

Focus Group Discussions¹

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The focus group discussion (FGD) is a rapid assessment, semi-structured data gathering method in which a purposively selected set of participants gather to discuss issues and concerns based on a list of key themes drawn up by the researcher/facilitator (Kumar 1987). This qualitative research technique was originally developed to give marketing researchers a better understanding of the data from quantitative consumer surveys. As an indispensable tool for marketing researchers (Krueger 1988), the focus group discussion has become extremely popular because it provides a fast way to learn from the target audience (Debus 1988; US Department of Health and Human Services 1980). Marketing and media studies have shown that the focus group discussion is a cost-effective technique for eliciting views and opinions of prospective clients, customers and end-users. In agriculture, focus groups have been used to obtain insights into target audience perceptions, needs, problems, beliefs, and reasons for certain practices.

Focus group discussion guide

To keep the session on track while allowing respondents to talk freely and spontaneously, the facilitator uses a discussion guide that lists the main topics or themes to be covered in the session. It serves as a road map that guides the facilitator in covering the list of topics and keeping the discussion on track. The number of items in the guide is generally kept to a minimum to leave enough time for in-depth discussion. It should focus only on relevant research issues. The sequence of topics in the guide usually moves from general to specific.

The following steps are suggested for developing the focus group discussion guide:

1. Specify the objectives and information needs of the focus group discussion.

Example

To determine farmers' perceptions and knowledge on the link between pest and disease problems and intra-specific diversity.

2. Break down the major topics into discussion points or themes.

Example

- a) Farmers' perceptions on the importance of pest/disease problems in their crops
- b) Farmers' assessment of their likelihood of effectively managing these pests/diseases

¹ See also: Escalada, M.M. and Heong, K.L. 1997. "Methods for research on farmers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices in pest management," In Heong, K.L. and Escalada, M.M. (eds.) Pest Management of Rice Farmers in Asia. Manila (Philippines): International Rice Research Institute. pp.5-8.

- c) Farmers' knowledge on the link between pests/diseases and the lack of crop diversity and related factors
- d) Extent to which farmers use the available intra-specific diversity to manage pests/diseases
- e) Farmers' awareness and understanding of movement and transmission of pests/disease within communities
- f) Ways through which farmers access intra-specific materials

3. Prepare probe questions.

Example

- a) Let's talk about the local varieties of _____ (rice, maize, faba bean, banana) grown in your community. What are their key characteristics?
- b) How many varieties of _____ do you grow? How long have you been growing those varieties? What are your reasons for maintaining them?
- c) Where do you get the planting materials for those varieties?
- d) What are the major pest and disease problems of your crop?
- e) What are the major factors that give rise to pests/diseases? *If crop diversity is not mentioned: Would you say that the lack of crop diversity contributes to the incidence of pest and diseases?*
- f) How do you manage the pests/diseases in your crop?

4. Review the guide and eliminate any irrelevant questions.

Asking questions during focus groups. The quality of questions asked in a focus group can make a large difference in the kind of information obtained. Krueger (1988) gives some tips on how to handle open-ended and dichotomous questions in these discussions:

Open-ended questions are most appropriate at the start of the discussion because they allow participants to answer from different angles. As the possible responses are not preconceived, open-ended questions give the participants opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings based on their specific situations. Krueger warns that some questions may appear to be open-ended but are really closed-ended because they include phrases such as "satisfied", "to what extent", or "how much".

Dichotomous questions are ones that can be answered by a "yes" or "no" or other similar two-alternative items. As yes-no questions are dead-ends, they usually do not trigger the desired group discussion. They also tend to elicit vague responses that do not lead to an understanding of the key issues being discussed (Moulton and Roberts 1993).

Logistical arrangements for FGD

Invitations. Participants are contacted in advance, at least one to two weeks before the session. A letter of invitation may be sent to each participant, taking into consideration the prevailing

practices in the area. Participants are also reminded about the focus group discussion one day before the session.

Group composition. The choice of participants depends on the topic of the focus group. Often, the people who are included are those knowledgeable about the topic but at the same time, it is also wise to gather the views of certain groups in the target population. The optimal number of participants is 8 -10. If a group is too small, one person in the group may dominate it; if it is too big, then it may be difficult to control. Group members should be representative of the intended target population.

Transportation. To ensure attendance, transportation is usually arranged for the participants from their residence to the focus group venue. In rural areas where farm families may reside in distant villages, participants could be asked to converge at a central location to facilitate pick-up.

Venue. Focus group discussions can be conducted in a place where 8 - 10 persons can be seated and assured of some privacy. In the rural areas, the most readily available sites are school buildings, health and community centers and churches. An appropriate venue is a neutral place that is free from distractions and where participants can talk openly.

Seating arrangements. A semicircular seating arrangement facilitates interaction among participants because it allows them to freely see and hear each other.

Timing. The timing of the meeting should be convenient to all participants. While waiting for other participants to arrive, the focus group discussion team can use the time to break the ice by getting information about their backgrounds. To minimize boredom, focus group discussions are generally not stretched beyond two hours.

Name tags. It is best to remember the names of the participants. Often, a seating arrangement will facilitate identifying each one. If the culture permits, providing nametags to participants is useful because it enables facilitators to call on those who may be too shy to express their opinions.

Recording. A trained rapporteur should be asked to capture the discussion in writing and note the participants' nonverbal expressions. Situations may occur where the discussion needs to be tape-recorded, but facilitators should weigh the advantages and disadvantages.

Refreshments. When resources permit, serving refreshments after the session is a small gesture of appreciation to the participants for having taken time off their work to participate.

How to conduct a focus group discussion

Facilitator. In selecting a person to moderate a focus group, it is important that this person have these qualities:

- familiarity with the discussion topic
- ability to speak the language spoken of the area
- cultural sensitivity, including not acting as a judge, a teacher, does not looking down on respondents, not agreeing or disagreeing with what is said, and not putting words in the participants' mouths.
- genuine interest in people
- sensitivity to men and women
- politeness
- empathy
- respect for participants

Steps in conducting the session. Before the focus group discussion begins, the facilitator should obtain the background information of participants such as their age, crops grown, farm size, and other pertinent information. The type of information to collect depends on the FGI topic. Once this is done, this sequence of steps is carried out:

1. After a brief introduction, the purpose and scope of the discussion are explained.
2. Participants are asked to give their names and short background information about themselves.
4. The discussion is structured around the key themes using the probe questions prepared in advance.
5. During the discussion, all participants are given the opportunity to participate.
5. Use a variety of moderating tactics to facilitate the group. Among these tactics that the moderator can use include:
 - Stimulate the participants to talk to each other, not necessarily to the moderator.
 - Encourage shy participants to speak.
 - Discourage dominant participants through verbal and nonverbal cues. The following may be used when the situation permits:
 - Call on other participants
 - Politely intervene by saying, "Maybe we can discuss that in another occasion..."
 - Look in another direction

- Take advantage of a pause and suggest that the subject can be discussed in detail in another session
- Pay close attention to what is said in order to encourage that behavior in other participants.
- Use neutral questions, open-ended as much as possible. Do not suggest answers.
- Interrupt non-productive responses/behavior verbally or non-verbally, for example:
 - re-stating or re-phrasing the original questions
 - looking away or at someone else
 - holding up your hand
 - saying you're going to interrupt and explain why
- Use your own non-verbal actions to encourage participants to speak, for example:
 - eye contact
 - leaning forward with interest
 - open hand gestures
- Balance your attention between process (how things are happening) and content (what's being said).
- Use in-depth probing without leading the participant.

Tips for probing

Here are ways to encourage discussion group participants to give more substantive answers:

- What else?
- Anything else?
- How is that for you, (*say person's name*)_____ and for others?
- What does (*say word*)_____ mean for you?
- How would you describe that feeling/thought in other words?..... to someone who didn't know (from another place?)
- Please tell me more about...
- Say a little bit more about that.
- Please give me an example of...
- What can someone else tell me about this?
- What ideas/reactions have I missed? ...not heard yet?
- When was the last time you saw/felt/thought...?
- Does anyone feel differently about this issue?

Data analysis

After conducting the focus group discussion, the key findings are described, analyzed and written up in a report. Debus (1988) suggests some useful guidelines for analyzing data:

1. Develop a plan for analysis consisting of:
 - background of the research
 - objectives
 - methods
 - discussion details
 - focus group discussion guide
2. Analyze the content of the group discussion by
 - reviewing the notes from the focus group
 - listening again to the cassettes from the session (if tape recorded)
 - grouping research findings according to key themes
 - identifying the different positions that emerged under each key theme
 - summarizing each of the different positions and assess the extent to which each position was held by participants
 - pulling out verbatim phrases that represent each position.
2. Synthesize the group discussion by:
 - reviewing the notes of each discussion made by the moderator
 - identifying the recurrent ideas that came out during the discussion
 - interpreting these recurrent ideas based upon other findings that emerged in the groups
 - identifying the differences expressed for each topic and summarizing the findings and group discussion.

FGD GUIDE (Sample)

Date and Location _____

FGD Team _____

1. Purpose of the FGD (approx time)

2. Introduction of Participants and Facilitators (approx time)

Sample introduction:

Good afternoon and welcome to our focus group session on water shortage/delivery problems. Thank you for taking the time to come here.

My name is Angie Maghuyop and I work in IRRI. With us here are IRRI Training Center participants. We would like to understand your water shortage/delivery problems so we can develop strategies to scale up adoption of water-saving technologies. As we are aware, water is an expensive resource and rice production depends much on water.

There are no right or wrong answers but rather various points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Before we begin, let me remind you to please talk one at a time. Please keep in mind also that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.

Our session will last about an hour to an hour and a half. But before we ask the first question, let's find out some more about each other. Tell us your name and how long have you been farming.....

3. Discussion Themes

Theme 1: (approx time)

Guide questions:

Remarks:

Theme 2: (approx time)

Guide questions:

Remarks:

Theme 3 (approx time)

Guide questions:

Remarks:

3. Summary of Discussion Points (approx time)

4. Closing Remarks (approx time)

General Reminders:

GUIDELINES IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD)

1. The main purpose of the FGD is to explore and understand farmers' knowledge, perceptions, beliefs and practices. It is an opportunity for the research team to listen and learn, and not to lecture or provide team members' interpretation of the local biophysical and social system.
2. The team members agree on various task assignments including: a) facilitator/ interpreter , b) rapporteur, c) logistics in-charge.
3. Each team member must have a copy of the FGD guide. The list of themes to be discussed may be written on the board to serve as guide for FGD participants on the scope and progress of the discussion.
4. Familiarize yourself with local terminologies/names to avoid misunderstanding of what farmers say.
5. Keep an open mind and listen more. Do not push your own agenda (e.g. a new variety you have developed which you think will solve farmers' problems).
6. Make the farmers feel that you are truly interested in learning about what they think and do with regard to the topic at hand.
7. Be conversational. The FGD is a form of directed story telling where you probe and pursue issues that come during the conversation.
8. Empathize. Try to be on equal footing with farmers in order to establish rapport and build trust.
9. Although you have more expertise. Never engage the farmers in a debate nor pass judgment on their views or practices. Always remember your objective in talking to the farmers – to learn what they are doing, find out their problems, identify the root causes, and perhaps explore how your own knowledge could find a way into the management and decision-making about their agricultural system.
10. Avoid questions that yield Yes or No answers.
11. Avoid leading questions. Examples: Don't you think that variety X is an excellent variety?
12. Be sensitive to local norms and customs.
13. Remember that farmers' time is valuable to them. Strive to complete the FGD within the time period that you mentioned to participants.
14. Don't forget to thank participants and local leaders after the conduct of the FGD.

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