

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

(Adapted from Oxfam PHP guidelines and Hygiene Promotion, a practical manual for relief and development, ITDG publications)

A focus group is usually composed of not more than 10-12 people who have been selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic under discussion. The aim of the focus group is to understand people's current ideas and beliefs in detail. Sometimes the discussion generated by the group can lead to people considering a particular problem and acting to address it. If focus groups are used as a method of assessment or research, the data collected from the group is known as qualitative data and it cannot be translated into quantitative data.

Usually there will be one facilitator and one recorder. The recorder should try to take down what people say as completely as possible. Notes can be taped onto a recorder, with the permission of the participants but this will entail transcribing and analysing the data after and may not be appropriate in an acute situation. The facilitator is there to keep the discussion going, to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak and to probe in depth for an understanding of the issue being discussed. The session should last not more than an hour.

The group size is kept small on purpose and no more than 10-12 people should be invited. In larger groups, people's speaking time may be restricted and dominant people often monopolise the discussion. It becomes harder to facilitate the group properly and much important information may be lost.

It is better to have men and women in separate groups as often women do not speak if men are present. It is also preferable if the participants are roughly the same age as otherwise older people may do all the talking. Try to avoid having leaders or people in authority in the groups, as people may be unwilling to give their true opinions and defer any questions to them. Interview key informants separately.

Some common mistakes made in focus groups

- There are too many people
- Only a few people talk
- No one takes notes
- People start talking about something else
- People start talking to each other or wander off if they are bored
- The facilitator joins in the discussions, gives an opinion or starts teaching the group
- Questions are closed questions that require one answer
- There is little discussion, people just give information
- Percentages are used in order to make the data quantitative
- General statements are made without saying how many people actually talked
- The facilitator makes assumptions about the group

How to conduct a Focus Group Discussion

- Prepare a framework of questions that might be asked to probe a particular issue. The questions should be as open ended as possible. Sometimes it may be easier to refer to someone in the third person e.g. rather than say 'what do you use for protection during menstruation' ask 'what do women use to protect themselves during menstruation?'
- Invite suitable participants to attend the meeting at a venue and time identified by them. Six to twelve participants are often cited as an ideal but do not turn people away. In a camp situation, there may not always be venues available that afford privacy. Focus group discussions may be held under a tree or outside someone's shelter. Try to hold separate groups with men and women however to ensure that you have both male and female perspectives.
- Introduce yourselves to the group and explain very clearly the object of the exercise and that you hope that everyone will learn from the session
- Explain that there are no wrong or right answers to the questions. Stress that people should try not to interrupt others when they are talking and that everyone's point of view will be valued.
- Try to make the discussions as interesting as possible for the participants by providing photographs or pictures of key problems or designs of toilets etc. Reassure participants that they can also discuss amongst themselves and ask questions of each other if they do not agree with what has been said.
- Do not interfere too much in the discussion or put your viewpoints across. As the session proceeds, you will need to formulate new questions in response to what has already been said. If people ask for your opinion, say that you will discuss these with them once you have heard their views.
- The recorder should try to take as many notes as possible or if a tape recorder is available and with the permission of the participants you might tape the proceedings but care should be taken that this does not inhibit the participants.
- Bring the session to a close when you feel that the subject has been exhausted. If problems have been identified, try to get people to also consider any possible solutions and how they intend to implement them.
- Thank the participants for their time and ask them if they would like to be involved in any further discussion groups or if you could meet up with them again to discuss any further conclusions you have come to or anything that was not clear.
- If a very large group turns up carry on with the discussion explaining the reasons why a smaller group was invited. At the end of the session, ask whether people thought that enough people participated or only the confident ones.