

How to conduct a focus group

What is a focus group discussion?

A focus group discussion is simply a group of people, guided by a facilitator, talking freely about specific issues. Focus group discussions often ask people to respond to specific questions, though the questions can be very broad or narrower and more specific.

We call this kind of a discussion a focus group because it focuses on a specific topic that the facilitator wishes to explore. The facilitator not only asks questions, but also helps guide the discussion back to the topic if it wanders far from the intended focus.

Background information

Arrange to meet with men and women separately because the farming issues that concern women are often different than those that concern men. Also, the time that women want to and are able to listen to the radio is often different than the time men listen to the radio.

Preparing for the meeting

In most places, there is a local procedure to be followed in order to arrange a meeting with people in a community. If you are unaware of this procedure, please consult people or organizations in your area that know what to do.

Make sure you bring someone to take notes, and if possible use an audio recorder to record the discussion. When you arrange the meeting, make sure to ask permission to record the meeting and take notes. The focus group facilitator should ensure that all participants agree to grant their permission for audio recording. If there is no consensus, the facilitator should follow the policy that none of the discussion will ever be broadcast.

It is important to arrive on time. Farmers are often very busy and should not be kept from their daily activities any longer than necessary. Of course, all focus group discussions must take place in the local language, so be prepared to have an interpreter with you if necessary.

Think carefully about how you phrase focus group questions

Remember that your questions should be open. This means that you ask your questions in a way that prompts detailed information rather than a *yes* or *no* answer.

Avoid leading questions. These are questions that suggest what the correct answer is. You should phrase your questions in order to minimize what is called "response bias." "Response bias" occurs when people respond to your questions in the way they think you want them to respond rather than according to their own beliefs. To minimize response bias, avoid questions such as "Do you listen to our show?" or "What do you like about it?" You will be more likely to avoid response bias if you ask less direct questions such as, "Do people in the village listen to our show?" "What do they say about it?" This less direct approach should help gather more honest answers, because respondents will feel less pressure to praise the radio station.

Introduction

The following is an example of how you could introduce yourself to a group of farmers. Please modify it as needed for your audience and yourself.

Thank you for taking time to meet with me today.

"My name is _____ and I am a producer/presenter at _____ [insert name of radio station]. Welcome, everyone [shake hands/introduce yourself to everyone].

This is my colleague – [indicate person]. His/her name is _____. He/she will be making notes for me, but won't be taking part in our conversation.

[Make sure all respondents are comfortable, for example by sitting in an area that has room for everyone in the shade.]

Today I am here to learn about which farming issues are important to you. I also want to find out when would be the most convenient time for you to listen to a weekly radio program on farming broadcast by [insert name of station].

I have come here to learn from you. I want to collect your views and opinions. I will not disagree with what you say or try to convince you to think differently. This is not a test. This is a time when you can say anything you feel or think about the topics that I will discuss with you.

This is a group discussion in which we will all talk about things together as if we were chatting to our friends or family. The only difference is that I am here to guide the discussion. I don't want to hear myself talking much: I have come to hear your views and opinions. However, I do have a list of topics that I would like to cover. So sometimes I will steer the discussion back to these topics.

This discussion will be recorded. I need a record of our discussions because we will use your input to help us develop a list of issues we should address in a radio program on farming. I may also want to make a radio program based on the recording of this focus group. But I will only broadcast that program with your permission.

The group will take an hour to an hour and a half. I hope you find these discussions enjoyable and interesting. Remember: it is your chance to put your views across in a safe environment.

Is everything I have just said clear? Are there any questions?"

If someone asks who the information is for, say: "Our discussions today will help my radio station design a weekly farmer program. They will also help us decide when to air the program."

Questions

Once you've introduced yourself and outlined the process (as above), it is time to ask farmers the questions you have prepared. Notice if there are people who are not speaking and encourage them to contribute to the discussion.

Concluding the discussion

It is important to manage the time you have available. If people have a lot to say and you think you will need more time, you will need to ask the group's permission to take a bit longer. If they are not able to stay, then you will need to conclude.

After you have finished discussing your prepared questions, thank everyone for contributing and ask if there are any questions.

Five tips on facilitating focus group discussions

- 1) *Stay focused:* Keep questions short, clear, and on target. Some respondents will become confused if they hear more than one question at a time or if questions are too long-winded. A group can easily lose its focus. But if the guide is clear, the group will be responsive.
- 2) *Stay organized:* Keep together all questions relating to sub-topics of the key question(s).
- 3) *Ask one question at a time:* For example, "What steps have you taken to diversify your crops?" rather than, "What steps have you taken to diversify your crops, and what steps could be taken to promote crop diversification in the community?"
- 4) *Move toward depth:*
 - a. Move from the simplest to the most complex questions.
 - b. Move from the least threatening to the most sensitive questions.
 - c. Move from the least controversial to the most controversial questions.
- 5) *Avoid questions that confuse participants or introduce a bias:*
 - a. Avoid questions that ask people to choose between more than two responses. These kinds of questions can easily confuse. For example, avoid questions such as "What is more important to you: money from farming, harmony with your family, or a good roof over your head?" However, it is OK (because less confusing) to ask, "Which of these is *most* important to you?" if all are listed on a flip chart.
 - b. Avoid questions that impose assumptions that are inaccurate, leading, or misleading. For example, the question: "Given the amount of crime, how safe is it to walk at night?" assumes that much crime exists; that the person is aware of the crime rate; and that the person walks at night.

Acknowledgements

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For further information

M. Escalada and K. L. Heong. 2009. *Focus Group Discussion*. This article on focus group discussions was written to help agricultural researchers at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines conduct focus group discussions with farmers.

<http://ricehoppers.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/focus-group-discussion.pdf>

Monina Escalada, 2012. *Focus Group Discussion*. This is another and slightly longer piece on focus group discussions for agricultural researchers from the International Rice Research Institute. <http://devcompage.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Focus-group-discussion.pdf>