VERSION 1.0 | NOVEMBER 2013

TECHNICAL NOTE

Focus Group Interviews

Monitoring and Evaluation Series

This Note provides guidance on the use of focus group interviews within evaluations.

INTRODUCTION

Focus group interviews (FGIs, also often called focus group discussions) are a key tool for collecting data to support many USAID activities. This data collection technique is widely used in international development planning, monitoring and evaluation. They are quick, versatile and typically inexpensive, so they can be used with a broad range of stakeholder groups in a wide variety of settings. Because they allow evaluators to obtain a wealth of in-depth qualitative information, they often are combined with quantitative methods, such as surveys, to help explain the "why" or the "how" of observed statistical trends. FGIs typically offer greater descriptive depth than what is provided through surveys and a broader base of perspectives than often is obtained through individual interviews. For these reasons, FGIs are commonly included as part of both impact and performance evaluations.

DEFINITION

A focus group interview is a data collection technique in which a small group of people, usually between six and twelve individuals, is guided by a moderator to discuss specific topics in a structured way. The moderator raises issues identified in a discussion guide and uses probing questions to solicit opinions, ideas, and other information, often as it relates to a project or other activity. (For brevity, in the rest of this note "project" will be used to include projects and other activities.)

BACKGROUND

FGIs are commonly used in the fields of marketing and politics to quickly and inexpensively assess public opinion. What makes them useful in these settings also makes them valuable in the international development field. USAID's staff and partners frequently collaborate with local organizations and communities, and FGIs are one way to quickly gauge the concerns or opinions of groups like these. Having this improved understanding makes it possible to better tailor USAID's activities to the needs and goals of these communities, ultimately making these projects more successful and sustainable.

Technical Notes are published by the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning and provide key concepts and approaches to USAID staff and partners related to the Program Cycle.

RATIONALE AND LIMITATIONS

This section describes the key reasons why FGIs are used in development evaluation, as well as their key limitations.

ACTIVITIES WHICH ARE SIMILAR TO, BUT DIFFERENT FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS:

Community interviews are intended for gathering data from a relatively large group of people (25-50 individuals). Typically they feature quite basic questions about community conditions or delivery of program services.

Group informant interviews often take place at the spur of the moment in the field. They involve administering an individual interview protocol with more than one person at a time. In other words, the interviewer may ask a question, and then each person will answer it in turn, but it lacks the structured, purposeful, guided interaction among participants that makes FGIs unique and valuable.

ADVANTAGES

When considering including FGIs in an evaluation design, they are often compared to large surveys and individual interviews. With these two alternatives in mind, the key advantages of FGIs are that they are:

1. **Interactive and Informative**. FGIs enable participants to interact with each other, sharing and reacting to each other's ideas. This process allows for new ideas to emerge that may not have been expressed by any one person. In other words, an FGI is more than just interviewing several people at the same time; it is more than the sum of its parts. Neither individual interviews nor surveys allow for this kind of interactivity.
2. **Time and Resource Efficient**. One FGI can collect rich, substantial data from multiple stakeholders in one or two hours. Though an individual interview allows the evaluation team to delve deeper into the situation of one individual, and surveys can capture data from statistically representative samples, FGIs offer an efficient option for obtaining detailed qualitative data from up to a dozen people in a short period of time, without the need for any special equipment.

LIMITATIONS

There are also several limitations to FGIs that are important to consider.

1. **Require advanced planning.** FGIs call for getting together a group of people at the same place and time, which usually requires invitations to be distributed and confirmed in advance. Surveys and individual interviews also require advance planning to design the instruments and schedule the data collection sessions. However, the fact that FGIs require a group often implies greater coordination.
2. **Limited generalizability.** Usually, the prospective number of interviewees involved with a project is relatively large, and collecting the viewpoints of the limited number of people included in FGIs does not give evaluators a sample of sufficient size to be able to draw conclusions about the whole population. Therefore, FGIs are not intended to answer questions of "how much" or "to what degree" a service, result or opinion exists in the whole population. Surveys or other quantitative data usually fill this role.
3. **Vulnerable to moderator bias.** The moderator plays a central role throughout the FGI process, especially when guiding the discussion and interpreting the results. Thoughtful design of the moderator's guide, accurate recording, systematic coding and involvement of more than one individual in the data analysis can help minimize, but not eliminate, the risk of bias. On the other hand, in-person and telephone surveys, as well as individual interviews, also are susceptible to this kind of bias.
4. **Limited confidentiality.** While there are rare instances in which people may be more forthcoming in a group discussion than they would be on an individual basis, in most cases participants will be less likely to share very personal or sensitive information when they are speaking with a group. In order to collect such data, evaluators can use surveys or individual interviews, where privacy of the data collection can help to protect confidentiality.

DECIDING TO USE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

FGIs can be a useful data collection tool in many circumstances, but evaluators and evaluation managers still must think carefully about what the evaluation questions are, what the different ways for collecting the data necessary to answer those questions are, and how the data from FGIs can contribute to those answers. In situations where time or other resources are limited, or when group perspectives, not just individual opinions, are particularly important, FGIs may be appropriate and valuable. In many cases, FGIs are combined with other data collection techniques as part of a mixed-method design. (See the Technical Note on Conducting Mixed-Method Evaluations.) Doing so allows the evaluation to take advantage of the strengths of FGIs to accomplish specific purposes within the context of the evaluation, while at the same time supplementing them with other tools like surveys and individual interviews, in order to capture the most comprehensive picture possible of a project's performance or impact. Collecting information about the same issue but from different sources or different methods also allows for triangulation, the process whereby different sets of data are compared and contrasted to check for consistency, helping to increase confidence in the evaluation results.

FGIs often serve as a key source of data in performance evaluations, and often do so in combination with other data collection techniques such as reviews of secondary data and individual interviews. For example, when evaluating an education project based in schools, evaluators may conduct an individual interview with each school principal, because there is only one in each school and her or his perspective is likely to be especially important, and potentially different, from those of the teachers. Evaluators could then conduct an FGI with a group of teachers from each school, capturing a broader range of viewpoints in a shorter time than would be possible through individual interviews. In the same evaluation of this education project, evaluators may have identified certain trends in student test scores based on a review of existing secondary data. They could then use FGIs with teachers or with students to help explain these trends in the quantitative data. FGIs can also be particularly valuable when a performance evaluation aims to capture information about levels of stakeholder satisfaction, project strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement.

WRITING A STATEMENT OF WORK INCLUDING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Once the evaluation manager has decided to include FGIs as part of an evaluation, there are several important considerations that she or he must keep in mind when writing the evaluation Statement of Work (SOW). The evaluation SOW should clearly indicate what deliverables will be expected, including how the raw FGI data will be submitted as part of the final report. The SOW should require the evaluator to provide an explanation of the following:

1. How the FGIs will help to answer the evaluation questions
2. Who will conduct the FGIs and why they are qualified to do so
3. What the rationale and method are for deciding the number, timing, and location of the FGIs
4. How the participants will be selected and recruited
5. How the FGIs will be recorded
6. How the FGI data will be analyzed and presented
7. What the expected deliverables are and which will need approval

An explanation of all of these items should be included in the evaluation design section submitted with the work plan, and also in the final report. The evaluation SOW should also specify that the evaluator must provide the data collection protocols, in this case, the FGI moderator guide(s), to the evaluation manager for approval prior to the start of data collection.

FGIs often play an important role in impact evaluations, even though, as noted above, data from FGIs are rarely representative enough to make generalizations about the overall impact of a project. Early on in an impact evaluation, FGIs can be used to collect qualitative information about the local environment which can then be used to inform the design of the large-scale quantitative survey instruments. After such a survey is completed, FGIs can be used to explain patterns in the survey data and capture specific details and anecdotes which, when combined with the survey data, present a richer, more complete picture of the impact of the project.

PLANNING FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

SELECTING THE MODERATOR AND ASSISTANT MODERATOR

It is extremely difficult for one person to effectively facilitate and thoroughly document an FGI simultaneously. On the other hand, having too many non-participants in the room during an FGI may make participants feel uncomfortable or self-conscious. Therefore, FGIs are often conducted by a team of two or three people: a moderator and one or two assistant moderators. The **moderator** facilitates the FGI by firmly but unobtrusively guiding the group through a discussion that stays on topic, is rich in information, and maintains a comfortable environment where participants feel free to express their perspectives. The responsibility of the **assistant moderator** is to document the FGI, including taking thorough notes and making sure that all technology, such as audio or video equipment, is working properly. Both the moderator and the assistant moderator must be knowledgeable about the topic being discussed and very familiar with the language and culture of the participants. Given the importance of language in FGIs, moderators should be fluent in the language of the FGI participants. If that is not possible, a skilled interpreter should be present and the consequences of conducting the FGI through an interpreter should be described in the methodological limitations section of the evaluation report. The moderator should also know about the social, political and economic realities of the communities in which the FGI is being held, and about the design and implementation of the project to date. This knowledge allows the moderator to guide the discussion so that it addresses and explores the issues that are most relevant for the evaluation.

SELECTING THE PARTICIPANTS

After identifying the FGI team, the next step for the evaluator is to decide how many FGIs to conduct, and whom to include as participants. Whom the evaluation team selects to include will depend on the questions to be answered, but **in forming an FGI group it is important for all of the participants to be as similar as possible with regard to the characteristics most relevant to the questions asked**. For instance, if it is likely that males and females experience a project differently, perhaps because of traditional gender roles, then it is valuable to have separate FGIs—one with men and one with women. Similarly, the evaluator should take care to avoid situations where some participants in the group will be reluctant to share honestly because of the presence of other people in the group. Participants might be intimidated by having a community leader or a professional supervisor in the group, for example. In addition to sex, FGIs could also be separated (or disaggregated) by age group, ethnic group or role in relation to the project.

The ideal number of FGI participants is between six and twelve. Because the purpose of an FGI is to generate a focused discussion on a specific topic, it is important not only to have enough people to hold an engaging discussion, but also to limit the size of the group so that all participants can express their views. In some cases, it is easy to identify the ideal group of participants for an FGI because the total number of participants available is between six and twelve. In many other instances, however, there will be a large number of potential participants to choose from, even after the evaluation team has divided up the stakeholders based on relevant characteristics. In these cases, the team will have to use an alternative method to select the FGI participants. There are a few appropriate FGI sampling methods to choose from, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

NOMINATION

Using this method, key stakeholders nominate people they think would make good participants. Nominees are likely to be familiar with and able to speak about the topic, and will also likely be willing to participate in the FGI. However, if the stakeholder who is nominating participants wants the results of the FGI to reflect positively upon the project, she or he may deliberately avoid nominating individuals who have had negative experiences or are dissatisfied with the project. On the other hand, an opponent of the project might only nominate participants who have negative things to say about it. In this way, relying on key stakeholders to nominate FGI participants could introduce bias into the data and prevent the moderators from capturing a comprehensive and accurate picture of the project.

VOLUNTEERING

If there are a large number of potential participants, and the selection criteria are broad, volunteers can be recruited with flyers, newspaper ads, or announcements at religious or civic meetings. This sampling method is simple, but can lead to biased findings as the people who respond to these notices may be systematically different from the general target population. For instance, they may be beneficiaries who had particularly good or bad experiences with the project, and therefore are motivated to take the time to participate. If the sampling methodology is based only on volunteering, participants may also be disproportionately comprised of individuals who have more leisure time, while other potential participants who have more commitments, such as work or family responsibilities, may be less likely to volunteer.

RANDOM SAMPLING

If there is a large but defined group of potential participants, such as beneficiaries of a project, it may be possible to randomly select FGI participants. Randomly selecting participants can make FGIs more representative of the total population of potential participants by minimizing the sources of bias that can result from other sampling methods. In order to use random sampling, the evaluation team must have a list of all of the potential participants. The team can then assign a number to each individual and randomly choose as many numbers as the evaluation design says are needed. Randomly selecting FGI participants does introduce the risk that some participants selected may not be willing or able to participate. Pressuring unwilling individuals to participate in an FGI will not only be difficult for the moderator, but it is also likely to decrease the quality of the data collected. An unwilling participant may not fully engage in the discussion, or may respond to questions more negatively than they otherwise would, which also could negatively affect the tone of the overall discussion.

REPRESENTATIVENESS: GENERALIZING FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

It can be easy to misunderstand the role focus groups can play in the analysis of opinions of a large group of people. Focus group participants ideally should be representative of the larger relevant population–for instance, with individuals coming from various geographical districts, from various age groups, representing both genders, and so on. But it is important to keep in mind that this "representativeness" is only for strengthening the diversity of perspectives to be gathered from focus group participants; this method of selection does not allow the evaluator to make statistically valid generalizations about the opinions of the whole population.

If the evaluation team gathers data from several focus groups and systematically asks similar questions within these sessions, the evaluation report may appropriately refer to patterns *across the focus groups*. ("Seven of the nine focus groups included positive comments about the quality of training.") But evaluators should avoid summarizing these findings *across participants* using percentages ("Fifty percent of participants supported the training") or fractions ("Two thirds of participants were satisfied with the program"), as these kinds of statements are likely to encourage readers to incorrectly interpret such data as applicable to the larger population.

DETERMINING THE NUMBER, TIMING AND LOCATION OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

When there is a small number of potential FGI participants, the evaluator can divide all of the potential participants into groups of between six and twelve, and the number of FGIs to conduct will be clear. However, when the number of potential FGI participants is large, and the evaluator could conduct multiple FGIs within the same target group, it is less clear as to how many FGIs should be conducted. **In the absence of other constraints, it is best to continue FGIs with different participants until no new perspectives or information are being discovered, or in other words, until the moderator starts to hear the same things repeatedly. In reality, however, it may take many FGIs to reach this point, and constraints such as time, cost, and access to participants may limit the number of FGIs that can reasonably be completed.** In situations such as these, the evaluation team will have to determine the best solution, based on the evaluation objectives, the characteristics of the population, and the constraints of the project and the environment. For example, while a team may wish to conduct FGIs with six different groups (males and females of three different age groups) the team may have available resources for only five FGIs. In this instance, the evaluation team may choose to combine the two youngest age groups into one mixed-sex group, because up until adolescence, boys' and girls' experiences with the project are relatively similar, but older women and men are affected quite differently by the project. While this compromise is not ideal, and important information may be lost, it is typical of the kind of decision that often must be made in real-world contexts.

FGIs should be scheduled at times and in places that are comfortable and convenient for the participants. If participants feel comfortable and at ease in the environment, they will be more likely to respond openly and honestly to the questions asked. FGIs with project and ministry staff should be held in locations where they feel their comments will not be overheard by supervisors or other non-participant colleagues. The location should be private and, with the exception of the moderator and assistant moderators, there should be no non-participant observers (such as USAID evaluation managers) present. In the case where participants may be accompanied by their children, childcare should be provided, if feasible, so that participants will be able to devote their undivided attention to the discussion. Seating should be arranged in a circle or oval to emphasize that the opinions of all participants are equally valuable. Finally, especially if the participants have had to travel to the FGI, the moderator should consider providing refreshments and compensation for travel expenses.

PREPARING THE MODERATOR'S GUIDE

The moderator's guide helps the moderator introduce the purpose and process of the FGI to the participants, and then outlines the key questions or topics to be discussed during the FGI.

INTRODUCTION, GROUND RULES, CONFIDENTIALITY AND INFORMED CONSENT

The moderator should first **introduce herself or himself**, then welcome and thank all of the FGI participants. After that, the moderator should **explain the purpose of the FGI**, how the participants were selected, any potential benefits or risks to participating in the FGI, how long it will take, and whether there will be any compensation for participating. After discussing these logistical issues, the moderator also should **address expectations**, or ground rules, for the FGI. The ground rules will vary depending on the FGI, but in general they will include:

- Everyone is encouraged to share their ideas, and the FGI is strengthened if everyone participates.
- There are no wrong answers, and everyone's perspective is equally valued.
- The ideas shared during the FGI should not be shared outside the FGI with non-participants in order to respect participants' privacy.
- Disagreements about ideas can be valuable and productive, but personal attacks will not be tolerated.

After establishing these ground rules, the moderator should ask if there are any questions or concerns participants have, and these issues should be addressed and consensus reached as a group before moving on. The question of **confidentiality** is also important to address, and the approach to protecting confidentiality as data are gathered, stored and reported should be discussed and agreed upon between the evaluation manager and the evaluation team during the design phase. The moderator should clearly describe how the data collected will be used, including with whom it will be shared, and crucially, whether names or other personal or identifying information will be included with the data. Many times, the experiences and opinions shared during a focus group will include sensitive information, and participants may not feel comfortable sharing openly if they feel it could have negative consequences for them in the future. The moderator must be honest about how the data will be used, but should also reassure the participants that the data will be treated sensitively and that their privacy will be respected to the greatest degree possible given the needs and purposes of the evaluation. After providing this information, it is important to describe what will or will not happen if they choose not to participate. To ensure the data collected are reliable, participation in an FGI should be entirely voluntary and there should be no consequences for declining to participate. After informing participants of all of this information, **the moderator must ask each member to confirm that they consent to participate in the FGI**. Often, to be consistent across FGIs, the language communicating these points is written in the moderator's guide.

TYPES OF FGI QUESTIONS

Good discussion questions initiate exchanges between group members and elicit multiple points of view on a topic. The best questions are simple, single-topic, and use language familiar to, if not commonly used by, the participants themselves. There are many different kinds of questions that can be useful at different points in a discussion as well as for eliciting different kinds of information. Thought and care should be put into how questions are asked, and in what order. Follow-up questioning and other moderation strategies are described in the "Conducting and Recording the Focus Group" section below.

- **Closed-ended questions** are those that can be answered "yes" or "no" (e.g., "Do you collect water from a well?"), or questions that have a limited range of answers (e.g., "At what time of day do you collect water?"). Questions that ask participants to respond by raising their hands also fit into this category. These questions generally do not elicit discussions and should be used sparingly, but they can be useful at the beginning of a discussion to "break the ice," or "warm up" the participants before posing more complex questions.
- **Open-ended questions** have a wide range of possible responses, and are therefore more likely to generate discussion among the participants. Questions such as "What do you think of the new program?" "How has the program benefitted or harmed the community?" or "How did you feel when the program was ending?" are all examples of open-ended questions. These types of questions are valuable because they spur a variety of responses, but the moderator must also be careful to guide the responses so that they do not stray too far from the main topics of the FGI.
- **Recall and hypothetical questions** are types of open-ended questions that can be very productive for discussions. Recall questions, such as "Tell me about the first time the program community advocate came to visit you," elicit stories from group members and can yield rich and detailed data. Hypothetical questions, such as "If you were to improve the program, what would you change and what would you keep the same?" also are productive ways to initiate discussion and are good for exposing the values behind participants' practices and opinions.
- **Activities** also can be valuable tools for eliciting discussion and energizing participants. Activities can include role plays, making lists, or drawing maps or illustrations, all of which can be done by individuals or small groups and then shared with the whole group for comment. For example, the moderator could ask a group of community advocates to draw a map of the community and mark the areas where they met the

most resistance to program implementation. During an FGI with twelve community members, participants could break into four groups of three and create lists of the new skills or information they learned from the community advocates.

Because FGIs involve discussions of sometimes complex concepts by multiple individuals, it is important to **clearly define the words and concepts being discussed**. For example, terms like "poverty," "rights," and "development" likely have different meanings for different people, even within the same community. Even seemingly simple words like "children," can be interpreted differently. Thus, while everyone is likely to agree that a five-year-old girl or boy is a child, what about a fifteen-year-old, or an eighteen-year-old? So, if the moderator wants to know about a program's impact on children in the community, she or he may first discuss and agree on a working definition of "children" to be "boys and girls up to fifteen years old," and then ask questions like, "Has the program benefitted children in your community?" If the moderator understands the local context and language, it will obviously be much easier for him or her to choose appropriate words to use in the FGI.

CONDUCTING AND RECORDING THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

After welcoming the participants, explaining the purpose and ground rules of the FGI, and attaining participant consent, the moderator will begin the discussion. The moderator's ability to effectively and efficiently guide the discussion is key to a successful FGI. The following are some strategies and techniques moderators often use.

INCLUDING ALL PARTICIPANTS

The moderator should take note of who has not yet spoken, and who has spoken a lot, and respectfully steer the discussion in a way that allows for all to be heard. The moderator may need to respectfully interrupt some talkative participants or gently coax others who are reluctant to share. Cultural and gender awareness and sensitivity of the moderator are critical factors here, since participant expectations and responsiveness to moderator cues will vary considerably according to cultural context. The moderator also should be aware of the way power relations may contribute to this dynamic, as shyness may be a result of fear to speak in the presence of certain individuals or groups. In this case, it may be necessary to reevaluate the makeup of the groups, or to offer to speak with certain individuals in private after the FGI has concluded.

EMPLOYING FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Skilled use of follow-up questions to comments made by participants is one of the most important qualities of a successful FGI moderator. Participants may make statements that are confusing, contradictory, incomplete, or unclear. Discussions may drift away from the focus of the FGI, or may stall if participants are reluctant to speak. It is at these points that moderators can employ follow-up questions to help revive and guide the conversation.

- **Clarification questions**, such as, "What did you mean when you said X?" ask a respondent to define terms or phrases whose meaning may not be clear, may be contested, or is central to the discussion topic.
- **Probing questions** ask for more detail in an answer. For instance, the moderator may say, "You mentioned that the community advocate didn't always visit your family. Tell me more about that."
- **Origin questions** ask about where an opinion or idea came from, such as "What led you to this idea?"
- **Conflicts and consequences questions** ask about the implications of an idea, such as "Is there anyone who disagrees with what was just said?" or "What might be the positive and negative impacts of doing things the way you describe?" Disagreements within the group are not necessarily bad, but allowing two participants to argue back and forth without reaching a consensus, for example, can be distracting and cause other participants to become less engaged.

RECORDING THE DISCUSSION

A wealth of valuable information can be raised during an FGI, but in order to for it to be analyzed and used, the assistant moderator must accurately and comprehensively record it. Different data from the FGI can be recorded in different ways, but generally, it will involve some kind of note-taking and also possibly audio or video recording. How the discussion will be recorded should be agreed upon between the evaluation team and the evaluation manager at the design phase. Regardless of the final determination, the following points are important to note:

- **Consistency and clarity**: Having a standardized recording form tailored for each set of FGIs can help the assistant moderator capture and organize this data.
- **Group member characteristics**: Characteristics of participants which are most relevant to the evaluation objectives, should be noted, as this information may be crucial to understanding and analyzing the FGI.
- **Key points and themes:** Assistant moderators should record the key points and themes that arise for each discussion topic as thoroughly as possible, whether they are expressed by only one or multiple participants.
- **Word-for-word quotations**: As often as possible, the assistant moderator should record participants' exact quotations, as these are often the most useful and powerful data derived from FGIs.
- **Non-verbal observations**: In addition, the assistant moderator also should take note of participants' body language, such as head nodding, eye contact, voice volume, or emotions that would indicate intensity of agreement or disagreement, the importance of particular topics, or the power dynamics among participants.

Recording the sound or images from an FGI can be a valuable supplement to written notes. Recording discussions also makes it possible to transcribe them and to code the content, which allows evaluators to conduct more detailed analyses of the data.

ANALYZINGTHE DATA

The analysis of FGI data actually begins during the FGI and continues in a systematic way until the results are reported.

STAGES OF ANALYSIS

- **During each FGI**, the moderator is constantly listening to, processing, and responding to the participants' statements in order to guide the conversation and explore emerging ideas.

- **Immediately after each FGI**, the moderator and assistant moderator should discuss their initial impressions and interpretations of the ideas raised during the discussion, and should note any key themes they have already identified.
- **As soon as possible after each FGI**, the moderator and assistant moderator should assist with the transcription of any recordings made and should prepare a field report for each FGI. Field reports should summarize the responses to each key question and highlight quotations that illustrate particularly important ideas. These reports can be coded for analysis using software designed specifically to analyze such data.
- **After the last FGI**, the evaluators must then begin comparing and contrasting the results of different FGIs, if more than one was conducted, looking for patterns and trends. (If only one FGI was conducted, then the evaluator can look for patterns or trends among participants' expressed ideas.) These findings may be identified and organized based on key research questions, but the evaluator should also be conscious of the possibility of discovering unanticipated findings that do not fit neatly within any of the original research questions.

TECHNIQUES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW DATA

The way that the data from the FGI is analyzed will depend on the purpose of the evaluation and the role of the FGI within the evaluation design.

TRANSCRIBING

If the assistant moderator created an audio or video recording of the FGI, the evaluator may use the recording to make a transcript. A transcript is a word-for-word record of everything that was said during the FGI. Producing a transcript can be very time-consuming, but once it is done, the evaluator has many more options for analysis, including coding.

CODING

Often, and especially in evaluations including more than one FGI or other sources of qualitative data in addition to an FGI, the evaluator will decide to code the FGI data so that it is easier to compare different data sets and to identify any themes or patterns present in the data. Coding involves labeling or categorizing passages or parts of transcripts or other data sources so that the data can be readily retrieved, searched, compared and contrasted. If there are a large number of FGIs or a large amount of data to code, there are a number of computer software packages (for example, Atlas ti, Ethnograph, NVivo) that can help code this type of data automatically. Even with the use of a software package, coding qualitative FGI data requires a substantial amount of time, and the evaluation manager should allow for adequate time in the SOW. The evaluator should also make clear in the methodology section of the work plan whether and how the data will be coded as part of the analysis process, and whether and how this coded data will be included in the final report. (See "Report the Findings" below.)

TRIANGULATING

Triangulation is the process through which evaluators compare and contrast findings related to the same question but drawn from different sources and methods. Evaluators often use data from FGIs to triangulate findings from other methods to help to reduce potential bias and increase confidence in the evaluation's overall findings and conclusions. For a more detailed discussion of triangulation, please see the Technical Note on Conducting Mixed-Method Evaluations.

REPORTING THE FINDINGS

FGIs often produce a large amount of different kinds of data, including quotations, observations, and general impressions of the moderators. It can therefore be difficult to organize and present this data to other interested stakeholders. Presenting FGI results can be further complicated by the fact that FGIs are often one of several data collection techniques employed as part of an evaluation, so the evaluation report must not only clearly present the results from the FGI, but also combine the FGI results with those from the other techniques in a way that is coherent and that supports the overall findings, conclusions and recommendations of the report. Generally, there are three key factors to gauge the presentation of FGI findings in an evaluation report:

REPORTING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW METHODS AND EVIDENCE

When evaluations use FGIs, the following key components of an evaluation report should provide transparent information on FGI methods and evidence:

1. **Methodology:** Include rationale for using FGI, selection strategy, limitations, analysis plan, etc.
2. **Data Collection Instruments:** Include all FGI moderators' guides in the annex.
3. **Findings:** Disaggregate findings by all relevant FGI participant groups.
4. **Data Sources:** Include raw FGI data in an annex in the form of transcripts, detailed summaries, or audio recordings as determined by the SOW.

1. **Relevance to the evaluation questions**: Do the results presented help to answer the evaluation questions?
2. **Sufficient methodological information**: Does the report provide enough information about how the FGIs were conducted so that the reader can have confidence in the results?
3. **Succinct and comprehensive analysis**: Are the results presented clearly so that the reader can quickly grasp the most important themes and findings?

It is best practice to provide a separate summary of FGI results, including separate summaries for the different relevant groups of participants, in the evaluation report. For example, if an evaluation included three sets of FGIs, one set with students as participants, one with their parents as participants, and a third with their teachers as participants, then the evaluation report should address what the main findings were for each group. **The raw data obtained from the FGIs also must be submitted to USAID as part of the evaluation files** (along with the FGI moderator's guides described above). The section below outlines several different ways the evaluator can include and incorporate these different components into the final report.

WAYS TO PRESENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW FINDINGS

There are several ways to present FGI findings are part of an evaluation report.

1. **In a separate section in the main body of the report**: The authors may choose to dedicate a chapter or section in the main body of the report to the FGI results. In this case, it should include the main findings that emerged from the FGI data, disaggregated by relevant FGI groups, as well as actual quotations from FGI participants which help to highlight and support these findings. When the evaluation design uses FGIs, and only FGIs, to address a single evaluation question, this strategy of presenting FGI results may be most appropriate.
2. **Summarized in the main body, details in a separate annex**: The authors may choose to include some discussion of the FGI results in a summary in the main body of the evaluation report, but still use an annex to go into greater detail with a complete summary of this data.
3. **Interspersed throughout the main body, details in a separate annex**: As FGI data are often used to complement other data to answer the same questions, it is often useful to present all of the data relevant to a single evaluation question, including the FGI data, together, integrated into the same section of the main report. For example, the findings section of an evaluation report may contain a table with collected survey data, followed by a paragraph which interprets the quantitative data in the table. This

paragraph could then be immediately followed by a paragraph discussing how the data collected from the FGIs support, refute or provide context to the survey data. The authors should also include relevant quotations from FGI transcripts in this section in order to enrich this discussion of results. Presenting FGI results in this way adds richness to the discussion of the evaluation results and clearly demonstrates how the different data sets help to complement each other. However, a separate section communicating the results of the FGIs, as an annex, is still recommended.

Regardless of the broader placement of FGI findings in the evaluation report, the authors should make optimal use of the actual words participants use during the FGIs. Direct quotations from FGI transcripts can make the evaluation report more interesting and persuasive, and can be inserted directly into the relevant paragraphs or included in text boxes to set them apart and highlight them as primary data. A quotation should not disclose the identity of the individual speaking, but it often is useful to make clear the individual's role within the project, for example, "-A small business owner in West Java".

WAYS TO PRESENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW RAW DATA

As noted above, USAID Evaluation Policy does require that the raw data obtained from FGIs be submitted to USAID along with the final evaluation report. Sometimes, this data will come in the form of full transcripts, plus moderator notes, from every FGI conducted as part of the evaluation. Though full transcripts provide the best written record of an FGI, producing them requires a considerable amount of time on the part of the evaluation team, and the evaluation manager should make sure, if they are required to be submitted as a part of a deliverable, that the SOW includes sufficient time and resources to allow for this process. In many cases, when the evaluation includes multiple FGIs, the transcripts from all of the FGIs may total many pages, so that including all of them as part of the evaluation report may be overly costly and impractical. In cases like these, the evaluation manager may decide to ask for a written summary of each FGI to be submitted instead of complete transcripts. Including the full set of raw data with the final evaluation report increases the transparency of the overall evaluation and allows the reader to explore FGI results in greater depth.

ASSESSING FGI DATA QUALITY

If the evaluation manager, or any interested stakeholder, is provided with all of the required components discussed above (detailed methodology including limitations, moderator's guides, summary of results disaggregated by relevant groups, and raw data), he or she can then essentially retrace the steps of each FGI and in doing so, assess the quality of the FGI data and the resulting findings. The assessor could first review the moderator's guides, checking to see whether the best practices described above are incorporated into the guides and whether the questions included in the moderator's guide are appropriately crafted to help answer the evaluation questions. By reviewing the raw data (either the FGI summaries or transcripts), the assessor could also make note of what proportion of participants actively spoke and responded to questions during the FGI; if only a small fraction of the respondents actively share their ideas during the FGI, then the resulting data is likely to be less informative and less reliable than data from an FGI where all group members actively participate. If a disproportionate number of participants in an FGI belong to one group (many more men than women; many more elderly adults than younger adults), and this was not the intention of the evaluator, then this skewed makeup is also likely to introduce bias into the results. **The moderators and the evaluators should clearly explain any limitations to the methodology and sources of bias that arose during implementation in the final evaluation report.**

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can be used as samples or templates, or provide more information on the topics reports and on evaluation in general. Where information differs, USAID's ADS (Automated Directives System) 200 series take precedence over that in other resources.

"Can You Call It A Focus Group?", Iowa State University- University Extension, accessed February 22, 2013. http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm1969a.pdf.

"Focus Groups", Better Evaluation, accessed February 22, 2013. http://betterevaluation.org/evaluation-options/FocusGroups.

R. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research (3rd ed.).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000.

International Program for Development Training, "Toolkit 5: Focus Groups," IPDET Handbook, Module 8 (Data Collection Methods), pp. 395-413. http://www.worldbank.org/oed/ipdet/modules/M_08-na.pdf.