## 4.1 Focus group discussions

Focus groups are an exploratory research tool - a 'structured group process' to explore people's thoughts and feelings and obtain detailed information about a particular topic or issue (Sherraden, 2001). Focus group discussions generally last from an hour and a half to two hours, longer than this and the discussion loses momentum (Sherraden, 2001). If the discussion is well managed, it allows deep-seated feelings on a subject to emerge naturally.

Groups are usually composed of seven or eight people, selected purposively, based on a set of criteria, plus a recorder, and led by a trained moderator. This size yields a variety of viewpoints and good participation. Groups can have a larger size range, e.g. four to 12 members, but smaller groups tend to be dominated by one or two people and larger groups inhibit the participation by some members (Sherraden, 2001).

The focus group moderator's job is to facilitate the discussion and to encourage all respondents to contribute their thoughts, feelings and ideas. The discussion is usually semi-structured using a checklist of issues constructed iteratively by the research team.

Focus groups are used widely by product marketing companies and in health related research. In development-related research, focus group discussions are often seen as being a participatory-type method. While they can be used alongside participatory methods, they can be used as a single self-contained method or alongside quantitative research.

Focus group discussions are useful early on in a study when the researcher wants to gain a rapid understanding of key themes or issues of controversy. Use focus groups when you are not sure of the exact questions you want to ask. They can be useful for:

- Generating qualitative data (insights into needs, expectations, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and feelings of participants)
- Broadening the research field – surprise issues may emerge
- Identifying key issues – for follow up later using other research methods
- Developing emergent themes
- Generating hypotheses for testing later in research
- Developing interview schedules (for key informants or sample surveys)
- Corroborating or triangulating findings generated earlier - by quantitative or qualitative methods (including individual sample questionnaires, structured or semi-structured interviews with key informants, and participative research tools)

- Providing clear and expressive vignettes to support quantitative findings
- Getting reflective feedback for impact assessments or on government policies or interventions

### 4.1.1 *Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups*

**Advantages**

- Relatively easy to undertake
- Efficient – including the views of a number of people at the same time
- Quick - results can often be obtained in a reasonably short time span.
- People often express views that they might not express in other settings, or if interviewed as individuals. Social interaction within the group can yield freer and more complex responses, when there is interactive synergy, spontaneity and security of participants within the group (Sherraden, 2001).
- Flexible - the researcher can probe for clarification or greater detail. Unanticipated lines of discussion can be pursued.
- Responses have high 'face validity' due to the clarity of the context and detail of the discussion.
- Work well a range of different populations, including people who may have limited education, modest verbal skills, and low self-esteem, and lack of prior experience expressing personal views.
- Low cost
- Require a moderate to low preparation time and a moderate time for analysis.

**Disadvantages**

- Moderator requires special skills - stimulating and managing a guided group discussion is not as easy as it sounds. The skill of the moderator can have a tremendous impact on the success of the group, i.e., whether discussion flows freely (Sherraden, 2001). 'Moderating focus groups is much like writing poetry: anyone can do it, but few do it really well' (Ellison Research, 2001).
- Groups can be difficult to assemble. It is difficult to persuade people to give up their time and to find a time suitable for all participants.
- The setting and conditions must be conducive to discussion - individuals must feel secure and confident within the group.
- Individual responses are not independent of one another and group dynamics can vary considerably.
- The evaluator has less control than in an individual interview.
- Data can be difficult to summarise and analyse. There is a lot of specific information, some of it very tangential to the topic (Sherraden, 2001).

- Conformity effects – the pressure in groups is to conform to the group norm and so important opinions may not be expressed.
- Participants are not randomly sampled so findings are not generalisable.

### 4.1.2 Undertaking focus groups

The goal is to obtain as much useful information as possible. Confidentiality helps. Group interaction can bring out additional information. The moderator stimulates the group discussion and keeps it on course, as necessary. S/he should not take a position on anything, but should listen. Every response is considered valid. There is no attempt to support or criticise any response, resolve any issue, address any individual problem or concern or reach any conclusion. Both concrete information and opinions are relevant (Sherraden, 2001). The moderator should not be concerned if the group is silent at any point. It may be the first time that participants have thought about the issue you are discussing.

Basic sequence of events:

1. Formulate the research question
2. Identify and train moderators
3. Generate, pre-test, and revise the interview guide
4. Develop the sampling frame
5. Decide what incentives to use to encourage people to attend. Choose one or more from: payment, food and drink, childcare, feedback on findings, a token gift, transport to and from the site
6. Recruit participants - use local contacts to identify people
7. Make necessary arrangements (setting, equipment, food and drinks, and childcare)
8. Schedule the groups – check that they are at an appropriate time for participants.0
9. Introduce everyone – give name badges if it is locally appropriate
10. Explain the purpose of the focus group, how long it will take, and what feedback they will get. Explain that what participants say will be confidential
11. Give the participants time alone together to talk, if you think that would be appropriate
12. Sit everyone down so that everyone can see everyone else.
13. Start the discussion, starting with easy topics first, but make sure that the topics that you most want to cover are towards the beginning of the session
14. Keep a record - tape recorder (audio tape with multi-directional microphone) and/ or a systematic recording form
15. Prepare data and analyse
16. Report

## Identifying and recruiting participants

The sampling frame is developed by identifying key population groups whose opinions you are interested in hearing. This may follow a stakeholder analysis exercise, a participatory wealth ranking exercise or some other method of identifying differentiated groups. This may result in the 'population' being divided by characteristics such as age, wealth, gender, ethnicity, health status, etc. The research team will need to decide how many 'levels' of each characteristic are meaningful for the purposes of the study (e.g., perhaps four income levels, two for gender, three for age) and form a group for each level of each important characteristic.

Take care when recruiting participants in order to avoid systematic bias and friendship groups. Systematic (even random) procedures may be desirable. The membership of each group should be as homogenous as possible, representing a particular segment of the population, but group members should not be close friends (Sherraden, 2001). The aim is to 'create conditions that promote both comfort and independence of thought, in order to maximise discussion and self-disclosure' (ibid).

The researcher will need to make initial contact with the prospective participant, assure them of confidentiality and then ask them several questions to ensure that they fit within one of the groups that are being recruited for. The researcher will also need to clarify the participant's expectations and find out whether they are willing to participate in the focus group discussion.

In reality the identification and recruitment function may need to be delegated to local NGO or research assistant. If this is the case, it is important that they follow guidelines agreed by the research team.

## Designing an interview guide for focus groups

The purpose of the interview guide is to provide an overall direction for the discussion. It is not the equivalent of a survey instrument and is not to be followed in detail or even necessarily in order. The guide provides the moderator with topics and issues that are, to the extent possible, to be covered at some point during the group discussion. The guide is loosely structured and does not suggest potential responses (Sherraden, 2001).

The guide should proceed logically from one topic to another and from the general to the specific. It is often useful to have broad questions at the start, to enable the moderator to get the feel of the group, and to contextualise later and more specific responses. Questions that are more important to the research agenda should be presented early in the session, if possible (ibid). Questions should be unstructured, unbiased, non-threatening, and very simple. Specification should almost always be left to the participants, unless the discussion is decidedly ‘off track’ at which time the moderator should gently redirect it.

The guide should not be overly detailed or have too many questions. A good focus group interview guide consists of twenty questions or less. Pre-testing the guide with several ‘mock’ focus groups is essential. The aim is to structure questions so that they are clear and stimulate discussion. Several stages of revisions may be necessary before the guide is ready to be used (ibid).

## Facilitating the discussion and recording

Each focus group should have a moderator and a recorder or note taker. It is ideal if the moderator is fluent in the local languages, but if absolutely necessary s/he can work through a research assistant/ translator. It is essential that the recorder/ note taker is fluent in the local languages, as the discussion may contain nuances which will be missed otherwise. Even where local people are fluent in English or the national language, they should be encouraged to hold the discussion in their local mother-tongue.

The moderator’s task is to make participants feel at ease and to facilitate open communication on selected topics by asking broad, often open-ended questions, by probing for additional information when necessary, and by keeping the discussion appropriately focused. The moderator should generally follow the interview guide, but participants should be able to express opinions, experiences, and suggestions and should be allowed to lead the discussion in new directions as long as they are relevant to the research in general (Sherraden, 2001). As a result the discussion may not follow the interview guide in the order suggested. The moderator should control the discussion to an appropriate level. Too much control and the discussion is stifled, too little and leaders will emerge from the participant group. The moderator should avoid getting drawn into discussing issues her or himself.

A recorder should tape record the discussion and keep notes of comments in the local language (for later translation, as necessary) on a ‘recording instrument’ form. Ensure that you have participant’s permission to record the session. Check the equipment will pick up all voices at the venue. Much detail can be lost by attempting to simultaneously translate into English or another non-local language, and verbatim quotes may be required later for inclusion in reports. The ‘recording instrument’ is similar to the interview guide, except probes are removed and plenty of blank space is inserted between questions to provide room for comments. Because the recorder is unlikely to be able write down all comments as they occur, it is important to tape record the session. Soon after the session, the recorder will use this tape to fill in key comments and quotations on the recording instrument.

However, some researchers prefer not to use recorders, as these can be distracting or off putting for the interviewee. Where they make interviewees anxious they should probably not be used.

In all cases the quality of subsequent analysis depends on the quality of the data stored, so the notes taken, or transcripts made are critical. This is one of the main reasons that a high calibre of researcher is required to make this approach work well.