

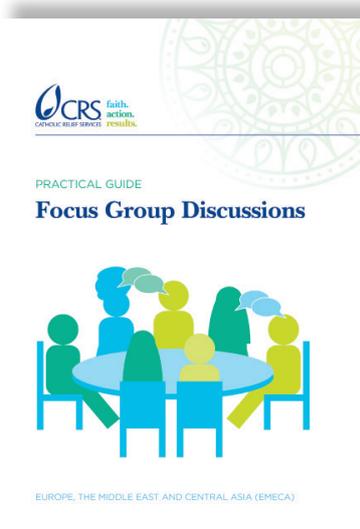


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PRACTICAL GUIDE

# Focus Group Discussions





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# Acronyms

<b>CFS</b>	child friendly spaces
<b>CRS</b>	Catholic Relief Services
<b>FGD</b>	focus group discussion
<b>KII</b>	key informant interview
<b>MEAL</b>	monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning
<b>MOE</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>NFI</b>	non-food item
<b>NGO</b>	nongovernmental organization
<b>RTA</b>	regional technical advisor

# What Focus Group Discussions Are and When to Use Them



## WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD)?

A **focus group discussion** is a qualitative data collection method that engages 6 to 12 people—with shared characteristics pertinent to the specific discussion topic—and is led by a trained facilitator. The shared characteristics may relate to a particular problem, livelihoods occupation, age, social group, place of residence, experience of adopting or not adopting a specific behavior promoted by a project, etc.<sup>1</sup> The discussion is facilitated using a semi-structured interview guide to foster active participation and in-depth discussion. The semi-structured nature of the discussion intends to probe specific, predetermined topics while allowing flexibility, and stimulating participants to share and discuss among each other. An FGD aims to gain insights into people's motivations and social practices, as well as how they view or perceive their experiences, communities, and other aspects of life. Like all qualitative methods, FGDs use open-ended questions to collect qualitative data i.e. words and narrative explanations.

A **focus group discussion** is a qualitative data collection method that engages a group with shared characteristics, and is led by a trained facilitator.

An **FGD is not** a group interview that results in a collection of individual participants' responses. Rather, it encourages the participants to talk to one another, discuss and build upon or challenge each other's opinions. An FGD does not generate data on a number or percentage of respondents with one or the other position; rather it generates data on the number of FGDs that reached or did not reach a consensus on the issue under investigation.

## WHEN DO WE USE FGDS IN THE PROJECT CYCLE?

FGDs can be used at various stages of our work including during assessments, at baseline, and for monitoring and evaluation. They can be used in parallel with quantitative methods, before or after quantitative data collection, or independently.

FGDs used **during assessments** can help with understanding the perceived needs and priorities of an affected population and probe issues identified through secondary data review. Assessments typically use only qualitative methods so FGDs are often combined with observations or key informant interviews (KIIs), ranking exercises, etc.

FGDs held **before quantitative data collection** can help explore, design or refine the quantitative data collection tools. E.g. you may use FGDs to explore beneficiary perception of the main factors that influence resilience and use findings to develop a quantitative tool to measure it at **baseline and endline**.

FGDs done **after quantitative data collection** can help probe deeper into *why* or *how* certain things have or have not occurred. This can be used **during monitoring** to understand why certain quantitative indicators' targets have not been achieved (e.g. why households do not use a certain knowledge or skill taught at trainings), and generate evidence to inform immediate remedial action. In these cases, FGDs help explain quantitative data.

In **evaluations** FGDs can similarly help explore why certain changes have or have not happened. They can be used simultaneously with quantitative methods and tools to compare or relate data collected through mixed methods.<sup>2</sup>

1. Adapted from *Guidance on Participatory Assessments* (Dummett et al 2013)

2. In mixed-method research, comparing and relating may result in conflicting findings between data collected through different methods. Lack of agreement is a sign that additional qualitative data collection or additional analysis may be needed, potentially leading to new emergent understandings of complex social phenomena. (Wagner et al. 2012)

The decision on when to conduct FGDs and—in case of a mixed-methods approach—their sequencing in relation to the other methods is influenced by the objective of the effort; the overarching assessment, monitoring or evaluation questions the FGDs seek to respond to (herein referred to as learning questions); and the human and financial resources available for the effort.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

FGDs are considered a low-cost method whose flexible format allows the facilitator to explore unanticipated issues. Because of their flexible design and the exchanges among participants, the discussions may lead to the discovery of attitudes and opinions that may not be revealed through methods targeting the individual, such as structured interviews, surveys or semi-structured key informant interviews. The FGD enables rapid collection of multiple perspectives on the topics under investigation, thus generating more information faster than in individual interviews. Interaction among FGD participants provides rich insights, and checks and balances, thus minimizing unique or outlying opinions. FGDs are an excellent method for obtaining information from, and hearing the concerns and ideas of, communities that cannot read or write. But an FGD may not be the best method to explore sensitive topics that may bring a sense of shame or discomfort to the participants.



An FGD enables **rapid collection of multiple perspectives** on the topics under investigation, thus generating more information faster than in individual interviews.

### Disadvantages include:

- Susceptibility to facilitator's bias, which may undermine the validity and reliability of findings.
- Limited confidentiality of information shared during the discussion.
- The risk of the discussion getting sidetracked by topics that may not be the primary focus.
- The risk of the discussion being dominated by one or more individuals, thus silencing other participants or simply making them agree with the most dominant person.
- As with any qualitative method, the data generated through FGDs cannot be generalized to the entire population; FGDs indicate a range of views and opinions but not their distribution within the community. The data generated through FGDs needs to be interpreted within the context of each group's unique characteristics.

In other words, FGDs require experienced facilitators to generate rich and reliable information and skillful analysis and interpretation to make the most of the effort.

# FGD Design: Where and How to Start



## DEFINE THE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING QUESTIONS<sup>3</sup>

The first step in any data collection effort is defining the purpose or objective. The objective guides the development of the overarching questions the effort seeks to answer—hereafter referred to as *learning questions*—which in turn influence all other key decisions in the process, including selection of data collection methods, identification of data sources, development of tools, sampling decisions, etc.

The development of the objectives and learning questions is informed by the specific information needs identified by the users of the information to be generated through the effort. A good learning question specifies *what* we will be investigating, *where* and *with whom*.<sup>4</sup> Each learning question may have several sub-topics to be investigated (sometimes also expressed in the form of questions).

In the context of emergency or development programs, the development of objectives and learning questions is typically led by the programming team that is the primary user of the information, often with input from technical advisor(s) who can help with technical and conceptual framing of the overarching questions. The role of monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) staff at this stage is to help (a) confirm that FGDs are an appropriate method for collecting the information to respond to a learning question; (b) assess the design and feasibility of the data collection effort (e.g. how much scope or how many comparison groups are feasible); and (c) to initiate thinking about data analysis.

A good **learning question** specifies *what* we will be investigating, *where* and *with whom*.

### Examples of objectives and learning questions appropriate for FGDs:

#### ■ ASSESSMENT

**Purpose:** To explore/determine priority food security needs of households in Ghornia.

**Learning questions:** What are household coping strategies at periods of hunger? How do they differ between different types of households?

#### ■ MONITORING/FOLLOW-UP TO QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

**Purpose:** To explore the gap between the high levels of knowledge gained at the community trainings and low adoption/application of practices.

**Learning questions:** Why do 75 percent of farmers report increased knowledge after the training on potato storage, yet only 30 percent have applied that knowledge? What are specific barriers and how different are they for farmers owning up to 1, and between 1 and 5 *dunums*, of cultivated land?

#### ■ MONITORING/FOLLOW-UP TO INFORMAL OBSERVATION

**Purpose:** To discover reasons for beneficiaries not using distributed materials in Takarma (they are lying on the ground around their houses).

**Learning question:** Why are the beneficiaries not using the distributed tarps?

#### ■ EVALUATION

**Purpose:** To understand the impact of child friendly spaces (CFS) on children's well-being.

**Learning question:** What is the impact of activities organized in CFS on targeted children? How is this impact described differently by children, parents and animators, and why?

3. These have also been referred to as assessment questions, evaluation questions, etc.

4. This process is usually nested within a broader process of planning for assessment, evaluation etc.

For more information on developing an assessment plan and its specific elements, please refer to *ProPack 1* (CRS 2015).

For more information on planning for evaluation, and development of evaluation terms of reference, please refer to the evaluation chapter in *Guidance on Monitoring and Evaluation* (Hagens et al 2012).

Not all learning questions can nor should be investigated through FGDs.<sup>5</sup> Generally, questions for which FGDs are the appropriate method aim to explore, describe, discover or understand.

## DECIDE WHO WE NEED TO COLLECT INFORMATION FROM

Once objectives and learning questions are developed, and the FGD is determined as the most suitable and feasible method for data collection, we need to decide who we need to talk to so we get the best insights into the topics under investigation. This step focuses on discussing and pre-identifying the **data sources** and then, within each data source, the **main groups** that might have different opinions or perspectives on the learning question and associated sub-topics that will be discussed during the FGD. The data sources represent broad categories of respondents e.g. students, children aged 6 to 17, farmers, etc. Defining the main groups within those broad categories of respondents entails determining the **shared characteristics** of individuals or households that we assume would hold a certain perspective. Defining shared characteristics is often informed by secondary data, our own experiences and assumptions, initial key informant interviews (KIIs), or existing monitoring data. These group characteristics define the types of participants you will invite to participate in the FGDs, and will feature as the comparison groups during the data analysis.

Defining **shared characteristics** is often informed by secondary data, our own experiences and assumptions, initial KIIs, or existing monitoring data.

Group characteristics relevant to defining focus group participants may include:

### Location

If a place of residence or settlement is likely to influence respondents' perspectives on the topic to be discussed, then location (where they come from or are settled in) may be one of the characteristics that will influence final selection of groups (e.g. inland versus coastal, rural versus urban, close to the market versus far from the market, etc.).

### Demographics

- **GENDER** As a rule of thumb, assume that we will ALWAYS want to hear separately from men and from women.
- **AGE** In some cases, age may be relevant to the topics to be discussed, e.g. in an education project, we may want to hear from children of different age groups. For a particular subject of discussion, young women may have different opinions or aspirations to older women.
- **NATIONALITY, ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION** Very often perspectives of respondents are influenced by their national, ethnic or religious background.

### Topic-based groups

We may have groups that share a specific household trait in relation to the topic to be discussed. For instance, when designing FGDs to explore resilience to climate shocks or FGDs to discuss food security, we may want to hear separately from households with different livelihood sources e.g. small livestock raising versus farming families, or from farmers with or without access to irrigated land, or of different wealth status. Or, when investigating why some households or communities have low behavior uptake of a specific practice or technology we are promoting, we may want to speak separately with groups of individuals who have or have not adopted this behavior.

5. Some questions may call for methods other than FGDs or as a complement to FGDs, e.g., *What is the relationship between the regularity of children's attendance at child friendly spaces and their psychosocial well-being? What is the impact of project activities on women's dietary diversity in the southern provinces?* These questions may be best responded to by using quantitative data collection methods, e.g., assessing and comparing children's attendance and their psychosocial well-being score, or gathering data from project participants to calculate women's dietary diversity score.

When defining the relevant characteristics of the main groups, consider the following issues:

- Identify the **minimum** number of “need to have” characteristics that are directly relevant to the topic. Ensure you use only one or two, at the most three, defining characteristics, otherwise the numbers can become unmanageable (see next section).
- Focus on individuals or groups **directly concerned or affected** by the issue you are investigating. As with all data collection methods, you should ask respondents about what they do, think, feel, know, need, aspire to, etc., not about what other people do or think.
- Reflect on the types of **comparisons** you will need to make across characteristics (e.g. comparing responses from men versus women, inland versus coastal communities). In some cases you may simply want to focus on respondents with a given characteristic that are most directly affected by the topic you are investigating (e.g. conducting FGDs only with groups of people who have not adopted a target behavior, rather than comparing between doers and non-doers).

Ensure you use only three **defining characteristics** at the most, otherwise the numbers can become unmanageable.

### Special consideration for FGDs with children

FGDs are not a suitable method for using with children under 10 years of age, as they most often will not sit quietly in a circle to discuss an issue, and younger children do not have sufficiently developed language capabilities to ensure appropriate and effective participation. If you seek feedback from younger children, consider other methods, including using drawings and pictures (e.g. smiling/frowning faces), theatre, hand puppets, and other interactive activities.

Ensure children’s groups are homogenous in age. There is a significant difference in the psychosocial and cognitive abilities between groups of 10-year-olds and 17-year-olds. Plan to have groups of children or young people of similar ages (for example, 10–11 years, 12–13 years, 14–15 years, 16–17 years).

When considering whether to use mixed gender groups or separate groups for boys and girls, consult the parents as well as the children. Ask the parents what is appropriate in their context and ask the children whether they prefer to talk in mixed or gender-segregated groups. To ensure meaningful feedback, it is important that children feel comfortable expressing their opinions freely without feeling shy, embarrassed or afraid someone will make fun of them. Usually, among children over age 10, there is an increase in teasing between gender groups, and girls and boys may feel shy speaking in front each other. Also take into account cultural considerations about the age at which girls and boys should be separated.



### HOW MANY FGDs ARE ENOUGH?

When deciding on the total number of FGDs, you will need to balance considerations of data validity with considerations of practical feasibility and the level of effort required for data collection and analysis. Data validity in qualitative studies is enforced through the principle of **data triangulation**,<sup>6</sup> which involves using two or more different *sources* of information in order to increase the validity of the results of a particular data collection effort. Therefore, the total number of FGDs will be influenced by the number of data sources deemed critical or best informed to respond to the learning question. For example, when exploring changes in child well-being, you may

6. The term triangulation comes from “triangle”, i.e. it typically suggests three data points. Note that the principle of triangulation extends to methods (using different methods to respond to the same learning question) and analysis (engaging different people to do the analysis of the same data).

need to conduct FGDs with parents, children and animators<sup>7</sup> so you can triangulate data among all different data sources. Note that triangulation across data sources should not be equated with comparing responses across comparison groups. In the example of exploring changes in child well-being, you will triangulate data from three data sources to check the validity, but will still have gender and age comparison groups for each of these data sources to learn their perspectives about the potential changes.



Another factor that influences the final number of FGDs is **data saturation**. Saturation refers to a point in the data collection process when all the viewpoints and information about the issue under investigation have been voiced by the participants. Additional FGDs of the same type would not reveal new insights or ideas that were not mentioned in previous FGDs. In our line of work, we usually want to conduct **two or, ideally, three FGDs with each distinct group of respondents with shared characteristics**. Based on experience and best practices, this is the point when data saturation occurs.

**Data saturation** is when all the viewpoints and information about the issue under investigation have been voiced by the participants, and additional data collection would not reveal any new insights.

Finally, logistical and cost considerations may be influential in determining the number of FGDs, and keeping the process manageable yet adequate for getting the information we need.

**80 percent**

**OF INSIGHTS ARE LIKELY TO BE CAPTURED BY 2 TO 3 FGDs OF THE SAME CHARACTERISTICS**

**90 percent**

**OF INSIGHTS ARE LIKELY TO BE CAPTURED BY 3 TO 6 FGDs OF THE SAME CHARACTERISTICS**

Source: Guest et al (2016)

**Deciding on the number of focus group discussions**

If you have too many specific characteristics and therefore too many different groups to collect data from, you may end up with an exhaustive FGD data collection effort that generates so much data that it becomes very challenging to analyze. One project wanted to understand how literacy and numeracy training influenced beneficiary effectiveness in keeping their financial books. The team identified the following characteristics: (1) type of business activities (with proposed comparisons between the 4 main types of small businesses assisted by the project: small businesses producing vegetables, running chicken farms, producing honey, and producing dairy products); (2) location (with proposed comparison across the 3 districts where the project was implemented); and (3) gender (businesses run by female versus male entrepreneurs). These 3 characteristics and comparison groups resulted in 24 different types of FGDs (4 x 3 x 2), so a total of 72 FGDs (24 x 3) would have had to be conducted!

When defining FGD types and characteristics, focus on **key characteristics that are likely to reveal differences in perspectives, needs or opinion**. In the above example, there was no reason to think that the type of business was relevant to the learning question. Unless monitoring data had revealed significant differences between the districts, there was no reason to sample each of the districts either. The plan for conducting FGDs could have been simplified to include: small businesses run by female versus male entrepreneurs in one remote and one more accessible district, for 12 FGDs total (3 male and 3 female entrepreneur FGDs in each of the 2 districts.)

7. Trained facilitators who work with children in child friendly spaces.

## SAMPLING DECISIONS

As in all qualitative data collection methods, FGDs require non-random or purposeful sampling.<sup>8</sup> Typically, there are two main sampling decisions to be made when conducting FGDs. These are: (1) decide on a sampling strategy to select locations from which you will call upon the FGD participants and (2) decide on a sampling strategy to select individual participants. Both are informed by your initial identification of the types of groups you want to hear from and their key shared characteristics, discussed in the previous step.



Decide on a sampling strategy to select **locations** and a sampling strategy to select **individual participants**.

### Select locations

This is informed by your initial discussion on demographics and locations. The sampling strategies that can be used here include: **best-worst case** (i.e. locations where beneficiaries exhibit high or low uptake rates), **critical case** (selecting communities that are critical to understanding the situation or context e.g. communities at the forefront of disaster) or **typical case** (selecting a few locations from a set of locations that represent an average, not markedly better or worse than others, according to the characteristics that are of interest). Note that in a selection of communities, it is possible to use so-called **purposeful random sampling**<sup>9</sup> when location does not feature as a factor that significantly influences participants' opinions.

### Select participants

Once you have selected target locations, think of ways to identify individuals with the key shared characteristics identified in the step above. A few tips to do so:

- The most common techniques include: **typical case sampling**, entailing identification of individuals that are “typical” representatives of those with the characteristics we have identified, and **snowball sampling**, which relies on local knowledge to identify relevant respondents and then they identify others with the same characteristics.
- *NEVER* use **random sampling** when selecting FGD participants. Remember, the groups need to be homogenous and all individual members need to share the characteristic relevant to your information needs in order for you to get the most out of the discussion.
- **Convenience sampling** (approaching respondents based on convenience of accessibility and availability) should be avoided as it is highly unlikely that participants selected through this approach will indeed share identified characteristics. Convenience sampling is neither purposeful nor strategic.<sup>10</sup>

8. For more information on purposeful sampling, please refer to *Guidance on Monitoring and Evaluation* (Hagens et al 2012).

9. It is critical to note the emphasis on a purposeful, rather than a representative, sample. The purpose of a small purposeful random sample is credibility, not representation. (Patton 1990).

10. Patton 1990.

## Good practice in the selection of FGD participants

- Consider **using local contacts** in the communities, such as community leaders, elders or mobilizers that are from those communities, to help identify FGD participants. Be careful of local contacts' bias in the selection process, e.g. inviting their friends or acquaintances, as this may evolve into convenience sampling.
- In some cases, it may be appropriate to **go to places where the community gathers** and ask respondents to self-identify according to the shared characteristics.
- There is no consensus on the **optimal number of participants per FGD**, but a range of 6 to 12 is considered sufficient to generate an active discussion. That is, for each FGD, you will aim to identify 6 to 12 participants sharing specific characteristics. It is better to conduct an FGD with a smaller group (e.g. 6 to 8 people), allowing for more in-depth discussion, than to have an FGD with 10 or 12 participants. As the group gets larger, managing time, facilitating the discussion, and ensuring the active participation of all respondents becomes more challenging.

## Special consideration for FGDs with children

FGDs with children aged 10 to 13 years should have 5 or 6 participants, while those with children aged 14 to 17 years can have up to 8 participants. If the group is too small, children might feel nervous. If it is too big, they may not participate as much. Discussions tend to work better if the children already know each other and feel comfortable and safe in each other's company.

When selecting children to participate in FGDs, it is good practice that a trusted person, such as a teacher or animator, explains the purpose of the meeting ahead of time (e.g. the day before and again on the day of the FGD) and asks for volunteers within the identified group characteristics (e.g. age, gender, etc.).



# Designing the FGD Guide



Every data collection method requires its corresponding tool to guide the data collection process. For FGDs, this tool is the FGD Guide. It contains all the questions you intend to ask FGD participants, as well as introductory and concluding information. Its format is semi-structured, with questions phrased in an open-ended way, inviting participants to share and discuss among themselves, and helping the facilitator guide the discussion.

## STRUCTURE OF THE FGD GUIDE

The FGD Guide should contain three parts:

1. **THE OPENING (OR ENGAGEMENT) SECTION** lists instructions for the following:
  - Welcoming the group and giving initial introductions of the facilitator, notetaker and participants.
  - Explaining, in the language understood by participants, the purpose of the data collection effort and the FGD, how the participants were selected to be part of that FGD, and the future use of the data.
  - Explaining the roles of facilitator, notetaker and participants, the expected duration of the discussion, the ground rules (e.g. mobile phones off) and the way the discussion will progress, emphasizing the importance of participants' honest responses, interaction, and that there are no right or wrong answers.
  - Explaining ethical considerations, including confidentiality and its limitations, voluntary participation, the right to refuse or withdraw, emphasizing no consequences for either.
  - Instructions for obtaining the participants' written or oral consent.
2. **THE EXPLORATION SECTION** is the main part of the FGD Guide. It lists all the questions for guiding the discussion, as well as possible probing questions, in a logical sequence.
3. **THE CLOSING (OR EXIT) SECTION** provides guidance for wrapping up the FGD. It reminds enumerators to invite participants to provide further information or input if they want to, to provide participants with contact information, to reiterate how the data will be used, to explain when the larger process will be completed, and to thank them for their time.

Emphasize to participants the importance of their **honest responses** and **interaction**, and that there are **no right or wrong answers**.

**Enumerators:** Individuals involved in the data collection process, facilitating FGD and notetaking



## Confidentiality during FGD data collection

The confidentiality of participants and information shared is particularly challenging when using the FGD method. Once something is shared within the group, it may become **common knowledge**. Encourage participants not to share the information beyond the group, however, be clear that you cannot guarantee complete confidentiality. It is a shared responsibility.

The participation is **anonymous**. As part of the confidentiality discussion, the facilitator needs to explain further sharing of notes and future use of data, pointing out that **nothing shared in the discussion will be associated with participants' names**.

The enumerators should never ask for any personally identifying information (i.e. names, phone numbers, home addresses, etc.). It is good practice to ask participants for their first names during the introduction so you can engage them in the conversation, but these should **not be written in the notebook**.

## More on ethical considerations

1. **VERBAL AND WRITTEN CONSENT FORM** This should be completed *before* the FGD starts and is designed to empower an FGD participant to decide whether or not to participate. This requires that subjects have the capacity to make their own decisions. Therefore, if you are working with groups that may not be able to do so, i.e. children or people with mental disabilities, you need to make ensure you obtain consent from their caregivers. No FGD should take place without consent from all FGD participants.
2. **MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY** Participants' identity and responses *after* FGDs should be confidential. After data collection is completed, all FGD notes need to be securely stored, managed and disposed of. The documents need to be kept in a secure location and made accessible only to the team members who are engaged in the effort. Note that maintaining confidentiality after the FGD notes are transcribed may require anonymizing certain parts, especially when notes are to be shared with an audience external to the team or someone perceived as potentially harmful by FGD participants. If any information shared during the discussion may reveal a person's identity, those portions of the notes need to be anonymized; potentially revealing terms should be replaced with generic ones.
3. **PROTECTION MEASURES** Be aware of and avoid potential risks you may inadvertently cause to participants by selecting them to participate in an FGD. Your primary concern is to Do No Harm and to ensure the protection of the respondents, and these take precedence over any other objectives associated with the effort.

*Remember* that many countries may have specific laws and regulations related to responsible data collection and management; be sure to check!

## Special consideration for FGDs with children

Parents or guardians/caregivers of the children who will participate in an FGD must be informed about the objectives of the FGD and provide their formal consent beforehand. No child can participate in an FGD without CRS having received the written consent from their parent or guardian/caregiver. Additionally, children should understand the objective of the FGD, how the data will be used, and that their participation is optional and voluntary. Even if a caregiver has given their consent, if a child does not feel comfortable participating, they should never be pressured into doing so.



## STEPS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE 'EXPLORATION' SECTION

- Review the objective of the FGD effort and learning question(s) you want to answer through FGDs. Ask yourself: What do we want to learn from the respondents? What do we **need to know** in order to respond to the learning question? This usually results in several sub-topics that need to be covered under each of the learning questions.
- Based on identified sub-topics, **formulate 1 to 3 key discussion questions** per sub-topic.
- Come up with ideas for a few follow-up, probing questions. Probing questions are neutral questions, phrases and gestures used to encourage participants to clarify or expand their responses. Probing questions may include: *Why do you think x is important? Why not? Is there anything else? Please share specific examples to illustrate x.* Remember that, during the discussion, you may choose to ask probing questions different from those in the FGD Guide, to allow for a natural flow of the discussion. Also, you may simply use a pause or gesture as a probe to encourage participants to explain or share more.
- Review the sequencing of the questions. Make sure the flow is appropriate for generating a rich discussion. Go from simple, warm-up questions that are easy to respond to, to more complex or sensitive issues. If needed, develop transitional statements to move from one topic to another.
- Narrow the list of questions down to the ones that are most directly relevant and important for the topics you want to discuss, ideally **no more than 7 to 10 questions**, keeping in mind that each question may be followed by additional probing questions to generate a discussion within the group. An FGD should ideally last **between 30 minutes and 1 hour, never more than 2 hours**.
- Translate all questions into the local language that will be used in the field. If you have time, consider having a second person back-translate the FGD Guide into English to ensure the accuracy of the translation.



You may choose to ask **probing questions** different from those in the FGD Guide, to allow for a natural flow of the discussion.

### Tips for writing questions in the FGD Guide

- Avoid closed-ended questions, i.e. questions that can be answered by “yes”, “no” or one-word answers. Instead use open-ended questions that begin with ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘why’, etc.
- Keep questions short and simple. Never pose the learning question in its original form as this is a higher-level, and often more complex, question that needs to be responded to through the series of questions in the FGD Guide.
- Avoid dichotomous questions that contain ‘OR’ or ‘AND’ that include two distinct issues. *E.g. How do you think our project and the external situation influenced your ability to do x?*
- Avoid leading questions. *E.g. How do you think lack of money in your household contributed to your children not going to school?*
- Avoid jargon or technical language that may be confusing or misunderstood by the participants. *E.g. How do you think our project influenced the MOE’s ability to work in schools?*
- Do not ask personal or sensitive questions in a group setting. *E.g. How much have you earned from selling the livestock?*
- Do not ask fact-establishing questions in a group setting. *E.g. How many refugees arrived in your village?* These are much more appropriate for individual interviews with key informants or could be responded to through secondary data review.
- Ask about what respondents do, know, feel, aspire to. Do not ask them to speculate about what other people may do or think, or about topics outside their direct knowledge. *E.g. do not ask men about activities that women typically do, and the reverse.*

## Special consideration for FGDs with children

As with the adults, the questions should be open-ended enough to hear what children have to say. It is especially critical to ensure questions are phrased appropriately to the age level.

Do not use leading questions, especially with children who can be easily manipulated into saying what you want them to say. It is possible that the outcome of FGDs with children will be different from (or even contradict) the outcome of FGDs with their parents or other adults. Children have their own very specific experiences and perceptions (due to their age, size, developmental stage) and often perceive and experience risks, dangers and situations differently from adults. It is important to take children's input as seriously as adults'.

When possible, incorporate things to touch, do, or respond to (e.g. a picture or story, or objects). Don't just use words as a stimulant. This is particularly important for younger children.

Ensure that you do not include any questions that could be upsetting for children. Avoid raising too many negative or sad issues; phrase questions in a positive way whenever possible. When children talk about the challenges that they are facing in their communities or at home, avoid making personal judgments ("this is bad", "that was wrong", etc.) and always be respectful when referring to their parents and community members.

Staff conducting the FGDs should be trained on how to respond to and report any protection cases that may be disclosed by children in FGDs.

FGDs with children should last no more than 40 to 60 minutes. Use songs or activities in between questions or topics, if you feel their energy is getting low.



## TRAINING, FIELD TESTING AND FINALIZATION OF THE FGD GUIDE

### Selection of enumerators

It is strongly recommended that FGDs are conducted in the local language. Translation is too disruptive to ensure a natural flow of discussion, picking up on issues for further probing, and uninhibited exchange among participants. Non-native speakers may observe the discussion with discreet translation, though this is also often considered to be too disruptive and potentially harmful to genuine participation. It is desirable for facilitators and notetakers to have some basic knowledge of the topic under investigation to be able to competently guide the discussion. This would ensure that facilitators do not quickly brush over responses, thus missing the opportunity to explore something of relevance in-depth.

### Training of enumerators

Thorough training of enumerators is a must before data collection. Training may involve other team members, including those who will translate and transcribe or participate in the analysis and interpretation. The topics to be covered at the training include:

- Overview of project or related intervention, if applicable
- Objectives of the effort and the main learning questions
- Overall timeframe/work plan
- Key principles for collecting high-quality data to minimize errors
- Sampling approach to be applied in the data collection effort
- Roles and responsibilities of the team members working on the effort
- FGDs as a data collection method, including facilitation and group management techniques
- Notetaking
- Tool/FGD guide to be used in the effort

## How many enumerators do you need?

The number of required enumerators will be influenced by the following:

- Time and resources available
- Total number of FGDs you need to conduct
- Geographical dispersion of locations

Best practice is to have teams of **two enumerators for each FGD**. One person will serve as facilitator of the discussion and the other as notetaker.

In most cultures, you will need to **separate male and female teams** so that female enumerators can conduct FGDs with women, and male enumerators with men, to foster open discussion. When recruiting or selecting enumerators, make sure your team is gender-balanced so you have enough staff to conduct female and male disaggregated FGDs. It is often easier to conduct both male and female FGDs in each location at the same time. To do so, plan for (at least) one male and one female enumerator team in each location.

It is strongly advised that training is conducted using the actual FGD Guide that will be used in the field (in English and in the local language). This will be an opportunity for enumerators to come to a mutual understanding of each question's intent and ensure the translation of the guide is accurate. Use role plays in which one enumerator acts as the facilitator and others as FGD participants, especially if this method of data collection is new to staff.

Conduct training using the actual **FGD Guide** that will be used in the field (in English and in the local language).

## Field testing and finalizing the FGD Guide

Field testing of the FGD Guide is a must. You don't have to go through an extensive field testing effort; two FGDs typically suffice (e.g. one with men and another with women). After field testing, have the team identify questions that were not clear, or generated information that did not match the question's intent, or that resulted in yes/no answers without detail. Discuss the field testing experience with the enumerators and agree on changes to be made to the FGD Guide, and then revise and finalize the tool with the team leader.

Be sure you keep copies of the final tool versions on file, in English and the local language.

## Special consideration for FGDs with children

The selection of facilitators to run FGDs with children is a key to their success. The facilitator needs to build rapport with the children without being patronizing. They need to be comfortable working with children and have experience doing this. They must exude trust, respect, tolerance, humor and a willingness to listen.

The facilitator conducting the FGD should speak the same language as the children. Children younger than 14 years often find it difficult to concentrate and await translation. If translation is necessary, consider having a native speaker conduct the FGD and interact directly with the children and an interpreter simultaneously translating for the non-native speaker outside the circle. The children do not have to wait for the translation, but the non-native speaker can still ask follow-up or clarification questions if needed.

As with adults, always make sure you have a separate person for notetaking. For FGDs with children, this is especially important as the facilitator needs to be able to concentrate on building up the relationship with the children and making them feel comfortable. Trying to take notes while running the discussion will act as a barrier to the relationship and flow, and may worry the children. The notetaker should sit outside the circle of children and, as much as possible, beyond the line of sight.



# Preparing For and Managing Fieldwork



## ORGANIZE THE VENUE AND SUPPLIES

Make sure you find a venue that is **accessible** to all participants, yet sufficiently private for them to be comfortable and freely express their views.

Bring all the **supplies** the FGD requires, especially if you plan to use a flipchart, pictures, cards, stones or beans, etc. Make sure that both the facilitator and the notetaker have the final versions of the FGD Guide and enough notebooks. Don't take notes in the guide itself, but rather use a separate notebook for each of the FGDs. This ensures that the notetaker has sufficient space to write responses word-for-word.

You may consider providing small **refreshments** as a token of appreciation for participants taking the time to participate in the discussion.

### Potential privacy challenges and ways to overcome them

Securing a private place for discussion may require negotiation with elders, community leaders or husbands, who may be eager to listen to what FGD participants have to say. However, the presence of anyone outside of the group selected, even as an observer, may influence participants' responses. Therefore, **it is of utmost importance to negotiate a private space**, by reiterating the purpose of the FGD, the confidentiality principles, etc. Sometimes this may require running a separate interview with a leader or an elder before or while the FGD is being conducted, or organizing concurrent FGDs with male and female participants.

It is of utmost importance to negotiate a **private space**, by reiterating the purpose of the FGD, and its confidentiality principles.

## PLAN FOR DAILY DEBRIEFS WITH THE FGD TEAM

A daily team debrief is a **MUST** and should involve all the facilitators and notetakers. This is typically done at the end of the day, so ensure it is scheduled after everyone is back from the field. If teams are dispersed across different locations, the daily debrief may take place over the phone or on Skype. The daily debrief focuses on sharing general impressions about the process of data collection and the content learned during the day. The team shares experiences and insights; talks about challenges, including potentially inadequate questions that are not producing the required information, or are duplicative, or are left blank; and discusses the occurrence of data saturation, etc. During the debrief, the team should jointly identify solutions to improve the process and participation in general and discuss plans for the next day. The debrief is chaired by the team leader, who writes brief notes, usually in the form of bullet points.

## KEEP TRACK OF THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

As the data collection in the field evolves, the team leader needs to ensure that the process goes as planned and all data gathered is safely delivered and stored at a central location. An archival data collection log—a simple table detailing the date of FGD, type of FGD, location, facilitator and notetaker names—is a helpful tool to keep track of all FGDs being conducted, and to check if data collection is going according to plan.<sup>11</sup> If possible, each team of facilitator and notetaker should deliver all FGD notes to the office or to the team leader at the end of each day.

An archival **data collection log**—a simple table detailing the date of FGD, type of FGD, location, facilitator and notetaker names—is a helpful tool.

If many FGDs are taking place on one day, it is recommended that team leaders are assigned a location so they can provide on-site management of the process and assigned teams of enumerators. These team leaders can also help with on-site solutions to potential challenges, e.g., securing a private space, negotiating with elders or village committees, and reinforcing data quality i.e. reviewing the notes for completeness and clarity, and pointing out potential gaps so they can immediately be addressed.

## ARRANGE FOR TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION OF NOTES

The FGD notes should be transcribed as soon as possible, preferably as they are delivered to the office, even though the data collection is still ongoing in the field. In our line of work, since FGDs are conducted in the local language, the notes will also need to be translated, therefore transcription and translation most often happen at the same time. It is critical to ensure sufficient time and resources to avoid rushing through this process, thus potentially jeopardizing the quality of the notes. It is often best to use translators at the office rather than external professionals who may not be familiar with the jargon and terminology. For that to happen, work with your manager in advance to allocate translators' time to this specific task. Note that you may often need more than one translator assigned to the effort. Remember to brief the translators on the purpose of the effort and the expectations in terms of transcription and translation quality.

## PREPARE FOR THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION WORKSHOP

It is good practice to prepare for data analysis before or as soon as the data collection commences in the field. At this point, it is advisable to start thinking about your data interpretation workshop or reflection event, for instance, developing the seven steps of design (See *Guidance on Designing and Delivering Effective Training Events*)<sup>12</sup> and drafting a rough outline of the process. Note that for larger data collection efforts, you may need to plan for a 2- to 3-day workshop. If you plan to use electronic copies of notes for organizing data, you may initiate development of a master data matrix (see Page 23) and start by populating it as soon as the notes are transcribed/translated.

11. This log will also be helpful when you start writing the report, to summarize information on data sources and participants profile.

12. Egger and Morel, 2016.

# Conducting FGDs



## WELCOME PARTICIPANTS

As participants arrive, ask them to sit in a **semicircle**. Start the FGD with the opening section of the FGD Guide. Make sure you address ethical considerations and obtain consent before moving on to the discussion. You may consider asking a few informal warm-up questions to break the ice.

## GUIDE THE DISCUSSION

The exploration section is the main part of the FGD. Ask the questions as they are written in the guide, but allow for some flexibility in the sequencing or probing questions to ensure the natural flow of the discussion. Don't forget that the FGD Guide is a semi-structured tool to help you guide the discussion; it is not a survey instrument, where you need to ask the questions in the same order and exactly as written on the paper. Let the discussion evolve naturally, without intervening unnecessarily, but without letting things get out of hand either.

As participants provide initial responses to each main discussion question, probe and investigate further if some issues come up that are particularly relevant to the topic. Use your judgment in deciding when to probe further. For instance, you may decide that the group has sufficiently covered a certain topic and that you do not need to ask any probing questions from the FGD Guide; or you may add a follow-up question that was not in the tool but which naturally flows from the direction of the conversation and is likely to produce insights of value to the topic of discussion. Do not get carried away, though, as you need to ensure all the main questions in the FGD Guide get answered within the time allocated for the discussion. If you notice that the discussion is superficial or fails to really start, ask for specific examples.



Don't forget that the FGD Guide is a **semi-structured tool** to help you guide the discussion, and does not need to be followed exactly.

## MANAGE THE DISCUSSION

Be patient. Don't stop anyone from talking, but ensure that everyone is given a chance to express themselves. Avoid taking too active a role in the discussion; the ideal is to generate a discussion among participants, not a back-and-forth conversation between the facilitator and the participants.

If someone dominates the discussion while other participants remain silent, thank the dominant participant for their input and turn slightly to face the other participants, calling on them to express their views. Make eye contact while asking probing questions to engage less active participants. Intentionally reach out and invite participants who are quiet to share their opinions. Ask questions such as: *"What do others think? Who else thinks this way? Who has a different opinion?"* If the conversation goes off track, don't interrupt, but use the first opportunity to sum up what has been said, then redirect the conversation.

If anyone wants to leave the discussion, allow them to do so. Remember, participation is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Be sure to thank those who leave.

Interruptions are common, especially if you were unable to find sufficiently private space. Be prepared to manage these patiently and use this time to review the remaining questions, make additional notes, etc. If the interruptions become too frequent, consider rescheduling the FGD.

## Facilitator's and notetaker's behavior

A good facilitator is one who creates a comfortable atmosphere, is naturally observant of the reactions of others, and can adapt according to these reactions. Both facilitator and notetaker should show warmth, responsiveness and a general interest in the respondents, but avoid the extremes of being too formal or too relaxed.

The facilitator and notetaker should be neutral in their behavior and attitudes, without exhibiting either positive or negative bias to anything mentioned by the respondents. Both verbal and nonverbal cues must be avoided. Facial expressions, tone, manners or body language may indicate an attitude or a judgment without the facilitator or notetaker intending to do so. The facilitator should be careful not to add comments or reactions besides encouraging people to talk, regardless of what they say and how different the participants' views are in comparison to their own. The notetaker should be as discreet and neutral as possible, so that the participants do not wonder or worry what is being written down while they talk.

The facilitator and notetaker need to work as a team. The facilitator should keep an eye on the notetaker, and allow them to catch up, before moving to the next question or topic in the FGD Guide. The facilitator should allow the notetaker to ask quick, clarifying questions of the facilitator or the participants, if needed. The notetaker may help the facilitator, if necessary, by pointing out questions that were not well explored or were missed.

## GROUP CONSENSUS

The facilitator should not push for consensus at the group level. It is OK if participants have different opinions on the discussed topics. Get a sense of the general group position or—if there is no agreement—what the different positions are and how the group is roughly split between them.

It is OK if participants have **different opinions** on the discussed topics

## CLOSING THE DISCUSSION

Be sure to thank participants for their participation. Explain what will happen with the information shared at the FGD. Respond to any questions participants may have and provide them with contact information should they want to provide additional input or ask questions.

## Special consideration for FGDs with children

As with adults, make sure you introduce yourself and the notetaker (and any other colleagues), explain what you want to do and why. Get the children to introduce themselves. It is important that they see themselves as valued individuals, not just sources of information for you.

Don't put words into children's mouths, and be sure to check that you understand what they are really saying. Children are great at giving examples; ask for a specific example to help clarify if you are not sure what they are saying. Give children time; don't rush them into giving an answer.

Once you have explained the objectives of the FGD and done the introductions, consider establishing ground rules together with the children (e.g. children have the right but not the duty to speak; when someone speaks everyone must listen); this is a good way to get the children to start talking and sharing their points of view. However, while conducting the FGD, remember that some small talk is normal and can be relaxing for children. Do not enforce the rules too strictly and always ensure a friendly and positive atmosphere.



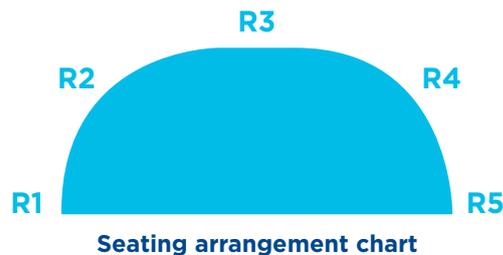
## TAKING NOTES

Notes from the FGDs are critical to ensuring the quality of the data and maximizing the benefits of the effort. If notetaking is poor, the effort taken to prepare and conduct the FGD may be futile. The notes should be extensive and reflect the content of the discussion, as well as nonverbal communication, including participants' facial expressions, body language, types of interaction among participants, etc. The discussion should be noted in the language the participants used, retaining their original phrases and grammar. This minimizes the risk of distortion of the information and ensures all details are recorded, including examples or anecdotes.

The notes should be extensive and reflect the **content** of the discussion, as well as **nonverbal communication**.

### The best practices for notetaking are:

- Use one notebook per FGD.
- At the top of the first page, note the date, time, the facilitator's name, and your (notetaker's) name, and who you are talking to (type of respondents and number of participants in the FGD).
- Once the participants are seated in a semi-circle, draw a seating arrangement chart on the first page of the notebook. Jot down *R1*, *R2*, *R3*, *R4*, *R5* etc. for each person present. This will ease the notetaking process so that each comment is assigned to the person giving it.



- Start each new question on a new page.
- Start each new respondent's comment on a new line, starting each response/comment with the respondent's unique code (i.e. R1, R5) to identify who said what. One person saying something eight times is still only one person, and should not be misinterpreted as a shared group opinion. Records of what each individual in an FGD says are not meant to support analysis of the individual's opinion or perception, but rather to track whether a particular person was dominant or had systematically opposing views to every issue discussed.
- Record what people say **word-for-word** whenever possible or at least write the main content of their responses word-for-word. Don't summarize or rephrase what people say in your own words. Try to write what each respondent says in their own dialect. Summarizing or paraphrasing responses can be misleading. For example, a verbatim reply: 'Yes, indeed! I fully agree!' loses its intensity if recorded simply as "Yes."
- To ensure accurate capturing of the discussion, which at times can be very lively and dynamic, the notetaker may use shorthand, abbreviations or symbols that, during the review of the notes, should be expanded into full sentences.
- In some cases it may be challenging or unnecessary to keep track of every single word said by participants. If there is a long debate, write down the main content of the discussion, the key points made and main phrases used. Note if consensus was reached or what the different opinions were and how the group was roughly split between those opinions.
- If you notice that some of the questions from the FGD Guide have been missed, inform the facilitator before the closing section of the FGD Guide.

**Don't summarize** or rephrase what people say in your own words.

## Example of notes from FGDs exploring factors that influence child well-being

### Q from FGD Guide: What are the factors that affect your child's well-being?

**R1:** I see that my daughter enjoys recreational activities and playing with other kids.

**R6:** My son too! He really loves sports activities, football and such. Especially when he is together with his friends. However, I also noticed if they don't have a ball then they spend their time just sitting around and thinking of some mischief.

**R7:** Boys are like that, especially at certain age when they have too much energy. I told the animators that they should punish my boy if he misbehaves.

**R5:** I don't agree with that, why would someone else punish my child, that would do no good for him. Don't you think so?

**R7:** I think we need to have discipline, and my boy is not with me all the time. We all need to ensure this is happening. You know how they say, it takes a village to raise the child. [R7: Shakes her head].

**R3:** I have two children, a boy and a girl, and there is a difference in the things they enjoy and things that make them happy. My girl is 10 and she loves to sing. Last month, when there was a singing competition, she really put her heart into preparing for it. My boy on the other hand [he is 13], have lots of fun when he hangs out with his friends. Boys like to compete so whatever activity can make this happen they are totally in it.

**R1:** My daughter also loved singing competition!

Question from FGD Guide; can be referenced by the number, e.g. Q3; copy-pasted during transcript.

Observations made during FGD of nonverbal communication, in brackets.

### Follow-up Q: Who organized the competition?

**R3:** It was in comm. center space, last month. [R1, 5 and 7 repeated the same].

**R4:** You are all right, our children enjoy playing and spending time with their friends, but for this to happen, we as parents need to be able to support them, give them love, sometimes work with them on their homework.

**R3:** Yes, I agree! I have 2 children and it is sometimes hard to dedicate them enough attention, especially when I worry about whether we will have enough money to put food on the table. It is hard for us now, my husband lost his job and now he cannot find another one. It is only seasonal work for which he gets very little money [everyone was nodding].

### [Probe: How are you managing? Who is supporting you?]

**R4:** We had some organizations – like you – come and give some food parcels but not everyone got it. [laughter]

R2 and 1 joked that organizations just come and go, no one offers permanent job.

**R7:** My family got nothing. My in-laws are helping us, little that they have they share with us.

Probes. Follow-up questions clearly marked.

### Team's observations:

- R6 was very quiet during the discussion, possibly because her sister was there (R4)
- There was visible discomfort when we started talking about husbands not having jobs any more. After FDG, a few participants (R3 and R7) asked us to help their families get additional income.

## RECORDING THE FGD

An electronic recording can be used to complement the notetaking process. Note that, in many of our contexts, recording may be considered threatening by the participants and therefore cannot be done. This is especially the case in emergency contexts when FGD participants may already be under severe stress and may mistrust the purpose of the recording.

In cases where FGDs involve CRS or partner staff, electronic recording is generally acceptable but should only be done if participants give their consent. The benefits of recording the discussion are that notes are captured word-for-word and you can always return to the recording if any information seems to be missing.

When recording FGDs, be sure to:

- Ask for participants' approval before the FGD starts. Explain that your main purpose is keeping an accurate record of the discussion.
- Inform participants that they can ask you to turn off the recording at any point during the discussion.
- Test the recording equipment at the site before the FGD starts.
- Have extra batteries available or arrange for recharging of the device.
- Make sure participants sit close enough to the recording device.
- At the end of FGD, turn off the device and ask if the participants would like to add anything.

Note that recording does not replace notetaking; in fact, the enumerators are still strongly encouraged to maintain the additional, albeit shorter notes, especially observations about interactions among the participants, as this will be vital for easily finding their place in the recording.



**Electronic recordings** may be considered threatening by the participants. Use it only if all participants give their consent. Even if just one person refuses, recording should not be done.

## FINALIZING THE NOTES

Shortly after each FGD, within 24 hours, the facilitator and notetaker should review the notes for completeness and accuracy. They should also explain or expand the shorthand, abbreviations or symbols, if these have been used, to ensure transcription is as smooth as possible. In addition to editing and verifying the content of the notes, the facilitator and notetaker should supplement the notes with their own observations. These additional comments may include: nonverbal communication, behavioral responses, the tone of the discussion, group dynamics, etc. These comments are very important for data interpretation and, if not linked to a particular moment during the FGD, they should be written at the end of the notes, clearly marked "team observations".

## TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION OF NOTES

Transcription helps provide a **permanent record** (e.g. electronic files) of the group discussions that may be shared or used in the future, as well as used as a **basis for the analysis**. As noted, translation and transcription are often one simultaneous process that has to take place as accurately as possible. Notes are not always complete, so the translator may add a missing word or correct a spelling during translation and transcription; however, editing should be kept to a minimum. The key is to maintain the character of participants' comments in the dialect and phrases they used even if those were grammatically incorrect.

Too much editing is undesirable and counterproductive. Summarizing participants' comments—even if they appear very similar—is particularly detrimental to data quality as it often means ending up with the same information and same language across all FGDs. Notes on observations by the facilitator and notetaker should also be translated.

If you recorded the FGDs, make note of potential noises in parenthesis during transcription, e.g. [laughter, disagreement, etc.], as well as conversational fillers e.g. uh, um, etc. If any parts of the recording are difficult to hear, be sure to mark those in the notes e.g. inaudible at x time of recording.

As noted earlier, in order to maintain confidentiality, you may need to anonymize the transcribed notes and remove references to specific places or people and replace them with generic terms or descriptions.

To minimize transcription and translation errors, you may randomly select a few finalized notes and compare the originals with the translated versions.



You may need to **anonymize the transcribed notes** and replace references to specific places or people with generic terms.

# Analysis and Interpretation of FGD Data

## KEY TERMS

### Data analysis

This is the process of probing and investigating information, and reviewing its constituent parts, and interrelationships between different issues to gain deeper insights. Analysis helps transform data and other forms of evidence into usable information that supports interpretation.

Analysis has both a qualitative dimension—what something is—and a quantitative dimension—how much of that something there is. Although in qualitative data the focus is on the qualitative dimension of analysis, some quantitative aspects remain relevant, e.g. *5 out of 7 FGDs said x*. FGD data should never be transformed into percentages. Data is analyzed by:

- Identifying similarities, differences, trends and gaps
- Making comparisons
- Ranking and prioritizing issues

The process of analysis results in identification of findings.<sup>13</sup>

### Data interpretation

This involves explaining findings, attaching significance to results, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and presenting patterns within a clear and orderly framework.<sup>14</sup> The essence of interpretation is giving a meaning to the data.

The essence of **interpretation** is giving a meaning to the data.

### Qualitative data analysis and interpretation

These go hand-in-hand. With qualitative data, the two steps often coalesce, since as you start organizing and reading the data you often make some initial interpretations. The analysis of qualitative data is a creative, intellectual process and, unlike the analysis of quantitative data, there are no predefined formulas for calculating results. Because different people manage their creativity and intellectual endeavors differently, there is no one right way to analyze and interpret qualitative data.<sup>15</sup> Below are suggested steps and best practices.

### Who should analyze the data?

It is ALWAYS recommended that you do a participatory data analysis and interpretation by engaging key team members that participated in the effort, including key project staff, MEAL staff and partners.

13. Adapted from *Propack I Glossary* (Adapted from Mathison 2005).

14. Mathison 2005.

15. Patton 1990.

## WHERE TO START<sup>16</sup>

### Check whether all the data is there

The data generated through FGDs is voluminous and some notes may get “lost in translation”! As a first step, it is necessary to ensure that you have all the data before you embark on the analysis. A data collection log can be of assistance here. Make sure you are storing data in a way that is safe and accessible to other team members. There are two sources of data for analysis: (1) the transcripts of FGD notes and (2) the observations and insights captured during data collection and debrief meetings.

### Organize the data

A great deal of qualitative data analysis involves creative copying and pasting or movement of different chunks of data during the analysis and interpretation process. For this to happen, data must be organized in a meaningful way. The framework for analysis usually comes from the overarching learning questions and sub-topics under each. There are two approaches applied in practice. The choice between the two is often influenced by the volume of data and the time available for organizing it.



Data must be **organized** in a meaningful way.

- **USING HARD COPIES:** Often the fastest way is to print enough copies of the FGD notes so each person involved in the analysis has their own copy of the data set. As they read through the notes, they make comments in the margins or attach Post-it notes with their own ideas, thus beginning to organize the notes into topics and sub-topics, mostly guided by the learning questions and associated sub-topics, but allowing for the surfacing of additional topics.
- **USING ELECTRONIC COPIES:** As the transcribed notes come in, you may choose to create one master copy of all data. This is a recommended approach for large data collection efforts that entail conducting 10 or more FGDs. The master copy is usually developed in the form of a matrix organized according to the learning questions and sub-topics that featured in your FGD Guide. An example of this master data matrix is provided below.

Copy-paste [The main learning question]		
Copy-paste [FGD Guide Question 1.]		
FGD	Data/responses	Notes = Code
<i>Make sure you develop a system that appropriately references the data source and shared characteristics (e.g. FGD No. 1 with young women in village Samaja = YWSam1)</i>	<i>Copy-paste [actual response from FGD notes for that specific question]</i>  <i>When you come across probing questions that were not originally included in the FGD Guide, add them in the matrix, after the original question.</i>  <i>You can also add observations from each FGD in the matrix.</i>	<i>A place to jot down general impressions from reading the data, potential themes or patterns (e.g. favors vouchers; dissatisfied with treatment during distribution, etc.) which will translate into your 'code' for that particular part of qualitative data.</i>
YW Sam2		
...		
Copy-paste [FGD Guide Question 2]		
Data source	Data	Notes = Code
...		

16. The approach presented here focuses on so-called 'thematic analysis.'

The matrix can take different formats and shapes depending on the complexity of the effort and your own way of organizing information. The benefit of this approach is an easy copy-pasting process as you start with the analysis, coding (see next section below) and grouping of data. It makes handling large volumes of qualitative data easier and more organized. Note that preparing this matrix before data collection starts is another opportunity to check whether the questions in the FGD Guide adequately cover all the main information needs and learning questions, and contain only need-to-know information. The data can be populated in parallel with fieldwork, as soon as the notes are being transcribed and translated.

## Start with data coding

Data coding is at the heart of qualitative data analysis. It is a process of assigning labels or codes to specific parts of qualitative data. Coding enables you to organize large amounts of text, and discover patterns that would be difficult to detect just by reading a transcript or listening to a recording of a conversation. In essence, the coding process is reduction or meaningful reorganization of the raw qualitative data into manageable chunks of information.

A code is most often a word or a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, prominent, and/or essence-capturing attributes to a portion of text-based data.<sup>17</sup> This could also be an FGD participant's phrase or sentence that best captures the essence of the data. The coding process moves analysts from individual responses (marked as *R1*, *R2*, etc. in the notes) to summative phrases that could later on be further transformed, merged or grouped. The codes help to give you a bird's-eye view, and discover patterns and relationships across collected data that would otherwise be hard to detect. The key themes or codes identified through this process become a foundation for identification of the key findings within and across pre-identified comparison groups.



A code could be an **FGD participant's word, phrase or sentence** that best captures the essence of the data.

17. Saldana 2016.

## Example of coding of responses for one FGD question from notes above: FGD held with women in Jelsa village

The main learning question: What are the effects of child friendly spaces [in community centers] on child well-being?		
FGD Guide Q3: What are the factors that affect your child's well-being?		
FGD	Data/responses	Notes = Code
WJel	<p><b>R1:</b> My daughter enjoys <u>recreational activities</u> and <u>playing with other kids</u>.</p> <p><b>R6:</b> My son too! He really loves <u>sports activities</u>, football and such. Especially when he is <u>together with his friends</u>. However, I also noticed if they don't have a ball then <u>they spend their time just sitting around and thinking of some mischief</u>.</p> <p><b>R7:</b> Boys are like that, especially at a certain age when they have too much energy. I told the animators that they should punish my boy if he misbehaves.</p> <p><b>R5:</b> I don't agree with that, why would someone else punish my child, that would do no good for him. Don't you think so?</p> <p><b>R7:</b> I think we need to have discipline, and my boy is not with me all the time. We all need to ensure this is happening. You know how they say, <u>it takes a village to raise the child</u>. [R7: waves her head].</p> <p><b>R3:</b> I have two children, a boy and a girl, and there is a difference in the things they enjoy and things that make them happy. My girl is 10 and she loves to sing. Last month, when there was a singing competition, she really put her heart into preparing for it. My boy on the other hand [he is 13], has lots of fun when he hangs out <u>with his friends</u>. Boys like to compete so whatever activity can make this happen they are totally in it.</p> <p><b>R1:</b> My daughter also loved singing competition!</p> <p><b>Follow-up Q: who organized the competition?</b></p> <p><b>R3:</b> It was in the community center space, last month. [R1, 5 and 7 repeated the same].</p> <p><b>R4:</b> You are all right, our children enjoy playing and spending time with their friends, but for this to happen, <u>we as parents need to be able to support them</u>, give them love, sometimes work with them on their homework.</p> <p><b>R3:</b> Yes, I agree! I have two children and it is sometimes hard to dedicate them enough attention, especially when I worry about whether we will have <u>enough money to put food on the table</u>. It is hard for us now, my husband lost his job and now he cannot find another one. It is only seasonal work for which he gets very little money [everyone was nodding].</p> <p><b>[Probe: How are you managing, who is supporting you?]</b></p> <p><b>R4:</b> We had some organizations—like you—come and give some food parcels but not everyone got it. [laughter].</p> <p><b>R2 and R1</b> joked that organizations just come and go, no one offers permanent jobs.</p> <p><b>R7:</b> My family got nothing. My in-laws are helping us, little that they have they share with us</p>	<p>Girls (G): <u>Recreational activities</u></p> <p>G: <u>Playing with others</u></p> <p>Boys (B): Recreational activities – sport</p> <p>B: If idle, mischief</p> <p>For discipline/punishment</p> <p>Against punishment</p> <p>For discipline/punishment; disagreement in FGD</p> <p>Difference between B and G</p> <p>G: Singing</p> <p>B: Competitive games, <u>hanging out with friends</u> ✓✓</p> <p>G: Singing</p> <p>CFS organized activities (4 respondents)</p> <p>Parents to give love and support, homework</p> <p>Parents' challenges: <u>insecure livelihoods</u></p> <p>Reliance on NGOs (move this under Q6)</p> <p>Uneven support by NGOs (move this under Q6)</p>
WSan	...[continue with the coding process for the rest of the notes]...	

The coding process starts with a reading of the FGD notes. It is always easier if you start reading and coding all the notes from one comparison group, and then move through the others. Once you have identified common phrases or ideas, assign specific codes that highlight the main concepts. If you are doing hard-copy based analysis, jot down the codes in the margins. You can also use your own system of highlighting, arrows, check signs, etc., to signify repetition of emerging trends, interconnection between codes, etc. If you are using an electronic version, write the codes in Column 3 of the master data matrix. At the initial coding stage, do not worry too much about having many codes, but avoid using different terms for the same issue.

As you move forward with reading and coding the FGD notes from the second, third, etc. comparison group, take note of similarities and differences, and capture them in the codes. This may mean that codes get reorganized, merged or split, renamed or expanded. Remember, coding is an iterative, creative process. It is an interpretive rather than exact science! There are no rules as to how many codes you may end up having. It depends on the volume of data you are working on.

Whether you are using one master soft copy of the data or hard copies, during this stage it is helpful to use highlighters to mark memorable phrases that could best explain the code, and that you may want to use during analysis and interpretation or report writing. Qualitative data analysis requires the reading and rereading of the notes, which eventually may look very messy, full of your own notes and highlights. This is all part of the creative process you are going through to make sense of data.

### Read data in advance

It is recommended that everyone who will be participating in the reflection event reads all the raw data in advance and, if possible, conducts the initial coding process. If you used an electronic master copy, the matrix may serve as pre-event reading for the data interpretation workshop. The next round of reading, coming to an agreement on codes, and doing the final analysis and interpretation, is done in a participatory manner at the workshop. If individual pre-workshop preparation is not possible, or in the case of smaller-scale efforts, the whole process can be done at the workshop as long as enough time is allocated for reading and rereading of data.

Engaging more people in the analysis ensures triangulation at this stage. This, so-called analytical triangulation, helps reduce bias and an inclination to view data from just one perspective, colored by one's own background, position, status or experience. As different people go through the notes, they will likely assign a slightly different code to the same responses. Do not worry about this! The data interpretation workshop/reflection event will serve as an opportunity to come to an agreement about key themes that will constitute finding statements.

### Remember that ...

- Analyzing and interpreting data across multiple data sources is not a matter of deciding who is right or which data is most accurate, but recognizing that any single data source or comparison group perspective is partial, and relative to the respondents' experiences and social position.
- Where and when possible, it is strongly recommended to engage sectoral regional technical advisors (RTAs) throughout the effort to ensure technically sound design of the FGD effort and evidence-based recommendations and best practices. If this is not possible, consider engaging the sectoral RTA in the review of the report.

In large data collection efforts when many FGDs are being conducted—e.g. during evaluations—coding may involve a more elaborate process and take more effort. Codes are kept in a separate file called a codebook. Having the codebook ensures a structured and consistent approach to analysis among different analysts. There are two general approaches applied in practice: (1) having a predefined codebook with a list of codes for categorization of data, depicting predicted or expected codes based on the learning questions and the questions in the FGD Guide, but also allowing for new codes to be added as they emerge through analysis, and (2) having codes emerge through the analysis<sup>18</sup> process as the analysts move forward with reading and analyzing the data.<sup>19</sup>

In our context, where we often need quick, ‘good enough’ results for project decision making, and when FGD data collection efforts are on a small scale, the second approach is more appropriate and more frequently applied. The assumption is that there is already strong alignment between learning questions and the questions in the FGD Guide, thus the general themes are already captured through the way the data is being organized. Also, the advantage of this approach is exploration of additional topics and ideas that emerge from the data and go beyond our initial assumptions about the data.<sup>20</sup> ‘Light’ coding takes place during individual reading and analysis, which is then compared and agreed upon with other team members during the data interpretation workshop.

Categories	Sub Categories	CODES	
DEF	Trafficking Definitions	Local Term	None
		Descriptive words	Fake Marriage Twice Marriage Thieves Marriage Work Trouble
PUSH	Push Factors	Financial	Greed Poverty Basic needs Debt Shocks to income Lack of work
		Social	Dowry Marriage prospects for boys Family honor Girl's reputation Burden Many daughters Social pressure Peer pressure
		Individual	Boy's aspirations
		Specific vulnerability	Landless Female-headed household Low caste Large family Poor health of household head Orphans
		Poor education	Poor quality No govt benefit No interest Girl astray Don't understand importance
		Other perceptions	Illiterate No control over child
		Assets (financial, physical, social)	Prosperity Multiple incomes Land Government job

An example of a codebook for FGDs that explored push and pull factors for human trafficking.

It is recommended that data coding is conducted for the entire data set. In some cases, during preliminary analysis in preparation for the reflection event, the data could be further reorganized, grouped and/or moved, to identify and highlight emerging patterns. Be careful not to overdo it as it is vital to maintain references to the original data sources to support meaningful interpretation. A way to keep track of the original data source is to label the lines in the transcription notes or use different colors for different types of respondents.

18. In the relevant literature, this approach is called *preset or deductive coding*.  
 19. In the relevant literature, this approach is called *emergent or inductive coding*.  
 20. Skovdal and Cornish (2015).

## PARTICIPATORY ANALYSIS OF FGD DATA



The analysis of FGD data is done in several stages. First, FGD data coming from one data source should be analyzed in two steps:

1. Comparing individual FGD responses and identifying common themes **within** each comparison group.
2. Comparing common themes and responses **across** comparison groups; identifying and recording commonalities and differences.

After the analysis of data coming from one data source, the two-step process is repeated for all other data sources.<sup>21</sup>

This is usually done in a workshop setting to come to an agreement on the themes/codes emerging through the individual reading and coding process. Helpful tools to facilitate these discussions are matrices and tables that visually organize and compare responses and observations by each data source group. This analysis results in findings for each data source/group, which are then compared and contrasted with findings emerging through the analysis of data from the other data source(s)/groups.

Remember that FGD data gets analyzed at the group rather than the individual level. This means that findings emerging through the analysis should be written as: '4 of 6 female FGD groups reported that the item they were most satisfied with was fuel for the winter'. This does not mean that every single individual within those 4 female groups and none in the other 2 groups expressed this opinion, but that this response was the consensus/majority position of the group. It is often helpful to make a note of the number of FGD participants that have made a particular comment, mainly to note the magnitude of an issue. When an FGD is divided on a certain topic, you can record these disagreements, e.g., *'In 2 out of 4 male groups, the participants, roughly split in half, had polarized opinions about the training approach'*.

### Qualitative data analysis software

There are many qualitative data analysis software programs on the market and you may be prompted to use one. The most obvious benefits are that they can handle large volumes of data and automatically link the codes.

However, no software will do the analysis for you! You still need to develop the codes and do participatory data analysis and interpretation. You also need to be trained in use of the software package. Note that some software may require data in a specific format, which needs to be taken into consideration during transcription of the notes.

Carefully weigh the pros and cons before embarking on using software!

Carefully weigh the pros and cons before embarking on using **software**.

21. There could be an additional step focusing on comparing FGD findings with findings obtained through other data collection methods; identifying and recording commonalities and differences. The data collected through other methods should be analyzed independently and in parallel with FGD data. Comparing findings across methods is the next step in the analysis and interpretation process. (USAID 2011c).

## Step 1: Analysis *within* one comparison group

The first level of analysis focuses on one comparison group. Data from all FGDs belonging to one comparison group (i.e. all FGDs conducted with women in villages close to community centers/child friendly spaces) are carefully read and reread to identify common themes *within* that group. When doing the data analysis in this first step consider the following questions:

- What common themes emerge in responses about a specific topic *within* this comparison group?
- Are there deviations from these patterns *within* the data for this comparison group? If so, what are they?

At this stage, you may choose to use a matrix that highlights the key themes and captures different groups' positions in relation to these themes as well as details about the themes. You can be as creative as you like! Here is an example of a matrix comparing responses within one comparison group: female FGDs conducted in the three locations of Jelsa, Vilsa and Sanal.

### Key factors that influence child well-being: Analysis of themes *within* one comparison group

Key themes/codes	FGD/locations		
	WJel	WVil	WSan
Structured/organized recreational activities	Difference between boys/girls: B: Sport G: Singing If no toys, B mischievous Activities organized by CFS (4 respondents)	No difference, both enjoy sports, competitions; anything that is organized	B prefer active ways to spend their time. G prefer crafts, work with hands. Activities organized by CFS (half FGD) and school (other half) – explore this further/why?
Playing with others/peers	Yes	Yes	Yes
Existence of punishment and reward	No consensus; group split roughly in half	For punishment	Against punishment
Parental role	Support, love, homework Importance of basic needs being met	Quality relationships at home	Support and care, discipline. If child is sick, no available medicines or expensive
...			

## Step 2: Analysis *across* comparison group

Once you have completed the analysis within each distinct type of FGD, start comparing results *across* different comparison groups to identify and record commonalities and differences. This analysis is further building on Step 1.

The questions to be considered at this stage are:

- What phrases or key ideas are repeated in different types of FGDs? What are similarities *across* different comparison groups?
- What phrases or ideas are unique to one type of FGD/comparison group? What are differences *across* different comparison groups?

As this stage, you want to weed out unique responses (only one FGD position) but document and discuss similarities and differences across comparison groups. Having a visual representation of the main themes for each comparison group can significantly simplify the comparison and analysis process. The next table represents an example of a matrix that makes a comparison between male and female FGDs in three locations.

## Key factors that influence child well-being: Analysis of themes across comparison groups

Location	Female	Male
<b>Jelsa</b>	<b>Recreational activities</b> (difference between B and G) CFS-organized activities Playing with others No consensus on punishment and reward Parental role key: emotional and meeting of basic needs	<b>Recreational activities</b> (games so children are active, both B and G) In favor of punishment and rewards Struggling with basic needs
<b>Vilsa</b>	<b>Organized recreational activities</b> Playing with others For punishment Quality relationships at home	<b>Well-structured time</b> , mainly in school or activities org. by school Playing with others For punishment No jobs, no land
<b>Sanal</b>	<b>Organized activities</b> (difference between B and G) CFS role/school role Against punishment Parental role: emotional and basic needs (medical)	Playing with others, <b>separate gender groups</b> Women take care of discipline Absence of basic necessities for children/cannot buy toys, clothing.

Having this visual representation enables a quick overview and identification of emerging patterns—e.g., 5 groups (2 male and 3 female) agree that organized activities play an important role in child well-being; groups have differing views on punishment and rewards, etc.—as well as identification of differences among the groups. For example, two FGDs are pointing to a need to have different types of activities for boys and girls, while one FGD emphasizes the importance of separating gender groups while playing. It also helps to identify areas that may require further discussion and clarification. For example, it seems that in one location, Vilsa, both FGDs have mentioned that the school rather than the CFS organizes structured playtime; you may want to schedule some time at the data interpretation workshop to better understand why this is so. Finally, having data organized in this way helps reveal potential connections or relationships between different parts of the data that help cluster or group the codes, identifying secondary themes, etc. For example, comments related to support at home and the meeting of basic needs were grouped into a secondary theme called ‘parental role’ which perhaps could relate to the expectations about ways to ensure discipline and attitudes towards punishment.

In the process of data analysis you may have many different matrices to facilitate comparisons, subsequent discussions and reflections, synthesis and the generation of findings. When using matrices as visual aids, consider the following:

- Use a flipchart and Post-it notes (each Post-it note containing one code), to facilitate regrouping of ideas and participatory discussion.
- Analysis should highlight both responses/observations that are *common* to groups (types of respondents or locations) and those that are *different* (i.e. differences in perspective and opinions between groups). But you will want to keep the focus on the average/common responses within groups rather than on outlier responses.
- It is easier to do a series of binary comparisons instead of complex multidimensional comparisons.
- Give equal weight to each comparison group (e.g. male and female) even if there are more FGDs from one than the other.

## Remember data triangulation? Comparing data from different data sources

Data triangulation (see Page 5) calls for the use of two or three different data sources to collect the same information to respond to a learning question. Remember, these are broad categories of respondents, not comparison groups (e.g. data sources: parents and children; comparison groups: men/women, age). You should follow a similar approach of using matrices and visual aids to compare findings across different data sources. When results from different data sources are the same, then validity or trustworthiness is established/increased. Note that the purpose of triangulation is not to arrive at consistency across data sources, but to compare and validate, and if inconsistencies are revealed, to discover deeper meaning behind the data through additional data collection and/or participatory data interpretation.

## FROM DATA ANALYSIS TO DATA INTERPRETATION

Data interpretation aims to **explain and attach significance and meaning** to the key findings identified during the analysis. This is the focus of the second part of the data interpretation workshop/reflection event.

The interpretation always moves beyond the description of the data and findings. The questions that can help in this process are:

- What factors might explain the findings?
- What factors might explain differences in findings between comparison groups?
- Did any group characteristic prove to be irrelevant (e.g. if all male and female groups or groups from different locations or types of villages, provided similar responses on all topics)?
- How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help illuminate the main learning question(s)?
- Are the patterns that emerge similar to the findings of other studies on the same topic? If not, what might explain these differences?

### Participatory interpretation

Always try to do participatory data interpretation by engaging key project staff, including MEAL staff, partners and—to the extent possible—enumerators, to provide contextual and practical insights into data, come up with relevant findings, and identify locally appropriate and manageable recommendations. Consider a session in the local language to hear from those who conducted the FDG and other activities relevant to the effort.

The ultimate results of the workshop should be: (a) a draft of key findings, with the evidence that backs them up, including how many focus groups of what type said one thing or the other and (b) an interpretation of each finding, especially similarities and differences between types of respondents. These in turn support context-specific, locally relevant and feasible recommendations to address identified issues. The recommendations can be contained in the FGD notes as suggestions from FGD participants, but more often are developed during and after the workshop, and come from project staff and technical experts in the field. It is essential to keep good notes of discussions you have had at the data interpretation workshop, as much of this material will be used when you start writing a report.

# Final Words

After completing data analysis and interpretation, it is time to write a report. A few final words to help you do so.

## Focus

When writing findings, it is critical to maintain the focus on the major learning questions. After all, that is why you conducted FGDs! If you do have additional findings and insights beyond the originally envisioned focus of the effort, present these after the findings that directly respond to the learning questions.

## Avoid lengthy descriptions

The description of the situation should be sufficiently insightful to allow the readers and users of the information to understand the findings but at the same time avoid unnecessary detail. This is a judgment call and again a matter of focus. The reader does not need to know everything that was said or done during the FGDs.

## Choose quotes to illustrate your findings

Good practice is to include quotes of FGD participants' statements in the report, to describe or illustrate an issue, but only when these are reflective of the common group position, rather than a unique divergent opinion of a specific member. Carefully choose quotes that have memorable phrases, but avoid having too many. Don't forget to add the key demographic characteristics of the person whose quote you are using e.g. female FGD participant in Torkia said: *'Fuel has multiple uses; it helps with keeping us warm and cooking the meals at the same time'*.

## Not all findings may be equally important

In contrast to quantitative studies where statistical significance determines the importance of findings, in qualitative studies, the analysts need to make judgments and provide clues to the readers and users about the significance of findings. In some cases, the findings may be strongly supported by evidence, while in others, the supporting data may be there but not at the same intensity. This needs to be reported, so the reader can make their own judgment about the credibility of the information presented in the report. The criteria that can help with giving weight to the findings include:

- How many groups mentioned a particular issue
- How much energy and enthusiasm the issue generated from the participants
- Particular words used or comments made by the participants, etc.

## Recommendations

Recommendations need to be linked to the findings and evidence. Improvements suggested through recommendations cannot come from your personal impressions that could be biased and colored by your own perceptions and interpretations. If you are asked to propose these sorts of recommendations e.g. from a sectoral or technical perspective, clearly mark them as such.

## Typical pitfalls when writing up FGD findings...

These may include:

- Findings lack precision and/or context. E.g., *'The majority of focus groups highlighted kitchen items as the most useful item in the NFI kit'*. A better way of formulating this finding is to state how many FGDs of what type said so, e.g., *'5 out of 7 female focus groups identified kitchen items as most useful, while none of the male FGDs mentioned them at all'*.
- Findings quote individual group members without putting their responses in the context of the groups' consensus position.
- Findings mix analysis and interpretation of the findings. E.g., *'All male and female FGDs in all districts mentioned hygiene promotion messages thus indicating the effectiveness of campaign.'* The 'effectiveness of campaign' belongs to your interpretation of the finding, rather than the finding statement itself.

### Remember:

- **FINDINGS** are empirical facts collected during data collection.
- **CONCLUSIONS** are interpretations and judgments based on findings.
- **RECOMMENDATIONS** are proposed actions to improve an ongoing or future project or effort.<sup>22</sup>

Now you should be ready to start writing the report and documenting learning from FGDs!

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22. Adapted from USAID 2011a.

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