

Using Focus Group Discussions to Complement Survey Findings



A focus group discussion (FGD) is a facilitated discussion among 8 to 12 carefully selected participants, who discuss a topic among themselves, with guidance from a facilitator. It is used to obtain in-depth qualitative information on the perceptions and ideas from a group of people who have something in common (women smallholders, cacao farmers, at-risk youth, etc.). Homogeneous groups are indeed preferred because mixed groups (different gender, age, social status) may inhibit some people, especially women or the youth, from expressing their views in front of others. Focus group discussions are structured around a set of predetermined questions—usually no more than 10—but the aim is to foster a

free-flowing discussion. Ideally, the participants' own comments will stimulate and influence the thinking and sharing of others in the group. If facilitated well, FGDs can bring out rich and detailed information and provide a valuable opportunity to gain insights into behaviours, attitudes and feelings. It takes several FGDs (usually 3 or 4) on any one topic to produce valid results. A good indication for having reached the goals of this qualitative research tool is when the discussion points and opinions keep repeating themselves—i.e., the point of saturation is reached. Focus group discussions generate qualitative information, with textual description of a certain situation as the output. The findings will not be representative of the views of the entire population. This is why FGDs are best used to complement the findings of RIMS surveys or annual outcome surveys, for example, to better understand specific findings that emerge from these surveys.

Limitations of FGDs

- Facilitation of a focus group requires considerable skills, both in moderating the group and in adequately recording the responses.
- The flexible format makes it susceptible to facilitator bias, which can undermine the validity and reliability of the findings.
- Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals.
- The information can be difficult to analyse; comments should be interpreted in the context of the group setting.

Before going to the field

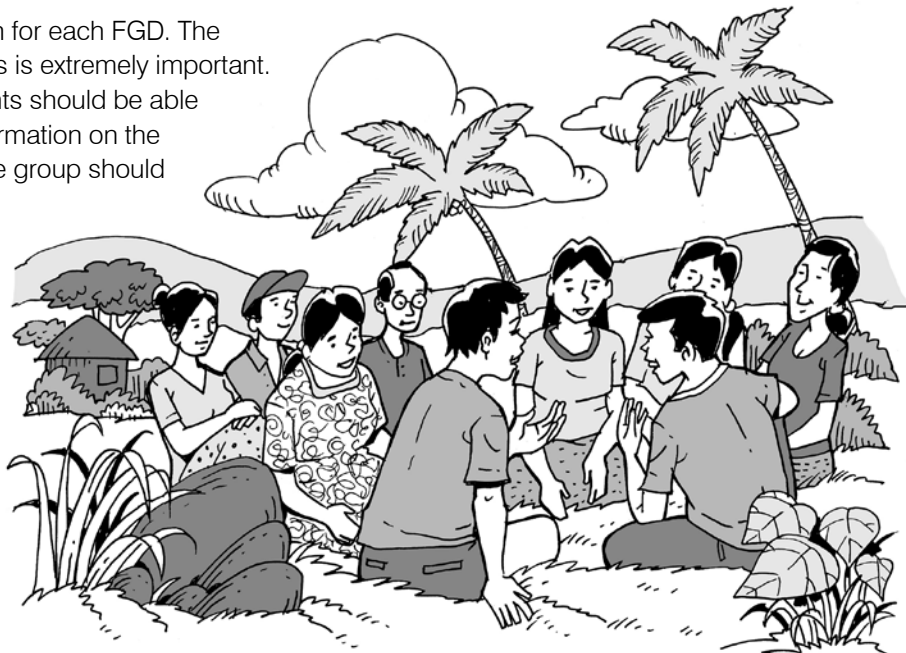
When preparing for an annual outcome/RIMS survey, the topics or themes to be discussed in FGDs and the specific information needs for each topic are identified (e.g., the information you need in order to know whether a particular outcome was achieved and why or why not). The number of topics to be discussed in focus groups will mainly depend on (i) the identified information gaps and (ii) the time and resources available. For each discussion topic, interview guides (a list of open-ended questions) are prepared. A short narrative of the objective of the focus group is included in each interview guide, so that the facilitator always has the objective of the discussion in mind and can refocus the discussion when necessary. In the interview guide, a blank space under each question is provided so that the assistant facilitator can easily take notes. One copy of the interview guide is for each focus group. Interview guides are pretested before going to the field. Pretesting provides an opportunity to determine whether the wording of the questions is appropriate or whether questions elicit discussion and to identify questions that are not easily understood. Pretesting can be conducted during the training of enumerators.

A focus group interview guide will have the following elements:

Name of moderator:
Name of assistant:
Location:
Date:
Discussion topic:
Number of participants:
Questions: <i>(Blank space for note taking)</i>

Data collection: how to conduct an FGD

- Upon arrival in each village, the village leader is briefed on the plan for discussions. Permission to interview village members is obtained. One or more FGDs in each village are conducted, though ideally, it would be best not to discuss different topics with the same group.
- Participants are chosen for each FGD. The selection of participants is extremely important. Focus group participants should be able to provide relevant information on the particular topic, and the group should be heterogeneous enough so that various and diverse opinions can be gathered. It may be a good idea to consult village leader(s) and field workers in the selection of focus group participants.



Characteristics of good facilitators and note takers

A good facilitator should have

- previous experience in qualitative data collection
- previous experience in collecting data related to rural development
- strong interview skills
- an understanding of group dynamics
- an interest in the subject and in the participants' views (curiosity)
- the ability to understand and elaborate on the participants' opinions
- familiarity with key concepts related to rural development
- knowledge of the local language and an ability to accurately translate the information into the language of the study (e.g., English)

A good note taker/assistant should have

- familiarity with key concepts related to rural development
- knowledge of the local language and an ability to accurately translate the information into the language of the study (e.g. English)

- Ideally, the FGD should be led by a moderator and followed by an assistant who will take notes.
- The topic is introduced to explain the objectives of the FGD. Example: *'This discussion should help us understand what impact project activities have had on the empowerment of women in the community'.*
- Participants are told that every participant is expected to contribute to the discussion. Example: *'Before we start, I would like to remind you that there are no right or wrong answers in this discussion. We are interested in knowing what each of you think, so please feel free to be frank and to share your point of view, regardless of whether you agree or disagree with what you hear. It is very important that we hear all your opinions.'*
- The discussion should take no more than 1 hour. The ideal duration is 45 minutes; if it is longer, there is a risk that participants will become tired and will stop participating actively.

Tips for an effective FGD

Location: Conduct FGDs in a relatively private place, where participants feel comfortable to freely share their opinions.

Introduction: The facilitator should open the session with a traditional greeting and other local conventions for group gatherings (e.g., a prayer), explain who they are and whom they work for, the purpose of the data collection, what will be done with the information, and who will have access to it. Facilitators should then explain that they do not make decisions about assistance or interventions.

Flexibility: The facilitator should begin the discussion in general terms and move on to more specific topics. They should be flexible, making sure at the same time that all topics are covered (following the interview guide). Allowing participants enough space and time to speak their mind, while guiding the conversation in the right direction, is a difficult task.

Participation: Facilitators should be constantly aware of their own biases and the ways in which they may be perceived by participants. The tone of discussions should be informal, not interrogatory. Although care should be taken to ensure that all participants in a group context contribute to the discussion, the facilitator should respect sensitive issues and the right of participants not to respond.

Timing: Fieldwork is time-sensitive work, which needs to pay close attention to the schedule of the study (e.g., deadlines for submitting the reports); the scheduled time for the FGD (e.g., key informants may be busy working in the field) and the season of the year (e.g., key participants may not be available due to seasonal migration). It is important that each team knows how to handle the various problems that may arise. For example, the team will have to be aware of security concerns (it may be better to schedule discussions before sundown).

Review: After the FGD is completed, the facilitator and the assistant should review the findings, compare notes and share experiences. This is a crucial step, which may yield important lessons for improving data gathering in the subsequent focus groups.

- The focus group facilitator has a responsibility to adequately cover all prepared questions within the time allotted. The facilitator also has a responsibility to engage all participants in the discussion and to stimulate their contribution. If needed, follow-up questions can be used to motivate the participants to talk and fully explain their answers:
 - ♦ 'Can you talk about that more?'
 - ♦ 'Why do you feel that....'
 - ♦ 'Can you give an example of what you mean?'
- Detailed notes are taken during the discussion. This will facilitate the subsequent analysis. Ideally, the note taker should preanalyse the results during the discussion so that only the most important points are recorded.

Troubleshooting: examples of what could go wrong

The facilitator should consider the checklist below and prepare to respond appropriately.

- The focus group participants are very quiet, unresponsive and reluctant to answer questions.
- Some of the participants arrive late or do not show up at all.
- A number of other local people (who were not selected as participants) want to join the discussion.
- The local authorities have set up the venue so that the facilitator has chairs and a table, but the participants have mats on the ground.
- The discussion on one topic goes on far much longer than expected.
- The village leader wants to sit in on the focus group.
- One focus group participant is dominating the discussion.
- The venue for the focus group is noisy or uncomfortable so that participants are distracted during the discussion.
- The facilitation team is unexpectedly invited to join the village chief of local authorities for lunch, but you have arranged to leave in order to get to another focus group in the afternoon.
- During the discussion, some of the participants talk about a serious problem (e.g., community conflict, child abuse, corruption, labor abuses) that has had an important impact on project activities.

Analysing and reporting the results of FGDs

The facilitator will prepare a report on each FGD, outlining the key topics discussed, the most commonly expressed views and a broad analysis of the preliminary findings. The person in charge of data analysis will prepare summaries of the focus group reports, covering the various themes and participant views. The analyst and the facilitators need to work closely together to review the focus group reports and discuss the findings. This is essential if the focus group was held in a language other than the language of the report.

How to structure open-ended information for easy analysis

- A short summary is produced of the main points mentioned by each respondent for each question.
- The points most frequently mentioned are noted. All the responses are then read. They are then categorised (e.g., those 'for' or 'against' a certain issue or by degree of enthusiasm about an issue).
- Important quotes are extracted to emphasise certain points and give depth to the analysis.
- Other colleagues are also asked to look over the responses to minimise the facilitators' biases in the interpretation of the findings.
- Following the list of points developed, the main points are identified. Using this numbered coding system, the information is prioritised, summarised and then analysed.

Useful internet resources:

On-line training module on focus group discussion:

http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-56615-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Tips for conducting focus groups interviews:

http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnaby233.pdf

WFP technical guidance sheet on qualitative data analysis:

<http://www.wfp.org/content/technical-guidance-sheet-no9-qualitative-data-collection-and-analysis-food-security-assessments>

Source

M&E/KM Toolkit, Asia Pacific Division, Unpublished materials. May 2011.

Acronyms and abbreviations

FGD focus group discussion

RIMS Results-based Impact Management System