

PARTICIPATORY METHODS TOOLKIT
A practitioner's manual

Focus Group

Colophon

Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual
Method: Focus Group

This is an extract of the publication 'Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual', a joint publication of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (viWTA).

The full version of the manual includes:

- Introduction about participatory methods
- General guidelines and tips for participatory methods
- Complete description of 13 participatory methods: 21st Century Town Meeting® ; Charrette ; Citizens Jury ; Consensus Conference ; Deliberative Polling® ; Delphi ; Expert Panel ; Focus Group ; Participatory Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation ; Planning Cell ; Scenario Building Exercise ; Technology Festival ; The World Café
- Brief descriptions of 50 methods and techniques

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FOCUS GROUP

I. DEFINITION

A focus group is a planned discussion among a small group (4-12 persons) of stakeholders facilitated by a skilled moderator. It is designed to obtain information about (various) people's preferences and values pertaining to a defined topic and why these are held by observing the structured discussion of an interactive group in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Thus, a focus group can be seen as a combination between a focused interview and a discussion group. Focus groups can also be conducted online.

II. WHEN TO USE

Focus groups are good for initial concept exploration, generating creative ideas. They are often used to test, evaluate and/or do a programme review. They are most appropriate to get a sense of regional, gender, age and ethnic differences in opinion. They are not effective for providing information to the general public or responding to general questions, nor are they used to build consensus or make decisions.

Focus groups are used for marketing research and political and sociological work. Some purposes of focus groups include exploratory work, pre-test work, aiding event recall and triangulation with other data collection methods. They are particularly useful when participants' reasoning behind their views is of interest, as well as the process by which participants' develop and influence each others' ideas and opinions in the course of discussion. Focus groups are useful to:

- gauge the nature and intensity of stakeholders' concerns and values about the issues
- obtain a snapshot of public opinion when time constraints or finances do not allow a full review or survey
- obtain input from individuals as well as interest groups
- obtain detailed reaction and input from a stakeholder or client group to preliminary proposals or options
- collect information on the needs of stakeholders surrounding a particular issue or concept
- determine what additional information or modification may be needed to develop consultation issues or proposals further.

Advantages

Focus groups are relatively inexpensive and the format is flexible, allowing participants to question each other and to elaborate upon their answers. Focus groups, in contrast to individual interviews, allow for the participating individuals to develop and express their opinions in a more 'natural' social context, which some claim is more akin to the ways in which people form their opinions in everyday contexts. In addition, this discussion period highlights people's reasoning and thoughts underlying their expressed opinions. The method is relatively simple, allowing participants to readily grasp the process and purpose.



When the power differential between the participants and the decision-makers is great enough to discourage frank participation, the focus group provides the security of a peer group. Furthermore, the method is particularly useful when one is interested in complex motivations and actions, when one will benefit from a multiplicity of attitudes, when there is a desire to learn more about consensus on a topic and when there is a knowledge gap regarding a target audience.

Disadvantages

The multiple voices of the participants, as well as the flexibility in process structure, results in limited researcher control over the focus group process. Sometimes group expression can interfere with individual expression and the results may reflect 'groupthink'.

III. PROCEDURE

A. Overview

To prepare for the focus group event at least three staff members must first determine the questions to be addressed by the focus group and the targeted participants. Next, the focus group participants and a moderator are recruited. At the focus group event, which usually lasts for a few hours, the moderator leads the group through a semi-structured discussion to draw out the views of all of the participants and then summarises all of the main issues and perspectives that were expressed. After the event the research staff analyses all results of the focus group(s) conducted and produces a report.

B. Pre-Focus Group Planning

1. PERSONNEL AND TASKS

(a) Staff

A minimum of three staff, one administrator and two (assistant) researchers, will be needed to prepare for the focus group event.

(b) Tasks

Administrative staff tasks include:

- preparing and sending information materials for participants
- organising logistics (location, equipment, catering, accommodation, etc.)
- set up and clean up after the event
- distribution of honoraria.



Research staff tasks include:

- recruiting potential participants in the focus groups
- recording proceedings
- analysing data
- preparing report

(c) Moderators

Either two moderators or one moderator and an assistant will be required to facilitate the focus group(s).

2. DEFINE CONCEPTS TO INVESTIGATE

- Assess the purpose of the focus group. What kind of information is needed? How will the information be used? Who is interested in the information? Determine the ideal end-result, including its probable use.
- Decide who the target participants are, for example, customers, employees, decision groups, etc.
- Listen to the broad target audience to determine how to select participants, appropriate incentives for various groups and ideal questions and moderator characteristics to maximise participant engagement.
- Determine, generally, the number of sessions. Consider whether different subgroups of the population have different levels of knowledge or different attitudes that may be relevant to the research and reflect on the expected generalisability to the population at large.
- Decide on the characteristics for the participants for (each of) the focus group(s). If you hold more than one, you may want to divide the individual sessions into groups of people sorted by gender, social class or interest group. Alternatively, you may wish to have more heterogeneous groups.

TIP: Some practitioners recommend recruiting members of the same socio-economic status for each of the focus groups. In any case, avoid putting people in a situation where they are unlikely to participate due to intimidation.

- Develop your description of the problem.
- Formulate potential questions in terms of issues for discussion.

3. GENERATE QUESTIONS FOR THE FOCUS GROUP(S)

- Create a set of questions in a loose-running order, with specific prompts to facilitate participant understanding and to encourage replies.
- An opening question should be used to acquaint and identify common characteristics among the group members.
- An introductory question can be used to introduce the topic and foster conversation.
- Use 2 – 5 key questions or topics to drive the focus group discussion.

The question list and order should be prepared but should be flexible and adapted to the group's natural conversation process. They should be clear, relatively short and use simple wording. Accompany the questions with sufficient background to minimise assumptions and place them in the appropriate context. The questions should be open-ended rather than dichotomous. Avoid broad 'why' questions and instead break them down into specific sub-issues. The questions can include various formats, such as sentence completion and conceptual mapping (situation – response: 'Given a certain situation, what would you do...?')

TIP: One can begin with a general question to get a sense of the level of knowledge of the participants as well as information about their perceptions/misperceptions. Alternatively, one can begin with questions about sub-issues that the members who are least likely to actively participate are likely to know the most about.

- Use a concluding question that helps to establish closure.

If consensus is the aim, one can ask, 'All things considered, what would you recommend...'. Alternatively, or in addition, the moderator can first briefly summarise the discussion. Then, ask the group if the summary is adequate and end with, 'Have we missed anything important?'

4. LOGISTICS AND RECRUITING FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPATION¹

- Select a location that is easy to find, minimises distraction, provides a neutral environment and that ideally facilitates sitting in a circle.
- Plan/schedule for the focus-group(s).

For very narrow topics focus groups usually last only an hour or two. However, if the topic is more policy-oriented, a one-day workshop can be organised with multiple sessions so that the group can focus on various sub-topics. When scheduling the event, avoid major national events. Do not exceed two hours per session with adults (or 1 hour for children). Schedule the focus groups at a convenient place and time. Avoid hosting the event at locations that might be contentious.

- Determine the planned focus group size.

TIP: The ideal focus group size ranges from 4 – 12 persons, with recommendations ranging between 4-8, 6-10, 7-10 and 8-12 persons. Larger groups can be used for more exploratory purposes, although they tend to fragment into smaller groups beyond a maximum group size of 12. Some researchers use mini focus groups of 4-5 persons to gauge initial reactions, but these can fail to generate useful discussion.

- Recruit participants at least 1-2 weeks prior to the scheduled focus groups.
- Invite potential participants.

Participants are generally chosen to represent a cross-section of the public affected by the issue and may be chosen to



represent specific interests.

How to select the group members:

- Try to make the group representative of your target.
- Do not use regulars (focus-group addicts).
- The moderator should not know members.
- Members should not know each other.
- Choose people who can communicate effectively.
- Do not choose people involved in marketing.

Identify the sponsor, the general topic and the purpose of the research. If a stipend will be provided, mention this. In addition, if it is possible to provide a reception with food and beverages, mention this.

TIP: When recruiting for focus groups, it may help to emphasise the need for participants' insight to discuss the topic at hand rather than participation in a 'focus group'. This more casual formulation may prove less intimidating.

- Send personalised letters of invitation to each person who has been pre-selected and who has confirmed their availability and interest in participation. Include the information provided on the phone (and/or in person) with some elaboration, if appropriate. Include directions to the location of the event, information about public transportation and parking availability, etc.
- Call each of the focus group participants the day before the event to remind them.
- Recruit a focus group moderator(s).

The moderator should have a good knowledge of the topic in order to ask appropriate follow-up questions.

If the focus group participants make up a distinct culture group, it is useful to have a moderator with cultural sensitivity to that group. The moderator should dress as (s)he expects the participants will dress.

5. PRACTICAL PREPARATIONS

- Prepare copies of any questionnaires or handouts, if there are any.
- Identify small talk topics for discussion with participants as they arrive. Avoid the focus group topic.
- Secure audio or video-recording equipment, extra batteries, tapes, extension cords, notepads and pens.
- Make nametags.
- Arrange furniture in the room.
- Ensure absence of disruptive background noise that might interfere with discussion and recording.
- Set up and test recording equipment.
- Set out refreshments.
- Have honorariums and/or travel imbursement money ready.



C. Conducting the Focus Group

(1) Participant Arrival

As participants arrive, the moderator(s) greet(s) guests and make(s) small talk but avoid(s) the topic of the focus group.

TIP: At this time the moderators have a chance to quickly assess the communication styles of the participants. Based upon their assessment, they can place nametags around the table. It has been suggested that dominant communication styles be placed near the moderator and more reticent participants be seated where eye contact can be easily established. In case some participants happen to know each other, they can be separated.

(2) Introduction

- Begin taping the session.
- Once all participants are seated, the moderator welcomes the group, introduces him/herself and gives relevant background information and an overview of the topic. Emphasise that this is an opportunity for participants to give voice to their opinions and that the researchers are there to learn from the participants.
- The moderator explains what the results of the focus group will be used for and what form the data will take.
- The moderator outlines the ground rules. Emphasise that one person speaks at a time and that the session is being recorded to ensure that all comments are noted. Assure that no specific names will be used in the final report. Emphasise that all points of view are important to the discussion.
- The moderator asks a warm-up question that everyone is asked to answer.
- The moderator asks the introduction question (if any) and then moves to the other questions/topics, as pre-decided.

During the course of the discussion, the moderator or an assistant can use a flipchart to illustrate the ideas expressed. The moderator should encourage all participants to express their views, for example by asking, 'Does anyone have a different view?' Overly dominant participants and those who ramble should be reigned in to give others space. The moderator may suggest that all participants initially write down a few thoughts in response to a question before the group discusses it together.

(3) Focus Group Conclusion

- The moderator briefly summarises the main points of view and then asks if the summary is accurate or if anything was missed. (S)he answers any final questions about the focus group work.
- The moderator thanks the group members for their participation and explains how the honorariums and reimbursements will be distributed.



D. Post Focus Group

Send letters of appreciation to all participants (as well as honorariums or reimbursements, if these were not distributed at the event).

(1) Analysis²

1. Start while still in the group
 - Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding.
 - Listen for vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding.
 - Consider asking each participant a final preference question.
 - Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation.
2. Immediately after the focus group
 - Draw a diagram of the seating arrangement.
 - Spot-check tape recording to ensure proper operation.
 - Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing.
 - Note themes, hunches, interpretations and ideas.
 - Compare and contrast this focus group to other groups.
 - Label and file field notes, tapes and other materials.
3. Soon after the focus group – within hours – analyse individual focus group.
 - Make back-up copy of tapes and send tape to transcriptionist for computer entry if transcript is wanted.
 - Analyst listens to tape, reviews field notes and reads transcript if available.
 - Prepare report of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes.
 - Share report for verification with other researchers who were present at the focus group.
4. Later – within days – analyse the series of focus groups (if applicable).
 - Compare and contrast results by categories of individual focus groups.
 - Look for emerging themes by question and then overall.
 - Construct typologies or diagram the analysis.
 - Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate.

(2) Prepare the Report³

The nature and style of the report will depend upon the audience. It is recommended to use summary as well as specific quotes (without mentioning individuals' names) to illustrate the various perspectives, ideas and concerns.

Some additional suggestions include:

- Consider narrative style versus bulleted style.
- Sequence could be question by question or by theme.
- Share the report with others for verification and then revise.

(3) Conduct an Evaluation.

² For additional guidance on focus group analysis and report-writing, refer to: http://www.tc.umn.edu/~rkrueger/focus_analysis.html

³ For detailed guidance on focus group report writing, refer to: http://www.tc.umn.edu/~rkrueger/focus_analysis.html

IV. RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS (TIME, BUDGET)

Focus groups require at least one month of planning plus the time required for writing the final report.

This method is relatively low in cost for each individual event but the total cost will depend upon how many focus groups are conducted on the subject. (Often multiple focus groups are held on a given topic.) Naturally, the cost per focus group declines when the focus group is part of a general research programme or when several groups are conducted on the same topic.

The main budgetary items for a Focus Group are listed below.

- Personnel
 - project manager
 - moderator
 - assistant
 - honoraria for participants (if applicable)
- Travel
 - for project team
 - for participants
- Accommodation (only necessary for all-day and non-local events)
 - for participants
 - for moderator
- Food
 - light refreshments
 - meals for participants and project team, if event is all-day
- Recruitment and Promotion
 - recruitment of experts
- Communications
 - paper, printing & postage for 2 mailings to participants
 - translation costs (if required)
- Facilities
 - location for the Focus Group to meet
- Materials and Supplies
 - cost to rent recording equipment (if applicable)
 - tapes, nametags, paper, pens



V. ADDITIONAL BEST PRACTICES AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS

A focus group needs to build synergy and secure cooperation from the members. Thus, it is crucial that communication be open and trust is built quickly. This helps encourage new ideas. It is necessary to choose the right focus group members, as well as facilitator, in order to make the information flow positively.

Some additional guidelines for effectiveness include:

- Secure skilled personnel to identify and moderate the focus groups.
- Record the sessions.
- Ensure the atmosphere in the group is informal.
- Use an interviewer, guide or facilitator – do not use a questionnaire.
- It is not always appropriate to give participants advance notice of the material.

For more information on conducting focus groups, refer to:

Dürrenberger, Gregor. Focus Groups in Integrated Assessment: A manual for a participatory tool.

ULYSSES Working Paper WP-97-2. This can be downloaded at:

<http://www.zit.tu-darmstadt.de/ulysses/docmain.htm>

Einsiedel, A., Brown L., & Ross, F. (1996). *How to Conduct Focus Groups: A Guide for Adult and Continuing Education Managers and Trainers*. University of Saskatchewan: University Extension Press.

Another version of focus groups is to conduct them in a conference call. For more information on this format, refer to: http://www.tc.umn.edu/~rkrueger/focus_tfg.html

However, some practitioners insist that this method should be conducted in person.

References and Resources

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