



Planning Focus Group Discussions

Guidance for resettlement staff on implementing quality data collection via focus group discussions

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a data collection method that involves a structured interview with a small group of six to 12 people. A moderator asks respondents both standardized and follow-up questions to collect information about their experiences, feelings, and preferences. This guide offers five steps you can take to plan focus group discussions, as well as additional tips and resources to help you in the process.

Introduction

Before you start thinking about what data you need to collect, whether through FGDs or other methods, it's critical to first identify what you want to learn and why. Take adequate time to [define purposeful monitoring and evaluation \(M&E\) questions](#), then identify what data you need to answer them, whether qualitative or quantitative. For details on this process, see Switchboard resources including this [Data Collection Planning Worksheet](#), the [written guide](#) and [Switchboard Short](#) on managing data collection priorities, and this [M&E Plan Template & Checklist](#).

Step 1: Assess whether FGDs are an appropriate data collection method.

Once you have defined M&E questions and the data needed to answer them, decide whether a FGD is the best method for gathering this data. Focus groups have several advantages: they are **good for gathering feedback** on a particular service or product, their flexible format allows for clarification of responses and exploration of unexpected topics, and they provide **insight into group dynamics**.

However, it is key to remember that the data collected from focus groups is **not generalizable** and can be difficult to analyze. Other disadvantages include that

participants are limited to those who are able to attend the meeting (either in-person or online, or a mix of the two); that the facilitator must work hard to stay on track, as the discussion can be sidetracked or dominated by certain individuals; and that group dynamics may prevent candid discussion of sensitive topics.

For a detailed comparison of the pros and cons of different data collection methods, including surveys, focus group discussions, interviews and observation, see Switchboard's [Overview of Common Data Collection Methods](#) quick reference table.

Social Interaction in FGDs

Imagine that a refugee youth program wants to learn if participants are comfortable getting guidance from peer educators. Focus groups that include both the refugee youth and the peer educators would be a good way to observe how they interact with each other.

An effective note-taker would document not only the answers to specific questions posed by the moderator, but observations on the comfort level of the youth when interacting with peer educators, such as: participants' body language, level of participation and interest, expressions of emotion (e.g., laughter, uncomfortable silences), casual remarks and side conversations, etc.

Content on social interaction adapted from Medecins du Monde, Data Collection: Qualitative Methods, "Focus Groups," 2012.

Step 2: Develop a data collection plan.

Your plan should include the following components, and should integrate culture, language, and other considerations as needed to ensure it is appropriate for the participant population:

Sampling

In contrast to probability sampling, focus group participant selection uses **nonprobability purposeful sampling**, a method of selecting participants based on their perceived ability to provide the most meaningful information on the topic. When using this sampling method, you must acknowledge the **potential for bias** in participant selection and the limitations of your findings.

Begin by defining the range of perspectives you want to capture, which may be based on characteristics like sex, age, or country of origin; experiences in areas like work, education, and health; or participation in certain programs, social groups, or institutions. Then, systematically identify individuals with those characteristics. Each group should be homogenous (e.g., a group of community health workers, mothers, or unemployed young adults). The aim is not to create consensus, but to help participants feel comfortable speaking and interacting with each other.

Selecting participants can be challenging, especially if the topic is sensitive. Carefully consider **power dynamics** among potential participants since status, socioeconomic situation, and other factors can influence participants to provide socially acceptable answers rather than discuss real experiences and beliefs. People may be also reluctant to participate for privacy reasons. Ideally, participants will not know each other, since anonymity tends to reduce inhibition, but this is not always possible.

While the ideal number of participants per group is six to 12, there is no "correct" number of FGDs to conduct in total. It is common to hold at least two groups for each characteristic (e.g., two groups of students, two groups of elders), but note that the more groups you hold, the more data you will have to analyze. When new FGDs are not yielding new information, you can be reasonably sure that you do not need to hold further discussions.

Ethics

Plan how you will obtain **informed consent**. For more information, see Switchboard's [Obtaining Meaningful Informed Consent from Newcomers](#) guide and [Sample Informed Consent Form](#). **Confidentiality** is another key concern, especially given that all FGD participants will hear each other's responses. Maximize confidentiality by repeatedly requesting that participants respect each other's privacy and by using numbers or abbreviations rather than names during the focus group and in the notes. Assure potential participants that what they say will be kept confidential by those in your organization, but make clear that you can't promise that other participants will maintain confidentiality. Reiterate participants' right to withdraw if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. If there is a possibility that a FGD will put participants at risk, it should not be conducted.

Location

For in-person FGDs, choose a convenient, private space where the group will feel comfortable talking freely and where there will be no interruptions for one to two hours. The location should be as informal as possible to encourage a natural discussion. If possible, avoid

spaces affiliated with institutions such as health centers, churches, schools, etc. Remove posters or similar materials that might influence responses. Work to minimize the potential for intimidation (for example, do not use flip charts if participants are not literate).¹

Virtual FGDs are also possible via video chat platforms. This option can ease scheduling because participants do not need to factor in transportation. However, they also require that participants have sufficient digital literacy skills and access to a suitable device and secure internet connection. Be sure to consider whether holding virtual FGDs will exclude any key segments of your population.

Training for staff involved: (see Step 3, below).

Recording and transcription

Prioritize participants' comfort level and your own resource availability when deciding whether to record focus groups. Recording can facilitate detailed data analysis, but it may not be advisable if there are prohibitive transcription and/or translation costs or if the FGD is on a highly sensitive topic. There is also higher potential for breach of confidentiality as recorded voices are often identifiable. If FGDs will not be recorded, it is critical that the note-taker be well-trained (see Step 3, below).

Plans for how data will be managed, verified, analyzed, and used

Analyzing focus group data can be time-consuming. To ensure your findings are useful, dedicate time upfront to plan for how you will analyze data. This process should be guided by your learning priorities (M&E questions).

While data analysis strategies vary, plan for note-takers to begin the process as soon as possible after each FGD, expanding and clarifying their shorthand so other people can understand it and elaborating points from the discussion in writing. Also plan for the moderator, note-taker, and others on the data collection team to debrief shortly after each focus group ends; record any additional information not in the notes; and discuss the responses collected, the questions asked, and any comments that need clarification.

When all focus groups conclude, plan to reread the notes and highlight the main opinions and attitudes whose themes address your learning priorities. Also note any unexpected themes that arose. Qualitative data analysis techniques vary, but detailed coding is often the next step. If the FGD was recorded and transcribed, some software platforms can facilitate this analysis.

Step 3: Assemble the team.

FGDs require specialized roles. A moderator is responsible for initiating the discussion, posing the questions specified in a focus group guide, keeping the discussion on track, and encouraging all participants to contribute. Moderators may also help recruit participants, remind them of where to go and when, and answer their questions before, during, and after the FGD.

Each FGD can include people with a range of personalities. Participants may be talkative, prone to interrupting, aggressive, shy, angry, intimidating, cautious, etc. Moderators must be able to build rapport among participants and create a relaxed, respectful atmosphere where they feel comfortable expressing opinions. Building rapport is context-specific, so moderators must be very familiar with language and behaviors appropriate in their context.

A good moderator must also be very familiar with the questions and prepared to handle unanticipated responses. Effective questioning involves asking questions clearly and one at a time, keeping track of what has been asked and answered, phrasing questions in an open-ended way to elicit detailed and rich rather than specific (e.g., "yes" or "no") responses, and welcoming a range of responses rather than enforcing the moderator's own views.

The flexible nature of focus groups means that the data is susceptible to moderator bias. Moderators should actively seek to prevent influencing responses. They should not provide clues about what types of responses are desirable; attempt to reach consensus on particular topics; or allow the discussion to be swayed by dominant voices.

FGDs also require a note-taker to document the session. The moderator should *not* be tasked with taking notes and facilitating the discussion at the same time. An effective note-taker knows the purpose of the FGD at hand; understands the purpose of each question in the focus group guide (see Step 4, below); and is both a good listener and observer of social interactions.

A note-taker must also know how to take shorthand notes. There are many ways to take notes on a focus group discussion, but all should be organized and comprehensive. Make sure the note-taker uses a shorthand that he or she can refer back to later without losing meaning, and preferably that others on the team can understand.

¹ Content on FGD locations adapted from Medecins du Monde, [Data Collection: Qualitative Methods](#), "Focus Groups," 2012.

Step 4: Develop a focus group guide.²

A **focus group guide** is a set of written questions used by the moderator to facilitate discussion. It is not a word-for-word version of the questions that will be asked (such as a structured interview or survey questionnaire). Instead, it provides direction but allows the moderator freedom to modify questions, follow up, probe, and ask additional questions during the discussion.

For example, consider a health program that serves low-income families. To better understand the financial barriers families face in accessing healthcare services, the program manager decides to use focus group discussions to explore perceptions about paying for healthcare using family resources. The Sample Discussion box on the next page shows an example of the moderator in this scenario guiding the conversation to elicit useful and accurate responses.

In developing questions, refer to your learning priorities (M&E questions) to ensure there is a clear purpose for how you will use the responses to each one. Typically, a focus group guide will contain 5-10 open-ended questions. Plan fewer questions when the topic requires intensive reflection, effort, or emotion on the part of participants. Begin with questions that will put participants at ease and feel more comfortable answering. More important questions should also be asked early on, before participants become fatigued; less important questions may be asked later.

Every effort should be made to write questions in participants' languages first. If this is not possible, translated questions should be back-translated to check for inconsistencies. The moderator should be comfortable in speaking the language with which participants are most comfortable.

The phrasing of each question is important. Questions should not be biased or leading, meaning they should not be asked in a way that gives the impression that there is a right or wrong answer. The table at top right provides some examples.

To learn more, see [Switchboard's Collecting and Analyzing Data for Learning and Program Improvement](#).

Leading Question	Neutral Question
Is the reason you want to send your children to school so that they will have a better future?	Why do you want to send your children to school?
What skills did you gain from the vocational training course that you will use in your business?	Are the skills being taught in the vocational training course useful or not useful?
Don't you think that...?	What is your opinion about...?

When developing your focus group guide, you may also want to provide guidance on **avoiding common errors in FGD facilitation**, such as:³

- Allowing one or two participants to dominate the discussion; not enabling shy or less talkative participants to speak.
- Making assumptions; failing to explore conclusions (such as not asking: "Why is that?" or "Why do people say that?").
- Accepting comments on what people *should* do without probing what they actually do and why there is a difference.
- Failing to fully acknowledge participants who express a different point of view.
- Using the same exact phrasing when repeating a question rather than reframing or clarifying to elicit new responses.
- Not exploring a vague or unfamiliar word or term used in a response.
- Letting a good question drop if it is not answered immediately.
- Conversely, remaining on a topic for too long.

Step 5: Develop an adequate budget.⁴

Focus group costs are often low relative to other data collection methods. They can depend on several factors including sample size, linguistic needs such as translation or interpretation, whether space rental is needed, and whether incentives are used. A typical FGD budget includes:

- Staff time for personnel with the necessary skills in planning FGDs, developing questions, moderation, and note-taking.
- Staff benefits based on total staff time needed.

² This section contains content adapted from Steward, D., Shamdasani, P., & Rook, D. (2007). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage Publications.

³ Common errors adapted from Ulin, P., Robinson, E., & Tolley, E. (2005). *Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research*. California: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Questions and sample dialog adapted from Medecins du Monde, [Data Collection: Qualitative Methods](#), "Focus Groups," 2012.

- Costs associated with securing space for each discussion.
- Travel costs if needed for moderator training, site visits, or results dissemination.
- Data collection and project management supplies (pens, paper, etc.).
- Reimbursement of participant travel costs to the focus group location.
- Incentives if being provided for participating in focus groups, such as grocery gift cards.
- Costs of light refreshments for participants.

Sample Discussion

The following interaction is an example of how a moderator might direct a conversation by probing further.

Moderator: What do you do when a child is sick and you have to pay for healthcare?
[Question in the FGD guide]

Mrs. X: I usually have enough money for the clinic co-pay in my account, but sometimes I use a credit card.

Moderator: What do others do? Is that the case for everyone? [Repeating]

Mrs. Y: Well, not exactly. In that situation, my brother-in-law helps me.

Moderator: I see. What does he do? [Probing]

Mrs. Y: Well, he lends me money so I can take my child to the clinic.

Moderator: Can he always help you in this way? [Checking to what extent one person's experience is consistent]

Moderator: And what do you all do if you don't have enough money? Do you ask somebody for a loan? Or do you do something else?
[Checking whether one person's experience is shared]

Question and sample dialog adapted from Medecins du Monde, Data Collection: Qualitative Methods, "Focus Groups," 2012.

Conclusion

Focus group discussions (FGDs) can be a powerful source of data for resettlement programming. They offer the opportunity to probe more deeply into responses and to observe the interactions between participants. However, FGDs present some challenges as well. Because of the small sample size, findings are not

generalizable to the broader population. In addition, there may be logistical challenges, such as scheduling or accounting for power dynamics and cultural considerations within and between groups. The steps and tips presented here can help you approach these considerations in a thoughtful and intentional way, leading to higher-quality, more reliable data.

Resources

[Research/Evaluation Budget Checklist](#): This

Switchboard tool can help guide your overall budget development process when using focus groups as part of research or evaluation.

[Research/Evaluation Time & Effort Calculator](#): This

Switchboard tool can be used with the checklist above to allocate resources for research and evaluation activities, such as conducting FGDs.

[Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups](#): This toolkit from

Omni offers more in-depth guidance on many of the points included here. In particular, it includes guidance on navigating difficult situations during the FGD and a Facilitator Checklist you can use.

[Practical Strategies for Collecting and Incorporating](#)

[Client Feedback Data](#): In this archived webinar from Switchboard, you can learn more about how to incorporate the feedback you collect from clients via FGDs and other methods.

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Adapted from the International Rescue Committee's "Data Driven," Vol. 6, issue Nov. 2007. The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

