Guidelines for Conducting Focus Group Discussions

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a qualitative research technique consisting of a structured discussion and used to obtain in-depth information (qualitative data) from a group of people about a particular topic. The purpose of the discussion is to use the social dynamics of the group, with the help of a moderator/facilitator, to stimulate participants to reveal essential information about people’s opinions, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes.

Focus groups are often conducted among homogenous target populations, who usually share a common characteristic such as age, sex, or socio-economic status, which encourages a group to speak more freely about the subject without fear of being judged by others.

Key Steps in Conducting a FGD:

STEP 1: Select field team

- Moderator: The moderator/facilitator should have knowledge and experience or skills in leading FGDs, and at the least, understand the importance of assisting all members to speak at some point, be able to manage dominant group members, and have an ability to ask open questions and follow up with relevant additional questions to stimulate conversation and reflection. It is not desirable to run them as a question / response, question / response exercise. In that situation, people are more likely to respond what they think the interviewer wants to hear.
- Interpreter: Make sure the FGDs are conducted in the local language or in the language the participants feel most comfortable in, and if needed, use interpreters that have been trained/or train them in their role as translators in FGDs. (They need to translate directly and, as far as possible, not get involved themselves in the discussion, then translate back an edited version)
- Observer/recorder: It can be effective to have two people conducting the focus group -- one asking the questions (the moderator) and one writing and observing expressions, body language etc, which can give clues about sensitivities etc. When using an interpreter, however, the moderator might be able to do both given the lag time for translation.
- Other staff: There needs to be a clear motive if any other staff is to be present during a FGD.
- Make sure that none of the field staff are biased to the subject at stake (i.e. no personal or organizational interest) or have a role that might obstruct participants to speak out freely.

STEP 2: Determine what types and number of groups needed

- In each location, there should be interviews with elderly women, elderly men, adult women, adult men. If it does not inhibit conversations, age groups or gender could be mixed when it would be inconvenient to them to be separated, as long as the topic does not relate to or is affected by gender or age stereotypes, and as long as there is some possibility of also gaining disaggregated information.
- Interview adolescent girls and boys if the moderator is trained or experienced in interviewing young people under 18. Be particularly careful in interviewing younger children and consult with UNICEF or experts in child protection for assistance.
- Ensure, wherever possible, to target specific groups with disabilities and attempt to meet with indigenous or other minority groups.
- Group size: the ideal size is 8-12 persons, however smaller and larger groups can work well and oftentimes judgement must be made quickly on the spot so as not to offend or inconvenience people. If the space available is noisy, try to make the groups smaller to facilitate hearing.
- Make every effort to ensure that non-participants are not present or within hearing distance, particularly as this can give rise to protection risks.
- Try to ensure that people such as community leaders or representatives are not mixed in amongst the groups, as they may well discourage others from speaking freely. If such people are present, it is best to interview them separately.
- The nature of this kind of work is that all the best laid plans are likely to disappear out of the window when the team arrives at the venue, and quick thinking and flexibility is required to manage the best outcome in what is likely to be chaotic circumstances.

STEP 3: Prepare for the individual FGD

- Location for FGD: Try your best to organize the meeting in a private, safe and comfortable environment (e.g. not direct under the sun), and that it is accessible (especially to persons with disabilities, older persons, and women). In the current conditions, be prepared to compromise and check with the group that the compromise works for them.
- Date and time for the FGD: ensure mobilization of participants before the meeting as far as possible, and inform community leaders in advance of the discussion so they are aware of it. If a local agency is facilitating your access to communities, ask them to explain the purpose of your visit and to the extent possible, prepare the groups to reduce time lost in confusion.
- Plan with your team beforehand how you will divide groups between you. You want to aim for as much consistency of approach so that results are comparable.

STEP 4: Conduct the FGD: Introduction

- Introduce the focus group by explaining the reason for the visit. It is important to explain the rationale to avoid raising expectations. Explain what you will do with the information, and be very clear that when asking about needs, there is no guarantee that things will change, however to the extent possible, you will pass on their feedback to relevant authorities.
- The discussion might touch upon some sensitive issues such as security and violence. Ensure participants there are no requirement to respond if the question causes discomfort. Participation is completely voluntary and participants are free to answer or not, or to leave at any point.
- Reassure participants that confidentiality will be kept throughout in that no names or personal information will be disclosed or used in any publications/reports.
- Explain that you will be taking notes during the interview to help you remember what was said, but that these are for your own personal use and will not be shared with others.
- Make sure that your notes reflect as closely as possible what was said. When it comes to analyzing the outcomes, the more detail captured the better, and the more likely you are to have quotable passages which can be very powerful. Scant notes can render the exercise useless.
- Ask if there are any questions before starting the interview and make sure to take some notes about the demographics of the group.
- Be mindful that these are people who have suffered great loss and trauma and are also all individuals who have their own stories. Without spending all the time set aside building rapport, and without getting too personal, it is advisable to spend some time showing genuine interest in the people to whom you are speaking, to learn a bit about them and to put them at ease. You might like to ask people what they did before the typhoon, and in our experience, people also
don’t mind telling a bit of their experience of the typhoon. Use your judgement and be a bit creative.

**Step 5: Tips for the facilitator, observer and interpreter**

- Notice body language and expressions as relevant.
- Make sure to listen to participants, non-judgmentally and intervene if others are judging them, reminding them of the respect for other opinions.
- Encourage that only one person talks at a time, and remind people and the interpreter not to go too long in between translation, as you will lose a lot of the detail.
- It can be helpful sometimes, especially in one on one interviews, to put a question in the form of a role play. For example, you might say something like, “imagine I’m the head of (insert local authority or aid agency), what would you say to me?”
- Use neutral comments and encourage the quieter people to contribute – “Anything else?”, “does anyone else have something to add?”, “How about this side of the group?”
- Explain to interpreters the importance of translating sentence-by-sentence and not summarizing what people say. Interviewers should help interpreters by asking only one short question at a time and by reminding them about confidentiality of the discussions.