MEL Tip Sheet: Focus Group Discussions

Baseline studies, final evaluations, and lessons learned—Mercy Corps Minimum Standards—all require data analysis. Focus group discussions can provide data for all of these efforts.

Focus group discussions are a great way to better understand the views and perceptions of key groups participating in or affected by Mercy Corps projects. They consist of loosely-guided discussions around key topics. Focus groups are generally held with a small group of individuals sharing a common trait or vocation; for example, women's groups, farmer's associations, or users of a certain service. The facilitator uses a list of open-ended questions to start a discussion and probe experiences, feelings, and preferences on issues of interest.

Focus groups are a *qualitative* tool, meaning that they are useful in obtaining descriptive information such as opinions and perspectives, often to complement or more fully explain *quantitative* data. The following tip sheet will look at some simple techniques we can use to ensure that our focus groups yield high-quality results.

When to use focus groups?

Focus groups allow us to solicit views from various stakeholders, including program staff, beneficiaries, technical experts, and community members. They can be used in all types of M&E activities. For example, focus groups may be useful in gaining a better understanding of the needs of different groups during project design or assessment. Likewise, as part of project monitoring activities or in a mid-term evaluation, they can highlight problems in implementation and generating creative ideas for improvement. In final evaluations, they may help explain differing perceptions around project outcomes or highlighting impacts on various groups.

<u>Effective Focus Group Discussions:</u>

- Explore *qualitative* issues such as perceptions, feelings and opinions
- Consist of 7 to 11 individuals who share common group traits
- Last no more than 1 to 2 hours
- Have 8-10 well structured questions
- Are guided by facilitators posing broad questions and probing for more information

Focus group discussions are especially useful because they can be cost and time-efficient. We can obtain rich and detailed levels of information quickly on a range of subjects affecting the target population, often without expending large amounts of resources. This can be especially relevant in emergency situations or in projects working within strict time or resource constraints. The tradeoff, however, is that it takes a long time to analyze the information collected. With this in mind, we should try to limit the number of focus groups we undertake. We can also try to include response categories where possible, to help facilitate easier analysis and the ability to quantify results.

Focus groups are often used to complement other more *quantitative* methods such as surveys. Whereas quantitative methods use numbers and percentages to show "what happened" and "how many times it happened," or "who did or did not use services," *qualitative* methods such as focus groups are better at describing the story behind the numbers, including "why," "why not," or "how it happened." For example, focus groups allow us to better understand why the project did or did not achieve its desired results, how different groups benefited from the same project, or why certain groups tend to favor certain kinds of community projects over others.

One of the main benefits of focus groups is that they can uncover unanticipated issues. They can also serve as a way to *triangulate*, or further verify, information learned through surveys, key stakeholder interviews, or other techniques. The group setting allows for first-hand observation of respondents' interactions, behaviors, attitudes, and language. This can be useful in generating important insights that are not possible in other formats. Often, focus groups are also used as part of the pre-planning phase of an assessment or evaluation, in order to gain clarity around different issues and to refine or test pilot other tools such as surveys.

When **not** *to use focus groups?*

If capturing quantitative data in the form of numbers and percentages is our main goal, then extensive use of focus groups is usually not the best option. One of the limitations of focus groups is that it is difficult to use the results to make statistically valid claims about anything or anyone beyond the specific groups we are interviewing. This is because answers are easily influenced by the group setting and the behavior of the individuals involved. The facilitator can influence, or bias, responses through the way in which he or she guides the discussion or the way participants are selected. For example, in many places locating women or adolescents available to participate and accommodating their needs can be challenging. It is also difficult to ensure that the "sample," or group, represents a larger population.

Despite these common short-comings, however, focus groups can sometimes be used to obtain quantitative data, particularly when the group (such as a farmer's association or community action group) is the primary unit of analysis. They can also have the benefit of group verification of quantitative responses, which could be more reliable than relying on one person's interpretation, and can allow us to reach a larger sample in a shorter amount of time than individual surveys. In these cases, using a semi-structured interview style with response categories for key quantifiable questions can greatly assist subsequent data analysis.

Key steps in conducting focus groups

1. Determine informational needs and key groups
2. Determine number of groups and selection process
3. Develop teams - one facilitator and one note-taker for each focus group
4. Decide timing and setting
5. Create topic guide and questions, plan for analysis
6. Train facilitators and practice techniques
7. Pilot test and refine the topic guide
8. Implement focus groups
9. Discuss and collate findings soon after (same day if possible)
10. Analyze findings and disseminate results

What are the key factors to consider in planning a focus group discussion?

To carry out successful focus group discussions, sufficient planning and preparation is required. This phase is often overlooked or under-appreciated in practice, leading to difficulties in implementation and low-quality results. Effective planning includes determining informational needs and relevant groupings, setting up and training a team, determining how to record the discussion, developing topic questions, and planning for logistics and potential contingencies.

Determining what the key informational needs are, and who has these needs. Often, this is best guided by the project logframe and indicator plan or a particular assessment or evaluation scope of work. This will help us figure out which groups are most important, and what topics should be included in our questions guide. Individuals in focus groups should be homogenous—they should share some common traits. For example, we may want to look at ways in which a community mobilization project impacted at-risk boys, or how a livelihoods project affected traditional fishermen, or how girls experience a youth project differently from boys. If so, these groups should be targeted and questions designed specifically for each group.

Deciding how many groups to interview, and how to select them. This is also guided by project needs. For example, if we are just trying to get a general overview of the situation as part of an assessment, two groups per community (for example, one of men and one of women) may suffice. However, if we are interested in the views and experiences of different vocational, ethnic, or economic groups for a particular project, we may want to include several groups within a community.

Depending on project size and geographical scale, we may prefer to select only a sample, or sub-set, of groups. For example, we might conduct focus groups by vocation in only 10 out of 40 communities in the project area, or with 15 out of 30 associations participating in a certain project. While we want to strive for a representative group of participants, statistical rigor in sample selection is not as important in focus groups as it is with more quantitative tools like surveys. To ensure a representative sub-set of groups, we can use sampling methods similar to those described in the *MEL* *Tip Sheet: Sampling*.

Developing our team and conducting training. We will need two people for each focus group: one lead facilitator and one note-taker. We should also designate a supervisor to coordinate all of the focus group teams. The supervisor also has to ensure that information is being asked and recorded in similar ways, to ease the analysis and interpretation process. The team should be balanced demographicallly – gender, age, and ethnicity – according to the types of groups interviewed and the sensitivity of issues.

Sufficient training and practice for the facilitators is very important, and often overlooked. While some facilitators may have extensive prior experience, others will need to further develop these skills prior to leading the focus groups. Someone with experience should give a brief overview of some of the main skills and techniques involved in facilitating focus groups, and lead practice sessions with feedback opportunities. This is also a good way to pilot test the list of questions. Useful facilitation techniques that should be covered in the training are discussed in the next section.

Determining the timing and setting of the focus group discussions. We will want to choose times and facilitate conditions so that group members are more likely to be able to participate. For example, women may be able to attend meetings in the evening after the family meal, but only if childcare and/or transport are provided. The setting is also very important. It should be a place where group members are most comfortable. For example, sometimes women's or farmers' groups may be more habituated to meeting casually near an agricultural field or a water source. If so, this would constitute an appropriate place for a focus group discussion. It may be preferable to, for example, the town meeting hall, where participants might feel more rigid and exposed. The group's privacy should be respected, and places that are likely to draw a crowd should be avoided.

Developing the *Discussion Topic Guide*. The discussion topic guide is a list of open-ended questions covering the key topics we would like to explore. The intent is to use the questions as a base for generating lively discussion around the issues. It is really more of a topical outline of key issues to cover rather than a detailed questionnaire, and is meant to be flexible to adapt to the course of the conversation. Please see the example in the Annex for an idea of a discussion topic guide.

In developing the topic guide, the emphasis should be on open-ended questions that spark discussion and debate. For example, we may ask, "What do you think about the quality of service in the health clinics?" or "How do you feel about the level of citizen participation in local governance?" We will want to avoid overly simple questions that limit discussion or debate, such as yes/no questions. When it is necessary to ask these types of questions, we should follow up and ask "why" or "why not," and probe for more in-depth explanations.

Conducting focus group discussions

Introducing yourself and explaining the purpose of the session. It is important that we establish rapport with the group before diving into the questions. Groups often do not know what to expect from focus groups, making them uncomfortable and anxious. The facilitator has an important role in making the discussion informal and putting the group at ease from the beginning. It is helpful if the facilitator provides an outline of the purpose of the session, and how it will proceed. It is helpful to give a reason or incentive of why active participation is beneficial to the group. For example, it may give Mercy Corps or donors a more accurate view of the group's needs and concerns in order to better assist them with project interventions. He or she should also explain that everyone is expected to participate and that debate or dissenting views are welcome.

Phrasing the questions carefully and clarifying potential misunderstandings. The same questions posed in even slightly different ways can lead to differences in responses. We therefore want to phrase the questions carefully and in a similar manner across like groups, particularly if we want to compare and contrast. It is important that we seek to detect potential misunderstandings, and take the time to carefully explain any issues or questions that may be unclear.

Keeping the discussion on track. While it is good to be flexible and explore uncharted territory in focus groups, discussions also have a tendency to get sidetracked into issues that are not critical to our informational needs. This often happens when discussing a particular project detail, or when there are dissenting views within the group. Although a certain level of debate is healthy, getting side-tracked into unimportant details uses up valuable time. It is the task of the facilitator to keep the discussion moving in line with the topic guide. Some recommendations for doing this include intervening politely by summarizing the main point and then refocusing the discussion, or making a list of issues that can be discussed later.

Dealing with dominant personalities in the group. It is natural for groups to have one or two vocal members who tend to answer questions on behalf of the group. Sometimes it is the leader, such as an association's president, and sometimes it is just a strong personality. The facilitator has to make sure that these people do not dominate the discussion, and encourage the participation of other members. One way to do this is to interview the leaders separately, giving more space for other members of the group. Another strategy is to specifically direct questions at individuals who have not yet spoken, and use body language such as looking the other way or stopping taking notes if certain individuals continue to dominate.

It is important to be aware of power dynamics among focus groups based on age, sex, ethnicity, economics and other categories. For example, boys may not feel comfortable expressing their opinions when adult men are present. Similarly, girls may not feel they can express different opinions from older women in the group. No one may feel comfortable disagreeing with the wife of the local religious leader. In these cases, separating groups by age, sex or other factors may result in better information collection.

Probing techniques

- Repeat the question to give respondents more time to think and formulate a response.
- Ask for more specific details, conveying a limited understanding of the issue.
- Use body language, such as a thoughtful nod or inquisitive look, to show that you would like more detail.
- Repeat the response – this can stimulate more discussion.
- Elicit explanatory responses by using words like how, why, when, what, and where

Making adjustments and probing for more detail. The great benefit of focus groups is that they can explore unanticipated areas. The facilitator should build on enlightening responses and probe, or look further into, certain topics. Techniques for this are in the text box on the next page.

Recording and analyzing the results. The note-taker should write down responses from the group as much as possible during the discussion. Notes should be extensive, and include elements such as emotions and body language. A tape recorder, where appropriate, can help make sure everything is captured and generate quotations to use in a report. Soon after the focus group concludes, the facilitator and note-taker should compare notes and discuss views to make sure they have a consistent and accurate interpretation. This information should be summarized and placed in a standard reporting format that can be used to analyze the results of the various focus groups.

In analyzing and presenting the results, we often group, or categorize, certain themes that emerge. This allows us to make statements such as, "70% of focus group respondents mentioned poor attitudes of clinic staff as a reason for not visiting the clinics more frequently." Using a number or percentage to state our results can make our findings more powerful. We have to recognize, however, that theme-based groupings often require us to make subjective judgments in interpreting responses. We should therefore be careful not to make overly-ambitious claims, and present the findings in terms of general associations and themes rather than rigorous, statistically-proven results. For more guidance on analysis, see the MEL Tip Sheet: *Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis.*

Additional Resources

- *MEL Tip Sheet: Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis*
- *MEL Tip Sheet: Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis*
- *MEL Tip Sheet: Sampling*
  https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsdl/docs/MELTipSheetSampling.pdf
- *Civil Society Key Informant Interview Guide by Mercy Corps Myanmar (INRM)*
  https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsdl/docs/KeyInformantInterviewGdCivilSociety.docx
- *Government Key Informant Interview Guide by Mercy Corps Myanmar (INRM)*
  https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsdl/docs/KeyInformantInterviewGdGovernment.docx
- *Conflict Analysis Focus Group Discussion Guide by Mercy Corps Lebanon (Arabic & English)*
  https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsdl/docs/LebanonFGDgdConflictAnalysis.docx
- *Making the Input Supply Market Work for the Poor: A Case Study from the Somali Region of Ethiopia by Roger Oakeley & Emma Proud*
  https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsdl/docs/MakingInputSupplyMarketWorkforPoorCaseStudy.pdf
- *Market Analysis Resource Guide: Value Chain Focus Group Discussion Guide (Liberia Advancing Youth Project)*
  https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsdl/cgi-bin/library?a=q&r=1&hs=1&t=0&c=all&h=dtt&q=market+analysis+resource+guide+focus
- *Market Analysis Resource Guide: Youth Focus Group Discussion Guide (Liberia Advancing Youth Project)*
  https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsdl/cgi-bin/library?a=q&r=1&hs=1&t=0&c=all&h=dtt&q=market+analysis+resource+guide+focus
- *USAID Tips for Performance Monitoring and Evaluation* - Focus Groups.
  www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/pdf_docs/pnabs539.pdf
- Qualitative Methods chapter of *User-Friendly Handbook for Mixed Method Evaluations*
  http://www.ehr.nsf.gov/EHR/REC/pubs/NSF97-153/CHAP_3.HTM

Annex – Sample Discussion Topic Guide

Example: Discussion Topic Guide from Community Mobilization project

Introduction

Introduce myself to group, explain purpose and format, have group members introduce themselves.
Note: Set informal, relaxing tone and make individuals feel comfortable. Engage for more information during introductions. Note-taker record demographics and other characteristics of group.

Questions

1. Selection of the projects at the local level:
   - How and when did the group organize town meetings?
   - How do you feel about the project selection process? Was it fair and participatory? Did the projects proposed reflect the community needs and priorities?

Note: Probe for information and viewpoints of less vocal members. Seek to see if minority or vulnerable groups were represented. Look for differing opinions on the process.

2. Implementation and effects/impacts of projects:
   - Were the projects proposed implemented successfully? Why or why not? What were some of the main challenges? *Note: look for funding & municipal politics issues*
   - How was implementation managed? By who? What were the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating projects?

Note: may have to further explain monitoring and look for unconventional methods. Try to gauge what their indicators are of project impact. Also, look for different perspectives on success from different members.

3. Sustainability and lasting impact
   - Do you feel the projects are sustainable? How will they pay maintenance costs?
   - In your opinion, what was the most significant change for your community brought about by engagement with Mercy Corps in this project? Why?
   - How do you feel the project could have been improved? Are there any other main issues you'd like to discuss?

Note: Try to dig for creative or unanticipated effects from the project. Be open and probe further for negative as well as positive impacts.

Conclusion

Thank the group for their participation, and clarify again the purpose and how the information will be used.