the interview and should be visible to participants. The moderator must encourage participants to speak one at a time, and for a larger group it may be preferable for participants to identify themselves before they speak.

The moderator can attempt to make notes or an assistant can try to capture exact phrases and statements made by participants. The consideration here is that the note taking should not interfere with the discussion. Notes should be complete and useable in the event the tape recorder stops working.

# **III. PREPARING FOR THE DISCUSSION**

## **QUESTIONING ROUTE**

Create a set of 5-10 questions in a loose running order, with specific prompts to facilitate participant understanding and to encourage replies. When formulating questions, two principles should be followed:

- Questions on a given topic should be ordered from the more general to the more specific.
- Topics of greater importance should be placed early in the discussion.

The questioning route should be flexible and adapted to the group's natural conversation process. Questions should be clear, relatively short and use simple wording. Accompany the questions with sufficient background to minimize assumptions and place them in the appropriate context. The questions should be open-ended rather than dichotomous. Ask participants for definitions, impressions, examples, their ideas of others' perceptions, and the like. Avoid broad 'why' questions and instead break them down into specific sub-issues.

Consider including questions about sub-issues that the members who are least likely to actively participate are likely to know the most about.

Use a concluding question that helps to establish closure. If consensus is the aim, one can ask, “All things considered, what would you recommend ...” Alternatively, or in addition, the moderator can first briefly summarize the discussion, then ask the group if the summary is adequate and end with, “Have we missed anything important?”

## **MODERATOR**

The moderator should memorize the questioning route in advance of the focus group discussion; and should have a good knowledge of the topic in order to ask appropriate follow-up questions. The moderator should dress as (s)he expects the participants to dress. If the focus group participants make up a distinct culture group, it is useful to have a moderator with cultural sensitivity to that group.

## **SELECTING THE PARTICIPANTS**

The ideal focus group size ranges from 4-12 persons. Larger groups can be used for more exploratory purposes, although they tend to fragment into smaller groups beyond a maximum group size of 12. Some researchers use mini focus groups of 4-5 persons to gauge initial reactions, but these can fail to generate useful discussion. Invite more people than your ideal group size in anticipation that some will not turn up on the day.

Composing a group with highly different characteristics will decrease the quality of the data. Individuals will tend to censor their ideas in the presence of people who differ greatly from them in power, status, job, income, education or personal characteristics. To get a cross section of views from a diverse population using the focus group method, it is necessary to conduct multiple separate discussions on the same topic.

Choose participants who are informed and can communicate effectively. Avoid people who habitually take part in such discussions and people involved in marketing (unless this is a topic of the research). The moderator should not know the group members, and ideally, members should not know each other.

## **IV. FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION**

As participants arrive, the facilitator greets guests and makes small talk but avoids the topic of the focus group. At this time the moderators have a chance to quickly assess the communication styles of the participants. Based upon their assessment, they can place nametags around the table. It has been suggested that dominant communication styles be placed near the moderator and more reticent participants be seated where eye contact can be easily established. When participants happen to know each other they can be separated.

Once all participants are seated, the moderator welcomes the group, introduces him/herself and gives relevant background information and an overview of the topic. Emphasize that this is an opportunity for participants to give voice to their opinions and that the researchers are there to learn from the participants.

The moderator explains what the results of the focus group will be used for and what form the data will take. The moderator then outlines the ground rules. Emphasize that one person speaks at a time and that the session is being recorded or notes taken to ensure that all comments are noted. Assure that no specific names will be used in the final report. Emphasize that all points of view are important to the discussion.

The moderator asks a warm-up question that everyone is asked to answer and then moves to the other questions/topics, as pre-decided in the questioning route.

During the course of the discussion, the moderator or an assistant can use a flipchart to illustrate the ideas expressed.

The moderator should encourage all participants to speak, without letting one member dominate. Ask facilitating questions such as “Do the rest of you agree with X’s statement?” “How would you extend what X has said?” “Does anyone have a contrasting experience?” The moderator may suggest that all participants initially write down a few thoughts in response to a question before the group discusses it together.

While the tape recorder will provide a record of what was said, be sure to notice non-verbal interactions and responses in your session, taking notes of body language, reluctance or eagerness to speak, dynamics between group members that either open up or shut down conversation.

## V. ANALYZING THE DISCUSSION

Analysis begins during the discussion:

- Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding.
- Listen for vague or cryptic comments and seek clarification.
- Consider asking each participant a final preference question.
- Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation.

Immediately after the focus group note themes, hunches, interpretations and ideas. Compare and contrast this focus group to other groups, if appropriate. If required, the entire discussion can be transcribed to provide a complete record of the discussion and facilitate analysis of the data.

The next step is to analyze the content of the discussion. The aim of this analysis is to look for trends and patterns that reappear within either a single focus group or among various focus groups. It is inappropriate to report the results of focus groups by percentage (e.g. 56 percent of participants mentioned ...). Rather, look for emerging themes by question and then for the discussion overall. Compare the words used to answer specific questions, the emphasis or intensity of the respondents’ comments, and the consistency of comments and the specificity of responses in follow up probes.

Conversation is the heart of the focus group. However, qualitative techniques also highlight what is not said—**silence**—as clues to perspectives and world views, or indicators of potentially sensitive areas.

If appropriate, construct typologies or diagram the analysis. Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate.

As you make claims based on the focus group data, remember that data from focus group interviews are group data; they are not identical to individual interview data. They reflect the collective notions shared and negotiated by the group. Additionally, while you might speculate about how the focus group data might be indicators of larger trends, be careful about the kinds of claims you make.

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