

How to run a focus group discussion

Focus groups are used to find out what a particular group of people think about an issue. A focus group discussion is held with a small group of people (usually about 10–20). It is led by a facilitator.

Why hold a focus group discussion?

Some uses of focus group discussions are:

- to help a community identify its needs at the start of a project
- to research a particular issue – for example, why girls in a particular area are dropping out of school
- to help monitor, review and evaluate our work, allowing us to hear how the community is experiencing it

Focus group discussions can be helpful in getting the views of children or people with low levels of literacy, who would find it hard to give written feedback.

Who should be involved?

Focus groups should usually be made up of people who share a key characteristic. For example, in your community you might run separate focus group discussions for:

- men
- women
- children (or separate groups for boys and girls)
- elderly people
- people with disabilities
- livelihoods groups, such as farmers.

You will probably need to run several different focus groups to get an overview of the different opinions across the whole community.

When and where should it be held?

Try to find a time that is suitable for all the group members. For example, try to avoid market days, festivals or weddings.

Find a location where people feel comfortable and where there is enough space. It should be reasonably quiet and private. It should also be a 'neutral' location where everyone feels able to express their view. All the participants should be able to get there easily.

Some examples of places to meet include:

- a location in the shade under some trees
- a school building during the school holidays
- a village hall.

How long should it last?

Focus group discussions should last for at least an hour, but ideally less than two hours – otherwise people start to lose interest.

Top tips for facilitators

- For men's or women's groups, it can be best if the facilitator is the same gender as the group. For a children's focus group, a young person could be the facilitator.
- Make sure you manage the time and keep the session on track.
- Use language that people will understand easily, and explain difficult concepts.
- Use the questions you have prepared, but make sure you are also flexible and respond to what the group is saying.
- If one participant tries to dominate the session, invite each person to speak in turn.
- Use open rather than closed questions. Closed questions have a simple yes-or-no answer, eg 'Has the new health centre improved your life?' Open questions draw out more information, eg 'What changes has the health centre caused in your community?'
- Encourage people to give specific examples to support their views.
- Avoid taking sides. Instead, ask questions such as, 'How much do others in the group agree?'
- Let participants know their contributions are valuable (both by what you say and your body language).

Step-by-step guide

STEP 1 Prepare in advance

Consider the following points:

- What are the **key questions** you want to ask?
- How will you record the information from the discussion?
- What materials do you need? This might include pens, paper, and refreshments for the participants.
- What language will you conduct the discussion in? Will you need a local translator?



Illustration: Petra Röhr-Rouendaal, *Where there is no artist* (second edition)

STEP 2 Welcome the group

Thank everyone for coming and introduce yourself and any assistants. Let people know the purpose of the focus group discussion. Invite members of the group to introduce themselves. You might want to use an ice-breaker activity or a game to help people feel comfortable with one another. As a group, agree any guidelines you will follow, eg one person speaking at a time.



STEP 3 Begin the discussion

You may like to ask the participants to split into groups of two or three to talk about the issue, before bringing them back together. You could ask them to put the things they are discussing in order of importance. You could then go on to ask deeper questions about the things they prioritise.



STEP 4 Capture the information

Throughout the discussion, make sure the key points are being recorded. If you have an assistant, they could write them on a flip chart, or participants could write their thoughts on pieces of card. Alternatively, you could make a video or sound recording (see page 6).

Give the group a break when they seem to be tiring.



STEP 5 End well

When you feel that it is the right time to end, thank the participants for their time. Summarise the main points you have covered. Explain to the group how the information will now be used, and any follow-up discussions or activities you will hold.

