



<b>FAO Standard Seed Security Assessment</b>
<b>FACILITATORS' GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS</b>

***What is FGD?***

A FGD is a tool used in qualitative research<sup>1</sup>, particularly participatory research where group participants jointly discuss, understand and resolved to take action together. For outsiders, it can extract in-depth information on the concepts, perceptions and ideas of a particular group e.g. resource-poor, differently-abled, females, males, young people – or it can be used to gather views representative of a whole community. A FGD aims to be more than a question-answer interaction, and works best with roughly-equal participation of no more than 10 active participants.

***Strength and limitation of FGD***

Implementation of FGDs is an iterative process; each focus group discussion builds on the previous one, with a slightly elaborated or better-focused set of themes for discussion. Provided the groups have been well chosen, in terms of composition and number, FGDs can be a powerful research tool which provides valuable spontaneous information in a short period of time and at relatively low cost. It can avoid the bane of classical academic research which at its worst extracts a high volume of indigestible data which is analysed far away by people with little understanding of context.

Care must be taken when considering how far FGDs are representative; this will depend on the quality of facilitation and the geographical scope. FGDs are often used to complement other surveys, for example by gaining an in-depth analysis of early indications from Household Interviews.

In Household interviews, people will tend to concentrate on their individual concerns and potential advantage (often of the Head, if care is not taken to interview other family members). In group discussions, people tend to consider what is acceptable (or considered true by) the group. Both can lead to bias. Good facilitation of FGDs involves soliciting a range of views and avoiding dominance of particular individuals.

***Key considerations when implementing FGDs***

An effective focus group discussion will depend primarily on the skills of facilitators and the composition of the group members. Effective facilitators must have some qualities that can encourage interactive discussion including:

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<sup>1</sup> If tool such as voting and scoring are used it can also be quantitative; this requires careful preparation.

- Understanding of power issues, with an active commitment to reducing one's own power and promoting the 'voice' of typically excluded members of the community.
- Avoiding the temptation to act as a judge or a teacher to lecture the group participants. FGDs are not a venue to push one's own agenda e.g. offering extension services about new technologies, such as intensive rice farming, land preparation...etc
- Remaining neutral. A facilitator should not agree or disagree with any member's statement (which would obstruct the flow of discussion and discourage expression).
- Be professional and not dominant. Be objective and accept criticism and not maintain a defensive attitude - there is no need to justify anything for any reason. Be open-minded and listen more than you talk. Group members are the experts.

### ***Do's and don'ts for FGD facilitators***

#### **Do's:**

- Keep the group focused on the tasks, on the process and on time. When a facilitator sees that the discussion goes off track, e.g. the supposed topic is about the effectiveness of provided training and the discussion extends to other not related topics, the facilitator must politely steer the group's attention back to the topic.
- Encourage everyone to participate in the discussion regardless of age, status, gender...etc. Therefore, when mobilizing participants, group members must be the ones who have a certain degree of knowledge about their locality. In addition, a facilitator must also control the participants who dominate the discussion. A second facilitator might classically invite such people to go to an alternative location for a (prestigious) individual interview, so that group members can create a more participatory dialogue.
- It is inevitable that some participants will realize their viewpoint is in the minority and may not speak up. In this case, a facilitator must encourage by trying showing the value to the group of his/her opinions. Don't say: "your idea is wrong, impossible...", etc.
- Energize the group or slow it down as needed.
- Re-play a summary of the group's views from time to time to check for accuracy.
- Facilitators will have to build rapport with the participants; well-conducted FGDs are enjoyable for the participants and facilitator!
- The sequence of questions should flow naturally, and spontaneity encouraged (if on-topic!)

**Don'ts:**

- Avoid dichotomous questions leading to option choosing. For example Yes/No questions and “which” questions. Instead use open questions – when, why, how ...etc
- Avoid also leading questions. For example: “Do you think the variety X is much better than traditional variety?”
- Don't make any judgement of the responses/statements made by group participants.
- Strive to complete the FGD within the period that is mentioned to participants before starting. Overtime will lead to loss of concentration among participants.

Venue setup is also important for the smooth proceeding of the FGDs. Participants must be seated in an environment where they are free from distraction or any possible frustration caused by location settings e.g. if there is a poor relationship with village chiefs, then the venue should not be set up at his/her house. Ultimately, group participants must be seated where they can talk openly with minimum barriers (usually in a circle if possible, without facilitators being the only ones in the shade, on the chairs, on higher ground etc.). Advice from local contacts is really necessary to circumvent any constraints. Lastly, compensation for their time participating can be announced to encourage them if communities will not directly benefit from the research (e.g. it goes to a political or policy level).

***Conducting FGDs*****Functions of facilitators**

The facilitator should not act as an expert on the topic. His or her role is to stimulate and support the discussion.

- **Introduce the session:**  
Introduce yourself as a facilitator and introduce the recorder. In FAO's training, we use 'I am (e.g. Joe), we are (FAO), we do (seeds), we want (an hour of your time), we will do (come back to your community to discuss setting up credit groups – or 'no follow-up directly but results will be shared with the Cluster' if that is true)  
Put the participants at ease and explain the purpose of the FGD, the kind of information needed and how the information will be used and for what. Some informal dialogue can also be useful.
- **Encourage discussion:**  
Be enthusiastic, lively and humorous and show your interest in the groups' ideas. Formulate questions and encourage as many participants as possible to express their views. There are no right or wrong answers. React neutrally to responses.
- **Encourage involvement:**  
Avoid a question-and-answer session. Some useful techniques include e.g.

- Asking for clarification: *Can you tell me more about....?*
  - Reorienting the discussion when it goes off the track: *Wait, how does this relate to...? or Interesting point, but how about...?* or use one participant's remark to direct a question to another, for example – *Mrs. A said..../ but how about you, Mrs. B?*
  - Politely slow down the dominant participant and encourage reluctant participants.
- **Build rapport, empathise:**  
Observe non-verbal communication. Ask yourself, What are they saying? What does it mean to them? Be aware of your own tone of voice, facial expressions, body language and those of the participants.
- **Avoid being placed in the role of expert:**  
When asked for your ideas or views by a respondent, remember that you are not there to educate or inform them. Direct the questions back to the group by saying: What do you think? What would you do? Set aside time, if necessary, after the session to give participants the information they have asked for.  
Do not try to comment on everything that is being said. Don't feel you have to say something during every pause in the discussion. Wait a little and see what happens.
- **Control the rhythm of the discussion but in an unobtrusive way:**  
Listen carefully, and move the discussion from topic to topic. Subtly control the time allocated to various topics so as to maintain interest. If participants spontaneously jump from one topic to another, let the discussion continue for a while since useful additional information may surface; then summarise the points brought up and reorient the discussion.
- **Take time at the end of the meeting to summarise, check for agreement and thank the participants**  
Summarise the main issues brought up, check whether all agree and ask for additional comments. Thank the participants and let them know that their ideas have been a valuable contribution and will be used for the above-mentioned purposes.
- **Listen to additional comments and spontaneous discussions** which occur after the meeting has been closed.

### **Functions of recorders**

The recorder should keep a record of the content of the discussion as well as emotional reactions and important aspects of group interaction. Assessment of participation, power-play and the emotional tone of the meeting and the group

process should be recorded and reported. These will also enable you to judge the validity of the information collected during the FGD.

**Items to be recorded include:**

- Date, time, place
- Names and characteristics of participants
- General description of the group dynamics (level of participation, power-play eg presence of a dominant participant, interest-level)
- Themes introduced by facilitators, and themes given importance by communities.
- Opinions of participants, recorded as much as possible in their own words, especially for key statements
- Emotional aspects (e.g., reluctance, strong feelings attached to certain opinions)
- Spontaneous relevant discussions during breaks or after the meeting has been closed

A supplementary role for the recorder could be to assist the facilitator (if necessary) by drawing his or her attention to:

- missed comments from participants
- missed topics (the recorder should have a copy of the discussion guide during the FGD)

If necessary, the recorder could ensure that the venue is appropriate, with participants and facilitators receiving equal treatment, remove dominant individuals from the group (for individual interviews), help resolve conflict situations within the group that the facilitator finds difficult to handle on his/her own.

***Timing and duration of a FGD***

The FGD should be conducted to meet the priorities – negotiated in advance - of the community e.g. ending before food-preparation time. FGDs can last for any time between 1 and 3 hours.

***Useful tools for conducting the FGDs***

The following will present some useful tools, often used in participatory approaches like FGD. The purpose of presenting these tools is to guide the facilitators when challenged with participants' limited understanding on topics to be discussed and difficulty to express their opinion. Therefore, these tools are not strictly required to be followed but each facilitator will have to decide if to use them or not, keeping in mind the interview guide and discussion topics to be covered. And of course, if facilitators come up with other tools that easily facilitate the flow of discussion, they can use these.

**Pair Wise Ranking**

Pair-wise ranking is used to understand the relative importance of plural items e.g.: rice, corn, millet, finger millet, sorghum. Some rice seed might be

placed next to some corn seed, and the question asked 'So which of these two is more important to you?' Rice may then be compared against millet etc.

Ranking methods allow us to see individual and group priorities among a number of alternative problems or solutions. It helps to generate reasons why people choose one item from the other.

For a practical application see link:

<http://web2.concordia.ca/Quality/tools/18pairwise.pdf>

### **Proportional Piling**

Proportional piling is a simple method that helps to obtain data from respondents in percentages. It shows in a quantitative way, the relative values of items to be compared. By how much is an item lower or higher than the second? It is a measure of relative importance of an item for certain uses.

Proportional piling is used to obtain qualitative values of comparable items. It shows relative shares or proportions of things to be compared. The values could be calculated out of the whole i.e. 100 or other scores.

Proportional piling works better with ranking in the condition of finding consensus among group participants. Group participants will be provided with 20 pebbles. Then, they will be asked to allocate the given pebbles to each item representing the relative importance of the item; i.e. the more pebbles they put, the more important the item. They could choose to put 16 pebbles (highly important) on one item, and one pebble for each of the other four items (low importance). Or they could put 4 on each item; they are totally free in their voting.

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Proportional piling is used to give a quantitative representation of the value given to comparable items. The scores can be put into %s if required.

### **One approach to processing and data analysis of FGDs:**

- After each focus group session the facilitator and recorder should meet to review and **complete the notes** taken during the discussion. This is the right moment to **evaluate** how the focus group went and what changes might be made in the topics when facilitating the next focus group. Immediately afterwards a full report of the discussion should be prepared which reflects the discussion as completely as possible, using the participants' own words. List the key statements, ideas, and attitudes expressed for each topic of discussion.

- After the transcript of the discussion is prepared, **code**, following your topics, the participants' statements right away, using the left margin. **Write comments** (your first interpretation of the data) in the right margin. Formulate additional questions if certain issues are still unclear or controversial and include them in the next FGD. Further categorize the statements for each topic, if required.
- When you have all the data, **summarize** it in a **compilation sheet** organizing the findings per topic. Number the FGD interviews and use key words to summarize group statements in the compilation sheet so that you can always go back to the full statement. If you have different categories of informants, e.g., male and female, you can summarize the information from the male and female groups on two **separate** compilation sheets.
- You should then do a **systematic comparison** between groups on all topics. Use your objectives and problem analysis diagram as a framework for analysis and comparison.
- The next step could be to put the major findings for different study populations on one sheet. You may want to use some of these sheets in the final report.
- Sometimes you may also wish to use diagrams when summarizing the causes or components of the problem under study.
- Only now can you report the major findings of the FGDs in a narrative.