

SHORT GUIDE ON FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND INTERVIEWS FOR COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH:

This guide has been developed in the context of ESCR-Net's community-led research project, with inputs from Terra de Direitos (Brazil), Pamoja Trust (Kenya), Manushya Foundation (Thailand). The guide also draws from www.researchfororganizing.org

Index:

Click on the title to be directed to the page.

1 Introduction:

2 Short guide to focus group discussions:

- Overview of the process to develop FGDs
- Considerations for planning FGDs
 - Tips for developing good questions

3 Short guide to individual interviews:

- Considerations for planning interviews
- Developing good interview questions:

4 Managing data from interviews and group discussions General tips:

- Managing and storing hand-written notes from interviews and FGDs
- Managing and storing digital data (audio or video recordings, pictures etc)

* *Template discussion guide for FGDs and interviews*



1. Introduction:

Focus group discussions and interviews are qualitative research methods. These methods focus questions around 'why' and 'how' something is affecting people (or groups of people). They allow gathering in-depth information about people's perceptions, experiences. Group discussions, in particular, can strengthen organising by stimulating collective reflections, finding agreement or helping people understand each other's point of view.

Group discussions: are structured conversations involving about 6-10 people. They are appropriate to understand how a given group of people (e.g. young women) feel about an issue or problem, what are their perceptions, beliefs, or vision for the future.

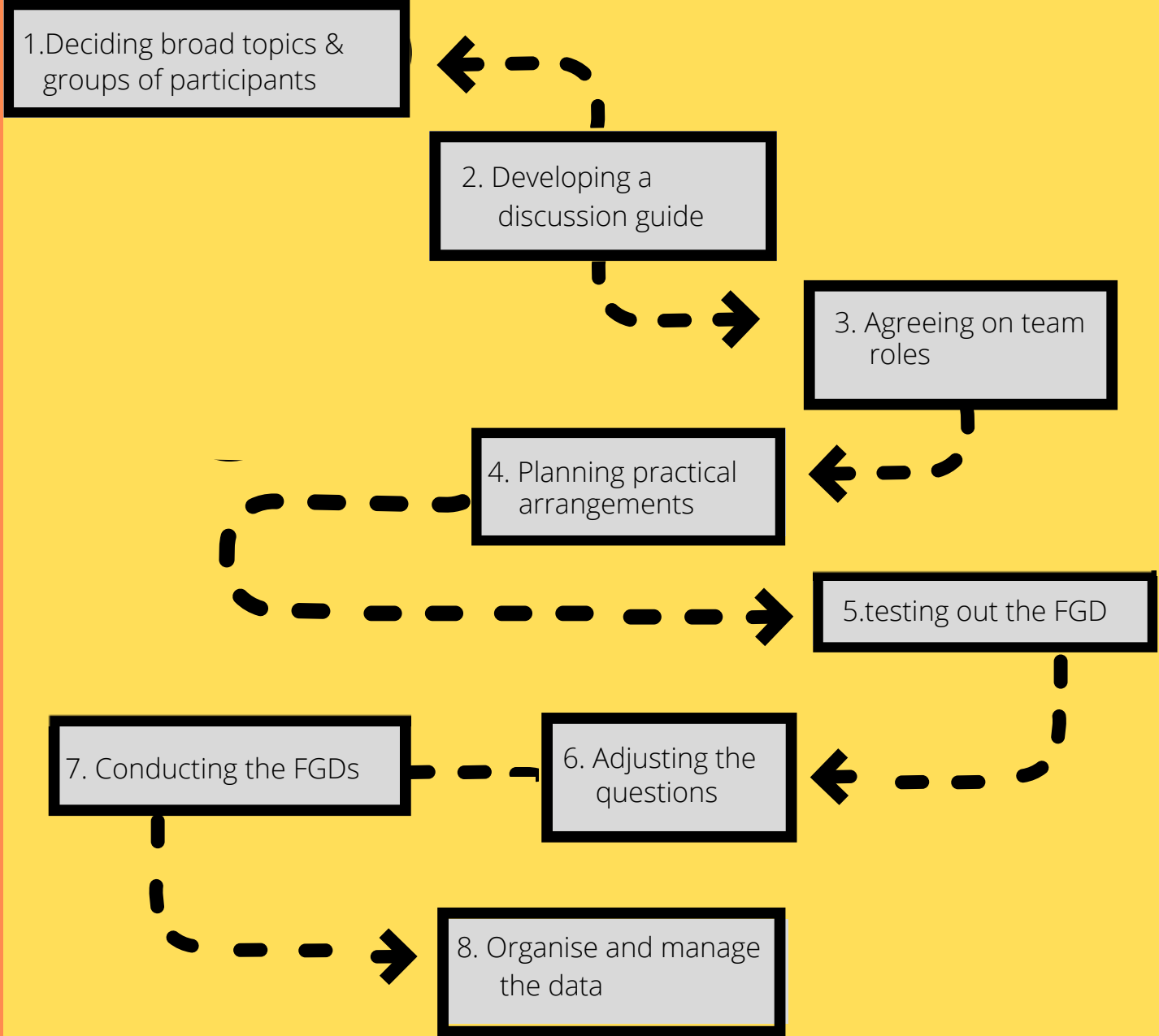
Individual interviews: are structured conversations with one person. They are most appropriate when you want to:

- gather the opinion and views of a specific person (e.g. because of their role or involvement in an issue)
- get information that is particularly sensitive or personal and people wouldn't share it in a group setting
- involve someone who feels particularly discriminated or marginalized and who may not engage in a group setting
- verify what someone else has said, or information that emerged in a group discussion

The downside of FGDs and interviews is that the data gathered does NOT allow to make general statements about an entire population, to understand the percentage of people affected, or how the majority of people view an issue. For these kinds of questions, a survey may be more appropriate. Surveys questions are closed (= yes/no) or with multiple answers. Surveys do not provide much room to go into details and explain in detail why something is happening but they are useful to provide general trends and numbers (e.g. statistics, percentages) to support statements that apply to the community in general.

In a research project you may need to use both methods. Some research questions may be better answered through a survey while some others through focus groups.

2. Short guide to focus group discussions



[Analysis → --- → Verification will be addressed late]

Considerations for planning FGDs:

- A CREATING A SAFE SPACE:** As much as possible, you should try to create a safe space where participants feel comfortable sharing information. This involves thinking about the right place and time of the day to hold the FGD, as well as considering how to formulate questions and who should ask them. It may also be good to begin by inviting participants to set group rules for the discussion (e.g. addressing confidentiality, see below). With regards to the logistics, the venue where the FGD is taking place should guarantee a good level of privacy. It is a good idea to provide food/water or other things that may help people focus on the discussion (including childcare arrangements). It is also good to find a way for participants to face each other during the discussion. Please also consider Covid-related measures such as distancing, providing PPE and limiting the number of participants.
- B FACILITATION AND TEAM ROLES:** Conducting a FGDs usually requires at least 2 people: 1 facilitator and 1 note-taker (see more below). A third team member could be present to take care of logistics etc. and if needs be there could be a translator. Consider who is participating (including how many of you) and how this might affect the power dynamics between you and FGD participants. Having too many people who are 'observing' the discussion may put off participants and convey the sense that information is being extrapolated from them.
The facilitator: It's really important to consider who among your team is best placed to conduct FGDs and who will facilitate it. Facilitators should have good communication skills, be able to purposefully use small talk for ice-breaking, use pauses and probes, control group dynamics whilst making participants feel at ease with sharing information. For this reason, when choosing facilitators you may want to consider factors such as consider how gender, age, role within the community etc.
- C GROUP DYNAMICS:** FGDs are structured conversations with 6-10 people who share something in common that puts them on a fairly 'equal' footing (e.g. they are women, older women, migrant women, young boys, young girls etc).
> **Group composition:** Consider carefully who to involve in your group discussions. Usually mixing men, women, younger and old, etc means that only 'stronger' voices speak up, while the rest feel intimidated or uncomfortable. To avoid this: plan to bring together people who have something in common and make that the basis of the conversation - e.g. a women-focused discussion to talk about concerns women have over a development project. Or, young people-focused discussion asking young people's views and opinions etc. In addition to age and gender please also consider the role some people play in the community. For instance it may be better to speak with community leaders in a separate individual interview rather than inviting them to participate in a group discussion with other members of the same community.

> **Group Size:** It is strongly advised to avoid groups larger than 10-12 people. You may contact and invite up to 12-15 people if you fear that someone may not show up. Larger groups will make some people, especially those who may feel more uncomfortable or marginalised, and worsen the disparity between those who tend to be more outspoken and those more shy. It is much more difficult to manage a larger group than a small one. It is likely that you won't have time to discuss all the questions in depth and leave space for everyone to share their thoughts. Instead, smaller groups ensure everyone a chance to speak and help create a more safe and 'private' space.

> **How many FGDs are enough?:** In general, the more the better! Plan for as many group discussions as you can hold, considering the timeframe and budget availability. As a minimum, our suggestion is to run at least 3-5 FGDs as part of your research (involving at least 30 people). This is because having only one or two discussions will give you very limited data to analyse and work with.

D DEVELOP A DISCUSSION GUIDE WITH STRONG QUESTIONS: FGDs are 'structured' conversations where participants discuss in-depth about a set of questions/issues. It is really helpful to develop a discussion guide (see template below) that outlines the entire group discussion (from the introduction to the closing) and that can be used as a reference for facilitators. This is particularly important if you're planning to have different facilitators. Questions should be open-ended, formulated to go beyond 'yes' or 'no' answers to try to get at the 'how' and 'why' of the issues you want to discuss. For each main question/issue you should develop probing questions that ask respondents to elaborate more on their answers. For example it is really important to ask why people answered in a certain way, even if you already know the answer or if it sounds banal to you. See [below](#) on how to develop strong questions.

E VERY GOOD NOTE-TAKING AND RECORDING!: The success of your analysis depends hugely on how well you've documented the discussion. It is advisable to both take written notes of the discussion while at the same time record it using an audio recorder. Notes and recordings will be the basis for your analysis.

- Notes: There are different ways to take notes during the FGD. You can write down what people say word by word, or you can try to summarise their statements. If you decide to write a summary, you should be careful to stick to what people have said, and not interpret their statement on the basis of what you think it means. Word by word note taking is more reliable and any gaps can be filled by listening to the audio recording.

- You should take notes in a way that you are able to tell who said what, since it may be difficult to distinguish different voices from the audio recording. An easy way to do so without breaching confidentiality is to assign a letter or code for each participant at the beginning of the FGD, and use it to document who among the participants said a given statement. The note-taker should be able to interrupt the conversation if it is going too fast or if people are speaking over each other.
- Audio recording is very important as it provides a back-up and verification for the notes. *The analysis will begin by transcribing the audio recording, and confronting it with the notes.* To record you can use your smartphone (all Androids and OS have built-in recording applications) or budget for a recorder. If you're using your smartphone please check that: a) the phone has enough battery and storage (1 hour of recording at an average sound quality can use approximately 150MB of storage), b) the data is stored in a secured place as soon as possible after the FGD.

Read more about [managing data](#) below.

Tips for developing good focus group discussion questions:

- ☑ Identify a set of questions (6-9 max) that reflect issues you'd like participants to discuss. These questions should be broad enough to allow for group discussion and exchange. Keep questions short and simple.
- ☑ **Questions should be open-ended:** open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered by a 'yes' or 'no' but require participants to articulate a full answer - e.g. starting with 'how' 'why' 'what' etc. However, you can still use closed questions as a way for the participants to state their position, and then follow up with probing questions to ask them to qualify and explain their answers further.

For instance 'Do you think you were provided adequate information about the project?'

For those who say yes → what types of info were you given and how was it useful?

For those who say no → what information was missing? What more would you have liked to know?



✓ **Probes** are very important in focus group discussions. This is the core element of FGDs. Make sure that each question follows with a probe 'why do you think that?' or 'how so?' (even if these sound obvious to you) as these are what make people go in-depth in their answers.

✓ **Start with general and go to specific**

Avoid questions that are too personal as they may not provide information in a group setting.

✓ **Avoid leading questions** that already suggest a certain answer. For instance if you want to gather data on how community members feel about the fact that the company did not comply with its promises to provide jobs to the community, you would ask:

'How do you feel about the fact that the company did not provide job opportunities to the community?' - YES

'How do you feel about the fact that the company did not provide job opportunities to the community, doesn't that make you angry?' - NO

'Were you disappointed to see that the company did not meet its promises about providing jobs to the community?' - NO

✓ Try **not to put your opinions or judgments** in the questions. This can be confusing, and people may start responding more to your opinion than to the question.

📌 **More tips here:** <http://www.researchfororganizing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/T-3-4.pdf>

→ Before starting your FGDs: TEST OUT the structure and questions with a group of people other than your research participants (e.g. your team or your friends): do the questions make sense? Does the conversation flow well? Do you think they will get you the information you're hoping to get? Is there anything else you should ask?

3. Individual interviews:

CONSIDERATION FOR PLANNING INTERVIEWS:

- Choosing who to interview: within the type of research you are conducting, you may choose to interview an individual because of their role in a specific situation (e.g. they are a community leader, a witness, a government officer, etc.) or to discuss a personal and sensitive issue that wouldn't otherwise be shared in a group setting. You may also interview someone at the end of your research to verify statements and findings from other interviews. Make a list of the people you plan to interview and write down what you expect or hope to achieve with each interview. This will help clarify which questions you want them to answer.
- As for FGDs, try to put the person at ease and create a safe space where they can freely share their views and experiences. This begins with explaining clearly who you are, what the research is about, and how you will keep the information they share with you anonymous and confidential.
- **Your team:** 1-2 people. One person could be asking the question, another person could be taking notes. Interviews should be recorded (phone/recorder).
- Individual interviews can last between 45 minutes to over 1 hour depending on the availability of your interviewee. Please consider that interviews can be very consuming and people tend to get tired after 40 minutes. If you're speaking with people who are very busy, it may be good to clarify in advance how long the interviewee has so that you have a sense of how many questions you'd be able to cover in that time.

DEVELOPING GOOD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:


Many of the tips mentioned above with regards to focus group discussions also apply here. Generally speaking, it is best to use open-ended questions, use probes to get a more in-depth understanding of the perspective and experience of the person interviewed, and to avoid leading questions. However individual interview questions can be more specific and personal than the questions asked in a group setting. You can have more questions in an individual interview than a focus group discussion.

In addition:

- It is a good idea to let the interviewee begin by narrating his/her story. Then go back over the interviewee's account and ask precise and simple questions in a logical order. The interviewer should listen attentively to the "narrative presentation" and be patient with circular and repetitive statements which are not logically ordered. Allowing the person to highlight what they consider to be important is a critical element of

establishing a rapport, even though the information may not be strictly relevant to your research topic or question. If the person is not able to speak freely they may also be reluctant to share details and information that are relevant to your research.

- You should not ask difficult questions at the beginning of an interview. People who feel marginalised or oppressed may feel that they are being challenged or pushed.
- Try not to put your opinions in questions. This can be confusing, and people may start responding more to your opinion than to the question.
- It may be useful to ask the same questions in different ways in order to help the individual see the facts from different perspectives and to assess the reliability of the entire story.

 **More tips:** <http://www.researchfororganizing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/T-3-4.pdf>

4. Managing and organising data gathering during field research

During the research you will gather a fair amount of pictures, videos and interview notes and other materials. In order to systematically analyse this material it is essential that they are safely stored and that they are accessible to most members of the team.

GENERAL TIPS:

- It is best to save both a paper and a digital version of all interview notes or questionnaires.
- It is good to keep track of all interviews conducted (on a separate document): type of interview (survey questionnaire, FGD, individual interview), date, location, who conducted it, how many people participated, and the name of the file where the interview notes or questionnaire are stored. You can add other details that may be relevant (e.g. district/area, n of the community, gender, age, type of media, etc.) This document would be very handy to know how many people you've interviewed, who they are, and it will be helpful to refer back to it while writing the research report, or when you need to speak to the media about your research etc.



It is usually a good idea to establish a system to organise all files (see below), whether paper and digital, so that during the analysis and report writing it's easier to find a specific picture, note or document. If files are not stored properly, the information contained in there may fall through the cracks and not be considered during the analysis. This is even more important when several people from the same team are handling the data.

MANAGING AND STORING HAND-WRITTEN NOTES FROM INTERVIEWS AND FGDs:

Make sure to allocate some time after each interview or FGD to look at the notes you've taken and fill in any gaps. Add anything missing that is still fresh in your memory. Make sure the handwriting is legible and clear enough, re-write something or add explanations or guidance where needed. For notes about interviews and FGDs, number the pages so that it is clear in which order they should be read. Ensure that the first page reports the date, time and location of the interview, n. of participants and their profile, name of facilitator and note-taker.

It is advisable to save a digital copy of all notes. You can make a digital copy of your notes using a scanner or taking a picture from your phone. If you're using your phone, consider downloading a free scanning app for better quality.

MANAGING AND STORING DIGITAL DATA (AUDIO OR VIDEO RECORDINGS, PICTURES ETC):

The best option for digital files is to save them on an external hard drive or a USB key, preferably encrypted (see more [here](#)). Hard drives do not require internet connections and (especially for that reason) are better protected from data breaches. However they are also fairly fragile and easy to damage, or can be confiscated, so they may not be the best option when you're traveling. In these cases you can save it on your laptop and transfer it later. To enhance data protection it is important that your laptop has an up-to-date software, as well as considering some of [these](#) basic steps to prevent malware attacks.

If you have little storage on your laptop and access to internet, you can use a cloud service such as DropBox, G-Drive etc, however please be aware that these services are subject to frequent data leaks and therefore not safe.

If you've used your phone to record pictures or audios, it is advisable to delete the files as soon as you've saved them somewhere else to free up space and avoid data breaches through hacks or police search.

Organising digital files: Files can be organised in different ways, as long as there is consistency in how they are named/titled. You should think of what's important to include in the title, e.g. date, location, type of data (picture, audio, notes), who is featured etc. For instance, if you've conducted a FGD in Negombo

(Sri Lanka) you are likely to have several materials, such as a digital version of the notes, the audio recording, a few pictures. The file names could indicate when and where was the interview taken, the type of interview (FGD) and content:

2021104_FGDWomen_Negombo_Notes
2021104_FGDWomen_Negombo_pics
2021104_FGDWomen_Negombo_audio

Once all your data is organised (including data from other sources such as surveys, background information from government or companies, photos etc), it is ready to be analysed. Get in touch with us for support with the analysis!

Template discussion guide for FGDs and interviews

**consider 45 mins-1 hour per FGD*

Type of FGDs:

Number of participants:

Location: Time:

Name of facilitator:

Name of note-taker:

Name of audio file: [to be added]

a. Introduction - *write a short paragraph that you will use to introduce yourself and your organisation, explain broadly the purpose of the research you're conducting and of this specific FGD.*

b. Consent & confidentiality - *write a short paragraph to explain to participants how the data gathered through the FGD will be treated and how it will be used, and what will not be used for. Clarify that the information they will share will be treated confidentially - e.g. their names will not be disclosed or attributed to specific statements. Raise potential security concerns. Give people a chance to ask you questions about the research, and to walk away if they have changed their mind about participating.*

Ask permission to record the discussion with a phone or a recorder.

c. Opening question(s) - *develop a 'warm up' question, not necessarily related to the topic of the discussion, to help people feel more comfortable.*

d. Main questions - *your set of 6-9 questions (or more in case of individual interviews) on the topic of your research, starting from the 'easiest' to the least sensitive, and from general to specific. See above for tips on how to develop good questions.*

e. Closing questions - *allow space at the end for people to add or clarify what has been said (e.g. 'is there anything else you'd like to add or share?')*