

Developing Question Guides for Barrier Analysis Using Focus Groups

Here are the steps to preparing good questions to use during Barrier Analysis when using focus groups:

- A. Review the eight barriers to behavior change.
- B. Write down the promoted behavior that you wish to change. This should be a behavior that has not changed much in the past in your project area despite your efforts to make a change (e.g., through health promotion) or a behavior that you have just begun promoting that is extremely important to your project's success. It should also be one that is highly associated with your goal (e.g., increased yield or decreased malnutrition).
- C. Write down the problem or illness that you hope to prevent through the promotion of this behavior.
- D. For each barrier, write questions that can be used to see if this barrier is, in fact, a barrier to the successful carrying out of the promoted behavior. Remember that we are generally not trying to establish, for example, whether or not a type of illness or problem *is* serious, but whether or not people *perceive* that the illness or problem is serious. We are trying to measure perceptions, and questions should be worded with that in mind. For example, we would not ask, "Is diarrhea a serious illness?" but rather, "Do you feel that diarrhea is a serious illness?" The first question may produce more "ideal answers"—what people *have heard* is true, what they *should* do, etc. The second question is more likely to get at the person's true feelings and behavior concerning the illness: what they believe and what they normally do in a given situation.
- E. For some barriers, it would be best to start out with an open-ended question to find out the general situation. For example, if you are trying to influence when solid foods are added to a child's diet, you could say, "Tell me about how you fed your child during the first year of life," then ask specific questions about when certain things were done and why. Or for agriculture, you might say, "Tell me about what you do in your garden at the beginning of a growing season."

F. When asking about specific barriers, the following guidance may be helpful:

1. **Barrier #1—Perceived Susceptibility:** For this barrier, you can start by exploring what people believe are the causes of the problem/illness that you are trying to prevent. For example:
 - What type of children usually become thin?
 - Are there things that mothers sometimes do with their children that make them become thin?
 - What are the things that cause low yields?
 - Why do some people produce more crops than others with the same amount of land?

You can then ask more directly about whether the group thinks that they (or their children) are susceptible to the problem/illness. For example:

- Has your child ever had diarrhea?
- Do you think that your child could get diarrhea?
- Have you had a year when your crop production was low?
- Do you think that that could happen this year?

2. **Barrier #2—Perceived Severity:** Ask whether the group feels that the problem/illness is serious. For example:
 - When a child who is about two months old has diarrhea, is that a serious problem?
 - When an older child (e.g., a four-year-old) has diarrhea, is that a serious problem?
 - How serious a problem would it be if your harvest was (say) 20% lower this year than last year?
 - How serious a problem would it be if you were only producing 80% of what you could be producing?

You can then use questions to try to determine how serious the group feels the problem can be *if they were to have it*.

- Can diarrhea kill a child who is two months old?
- Does diarrhea *usually* kill a child who is two months old?
- When a farmer's cassava is infested with cassava mealy bug, how serious a problem is that? Can it wipe out most of his or her crop?

You can then use questions to find out if people feel that the problem can be easily treated. A person's perception about the severity of a problem is linked, in part, to how easy he/she thinks it is to treat. You need to establish how much energy and time people will devote to preventing a problem or illness. For example, in the U. S., many people at one point in history (prior to the AIDS epidemic) considered getting a sexually-transmitted disease to be a "nuisance," but not that *severe* of a problem. (Hence, they did very little to prevent it.) They knew that the disease *could be severe* (e.g., syphilis could cause blindness), but that it was easily treated and thus *not usually severe*.

Questions could be used such as:

- Can diarrhea be easily treated? By whom?
- Can kwashiorkor/marasmus be easily treated? By whom?
- If your crops were infested with the cassava mealy bug, would it be difficult to get rid of them once you discovered the problem?

3. Barrier #3—Perceived Action Efficacy: You can look at some of the answers to questions used for Barrier #1 to find out if this is a barrier. (If respondents feel that the promoted behavior is not linked with the problem/illness, then they are saying that they do not think that the promoted practice will decrease the problem/illness.) For this barrier, you can also look for what they perceive ideal behavior to be concerning the practice:

- When should a mother start giving a child other drinks beside breastmilk? Water? Other semi-solid foods?
- When is it necessary to plow a field?

You can then ask them directly if they think doing the promoted behavior will prevent the problem/illness. For example:

- What would happen to a child if you only breastfed him or her for the first six months of life, and gave no other foods, drinks, or water?
- What affect does plowing a field have on the growth of the crops?

You can then look at the inverse situation. Does NOT doing the behavior lead to the problem/illness? For example:

- Do you think that giving a child foods or drinks before he is six months old leads to more diarrhea?
- Do you think that a farmer who does not plow his field will have a smaller harvest?

4. Barrier #4—Perceived Social Acceptability: To develop questions for this barrier, first reflect on who the people are that may have an opinion about your target group's practices (e.g., mothers of young children, farmers).

Start by asking questions about who influences them. For example:

- Who do you talk to when you have questions about breastfeeding?
- Who has offered you advice on breastfeeding?
- Who do you talk to when you have questions about your farming practices?
- Who gives you advice about your farming practices?

Then ask what advice they were given from the people that they have mentioned. For example:

- How did the doctor or nurse tell you to feed your child when s/he was very young? What advice were you given?
- What did your mother tell you that you should feed the child?

Then you can probe using specific questions about the advice. For example:

- When did the doctor or nurse tell you that you should start to give your child other things aside from breastmilk? What things did s/he suggest you give your child and at what age?
- How did the extensionist tell you that you could prevent cassava mealy bugs?

Then you can ask about the person to predict what their network of friends and family members would think about the practice that you are promoting (without saying that you are or will be promoting it). For example:

- If you were to decide to breastfeed a child for six months without giving any other foods or drinks, what would your mother think of that? Do you think she would agree to your doing that?
- What would your neighbors think of you if you did that?
- What would the traditional healer say if you did that?
- Are there other people who would not agree to your doing that? Why would they not want you to do that?
- Are there other people who would approve of your doing that? Why would they approve of your doing that?

5. Barrier #5—Perceived Self-Efficacy:

Ask what things would be necessary for the person to do the promoted behavior:

- If you wanted to breastfeed your child for six months without giving any other foods or drinks, what would make it difficult for you to do that?
- What are the things that you would need in order for you to plow your field using animal traction?

Ask how difficult the person thinks it would be to do the promoted behavior. For example:

- If you had those problems resolved, and assuming that you wanted to do it, how difficult do you think it would be to only give your child breastmilk each day until s/he is six months old?
- If you had those things, how difficult do you think it would be for you to plow your field using animal traction?

Ask about ways that you know of to overcome some of the group's barriers to the promoted action. For example:

- Some people mentioned that they work outside of the home, and that situation would make it difficult for them to exclusively breastfeed ... Do you know how to express breast milk from your breasts? Is it a good thing to express your breastmilk? (Why or why not?)
- If you wanted to breastfeed your child for six months without giving any other foods or drinks, would it be possible for you to leave breastmilk for your child when you leave the house (for example, when you go to the market)? What would make it difficult for you to do that?

You can also explore the acceptability of the behaviors that you plan to suggest for overcoming some of those barriers. For example:

- Let's say that you have a one-month-old child. If you were to express your breastmilk each day to leave for your child, do you think your child would gain weight properly? Do you think other people would approve of your doing that?

6. Barrier #6—Cues for Action:

Ask the group whether they think it is difficult to remember to do the action or to remember how to do the action (e.g., the steps). For example:

- Now that I have explained how to make ORS, do you think you could easily remember how to make ORS for your child if s/he had diarrhea?
- Do you think it would be difficult to remember to express milk for your child each day?
- Now that I've explained it, do you think you could remember the procedure for keeping pests off your cassava plants?

7. Barrier #7—Perceived Divine Will:

Reflect on the causes mentioned earlier for the problem. Did people mention spiritual/magic causes for the problem/illness (e.g., evil eye)? If so, they may believe there are specific times that it is God's will (or the way that the world is set up) that their child get an illness or disease. This has to do with the person's worldview. Ask people to compare those who have the problem and those who do not. For example:

- Why are there children who become thin/malnourished, and other children who do not become thin/malnourished?

Then ask specifically if they think it is ever/usually God's will (or the gods' will) that a person have a problem/illness. For example:

- Is it God's will that some farmers have very poor harvests? Why?
- Is it sometimes God's will that a person gets AIDS? Why?
- Is it usually God's will that a person gets AIDS?

8. Barrier #8—Positive and Negative Attributes of the Preventive Action:

Ask the participants to think of any positive attributes that they know of concerning the promoted behavior. Reflect on the possible positive attributes of the promoted behavior that are not directly connected to the outcome that is your goal (e.g., higher yield, less diarrhea). For example:

- Are there any benefits to the mother if she only gives her child breastmilk for the first six months of life? If so, what benefits?
- Aside from possibly having better harvests, are there any other benefits or other positive things that you know of concerning the use of animal traction for plowing?

Then you can ask more specifically about their opinions on some of the possible positive attributes that you can think of. For example:

- Do you think that exclusively breastfeeding would save you money (if you tried it)?
- What do you think of the taste of ORS? The cost?
- Do you think that ORS is useful for anything else aside from treating diarrhea?
- Do you think owning an animal to use for plowing would provide you with other benefits?
- What would you use the money for if you owned a pig and sold it?

Then ask about negative attributes:

- What are the things about using chlorine to purify your water that you really do not like?
- What are the things about weeding that you really don't like, or think you would not like?

In addition to the questions that you use with groups, you could talk to people who have tried out the practice to see what they liked about it.