

Focus group discussion



To bring together a group of individuals with similar interests or experiences to explore a particular issue in a structured way.

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a guided, structured conversation among a specific group of people. The purpose of a FGD is to discuss experiences, opinions and ideas about a particular issue. It is especially helpful to hold a series of FGDs with different groups in order to understand in detail what experiences, opinions and ideas are particular to different groups.

Participatory visual tools such as maps, trees, matrices, etc can be extremely helpful to provide structure to the discussion and can help deepen analysis. The images produced also provide a visual record of the discussion and can later be very useful in supporting monitoring and evaluation.

Steps in the process

1. Decide who will be included in the FGDs. Ideally, each group should have **no more than 10-12 participants** so that they can all participate meaningfully in the discussion.
2. It is important to hold a number of FGDs **with different groups of people** to ensure that the different members of the community are represented. It can be difficult to hold a FGD if the participants are from different 'groups' (e.g. bus drivers and street hawkers). They may hold contradictory opinions based on their group membership and this can cause unhelpful conflict in the conversation. To avoid this kind of conflict, hold separate FGDs with different groups.

3. Consider holding **separate FGDs for men and for women**. You could also hold a mixed group. In many societies, men's voice is dominant, and thus men may dominate discussions to the exclusion of women.
4. Identify a **facilitator and note taker** for each group. Make sure you write down who is there, even if you don't record names, recording the numbers of men and women, and their professions or roles is useful.
5. Decide on **key questions** for the groups. Focus groups are structured around a set of carefully predetermined questions – usually no more than 10 – but the discussion is free-flowing and may well expand beyond the topics identified by the facilitator. Ideally, participant comments will stimulate and influence the thinking and sharing of others. Some people even find themselves changing their thoughts and opinions during the group.
6. Decide on your **venue**. Holding FGDs in the same space as other community meetings is often convenient and comfortable for participants. However, even in a familiar venue, it can take time for participants to feel comfortable. If a setting feels too formal and it seems to be making participants feel uncomfortable, try a new seating arrangement or change rooms, if possible. Arranging chairs in a circle can be helpful.
7. Invite participants and select a **time** for the meeting that will suit group members. The ideal duration of a FGD is around 45 to 90 minutes. Beyond that most groups are not productive and it becomes an imposition on participant time.
8. Consider that the **overall time** for the FGD may be about three hours; 45mins to set up and get the participants in the 'zone', 45-90mins for the questions and 30mins for any wrap up.
9. At the meeting the facilitator should clearly **explain the purpose of the FGD** to the participants. The aim is to hear everyone's opinion and not to arrive at a consensus or conclusion. It is important to encourage each participant to join in the discussion. The facilitators have to be careful not to impose their views, nor ask any leading questions, or express positive or negative reactions to any comments or views expressed.
10. Make sure that the discussion is well documented, synthesised and analysed. Note that it takes double the face-to-face time to transcribe a FGD. So for example, if a discussion is 1hr long, the transcribing will take 2hrs. Make sure participants have a clear understanding of what is going to be done with the information and the results should be shared with the community.

FGDs are beneficial because they provide:

- a great deal of detailed information on a topic
- the opportunity to engage with and understand the perspectives of different groups of people.
- a setting in which participants, once comfortable, are more likely to be able to discuss sensitive topics.
- the opportunity to discuss, clarify and raise awareness about an issue
- the opportunity to share and debate ideas about potentially difficult or contentious topics.
- the opportunity for participants to discuss solutions to a problem.
- the opportunity, if well documented, to sense check a range of views, and to listen to and record stories and experiences which can be used to illustrate other evidence.

FGDs do not provide:

- easily achieved quantitative or statistically representative information that can be easily used to make comparisons between different groups or sites.
- information about the experiences and perspectives of large segments of the population

Using FGDs for research

- if you are using the FGD for research purposes, then you will have to pay particular heed to the notes above, particularly around recording the names and roles of your participants, coding them within your transcript and ensuring the correct ethics have been followed. You will carefully record any stories or quotes you hear that can illustrate the evidence you are generating, bringing it alive. In order to be able to make claims about your evidence, you will have to have a representative and large enough sample. Usually around 4-6 groups would be appropriate. However, it depends on the budget and the number of focus groups you need of each sub group (men, women, people with disabilities etc).

References

- *Making Cities and Urban Spaces Safe for Women and Girls – Safety Audit Participatory Toolkit*,
- ActionAid International,
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- 2011.
- *Tools for Gathering Information about Women's Safety and Inclusion in Cities: Experiences from the Gender Inclusive Cities Programme*, Women in Cities International, 2011.
- *Guidelines for conducting a focus group*, Trinity College of Arts & Sciences, Duke University website.
- Cornish and Skovdal, 2017, *Qualitative Research for Development*