

Focus Group Guidelines for TD Evaluations

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Introduction

Focus groups are a form of semi-structured interview with a selected group of people who discuss pre-determined topics in an open and participatory manner, guided by a facilitator. The purpose in an evaluation is to determine perceptions, feelings and ways of thinking about various aspects of the evaluand. From a constructivist epistemology perspective a focus group is one way of creating constructs that can lead to an answer for the question: What really matters about this project?

This technique is widely used in project evaluations, but often with flawed procedures that diminish the value of the information obtained. Guidelines were developed by World Vision International (2005) to improve the quality of procedures that are followed when complex indicators are included in the evaluation of transformational development projects. Major points are summarized here along with some additional content.

It is assumed that multiple groups discussed the indicator topics of interest.

The guidelines are organized by these eight categories. Three categories are guidelines for preparing for a focus group exercise. The other five categories are implementation guidelines.

Preparation	Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tools for more trustworthy data• Data collection roles and training• Selecting communities and participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitating group discussion• Recording participant contributions• Observing the process• Analyzing and scoring contributions• After action review

1. Tools to promote more trustworthy indicator information

For focus groups to be used to collect indicator information in many contexts, a range of tools should be used to promote methodological consistency, and assist the use and analysis of data. These instruments include:

- **Discussion guides:** for use by focus group facilitators to guide focus group discussions on the concepts of interest. Provide example questions that are culturally and contextually appropriate.

- **Analysis worksheets:** to aid the analysis of focus group records by guiding the discussion by data collectors in order to capture the range of opinions in each focus group on each topic, including notable quotes and examples.
- **Score cards:** provide a rating scale for each topic that enables data collectors to codify and score the focus group discussions. This aids comparison of focus group data over time, or between different topics or communities.
- **Log sheets:** to record key focus group process information, and assist monitoring, quality control and learning on focus group methods as they are applied in different settings.
- **After action review worksheet:** to record ways of improving the facilitation of focus groups.

2. Data collection teams

Discussion Facilitator	First Recorder	Second Recorder	Process Observer
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A data collection team includes four persons, who take the roles of facilitator, observer and recorders (2) for the focus groups. The selection and preparation of these data collectors is fundamental to the success of focus groups. This becomes especially important when there is more than one data collection team.

The role for each team member is discussed below.

Training for data collection teams

Training essentially is a process for calibrating the measurement process represented by the focus group experience. Focus group training should cover basic principles of focus groups: group facilitation skills, semi-structured interviewing / questions, use of discussion guides, recording, observation, team roles, managing time, dealing with challenges, etc, and should include role-play practice with actual groups.

Training should also enable focus group data collection teams to become confident with the concepts, instruments and methods. During the training team members should discuss and practice each component of the data collection process. The practice sessions should be with groups of people similar to those groups that will be interviewed in the study. Learning from this field practice should be discussed among the data collection teams. The teams also need to discuss any local adaptations of guide questions that are needed to ensure their relevance to local culture, context and issues.

After action reviews (BetterEvaluation.org) can be completed as team members practice each component of the process. The training process and content should be thoroughly documented so that it can be reviewed against an after action review of the completed group discussions.

3. Selecting communities and participants

A systematic process needs to be followed in selecting the communities, and the participants within the communities, that are invited to participate in the focus group discussion. The goal of the selection process is to have a balance between homogeneity and variation of opinions.

Selecting communities

The selection of communities is determined by the factors that distinguish the communities in the program from each other, along with the evaluation objectives. Generally an evaluation design will call for a diversity of communities to see if program effectiveness varies across the different types of communities participating in the program.

Selecting individuals

- Aim for each group having 7-10 homogeneous people that have a variety of opinions about the topics to be discussed. Experience shows that generally in a group this size everyone will have a reasonable opportunity to make a contribution.
- Avoid having close friends or people that are quite familiar with each other in the same group. Responses that are conditioned by familiarity are not as valuable.
- Identify the mixes of participants in the setting in which some participants will hinder the others in contributing to the discussion. Avoid having such mixes in a group. Plan to have separate groups for each part of the mix.
- Experience has shown that after four groups have responded to the same questions very little new information is produced. If no new information is produced in a group, consider cancelling the other scheduled groups. If new information is still being produced by the last scheduled group, consider adding another group.
- The preferred method for selecting individuals is to use an appropriate list of names and to invite 7-10 people from the list at random. See Krueger (2009) for other methods.
- A personal invitation to people with follow-up confirmation as the scheduled date for the discussion approaches is recommended.

4. Facilitating a focus group discussion

The first few moments in a focus group discussion are critical. In a brief time the facilitator must create a thoughtful, open and relaxing atmosphere, provide ground rules, and set the right tone for the discussion. The recommended pattern for introducing the focus group is:

- Welcome the group
- Provide an overview of the topic
- Explain the roles of each team member
- Establish the ground rules
- Pose the first question.

The discussion guide should then be used to facilitate participants' discussion of their views and experiences regarding the topics chosen for the group interview.

Good facilitation is the single most important factor in the success of any focus group discussion. It is also one of the most difficult things to achieve. It requires skill, experience and good teamwork between facilitator, observer and recorders.

Skills and characteristics of a good facilitator

There are three groups of skills and characteristics: controlling the discussion dynamics, demonstrating respect for all participants and monitoring personal reactions as the discussion flows.

Controlling Dynamics	Respecting Participants	Monitoring Reactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibly uses, adapts and follows up the guide questions. • Exercises mild control to keep the discussion moving. • Reviews and summarizes what’s been said where this helps to conclude discussion of a topic and/or gives participants an opportunity to say if anything has been missed. • Ensures good participation by all. • Covers all the topics within the time allotted. • Uses subtle group control to compensate for participants exhibiting different characteristics: experts, dominant talkers, shy participants, rambler. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses people respectfully. • Practices active listening - participants need to know they are being heard and understood. Head nodding and smiling can be part of active listening. • Appropriately uses small talk and humor to put people at their ease. • Understands, respects and fits in with local culture: dress, mannerisms, accent, and knowledge. • Is sensitive to participants (mood, body language etc.) • Keeps eye contact with all the participants, especially with the one who is speaking. • Thanks individuals after each contribution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is aware and in control of their own reactions to participants: verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are important. • Does not talk too much. Does not express his or her own views. Does not dominate the discussion. • Does not make judgments on what is being said; avoids short verbal responses such as “that’s good” and “excellent.”

In using the discussion guides facilitators should:

- Keep the discussion guides small and discreet – fold and tuck them into a notebook or other place where they can be looked at as a reminder when needed, rather than read

as a script. Do not have them large and obvious as they may distract attention of the participants, or prevent the facilitator from giving their full attention to the participants. Ideally the facilitator has memorized the flow of questions so that a written guide does not distract the participants.

- Take time for participants to discuss the meaning of any terms used which participants do not have a common understanding of, before proceeding further.

Dealing with common challenges

The recommended number of participants per group is 8-12. Various techniques can be used to avoid having too few or too many participants. If a significant number of invited people do not attend, it is important to learn why so that attendance in future groups is adequate.

Disruptive behavior poses a variety of challenges. Knowledge of how disruptive behavior is handled in normal community events is useful in deciding on useful strategies.

Managing time is an important aspect of focus group facilitation. Focus groups are likely to vary in length due to factors such as the level of interest and participation in the discussion topics. A typical focus group may take around 90-120 minutes. They should not go on beyond 2 hours as participants' concentration and interest is likely to drop and discussion of the latter topics is unlikely to be effective. If this is unavoidable, then a break needs to be planned with agreement of the participants to continue after it.

To allow for preparation and review time, it is recommended that each team of data collectors conduct no more than two focus groups per day. Some suggestions to help data collection teams in focus group time management are:

- When field testing ask the observer to note how long each topic takes, and discuss afterwards if any topics took too long or were rushed.
- It may be helpful for data collection teams to agree among themselves approximate times for topics, and for the observer to monitor time and let the facilitator know if there are concerns.
- It's important to balance this with keeping it reasonably flexible to maintain a relaxed focus group environment.

5. Recording focus group discussions

Inadequate recording is one of the most common failings in focus groups, yet without good recording the rich qualitative data and understanding gained from the group discussion is often lost or forgotten. This is a vital function that needs careful thought, planning, skill and diligence.

Best practice is to use two recorders, each of whom records notes on analysis worksheets prepared in advance. An example of a worksheet follows:

Discussion Topic: Style of Program Staff	
<p>Topics explored per discussion guide (mark out any that were not done):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For each staff member describe he or she interacts with community members. • For each staff member list strengths. • For each staff member describe what seems to be most important to him or her about this project. 	
Key points	Examples, Notable Quotations

The skills and characteristics of good recorders include:

- Clarity and consistency of note taking.
Anticipate that your notes will be used during team discussion of the focus group results and in reporting. Notes may also be retrieved and reviewed weeks or months following the focus group, when memory has faded. Notes should be legible and orderly, clearly following the flow of the topics and guide questions.
- Unobtrusive note taking (and tape recording).
Recording should not distract participants or interfere with focus group facilitation. Use a small notebook and sit in a less prominent position than the facilitator.
- Mutual sharing and reinforcing of notes between the two recorders.
The recorders should agree beforehand how they will do this. One recorder could take down comments made by half of the participants and the other focus on the remainder, or one could focus on general comments while the other captures verbatim quotes, or both take the same notes. Immediately after the focus group both recorders should meet and ensure that any gaps in their notes are completed. They should identify discrepancies between them and add their comments about how to resolve them. Everything written on the analysis sheets after the conclusion of the group discussion should be clearly identified.
- Noting different types of information.
This includes key points that represent the range of opinions expressed, divergent comments that represent a minority view, memorable individual quotes, group and

individual body language (e.g., nods, gestures, eye contact) that may indicate a level of agreement, support, interest (or disagreement, disinterest, lack of support).

6. Observing focus group discussions

While the facilitator is guiding the discussion and the recorders are capturing the discussion's contents, it is important to have one person who is able to observe the process of the focus group in order for the data collection team to continuously learn and improve their focus group facilitation skills.

7. Analysis and scoring

Within 24 hours of each focus group the two recorders, facilitator and observer should meet to analyze that focus group discussion. Ensure that all four persons have copies and are familiar with the scorecard and analysis worksheets. Ensure that recorders' notes are completed and in good order.

An analysis worksheet describes the key concepts explored for a particular topic, the key points that were made during the discussion, and notable quotations and examples. If 10 topics were discussed in a group, then there will be 10 analysis worksheets (a worksheet can have more than one page).

The selection of key points and quotes from the focus groups for inclusion in the summary report should follow these guidelines and process:

- i. Form small groups of 2-4 persons, comprised of one representative from each of the different groups of data collectors. Each small group will take the analysis worksheets from different focus groups on a specific topic. Each person is to read all worksheets – passing them around the group.
- ii. As a small group discuss the similarities and differences on this topic amongst the different focus groups.
- iii. Each person takes 3 colour pens/pencils/highlighters. The analysis worksheets are passed around and each person marks in agreed colours:
 - Representative points and quotes: the key point and quotes that they feel best represent the rating scores for the different groups on this topic.
 - Divergent points and quotes: any points, quotes or examples that are different from others, but they feel represent an important minority perspective
 - High Interest quotes and examples: any other quotes or examples that they feel are of special interest.
- iv. In small group discussion reach agreement/consensus on the selection of:
 - 1-2 key points: 1 representative and 1 divergent (if present) key point

- 2-3 quotes or examples: 1 representative and 1-2 divergent and/or high interest (if present) quotes or examples

Record these key points and quotes in summary narrative report.

8. After-action review

Immediately after the focus group discussion has finished the recorders, facilitator and observer should meet to discuss any learning from the process. This should include reflection on the community and participant selection process, as well as the focus group facilitation and recording. The observer may be the best person to lead this review, which should be constructive in approach while openly discussing any problems encountered or mistakes made.

An after-action review is a simple technique for identifying aspects of an action that can be improved. It is recommended that a focus group team complete such a review immediately following a completed group discussion. The review involves the team completing a chart like the following.

After-Action Review Worksheet

What was supposed to happen?	What actually happened?	What should we change before we facilitate the next discussion group? Why?

Resources

BetterEvaluation.org. After Action Review. Retrieve article from http://betterevaluation.org/evaluation-options/after_action_review

Describes the after action review technique and applications.

Dawson S., Manderson L., Tallo V. *The Focus Group Manual*. Geneva: United Nations WHO. 1992.

This manual is designed to help researchers and disease control personnel use qualitative research methods to learn more about social and cultural issues relating to infectious diseases.

Krueger, Richard A. *Focus Groups: A practical Guide for Applied Research*. Sage. 1988, 2009.

This classic text is now in its fourth edition, and is coauthored by Krueger and Mary Anne Casey. Essential reading for anyone that wants to do serious evaluation using focus groups.

Liamputtong, Pranee. *Focus Group Methodology: Principle and Practice*. Sage. 2011.

Per the publisher, Liamputtong presents clear, practical advice in simple terms which will be appropriate for undergraduate and postgraduate students who are undertaking research, making this an ideal starter text for anyone new to focus group research. The book pays close attention to research ethics and will also be of great interest to researchers who are working with different social groups - such as older people, children and ethnic groups - and anybody who is engaging in cross-cultural research. The concepts are illustrated with case studies and examples throughout.

World Vision Development Resources Team. Focus Group Basics. World Vision International. August 24, 2005.

Brief paper prepared for evaluators to use while evaluating international community development projects.

World Vision Development Resources Team. Transformational Development Indicators Field Guide, Volume Six, Methods – Focus Group Guidelines: A Guide To Planning, Facilitating and Analysing TDI Focus Groups. 2002, 2005. World Vision International.

Detailed description for collecting and analyzing focus group data related to specific indicators of transformational development included in all community development projects facilitated by WVI.