

Handout

Module 4: Social Accountability Tool

Focus Group Discussion



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4.4 Focus Group Discussion

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FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1- What is a focus group discussion?

A focus group is an organised discussion – though structured in a flexible way – of between 6 and 12 participants. It usually lasts one or two hours and provides the opportunity for all the respondents to participate and to give their opinions. Dominant and submissive relationships which develop within the group, as well as side conversations, can be controlled. Smaller groups and those with a narrower range of characteristics tend to be more coherent and interactive.

2- How is FGD implemented?

Focus groups differ from informal group discussions in a number of aspects.

2.1 Preparation Stage

First, specific, pre-determined criteria are used for recruiting focus group participants. Second, the topics to be discussed are decided beforehand, and the moderator uses a pre-determined list of open-ended questions arranged in a natural and logical sequence. The moderator may even memorise the questions beforehand.

☛ **Composition of groups and analyzing data by group:**

Focus groups should be composed of homogeneous members of the target population. It is a good idea to form groups of respondents who are similar in terms of social class, age, level of knowledge, cultural/ethnic characteristics and sex (in addition to any other variables you may identify). This will create an environment where participants are comfortable with each other and feel free to express their opinions.

2.2 Executive Stage

Finally, focus groups rely on discussion between participants about the topics presented, and group members may influence each other by responding to ideas and comments that arise during the discussion. There is no pressure on the moderator, however, to have the group reach consensus.

2.3 Consolidation and Reporting

- **Data should be analysed by group.** This also allows for the results of different types of group to be compared.

3- Strengths and Weakness

Strengths

The advantage of focus groups over individual interviews is that the comments of one participant can generate comments from other participants. Ideas and opinions can be developed and explored more so than in individual interviews. These types of discussions can be very productive. Researchers and interviewers can benefit from the ideas generated in these discussions. In a short amount of time, a large quantity of information can be collected – often more quickly and at a lesser cost than via individual interviews.

Focus groups are useful for obtaining preliminary information about beliefs, ideas, opinions, attitudes and behaviours in a community. They are particularly helpful in identifying pertinent and appropriate questions for individual interviews (semi-structured or structured).

Weaknesses

Some weaknesses are:

- The researcher has less control over the flow of discussion in the group interview as compared to the individual interview;
- Focus groups cannot tell you about the frequency or distribution of beliefs in a population;
- Results are harder to analyse than individual interviews. Participants' comments must be interpreted within the particular social environment created by the focus group (a discussion among strangers in a neutral place), and care must be taken to avoid lifting comments out of context or out of sequence;
- Because the amount of response time required for any given question is increased by having discussion among participants, the number of questions that can be addressed is smaller than in individual interviews;
- Facilitating and conducting a focus group interview requires considerable skill. It is important to know how to manage the interview so that one or two people do not dominate, and all participants are able to share their views.

Once the discussions are over, the analysis of the information can be long and costly. Very often, the researcher will have to listen to the tape recordings of the discussions again, transcribe the comments, code and analyse them etc. All of these steps are lengthy and require specific skills.