



# DATA DRIVEN

## QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION METHODS PART 1: FOCUS GROUPS

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### Key Terms

#### *Focus Group*

A focus group is a method of gathering information about social norms and relationships among people in a community or group.

#### *Moderator*

A moderator is the person who facilitates the focus group and gently guides the discussion.

This Data Driven is the first in a series of three that will focus on qualitative data collection methods. Please read *Data Driven #5: Methods Matter* (February 2007) before reading this one; it provides an important introduction.

IRC staff use focus groups more than any other data collection method. There are many examples of programs that have carried out purposeful and well-designed focus group discussions that capture useful information. But in many other cases, focus groups are inappropriately used and, as a result, the data produced are of questionable quality and ultimately not useful.

### What do you need to know to prevent this from happening?

- *What are focus groups?*
- *When are they appropriate to use?*
- *How should we conduct them?*
- *How do we analyze and use their data?*



## What are focus groups?

**Focus groups**, or Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), are methods of gathering information about social norms and relationships among people in a community or group. The data collected are qualitative: descriptions in the form of words. Focus groups are conducted by one or two facilitators or **moderators**, and include several (usually eight to ten) participants. Rather than leading a one-on-one interview or using a questionnaire, the moderator facilitates a discussion among the individuals in the group. The point is to learn from the group their common perceptions and attitudes, to uncover contextual meanings of events or developments, and to observe the group's interactions.

Focus group findings should **not** look like this:

... "20% of the women do not attend clinics in their communities."

... "18% of the focus groups said that there was no domestic violence in their communities."

... "Women in X district have nowhere to go for safety if they are beaten by their husbands."

All three of these examples suggest findings that focus groups cannot produce: percentages intended to represent aggregations of individual views ("18% of the focus groups") and/or generalized trends among proportions of a population ("women in x district ...").

Focus groups can, however, provide in-depth information. Specifically, continuing the example reflected in the above quotations, focus groups would be a good

method to use to:

...Understand why women are not attending clinics in their communities;

... Investigate social norms about domestic violence – is it, for example, a behavior that is considered acceptable within the confines of a marriage?

... Identify some of the local institutions or resources that women would consider using as a source of protection.

In other words, focus groups are not good tools for collecting statistics about individual attitudes, or for making statements about a whole community (“women in x district”). Focus groups put people in interaction with one another and with a moderator, making it very difficult to discern individual attitudes. Instead, they are best suited to explore a topic in-depth, investigate norms and values, and improve your understanding of communities’ views and behavior. You can use them to learn about a group’s opinions about or preferences for services, identify unanticipated issues or needs, or improve your understanding of topics about which we know very little.

Focus groups can be used alone or to complement other data collection methods. They are low-cost and can provide a large amount of information in a relatively short period of time. Consider using them before a survey in order to inform the survey questions with an understanding of the meaning of certain concepts or experiences in the local context. Alternatively, use them after a survey to get deeper, more detailed information from a group that you were not able to survey, or to explain group norms about a surprising finding. They are also good tools to gather information to inform education campaigns for messages that are consistent with local experience.

As you can tell, there are strengths and limitations to focus groups. The table below summarizes these:

FOCUS GROUP STRENGTHS	FOCUS GROUP LIMITATIONS
Focus groups are useful for collecting information about social interactions and a group’s preferences and opinions.	Focus groups are not appropriate for collecting information about individuals’ perspectives.
Focus group discussions are most effective for exploring topics that stimulate people to share their own ideas and debate others’ opinions.	Focus groups are not the best method for getting information about personal or sensitive topics. Moderators must be cautious about asking questions that may elicit private information since it can be challenging to ensure that what is shared in a focus group will remain confidential.
They are low cost and can provide a large amount of qualitative information in a relatively short period of time.	The flexible nature of focus groups means that they are susceptible to facilitator or <b>moderator bias</b> .
Focus groups are flexible and a good way to explore unanticipated issues and capture a range of views on a specific topic.	Discussions that take place during focus groups can lead in unexpected directions, and it can be challenging to capture and interpret the important aspects of the discussion.

## Remember...

**Every data collection method is suited to a specific kind of information.** Focus groups are a tool to gather *rich* information – descriptions and details that provide a window onto local meaning, perceptions, norms and context.

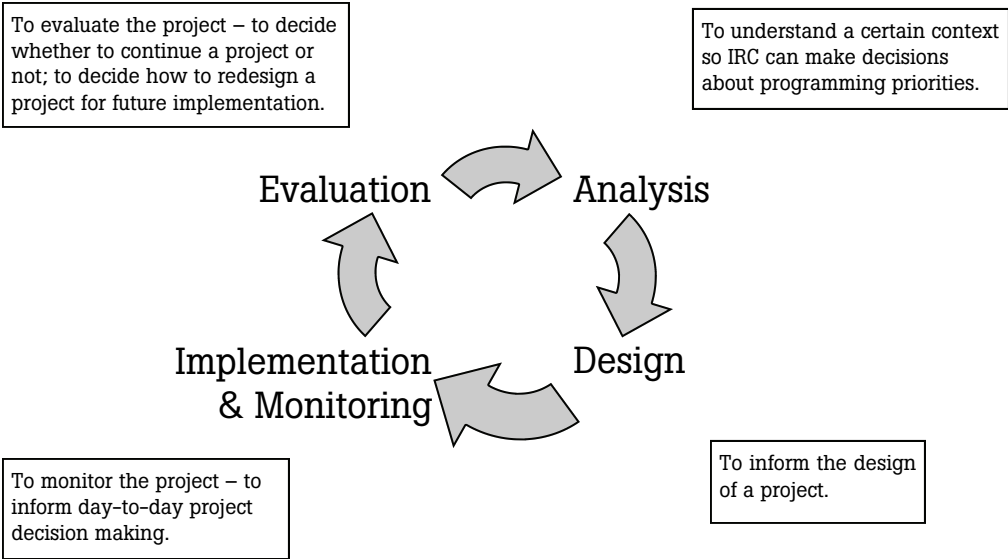
## Key Term

### Moderator Bias

Moderators can influence results by knowingly or unknowingly providing cues about what types of responses are desirable, or seeking to achieve consensus on particular topics.

## When are focus groups appropriate? Methods Matter Review

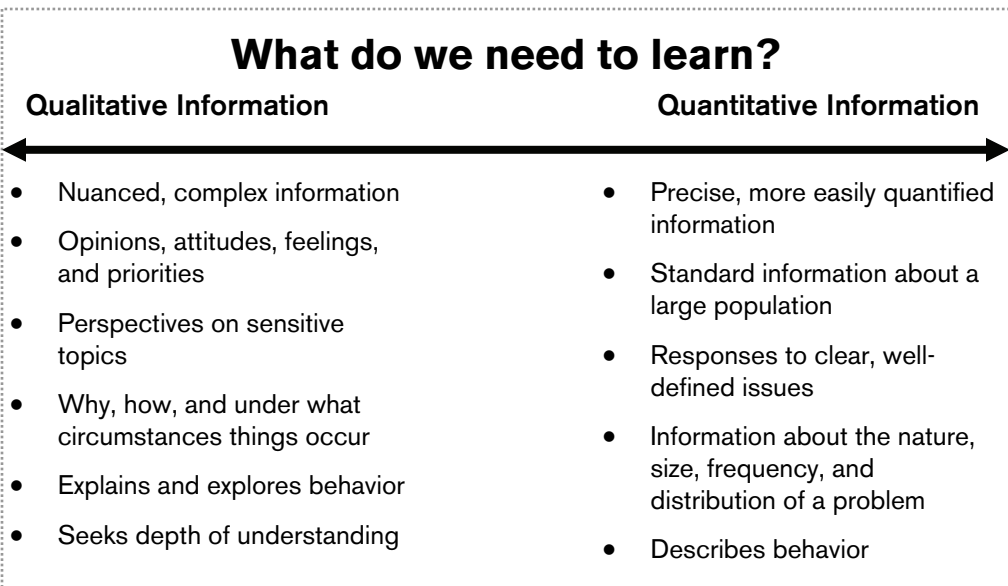
Knowing that focus groups have strengths and limitations, how do we decide when it is appropriate to use them? Refer to Data Driven #5: Methods Matter (February 2007). Recall that the first step in choosing a data collection method is to define why you need to collect data (the purpose) and what you need to learn. As you think about why you need to collect information, keep in mind the question “how will we use this information after we have collected it?” Data are used throughout the project cycle:



### Remember...

**Nice to know vs. need to know:** All data collection, regardless of the method you use, must be necessary. You must have a clear and essential use in mind before going out and collecting new information. It is not enough to collect data because it would be “nice to know.” Too often we collect information that either already exists or ends up going unused because we were not clear from the start what purpose it would serve. Collecting non-essential data is unethical and a poor use of time and resources.

Advocacy is another common use for data. IRC may collect data to advocate for increased funding or attention to a particular situation, or a specific policy outcome. As you identify the purpose of your data collection, you will also need to think about what kind of information you need to decide if focus groups are appropriate or not. Refer to the graphic below as you consider what you need to learn:



# DATA DRIVEN 4



## EXAMPLE

## DETERMINING WHEN TO USE FOCUS GROUPS

Once you've defined what information you need and how you will use it, you can choose a data collection method that is most suitable. This table provides examples of the reasons IRC may need to collect information, what we need to learn and whether or not focus groups are appropriate.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO LEARN?	WHY DO WE NEED TO LEARN THIS?	ARE FOCUS GROUPS APPROPRIATE?
How different contraceptives are perceived by young men and women	To design a family planning program that promotes the use of acceptable contraceptives	<p><b>Yes, focus groups are appropriate for collecting this information</b> because in all of these examples IRC seeks to explore a group's opinions about a specific issue and get group rather than individual information. In all examples, IRC needs in-depth, qualitative information, and none of the topics is highly sensitive (though this should be decided in context).</p>
Reasons children do not attend school regularly	To design an education program that aims to increase school attendance	
What behavior change communication techniques youth find most appealing	To design or monitor a project that aims to communicate specific messages to youth	
Returning refugees' perspectives about what information they need as they repatriate	To design a project that disseminates accurate and needed information about refugee return	
Small business leaders' opinions about what skills are needed among their employees	To design a vocational training project curriculum that address the demands of the business leaders	
Women's opinions about why they are not using latrines	To monitor a project that aims to increase latrine use	
How many young men and women report that they use condoms	To monitor the progress of a project that aims to increase contraceptive use	<p><b>No, focus groups are not the best choice with these examples.</b> In many of these examples, IRC requires quantitative data that are representative of a larger group. Focus groups are not well-suited for providing quantitative information and only give information about the group involved the discussion. Sensitive and highly confidential topics such as experiences with harassment are not appropriate for discussion in a group setting.</p>
How many children in an IRC project area attend school daily	To monitor the progress of a project that aims to increase children's attendance	
Whether trained youth are able to describe how to prevent HIV/AIDS	To monitor or evaluate what youth have learned from trainings	
Returning refugees' experiences with harassment during repatriation	To design or monitor a project that aims to reduce harassment	
The number of small business leaders who would hire people with specific skills	To design a project that aims to train and place people in jobs	
The percentage of women in a community who use latrines	To monitor or evaluate a project that aims to increase latrine use	



**EXERCISE 1**

**DETERMINING WHEN TO USE FOCUS GROUPS**

**Case Study**

IRC staff in country X began a reproductive health (RH) program by collecting baseline information about what young women and men in the target communities know about reproductive health. Having worked in the communities for several years, the program team already knew that many young women and men did not know how to use contraceptives or where they could access RH services. The program was designed to address these gaps. Since the program was just getting off the ground, the team wanted to find out specifically how many young women and men in the community knew how to put on a condom and where they could access reproductive health services. The team planned to collect this information at the beginning and end of the program to determine whether the young women and men showed improved knowledge. The team decided to conduct 24 focus groups – one in each zone of the camp – to capture this information about reproductive health knowledge. Half of the groups were comprised of young women, and half were young men. According to the report of the focus groups, “22% of young women and men in the community know how to put on a condom, and 15% of young women and men know where to access RH services.”

**Questions:**

1. What was the RH team’s purpose in collecting data?
2. Were focus groups the best data collection method for the team to choose? Why or why not?

See page 17 for the responses.

**How to conduct focus groups**

Once you’ve determined that focus groups are the most appropriate method based on your information needs, you can begin preparing. There are five steps to conducting successful focus groups:

<b>1</b>	<b>PLAN</b>	What do you need to plan to make your focus groups effective?
<b>2</b>	<b>CREATE SAMPLING STRATEGY</b>	How will you select participants to take part in the focus groups? Whom should you talk to and why? How many focus groups will you conduct?
<b>3</b>	<b>DEVELOP A FOCUS GROUP GUIDE</b>	What will you talk about with the participants?
<b>4</b>	<b>CONDUCT</b>	How do you conduct focus groups ethically with attention to confidentiality and other key principles?
<b>5</b>	<b>ANALYZE</b>	What do you do with the notes from the focus groups? How do you turn them into usable information?

## 1 PLAN FOR EFFECTIVE FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are more likely to provide you with useful and timely information if they are well-planned and organized. Create a focus group plan that details three primary things, described below:

- The required logistical arrangements for the focus group meeting, such as location and time;
- The team and its members' roles and responsibilities;
- A timeline for selecting participants, conducting the focus groups, analyzing the information, and reporting your findings.

**Logistics.** Focus groups should be conducted in a convenient and private location. The aim is to choose a place where the group will feel comfortable talking freely and there will be few interruptions. Focus groups should only consist of the people who were selected to be participants; bystanders and other people who are not active participants in the group should not be in the area where the focus group is taking place. Discussions usually last one to two hours, depending on the topic.

**The team.** Focus groups require people to facilitate or moderate, take notes and analyze the resulting data. In cases where many focus groups are being conducted, there may be a team consisting of one person who coordinates and plans, several moderators who carry out the focus groups, and note-takers.

A **focus group moderator** is responsible for initiating the discussion, posing the questions specified in a focus group guide, keeping the discussion on track, and encouraging all participants to contribute. Moderators may also be responsible for:

- Working with the team involved to create a focus group question guide;
- Recruiting participants and reminding them of where to go and when;
- Answering participants' questions before, during and after the focus groups.

The flexible nature of focus groups means that the data (the responses and discussions) are susceptible to facilitator or moderator bias. Moderators can influence results by knowingly or unknowingly providing cues about what types of responses are desirable, or seeking to achieve consensus on particular topics. Responses from focus groups may also be biased by a dominant or opinionated participant.

**To avoid this, an effective focus group moderator:**

- **Is reliable, professional and prepared.** Preparation involves facilitating the development of a focus group guide, becoming very familiar with the questions in advance, and being ready for unanticipated responses (see section on Ethics for how to respond to topics that warrant a special response).
- **Encourages a positive atmosphere.** A moderator must create an environment that will elicit a wide range of perspectives and points of disagreement rather than consensus. Moderators must be able to build rapport with and among the participants and create a relaxed atmosphere where participants feel respected and comfortable expressing their opinions. Since building rapport is context-specific, moderators must be very familiar with the context and the words and behaviors that are appropriate in that environment.

### Remember...

**Do not assume that anyone can be a good focus group moderator.** Effective moderators have specific characteristics and skills that can improve with practice and training.

- **Manages participants' personalities.** Every focus group is made up of people with a range of personality types and social characteristics. Participants may be talkative, prone to interrupt, aggressive, shy, angry, intimidating, intimidated, and so on. A focus group moderator must be able to manage different personalities so that everyone in the group feels comfortable contributing their opinions. If some participants are too talkative or interrupt the others, a moderator must remind the group to give everyone a chance to speak and to be respectful of others. If some participants are shy or unwilling to talk, a moderator must do his/her best to encourage a friendly environment and give those people opportunities to speak.
- **Asks questions and listens to answers effectively.** Effective questioning involves keeping track of what questions have been asked and answered; asking questions in a way that promotes participant participation; phrasing questions in an open-ended way to elicit detailed and rich rather than specific (e.g., "yes" or "no") responses; and asking questions that elicit people's opinions rather than reflecting the views of the moderator. (See page 14 for more on effective questioning techniques.)

The second member of the team, the **note-taker**, documents the discussion as well as the social interactions among the people in the group.

When might a focus group seek to understand social interactions? Consider this example: A youth program needs to find out if young people in the community are comfortable getting advice and guidance from peer educators. Focus groups comprised of both peer educators and their peers would be a good way to observe how they interact with each other. An effective note-taker would document not only the answers to specific questions posed by the moderator, but observations of the participants' body language or other clues indicating the comfort level of the youth when talking to the peer educators.

An effective note-taker:

- Understands what focus groups are, why they are used and the qualities of a well-facilitated focus group (e.g., the moderator asks one question at a time, listens to responses, asks for clarification when necessary, asks open-ended questions, etc. See page 14 for more on effective questioning and common errors);
- Knows the purpose of the focus group discussion for which he/she will take notes;
- Has practiced or has experience note-taking in focus groups;
- Is very familiar with the focus group guide and understands the purpose of each question;
- Is a good listener;
- Is able to take shorthand notes;
- Is able to document participants' responses as well as social interactions, when relevant;
- Speaks the language used by the participants in the focus group.

There are many ways to take notes about a focus group discussion, but the main concern is to be systematic: organized and comprehensive, yet focused. Make sure

### Key Term

#### *Note-Taker*

A note-taker is the person responsible for documenting the discussion that takes place.



EXAMPLE

SAMPLE FORM FOR FIELD NOTES

Focus Group Note-Taker Form

Archival #: CCFGFPU01 Date: 15-6-04 Note-taker: Marie K.

Question (# or key words)	Responses	Observations
#4 FP supplies available	R1 - not available R10 - no pills / injections - price ch - ch. methods (nurse says)	Frustrated All agreed ?? ★
4a Advice	R5 - shortage R2 - tell u to go R8 - leave u to go, no advice R5 - "They don't even tell u to come back!!!"	Agreement Idea of drs abandoning
Mod -	R3 - Some clinics dr will get methods from other clinic	(dif. city, on coast)
4b Alternatives	R7 no advice >1 yes, get advice - R2 "Go home + take care of yourself" - R6 ie no sex w/ husband	Gp knows what means b/c laugh laughtergp

*From Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 71*

your note-taker uses a shorthand that he or she can refer back to later without losing meaning, and preferably uses codes that your team can understand as well. The graphic above shows one example of a method for taking field notes. Don't worry if you don't understand all of the shorthand.

## 2 CREATE A SAMPLING STRATEGY

Whom you select to participate in a focus group depends on the purpose of the focus groups and your information needs. Recall that the purpose of focus groups is to gather information about social norms, group interactions and opinions and relationships among people in a community or group. Different from most quantitative data collection, which aims to generalize findings to a larger population, focus groups aim to produce in-depth information about a topic from a sample of people chosen for their ability to speak about that topic. As with most qualitative data collection, focus groups "emphasize depth more than breadth, insight rather than generalization" (Mack, et al., 2005, p. 54). Selecting people to participate in a focus group is about deliberately choosing participants who will be able to provide the most meaningful information on the topic. This is called purposive or **purposeful sampling**.

Selecting participants can be challenging, especially when the discussion topic is sensitive. People may be reluctant to participate because they are nervous that the opinions they discuss will not remain confidential. It is essential to discuss confidentiality before beginning any focus group (see section on ethics) and all participants must be assured that their participation in the focus group will not put them in harm's way. If there is a possibility that a focus group discussion will put participants in danger, the focus group should not be conducted. Another method may be less risky.

**Key Term**

*Purposeful Sampling*

Purposeful sampling is the process of selecting people to participate in a focus group who will be able to provide the most meaningful information on the topic.



One focus group usually consists of eight to ten participants, and should not include more than twelve. But how many groups should you have and how should you select participants for each group?

With quantitative data that we intend to generalize to a larger population, a “representative” sample size, or the number of people from whom we will collect data, is calculated using a mathematical formula. But with focus groups and other qualitative data collection methods, the best number of people to include is less clear.

You can always plan for a greater number of focus groups, but what follows is a guide to determining a minimum acceptable number to help you when planning and budgeting for data collection:

- Begin by identifying the range of experiences, perspectives, and behaviors you want to capture. Typically you will want to get the opinions of people with specific characteristics (sex, age, from a certain location), or members of different groups or institutions (e.g., parents, youth who do not attend school, women who attend classes at the women's center, business leaders, government officials).
- Each focus group should be made up of a homogenous group of participants, meaning the people in a single group share characteristics related to the topic at hand (e.g., a group of community health workers, a group of young girls who are not in school, a group of mothers who do not use latrines), and they are similar in ways that will allow them to be comfortable speaking and interacting among the other participants.
- Ideally, focus group participants will not know each other, since anonymity tends to reduce inhibition, but this is not always possible in IRC programs.
- It is common to conduct at least two groups for each characteristic or relevant group (for example, two groups of parents, two groups of youth), but keep in mind that all the data from focus groups will eventually have to be analyzed – the more groups you have, the more data you will have to analyze.

When little new information is coming in from focus groups, you can be reasonably sure that you do not need to conduct additional discussions.



## EXAMPLE

## FOCUS GROUP SAMPLING

An IRC program works with refugees who are expected to return to their home country in the next few months. As part of refining the design of the program, the team needs to learn more about which messages about the return process would be best received. The team knows that many of the returnees will be older men and women, and that these groups typically have very little accurate information about their rights as refugees. They decide that it is also important to get the opinions of the camp leaders, too, as they will need to endorse any messages used.

Ideally the team will conduct at least two separate focus groups for each category of older men, older women and camp leaders (a total of six focus groups). They may decide that they want the opinions of other groups, but for now they are being realistic about the amount of data they will be able to analyze given their time and resources.

The team also knows that it will be essential for them to think about how they will select

### Remember...

**Focus groups** “emphasize depth more than breadth, insight rather than generalization.”

### Remember...

**The information you collect** in focus groups will be more credible if you are able to justify and explain whom has been selected to participate and why. Never make generalizations about a larger population unless you have used specific sampling methods that allow you to do so.

the older women and men who will participate and to consider what their potential biases may be. For example, if they find participants by going to a legal resource center or asking older women and men who are already participating in an IRC program, these people may have distinct views about what messages are needed in the wider community. The fact that these women and men are already going to a resource center or participating in the program may mean that they need less or different information than the target group for their program; thus, including only these women in the focus groups may result in skewed information. Instead, the team will go to other common gathering points for older women and men to find participants who have not been involved in IRC programs to get their potentially different views.

In this example, the team rightly concluded that the information they collect will be more credible if they:

- Are systematic about how they choose focus group participants;
- Select participants based on specific characteristics that are connected to the kind of information they need;
- Balance the number of groups (or characteristics represented) with the time and resources available;
- Consider and acknowledge potential limitations of the people selected.



### EXERCISE 2

### MAKING GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT A LARGER POPULATION

**Refer to Exercise 1 on page 5.** In the case study, the program team decided to conduct 24 focus groups – one in each zone of the camp – to capture this information about reproductive health knowledge. Half of the groups was comprised of young women, and half young men. According to the report of the focus groups, “22% of young women and men in the community know how to put on a condom, and 15% of young women and men know where to access RH services.”

**Question:**

Is it appropriate for the focus group report to claim that 22% of young women and men in the community know how to put on a condom, and 15% of young women and men know where to access RH services? Why or why not?

**See page 17 for the response.**

## 3

### DEVELOP A FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

#### Key Term

#### *Focus Group Guide*

A set of questions that a moderator uses in his or her discussion with focus group participants.

The third step is to develop a **focus group guide**, or a set of written questions that a moderator uses in his/her discussion with participants. The questions must be based on the purpose of the focus groups and your information needs; thus, the guide cannot be developed before the purpose and information needs are well defined and commonly understood. When developing the questions in the guide, be sure to consider how you will use the information you are likely to get from the responses. Questions without a purpose are not worth asking.

A focus group guide is not a word-for-word version of the questions that will be

asked (such as a structured interview questionnaire or a survey); instead, it is a guide that provides direction for the moderator, but can be modified as needed. Consider the guidelines in the example below, and under *techniques for effective questioning* on page 14. Questions should be open-ended and unbiased, and followed up with probes and clarifying questions when necessary. If questions are drafted in a language that is different from the language that will be used during the focus group, they should be translated and back-translated to make sure that the meaning of the questions is consistent.

**Principles for formulating focus group questions:**

- Begin with questions that will put participants at ease and that everyone will feel comfortable answering;
- Questions that are more important (information you need most) should be asked early in the focus group; less important questions should be asked later;
- Focus group guides will have fewer questions when the topic at hand is one that requires more thinking, effort or emotion on the part of participants;
- Typically, a focus group guide will contain fewer than twelve questions, but the moderator has the freedom to follow up, **probe**, and ask additional questions during the discussion;
- The phrasing of each question is important. Questions should not be biased or leading, meaning they should not be asked in a way that gives a participant the impression that there is a right or wrong answer.


*Principles adapted from Steward, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007*

The table below provides some examples to further illustrate this final point.

**Key Term**

*Probe (verb)*

To question deeply or examine thoroughly. A probe (noun) is a follow-up question asking a participant to provide more details on a response.

 <b>EXAMPLE</b>		<b>UNBIASED VS. LEADING QUESTIONS</b>	
<b>Unbiased question</b>		<b>Leading question</b>	
“Why do you want to send your children to school?”		“Do you want to send your children to school so that they will have a better future?”	
“Tell us about your experience in the vocational training course – are the skills you are gaining useful or not useful? Please explain.”		“Will you use the skills you gained in the vocational training course in your business?”	
“I’ve heard some people in this community say that most smart people use a condom, and others say that they know smart people who don’t use condoms. What do you think?”		“Most smart people in this community use condoms, don’t they?”	
“What is your opinion about...?”		“Would you agree that...?” “Don’t you think that...?”	

The image on the following page provides an illustration of a sample focus group guide. The writing is from a moderator, taking brief notes as she goes from question to question.



**Family Planning Users Focus Group Guide**

Archival #: CCFGPU01  
 Site: Capital City Hospital Moderator: Sandrine B. *moderator copy*  
 Number of participants: 10 Note-taker: Marie K.  
 Date: 15-6-04 Transcriber: Marie K  
 Start: 15:30 End: 16:50

Excerpt from page 4:  
 (Question 4)  
 ✓ Have you ever gone to get your preferred method of contraception at the family planning clinic and found it was unavailable?  
 Yes  
 Price  
 ch methods

✓ (4a) If so, what did the clinic staff tell you?  
 leave  
 no advice

✓ (4b) Did they ever try to give you a different method? Please explain what they said.  
 Yes  
 no sex!

✓ (4c) Did they ever refer you to a different clinic? Please explain what they said.  
 No

Excerpt from Mack, et al., 2005, p. 68

## 4 CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS ETHICALLY AND PLAN FOR THE UNEXPECTED – INTERRUPTIONS, PROBLEMS, RESPONDING TO CONCERNS

There are several steps to take to ensure that focus groups are carried out ethically:

1. **Explain the purpose of the focus group and how it relates to IRC’s work.** Be truthful and straightforward about the objectives of the study and the anticipated risks and benefits to the participant and the community. Do not create false expectations – be careful about making any promises unless you know they can be fulfilled.
2. **Obtain informed consent.** Before beginning the focus group you must obtain informed consent from each participant. **Informed consent** means that participants understand the purpose of the focus group, how the data will be used and who will have access to it, and that they are not obligated to

**Key Term**

*Informed consent*

Informed consent is a person’s agreement to allow something to happen, made with full knowledge of the risks involved and the alternatives.

participate in the focus group, nor are they required to answer any questions they do not wish to answer. Participants must also be informed about any potential risks associated with participating in the focus group. Informed consent for focus groups is often done verbally, particularly when participants are not able to read and write. See the example consent form below.

**EXAMPLE**

## CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP WITH COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am working with the International Rescue Committee (IRC). We have brought together a group of people to ask all of you questions so that we can gather information on health issues.

### *Purpose of the Discussion*

IRC is facilitating this discussion. We call it a focus group discussion because there is a group of you discussing the questions. We are doing this focus group discussion to find ways to improve health and community programs for women. You have been chosen to participate in this discussion because you are a community health worker and have a very good understanding of the things preventing people from accessing health care.

### *Risks and Benefits*

You are free to join the discussion or not. There will be no penalty to you if you do not participate in the discussion.

There is no risk to your health from participating in this discussion. All of the questions will be about health and why people in your community do or do not use health centers. Sometimes answering questions like this can be difficult. If the questions are upsetting or if you do not want to answer a question for any reason, you do not have to. If you want to leave the discussion at any time, you are free to do so.

We hope that the discussion will help us understand health care in your community. If you have any questions or concerns about what we discuss, you are free to ask us at any time during the discussion or in private at another time.

We will be discussing all the questions as a group. Anything you discuss in this group will remain confidential. We expect that no one in the group will repeat what was discussed or who participated with anyone outside of this group.

The discussion will last approximately two hours. Do you agree to participate?

Participant: I agree to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of moderator to whom oral consent was given by participant.)

*If the participant refuses, read the following:*

I am sorry you will not be able to participate in this discussion. Thank you for your time.

3. **Explain and maintain confidentiality.** Maintaining confidentiality can be particularly challenging in focus groups since the information shared is available to all the participants. Try to avoid using participants' names during the focus groups; instead, numbers, letters, or other neutral identifiers can be used during the focus group and in the notes. Although the moderator can assure participants that everything they share in the focus group will be confidential among the IRC staff, they cannot promise that the other participants will maintain confidentiality. The moderator should emphasize at the beginning and at the end of the focus group that participants must respect each other's privacy. Once outside the focus group setting, they should not reveal the identities of the other participants, nor should they repeat anything about the discussion. If anyone is concerned about their privacy, explain the steps you have taken to ensure confidentiality. If they are still uncomfortable with the situation, the moderator must respect and support their right to withdraw from the focus group.

In addition to being ethical, take steps to ensure your focus groups will generate valuable data as well. Keep in mind the techniques for effective questioning as you carry out the focus groups and avoid the errors below. Remember, conducting or moderating focus groups is a skill that improves with practice.

## ***Techniques for effective questioning***

- Ask one question at a time
- Stay neutral
- Verify unclear responses
- Ask open-ended questions
- Avoid leading questions
- Use probes and follow-up questions to clarify a response or when more information is needed

## ***Common Errors in Focus Groups***

- Allowing one or two participants to dominate the discussion; not enabling shy or less talkative participants to speak
- Remaining on a topic for too long
- Using the same words to repeat a question instead of probing what has just been said or noticing new ideas and asking participants to elaborate
- Interrupting people who begin to express a different point of view by repeating the original question as if the participant wasn't addressing it
- Accepting comments on what people *should* do without probing what they actually do and why there is a difference
- Not probing people's conclusions (not asking why?)
- Not probing assumptions to see where they come from (not asking "Why do people say that?")
- Letting a good question drop if it is not answered immediately
- Not exploring a vague or nonspecific term that is unfamiliar to the moderator

*(Adapted from Ulín, Robinson & Tolley, 2005, pp. 247 – 248)*

## 5 ANALYZE THE DATA YOU COLLECT

Analyzing focus group data can be a daunting, cumbersome process, especially if you have conducted a lot of discussions. Perhaps this is why focus group data is rarely analyzed systematically and often goes unused! The tips here aim to provide you with simple and systematic steps for analyzing focus group data so that the information is in fact used. (See the list of references for more comprehensive guidance on how to analyze focus group and other qualitative data.)

1. **Expand notes.** Note-takers can begin the analysis process by expanding their notes (clarifying shorthand so other people can understand it and elaborating points from the discussion) in writing as soon as possible after the end of the discussion.
2. **Hold a debriefing session.** The moderator, note-taker and other members of the data collection team should come together to debrief shortly after each focus



### EXAMPLE

### SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP DEBRIEFING FORM

Focus Group Debriefing Form  
 Archival #: CCFGFP001  
 Date: 15-6-04 Name of Study: FP-VCT Integration  
 Moderator: Sandrine B.  
 Note-taker: Marie K.

(1) What are the main themes that emerged in this focus group?  
 - lack of FP supplies ~~Problems w/ FP will~~  
 - frustration w/ health services affect integr  
 - still stigma re: FP (condoms) of VCT

(2) Did any information contradict what you learned in previous focus groups?  
 - Provider Int said follow up clients when not enuf supplies, give new appts but FG participants say don't even tell them to come back

(3) What did participants say that was unclear or confusing to you?  
 "Go home and take care of yourself"  
 - What do providers intend w/this advice?

(4) What did you observe that would not be evident from reading a transcript of the discussion (e.g., group dynamic, individual behaviors, etc.)?  
 - lot of frustration in gp  
 - R4 silent

(5) What problems did you encounter (e.g., logistical, behaviors of individuals, questions that were confusing, etc.)?  
 Q 7 & 12 overlap

(6) What issues will you follow up?  
 - Ask about how clinic supplied - who? how often?  
 - Advice about changing methods when supplies run out - Why do methods prices change?  
 - No follow up of clients?

(7) Does the note-taker have any suggestions for the moderator and vice versa?  
 - NT → try to get more quotes  
 - Mod → direct questions at participants who don't speak

group ends. Refer to the example immediately below. The purpose of the debriefing is to record any additional information that may not be in the notes, and to discuss the information collected, the questions asked and any comments that may need clarification.

3. **Refer back to the purpose of your data collection.** After you have completed all of your focus groups, refer back to your plan for how you will use the information and what questions you needed answered. This will help you focus your analysis by keeping in mind its direction and key information needs.
4. **Organize your information.** Reread all of the focus group discussion notes and draw out pieces of information based on the questions you wanted to answer. You may want to add other categories based on unexpected themes that came up during the discussions. The data organization process can be straightforward or complex, depending on your information needs, time and resources available and the capacity of those who are analyzing the data.
5. **Summarize the findings.** What this summary looks like will depend on the purpose of your focus groups. If, for example, you have conducted focus groups to help refine the design of an education awareness raising campaign, and the audience for your findings is primarily internal (within IRC), you will not need to write a lengthy report of your findings. In this case, the findings may be presented verbally or as a short report focused on the implications of the findings for program design. If, however, the focus groups were among several data collection methods used in the evaluation of a program, you may need to organize and record the findings in a more formal report. In many cases, you will want to report your findings to the people involved in the discussions and the wider community; these reports will usually take the form of an in-person presentation to summarize what was learned. Regardless, make sure the summary of the findings includes an explanation of why and how you did the focus groups, how you selected your participants, as well as what you found.

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## Conclusion

### ***But we do focus groups all the time – do they really need to be so complicated?***

REL's intent is not to make focus groups seem more complicated than they really are. At their core, focus groups are conversations among people. The clues and free flowing opinions that can result if the setting is good and the moderator skilled result precisely because a focus group is somehow less formal than standing in front of someone with a written survey that you fill out as they speak.

At the same time, it is important to remember that all data collection needs to be systematic if the findings are to be useful. In the case of focus groups, being systematic means planning carefully and conducting purposeful, ethical and well managed discussions. It also means being clear from the beginning about why you are collecting this information, and constructing the questions in such a way that you get the information IRC needs.

### **Remember...**

**"A focus group is not** just a haphazard discussion or brainstorming among people who happen to be available; it is a well-planned research endeavor that requires the same care and attention that is associated with any other type of research" (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007).



## Exercise Responses

### Exercise 1:

1. The purpose of the RH team's data collection was to capture the status of young men and women's reproductive health knowledge at the beginning of the program that would serve as a point of comparison with the same data at the end of the program. These data would be used to evaluate the **apparent effectiveness** of the program.
2. No, focus groups are not the best method for collecting this kind of information, and for this purpose. The team was more interested in getting statistical information – the percentage of young women and men in a community who know how to use a condom, for example – that could be collected and compared across the life of the program. Focus groups will not capture such quantitative data; instead, they will provide in-depth information about people's opinions and perceptions.

### Exercise 2:

No, focus groups could not have given them this kind of statistical information. To make claims about the percentage of all young men and women in a community who know how to use a condom, for example, would require asking specific and pointed questions to a group of individuals who are "representative" of the entire population. The group or sample of people who participate in focus groups are not selected in a way that allows us to make generalizations about the entire population. Further, because focus group questions are addressed to an entire group, the responses and findings reflect the group's discussion about the topic, not individuals' opinions or perceptions.

## References

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### Key Term

#### *Apparent Effectiveness*

An evaluation of the apparent effectiveness of a program tells us whether we saw changes that we expected to see. See IRC's Evaluation Guidelines for more details.

## **Glossary**

<b>Apparent Effectiveness</b>	An evaluation of the apparent effectiveness of a program tells us whether we saw changes that we expected to see. See IRC's Evaluation Guidelines for more details.
<b>Focus group</b>	A method of data collection used to gather information about social norms and relationships among people in a community or group. Focus groups depend on group interaction and exchange of ideas. They seek to capture information about a group's opinion, and are often used to get people's perspectives about an issue or whether or not services are meeting their needs.
<b>Focus group guide</b>	A set of questions that a moderator uses in his or her discussion with focus group participants.
<b>Informed consent</b>	A person's agreement to allow something to happen, made with full knowledge of the risks involved and the alternatives.
<b>Moderator</b>	The person responsible for initiating the discussion, posing the questions specified in a focus group guide, keeping the discussion on track, and encouraging all participants to contribute.
<b>Moderator bias</b>	When the person facilitating the focus group influences what the participants say by knowingly or unknowingly providing cues about what types of responses are desirable, or seeks to achieve consensus on particular topics.
<b>Probe</b>	To question deeply or examine thoroughly.
<b>Purposeful sampling</b>	The process of selecting people to participate in a focus group who will be able to provide the most meaningful information on the topic.
<b>Note-taker</b>	The person responsible for documenting the discussion that takes place.
<b>Sample</b>	The subset of the population from whom data are collected.

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