

# FHI's FOCUS GROUP TRAINING NOTES

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*(USE overhead.)*

**After this section of the workshop, you should:**

- Be able to select a proper sample of people as participants in a focus group.
- Understand how to choose participants for a focus group.
- Select a place to do a focus group and know how to set it up.
- Understand what materials are needed to run a focus group.
- Understand how to facilitate a focus group.
- Understand some options for analyzing focus group data.

(30 minutes)

## 1. OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUPS

### a. *WHAT is a focus group?*

- Focus groups are a type of **group interview** whereby a small group of **about 6-15 people** has a conversation about a given topic.
- The conversation is **guided by one person** who is called the "moderator" or "facilitator."
- A focus group usually **lasts between 30 minutes and two hours**.
- The facilitator **asks open-ended questions** and then "probes" the participants with smaller questions.

• ***The facilitator is the learner not the teacher.*** The facilitator leads a discussion, but the purpose is to learn from the participants, not to teach them anything. Focus groups can be ruined if the person leading them switches into their "educator" or "promoter" roles. It's very difficult for us to just listen sometime, without too much comment or suggestions. Good listening is essential for focus groups, though.

- **The problem with using questionnaires or forms alone** (and reporting forms are really a type of questionnaire) **is that people are forced into fitting their way of thinking into someone else's categories** as they are listed on the questionnaire form. People sometimes talk about whether a questionnaire is "grounded" or "ungrounded." Ungrounded means that it does not fit with the respondent's way of thinking. Grounded means that it does fit. The information that you get from an "un-grounded" questionnaire can be meaningless. You have to try to make the questions that you use fit with the way people think. You often need to do this with your education and your project in general, as well. That's not always very easy, but focus groups can help you to do that.

### b. *Demonstrate a focus group.*

***[Explain the setup: I would greet each participant as they came in, have each one tell a little bit about themselves then ask the question and facilitate a discussion. Ask the question on the following page and facilitate a discussion of the question using good facilitation techniques.]***

"You know, I have been working with [*name of your organization*] for only about five months. I still don't have a very good idea of the ways in which [*name of your organization*] is

different from other private voluntary organizations. Let's talk about that for a while. **In what ways is [name of your organization] different from other organizations working in international development? What do you think its strengths are relative to other organizations? What really sets it apart?** Let me repeat that question , , , (**repeat the question**).

**Probes:** In what ways do you feel [name of your organization] is different from other organizations in terms of:

- ...its philosophy of development?
- ...its organizational structure?
- ... the way the offices in developed countries relate to the offices in the field?

**SUMMARIZE their statements, then use a transition: Now let's talk about the areas where Food for the Hungry needs to grow.**

**c. Discuss the Example**

**(ASK participants:)** "What are some of the things that you noticed about the question I asked that may have made participants more likely to respond?" (reread the question):

- I expressed **naiveté (ignorance about the subject)**.
- I used a series of **open-ended questions**.
- I used a **longer question** and **repeated** it.

**(ASK participants:)** "What are some of the things that I did while I facilitated the group to get a lot of information out of the group?"

- I used **probes** (small questions).
- I **asked specific people** what their opinion was.
- I **watched body language**.
- I **limited some people's answers** after a point so all could participate.
- I **brought about a true group discussion**. (In many settings, focus groups often turn into "interviews done in groups" where each person in the group gives an answer to a question that is unrelated to what the last person said in the group. This is not the intent of the methodology. The discussion in a focus group should be a free-flowing *discussion* amongst the participants where the facilitator plays a smaller and smaller role once the question is understood by the participants. Responses by participants are made in reference to the original question, but are also made in response to comments made by other participants in the group.)
- We will discuss others later during the facilitation skills part of this training.

(10 minutes)

## 2. Advantages of using focus groups.

**(USE overhead and discuss)**

- a) They **cost less** than other qualitative methods.
- b) They are especially **useful for** collecting information from certain age **groups or populations that are difficult to interview** one-on-one, such as teenagers. (This may be true of the very poor as well.) This is because **interviews between people from**

**different classes** often do not yield as good of results as when the interviewer is of the same status and class. Focus groups **take the emphasis off of the interviewer** since the interviewer in a focus group [the "facilitator"] talks less of the time --s/he is "outnumbered". When a person is in a group of people like his or herself, s/he is has the security needed to talk more freely about her opinions and ideas .

- c) Focus groups **allow for more community involvement** in the generation of ideas and materials useful to projects. For example, in some countries development workers have found that putting a picture of a child and a loving mother on an ORS packet meant that more mothers would buy them. Or *flavoring* the ORS made more people use it. They found these things out by using focus groups.
- d) Focus groups can **encourage people to speak honestly** more easily than in a one-to-one interview. Individuals sometimes feel more comfortable in talking about their beliefs and practices in a group of people who share their beliefs and opinions. (This often happens to "new" Christians who feel much more comfortable talking about their faith in church than they do talking about it with their non-Christian friends.) This is why focus groups have been used extensively for learning about family issues. Home interviews do not provide the "balance-of-power" that is needed.
- e) Focus groups can be **useful in defining problem areas and new concerns** which need to be addressed in detail with a survey (as mentioned earlier), problems that you may not have known existed had you started with a closed-ended questionnaire.

(10 minutes)

### 3. Disadvantages of focus groups.

*(USE overhead and discuss)*

1. **Harder to interpret** the data than other methods.
2. **Less control over the course of discussion** than other methods. A good facilitator needs to keep people on track so that all questions are answered.
3. The **setting is less natural** than some methods.
4. **Recruitment of participants is more difficult** than for many other methods.
5. Sometimes it is **difficult to achieve "anonymity"** (a goal of focus groups) where people feel like they can say what they want. Power relations and hierarchies can affect and distort the results if some of the participants know each other very well -- which is almost inevitable to a certain degree in small villages.

(10 minutes)

### 4. Organizing a Focus Group and Selecting People to Participate in Focus Groups

*a) Characteristics of good focus group participant selection.*

#### 1. Homogenous according to salient characteristics.

The respondents should share characteristics that most likely influence attitudes towards the focus group topic. (This may be hard to determine ahead of time.)

These may include:

- age
- race

- education
- sex
- income level
- people that share a particular problem (e.g., birds eating their sorghum; children who won't gain weight).
- people that are trying to modify or add a behavior (e.g., using terracing; exclusive breastfeeding).

Some researchers screen potential respondents to ensure homogeneity of the group: They look for people ahead of time who meet certain criteria.

**2. 6-15 people (8-12 best in most places).**

**3. Preferably, you want people who are acquaintances or less. (Difficult.)** This can be a problem. Focus groups are not as effective within an club or organization where people are often more than acquaintances and there are chains of command that can greatly affect people's responses in a group (e.g., people following the leader's response). You would not want to do a "focus group" using a community organization. That's not a focus group. It's just a group discussion. And it might end up being a speech by the group's leader!

**4. Ideally, do at least two focus groups (best 4-5) per grouping of people (e.g., Lead Farmers) per subject.**

**5. Do 3-5 groups per theme -- like erosion prevention methods or child health.**

**6. Select participants somewhat randomly if possible (within a category).**

- \* **Not** essential, but helpful.
- \* Consider using a door-to-door invitation in the morning for an afternoon focus group, selecting every third house, etc.
- \* Consider ease of selection vs. "purity" of sample.

**7. Naïve Participants**

Participants should not be told the questions they will be discussing before the focus group begins. You do that so that people will say what is on their mind (be spontaneous), be more honest, and give non-divisive answers. You can mention the general topic to the participants ahead of time (e.g., agriculture or health), but do not talk about specifics of the focus group or the planned project. (And when I ask questions about needs, I start with very open-ended questions, then ask specifically about the topic that interests me most [health].)

(3 minutes)

**5. Selecting the focus group site.**

The focus group site should be:

- \* **Quiet.** It is hard to exclude observers sometimes, but at least get them not to talk or distract participants. Don't shut out others (e.g., shutting windows) unless participants want that.
- \* **Comfortable** for participants

- \* **"Neutral"** or on "their turf." It should be a place where they feel fairly comfortable (e.g., a public meeting place rather than a church or a mosque).
- \* **Accessible**

(3 minutes)

## 6. Materials Needed for a Focus Group

- \* **Room** (or area near a reflecting wall -- put tape recorder in middle).
- \* **Table, a circle of chairs, or a square of benches.**
- \* **Refreshments.**
- \* Block of **paper and pen** to record responses.
- \* (Facilitator and **someone to record** DETAILED responses.)
- \* **Tape recorder** and fresh **batteries** (optional)

(3 minutes)

## 7. The Facilitator's Role

- **Greet** participants.
- Deliver **introductory statement**.
- Have participants **introduce** themselves.
- Keep people **speaking from their own experience**. (NOT, "I think my neighbors don't ..., but "I don't ...")
- **Encourage participants**, letting them know that their ideas and opinions are important ("I never thought of that!", "That's very helpful", etc.).
- **Guide the discussion** using proper facilitation skills.
- **Record key insights** after sessions and **assign someone (or two people, taking turns) to take detailed notes during the entire session**.

Desired (not mandatory) criteria for selection of facilitators (all can be learned):

- Able to listen.
- Skilled in group dynamics.
- Not too shy.
- Non judgmental.
- Knowledgeable and prepared on the focus group topic.
- If possible, not a major stakeholder in the project (hard sometimes and not all that important if you can remain objective).

(30 minutes)

## 8. Facilitation Skills

*(Go through each of these skills and give examples.)*

### a) Type of interaction desired.

- Relaxed
- Allow conflicting ideas to exist. **AGREEMENT (CONSENSUS) IS NOT THE GOAL!**

### b) Guidelines

Generally:

- **Sit in the circle** with everyone else, not further in or further out.
- **Dress** as you expect the participants will dress if that is appropriate (e.g., not too formal; wear jeans if they wear jeans; a tie if they wear ties [e.g., physicians]).
- Generally, **do not interrupt**, especially when someone speaks slowly or has trouble expressing his- or herself.
- **Laugh with people**, but NOT at them!

- **Small talk** with people before the focus group begins, but not about the subject of the focus group.
- **Limit dominator's answers.** Tactics: **(ASK participants:)** What are ways that we can do this without offending people? **(ADD:)** Asking to hear from someone else instead, "Ms. Ledford has lived here a bit longer than you; let's give her a chance to respond to that question"; not giving them eye contact after a point; act bored with them?; etc.)
- **Keep participants focussed.**
- **Get quiet people to respond.** Tactics: **(ASK participants for suggestions. Then ADD:)** Pulling them out, complimenting them more, etc.
- **Handle controversy, but don't stifle it** (intervene if necessary, "everyone has opinions"; "you and I can talk more about that before you leave, if you want, but we really need to move on now.")
- **Watch for body language** cues:
  - Body positioning (folded arms, leaning back, covering their mouth, etc.)
  - People laughing., smiling, or looking irritated by others answers.
  - Tone of voice.
- **Allow for some silences** (puts pressure on people to respond to a certain degree).
- **Use probes**
- **Make summaries** of what has been said.
- **Use transitional statements** (provided in the question guide) so that people know you are finished with one question and are going to something different; and
- **Use humor.**

(20 minutes)

## 9. Developing a Questions Guide for Focus Groups

(USE overheads)

### 1. Characteristics of Good Questions / Probes

- ◆ **Start off with a "sharing" questions;** use early (e.g., could you each tell me a little bit about yourself, who you are, how many children you have and their ages?")
- ◆ **Use open-ended questions.** That's what FGs are made for. If you mainly want to use closed-ended questions, then you shouldn't be using focus groups.
- ◆ **Use questions that help you to discover people's attitudes, opinions, and that get participants to talk about their own experiences.**
- ◆ **Consider using list-building questions.**
- ◆ **Use longer questions to encourage longer answers** that draw on the participants' ideas, experience, or beliefs. (Longer questions often generate longer answers.) You can use more than one question at a time.
- ◆ **Consider using "What if" probes,** hypothetical situations (e.g., "If we had the meetings every month instead of every week, would you be more likely to attend?") . . . but don't promise anything you are not ready to provide and do not believe everything that you hear! **Information about future activities is very unreliable.**
- ◆ Can use some probes that provoke **humorous responses** to lighten the atmosphere. **(Give an example of a good question: Note length of question, expressed naivete, "you're the experts," etc..)**

"I have only been living in Marsabit for about two years now so I don't know about a lot about the health facilities here in this area like you do. What I would like to know is, what has been your experience with the public health centres in

Marsabit?. Have you ever visited them? How were you treated when you went there? Are they good health centres or do they need a lot of improvements? Tell me about your experiences with the public health centres in Marsabit.

## **2. Delivery of Questions / Probes**

**(USE overhead)**

- ◆ **Read the questions, but you can elaborate from memory.**
- ◆ **Preface sensitive questions.** (Give an example: “People often feel a little uncomfortable talking about teenage pregnancy. But if we want to help prevent it, we need to talk about it more and understand why it happens.”)
- ◆ **Always repeat questions to give people time to think.** Ask if anyone needs to have the question repeated a third time. You don't want to start the discussion before everyone understands the question (since they would be left out for about 10 minutes otherwise).
- ◆ **Pace yourself so that the whole session lasts the amount of time you have allotted.** There's no benefit of finishing early, but you DON'T want to end late unless everyone is having a great time!

## **3. Sequencing of Questions**

- ◆ **Put objective, descriptive, less personal questions before subjective, value-oriented, personal ones.**
- ◆ **Begin with sharing-type question.**
- ◆ **Start with easy questions and proceed to hard ones then back to easy.**
- ◆ **Be somewhat flexible** about the sequence.
- ◆ **End with a question that make people feel good about themselves** and the focus group experience. (A touchy-feely question, e.g., “dreams for the future.”)

(60 minutes)

## **10. Small Group Exercise in Writing a Question Guide**

*[Have the participants divide into groups to develop a question guide (max. five questions) for a current need of theirs (e.g., client satisfaction with extension services, finding out about current agricultural practices, program fit, etc.). Have participants present their question guides, and give each group coaching in plenary.]*

(2.5 hours)

## **11. Small Group Exercise in Facilitating Focus Groups**

*[For each group of 8 people, have people take turns facilitating the group discussion using a question guide provided to them (relevant to their work). Workshop facilitators should rotate among groups and give coaching to each facilitator.]*

- ◆ Tell participants that we will have about 5-10 minutes per question during this exercise, then explain what has happened already: Participants have been welcomed and are sitting waiting for FG to begin.
- ◆ One of the training facilitators does the introductory statement then another person does the sharing question (where participants can introduce themselves).
- ◆ One of the training facilitators does the first question and facilitates discussion of that question. Then the second person in the group takes over (becoming a facilitator rather

than a focus group member). Workshop facilitators should sit behind each person as they are facilitating and whisper coaching hints to them (e.g., “pay attention to who is *not* talking to,” “use probes to get more information there,” “get people to talk to each other, not you”).

- ◆ **After each question/facilitator, have the group give feedback to the person who last facilitated the group.**

- ◆ What did s/he do well?
- ◆ What can s/he do to improve her facilitation techniques?
- ◆ Any other suggestions or comments?

- ◆ **Have a "plant" for certain questions** -- go whisper directions to people as the moderator facilitates the group. Tell the "plant" to do the following:

- ◆ On one question, have someone **dominate** (talking on and on, one story after another);
- ◆ on another, have someone **be shy** and not say a word;
- ◆ on another question, have someone **try to block the process** with a concern (e.g., "you're just here to get us all sterilized" or "you want to steal our land");
- ◆ on another question, have **someone talk about other people's experiences** all the time, but never his or her own experiences

## 12. Analysis of Focus Group Data<sup>1</sup> (30 minutes)

*[Discuss analysis options with the workshop participants.]*

After each session, the team should finish their notes and prepare a summary of what was learned. During an analysis workshop, these summaries can be read all at one time. Potential trends and patterns and strongly held or frequently aired opinions can be written on newsprint. If transcripts are made, participants can divide into groups and highlight key sections of the transcript to share with in plenary. At this point, information on each question asked can be analyzed separately. Participants can divide into small groups with each group analyzing a particular question or set of questions, and write a summary statement that describes the discussion. When analyzing the results, the team should consider:

- *Words.* Weigh the meaning of words participants used. Can a variety of words and phrases categorize similar responses?
- *Framework.* Consider the circumstances in which a comment was made (context of previous discussions, tone and intensity of the comment).
- *Internal agreement.* Figure out whether shifts in opinions during the discussion were caused by group pressure.
- *Precision of responses.* Decide which responses were based on personal experience and give them greater weight than those based on vague impersonal impressions.
- *The big picture.* Pinpoint major ideas. Allocate time to step back and reflect on major findings.
- *Purpose of the report.* Consider the objectives of the study and the information needed for decision-making. The type and scope of reporting will guide the analytical process. For example, focus group reports typically are (1) brief oral reports that highlight key findings; (2) descriptive reports that summarize the discussion; and (3) analytical reports that provide trends, patterns, or findings and include selected comments.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Performance Monitoring and Evaluation TIPS: Conducting Focus Group Interviews, USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation, 1996(10). Available for download at: [http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid\\_eval/pdf\\_docs/pnaby233.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/pdf_docs/pnaby233.pdf)

***(Overheads are provided on the following pages.)***

## **AFTER THIS SECTION YOU SHOULD:**

- **Be able to organize and select a proper group of people as participants in a focus group.**
  
- **Be able to set up a focus group site.**
  
- **Understand what materials are needed to run a focus group.**
  
- **Understand how to facilitate a focus group using good facilitation skills.**
  
- **Understand some options for analyzing focus group data.**

## **ADVANTAGES OF USING FOCUS GROUPS**

- 1) They cost less than other qualitative methods.**
- 2) They are especially useful for collecting information from certain age groups or populations that are difficult to interview one-on-one.**
- 3) Focus groups allow for more community involvement in the generation of ideas and materials useful to projects.**
- 4) Focus groups can often encourage people to speak honestly more easily than in a one-to-one interview.**
- 5) They can be useful in defining problem areas and new concerns that need to be addressed in detail with a survey.**

## **DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS**

- 1. Harder to interpret the data than other methods**
- 2. Less control over the course of discussion than other methods**
- 3. Setting is less natural than some methods.**
- 4. Recruitment of participants is more difficult.**
- 5. Sometimes difficult to achieve anonymity.**

## ***CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT SELECTION***

- 1. Participants are homogenous according to relevant ("salient") characteristics.**
- 2. There are 6-20 people (8-12 best in most places) per focus group.**
- 3. Preferably, the participants are acquaintances "or less." (Difficult.)**
- 4. Ideally, you have at least two focus groups (best 4-5) per grouping of people (e.g., Lead Farmers) per subject.**
- 5. You have 3-5 focus groups per theme.**
- 6. Randomly chosen (if possible)**
- 7. "Naive."**

## **POSSIBLE SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS**

- ⌘ Age**
- ⌘ Race or cultural group**
- ⌘ Sex**
- ⌘ Educational level**
- ⌘ Income level**
- ⌘ People who share a particular problem**
- ⌘ People who are trying to modify or try out a behavior**

# SELECTING A GOOD FOCUS GROUP SITE

The focus group site should be:

⌘ **Quiet**

⌘ **Comfortable** for participants

⌘ **"Neutral"** or on "their turf."

⌘ **Accessible**

## **MATERIALS NEEDED FOR A FOCUS GROUP**

- ⊗ Room (or area near a wall).**
- ⊗ Table (round if possible), circle of chairs, or square of benches.**
- ⊗ Refreshments.**
- ⊗ Block of paper and pen to record responses.**
- ⊗ Tape recorder and fresh batteries (optional)**
- ⊗ (Facilitator and someone to record DETAILED responses.)**

## **THE FACILITATOR'S ROLE**

- ⌘ Greet participants.**
- ⌘ Deliver introductory statement.**
- ⌘ Have participants introduce themselves.**
- ⌘ Keep people speaking from their own experience.**
- ⌘ Encourage participants, letting them know that their ideas and opinions are important**
- ⌘ Guide the discussion using proper facilitation skills.**
- ⌘ Record key insights after session and assign someone (or two people, taking turns) to take detailed notes during the entire session.**

**Desired (not mandatory) criteria for selection of facilitators (all can be learned):**

- **Able to listen.**
- **Skilled in group dynamics.**
- **Not too shy.**
- **Non judgmental.**
- **Knowledgeable and prepared on the focus group topic.**
- **Neutral relative to group (hard sometimes).**

## **FACILITATION SKILLS**

### **Type of interaction desired:**

- **Relaxed**
- **Conversational: NOT going around the circle in a fixed pattern**
- **Allow conflicting ideas to exist. CONSENSUS IS NOT THE GOAL!**

### **Guidelines:**

- **Sit in the circle with everyone else, not further in or further out**
- **Dress as you expectant the participants will dress if that is appropriate**
- **Bring about a true group discussion, not an individual interview in a group setting.**
- **Generally, do not interrupt**
- **Laugh with people, but NOT at them!**
- **Small talk with people before the focus group begins**

## **Guidelines (cont.)**

- **Limit dominator's answers**
- **Keep participants focused**
- **Get quiet people to respond.**
- **Handle controversy, but don't stifle it**
- **Watch for body language cues**
- **Allow for some silences**
- **Use probes (small questions)**
- **Make summaries of what has been said**
- **Use transitional statements**
- **Use humor**

## **Characteristics of Good Questions / Probes**

- ⌘ Start off with a "sharing" type question**
- ⌘ Use open-ended questions**
- ⌘ Use questions that solicit attitudes and opinions and keep participants speaking from their own experiences**
- ⌘ Consider using list building questions**
- ⌘ Use longer questions to encourage longer answers that draw on participants ideas, experience, or beliefs.**
- ⌘ Consider using "What if" probes, hypothetical situations**
- ⌘ Consider using some probes that provoke humorous responses to lighten atmosphere.**

## **Delivery of Questions / Probes**

- ⌘ Read the questions (but elaborate from memory)**
- ⌘ Preface sensitive questions**
- ⌘ Repeat questions**
- ⌘ Pace yourself**

## Sequencing of Questions

- ⌘ **Use objective, descriptive, less personal questions before subjective, value-oriented, personal ones**
- ⌘ **Begin with a sharing type question**
- ⌘ **Start with easy questions, proceed to hard ones, then end with easy ones.**
- ⌘ **Be somewhat flexible about sequence.**
- ⌘ **End with a question that make people feel good about themselves and the focus group experience.**