

Tips on running focus group discussions¹

These tips can be used to support staff when organising focus group discussions (FGDs). It is recommended to conduct FGDs throughout the programme cycle with different groups of the affected population, and to compare and cross-check the information collected from these and other sources.

What is a focus group discussion?

Focus group discussions are an opportunity to hear affected peoples' views and concerns on specific topics and collect their feedback, so that we can better understand their perceptions and needs and use their inputs to adapt our programmes.

The focus group should bring together people who have something in common, that share a problem.

How many people, how long?

It is recommended to create groups of eight to twelve people. This will allow everyone to speak to the group and build on what others have said, keep the focus on the topic and ensure the discussion is facilitated effectively.

It is best practice to hold separate FGDs with men and women, and other minority groups too, if possible. Vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities, migrants, should be actively included in discussions. Leaders and authorities should be involved separately.

Plan 1h to 1h30min for the activity, to have plenty of time to discuss topics in detail and allow everyone to express their views.

What do you need?

- An experienced facilitator (a native speaker who can make people feel comfortable and lead the discussion by drawing out the people who are not talking and stopping others from talking too much. If possible, the facilitator should be the same sex as the participants)
- One or two note-takers (with solid listening and writing skills, able to summarize information, also of the same sex as the participants)
- Community members
- A quiet place where the group will not be overheard or interrupted, and where it is possible to comfortably sit in a circle. Make sure the place is accessible to everyone.
- A list of open-ended guiding questions to ask to participants. Both facilitator and not-takers must be familiar with the questions.

¹ Adapted from IFRC/ICRC (2017) *Community Engagement and Accountability toolkit*, Tool 5: Guidance on running a focus group

Getting started

- Introduce the facilitator and note takers, thank everyone for participating, explain the purpose of the activity and set objectives.
- Get informed consent: ask permission from the group to take notes or record the discussion, explain that participants can leave the activity at any time.
- Manage expectations: explain clearly that participation in the discussion does not guarantee people will receive any kind of support.
- Set ground rules, for example: everyone has a right to speak, no one has the right answer, avoid interrupting.

Facilitating a discussion on a specific theme

- Introduce the topic selected for the discussion.
- Start by asking questions about the background of the individuals participating in the activity (such as what they do, their livelihoods, who they live with, where they live and how old they are).
- Use a list of guiding questions to structure the discussion.
- During the discussion, acknowledge what everyone says. Do not express opinions, nor judge people who speak.
- Ensure that everyone has a chance to speak on the topic, and that the discussion stays focused. Give time to expand on certain points and avoid moving quickly through the list of questions.
- Be sensitive to cultural norms when conducting the activity to ensure that everyone feels respected and that no one feels rushed or excluded. Ensure time for participants to raise their own questions and concerns.
- Ask questions that guide the discussion rather than soliciting direct answers from each of the participants. Ask simple questions, and only one question at the time.
- Ask open questions, such as “how, what, where and why” as much as possible, especially to clarify or to check understanding.
- Steer the group towards analysing the causes of the identified issues/problems/risks. Encourage participants to use their skills to resolve them, and to think about the role of the community in developing solutions.
- Ensure that the issues/problems discussed are linked to possible solutions that can be formulated in recommendations and follow-up activities.
- Ask the participants which of the issues raised they consider to be the most pressing.
- At the end of the session, summarize what has been discussed and thank everyone for their participation.
- Verify that the written record has captured the main points.

Discussing with children and adolescents²

The methodology for focus group discussions needs to be adapted when engaging with children and adolescents, as their abilities and needs are significantly different from those of adults and from each other. Rather than being shaped around verbal discussion and guiding questions, the activity can involve other forms of expression and make use of creative participatory tools that facilitate engagement of children and adolescents.

When engaging children and adolescents, risk assessment and mitigation measures must be in place to ensure safeguarding. Everyone involved in the activity must comply with safeguarding standards and regulations.

Strategies for communicating effectively with children:

- Engage with children and adolescents respectfully, whatever their age, ability or background. Be sensitive to gender, language, culture, ethics, and the power relations between them and adults.
- Actively seek participation from children and adolescents who might be discriminated against or marginalized.
- Organize activities in places that are familiar to children and adolescents, ensure privacy and create a non-distracting environment.
- Allow time for building trust, to help them feel relaxed, develop mutual trust and feel that they are being taken seriously.
- Use language and concepts appropriate to age, stage of development and culture, and share information in accessible, child/adolescent-friendly ways.
- Listen attentively – use gestures and eye contact to show that you are listening, summarize what participants have said, seek clarification, avoid interrupting them.
- Use creative forms of expression that allow for engagement with children/adolescents through their preferred style of communication, for example, using play or art (drama, poetry, drawings, photography, videomaking, etc.) as a medium of expression.
- Rather than relying on interviews or questionnaires which may not be effective, use creative participatory tools which enable children to identify, analyse and discuss the issues which most affect them. Produce something that children can see as an outcome of their participation.

² Adapted from Save the Children (2013) *Guidelines for Children's Participation in Humanitarian Programming* and UNHCR (2012) *Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents*