NUMBER 10
2011 Printing

PERFORMANCE MONITORING & EVALUATION

TIPS

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

ABOUT TIPS

These TIPS provide practical advice and suggestions to USAID managers on issues related to peroformance monitoring and evaluation. This publication is a supplemental reference to the Automated Directive Service (ADS) Chapter 203.

USAID's guidelines encourage use of rapid, low-cost methods to collect information on the performance of development assistance activities.

Focus group interviews, the subject of this *TIPS*, is one such method.

WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW?

A focus group interview is an inexpensive, rapid appraisal technique that can provide managers with a wealth of qualitative information on performance of development activities, services, and products, or other issues. A facilitator guides 7 to 11 people in a discussion of their experiences, feelings, and preferences about a topic. The facilitator raises issues identified in a discussion guide and uses probing techniques to solicit views, ideas, and other information. Sessions typically last one to two hours.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

This technique has several advantages. It is low cost and provides speedy results. Its flexible format allows the facilitator to explore unanticipated issues and encourages interaction among participants. In a group setting participants provide checks and balances, thus minimizing false or extreme views.

Focus groups have some limitations, however. The flexible format makes it susceptible to facilitator bias, which can undermine the validity and reliability of findings. Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals. Focus group interviews generate relevant qualitative information, but no quantitative data from which generalizations can be made for a whole population. Moreover, the information can be difficult to analyze; comments should be interpreted in the context of the group setting.

WHEN ARE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS USEFUL?

Focus group interviews can be useful in all phases of development activities— planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. They can be used to solicit views, insights, and recommendations of program staff, customers, stakeholders, technical experts, or other groups.

They are especially appropriate when:

- program activities are being planned and it is important for managers to understand customers' and other stakeholders' attitudes, preferences or needs
- specific services or outreach approaches have to take into account customers' preferences
- major program implementation problems cannot be explained recommendations and suggestions are needed from customers, partners, experts, or other stakeholders

For example, focus groups were used to uncover problems in a Nepal family planning program where facilities were underutilized, and to obtain suggestions for improvements from customers. The focus groups revealed that rural women considered family planning important. However, they did not use the clinics because of caste system barriers and the demeaning manner of clinic staff. Focus group participants suggested appointing staff of the same social status to ensure that rural women were treated with respect. They also suggested that rural women disseminate information to their neighbors about the health clinic.

Before deciding whether to use focus group interviews as a source of information, the study purpose needs to be clarified. This requires identifying who will use the information, determining what information is needed, and understanding why the information is needed. Once this is done, an appropriate methodology can be selected. (See *Tips 5 Using Rapid Appraisal Methods* for additional information on selecting appraisal techniques.)

STEPS IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Follow this step-by-step advice to help ensure high-quality results.

Step 1. Select the team

Conducting a focus group interview requires a small team, with at least a facilitator to guide the discussion and a rapporteur to record it. The facilitator should be a native speaker who can put people at ease. The team should have substantive knowledge of the topic under discussion.

Skills and experience in conducting focus groups are also important. If the interviews are to be conducted by members of a broader evaluation team without previous experience in focus group techniques, training is suggested. This training can take the form of role playing, formalized instruction on topic sequencing and probing for generating and managing group discussions, as well as pre-testing discussion guides in pilot groups.

Step 2. Select the participants

First, identify the types of groups and institutions that should be represented (such as program managers, customers, partners, technical experts, government officials) in the focus groups. This will be determined by the information needs of the study. Often separate focus groups are held for each type of group. Second, identify the most suitable people in each group. One of the best approaches is to consult key informants who know about local conditions. It is prudent to consult several informants to minimize the biases of individual preferences.

Each focus group should be 7 to 11 people to allow the smooth flow of conversation.

Participants should be homogenous, from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. They should share common traits related to the discussion topic. For example, in a discussion on contraceptive use, older and younger women should participate in separate focus groups. Younger women may be reluctant to discuss sexual behavior among their elders, especially if it deviates from tradition. Ideally, people should not know each other. Anonymity lowers inhibition and prevents formation of cliques.

Step 3. Decide on timing and location

Discussions last one to two hours and should be conducted in a convenient location with some degree of privacy. Focus groups in a small village arouse curiosity and can result in uninvited participants. Open places are not good spots for discussions.

Step 4. Prepare the discussion guide

The discussion guide is an outline, prepared in advance, that covers the topics and issues to be discussed. It should contain few items, allowing some time and flexibility to pursue unanticipated but relevant issues.

Excerpt from a Discussion Guide on Curative Health Services

(20-30 minutes)

Q. Who treats/cures your children when they get sick? Why?

Note: Look for opinions about

- outcomes and results
- provider-user relations
- costs (consultations, transportation, medicine)
- waiting time
- physical aspects (privacy, cleanliness)
- availability of drugs, lab services
- access (distance, availability of transportation)
- follow-up at home

The guide provides the framework for the facilitator to explore, probe, and ask questions. Initiating each topic with a carefully crafted question will help keep the discussion focused. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient. Its flexibility, however can mean that different focus groups are asked different questions, reducing the credibility of the findings. An excerpt from a discussion guide used in Bolivia to assess child survival services provides an illustration. (See box on page 3)

Step 5. Conduct the interview

Establish rapport. Often participants do not know what to expect from focus group discussions. It is helpful for the facilitator to outline the purpose and format of the discussion at the beginning of the session, and set the group at ease. Participants should be told that the discussion is informal, everyone is expected to participate, and divergent views are welcome.

Phrase questions carefully. Certain types of questions impede group discussions. For example, yes-or-no questions are one dimensional and do not stimulate discussion. "Why" questions put people on the defensive and cause them to take "politically correct" sides on controversial issues.

Open-ended questions are more useful because they allow participants to tell their story in their own words and add details that can result in unanticipated findings. For example:

- What do you think about the criminal justice system?
- How do you feel about the upcoming national elections?

If the discussion is too broad the facilitator can narrow responses by asking such questions as:

- What do you think about corruption in the criminal justice system?
- How do you feel about the three parties running in upcoming national elections?

Use probing techniques. When participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can probe for fuller, clearer responses. A few suggested techniques:

Repeat the question—repetition gives more time to think

Adopt sophisticated naivete" posture—convey limited understanding of the issue and ask for specific details

Pause for the answer—a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer

Repeat the reply—hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation. Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions—they provoke more detailed information

Use neutral comments— Anything else?" Why do you feel this way?"

Control the discussion. In most groups a few individuals dominate the discussion. To balance out participation:

- Address questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk
- Give nonverbal cues (look in another direction or stop taking notes when an individual talks for an extended period)
- Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion

- Take advantage of a pause and say, "Thank you for that interesting idea, perhaps we can discuss it in a separate session. Meanwhile with your consent, I would like to move on to another item."

Minimize group pressure. When an idea is being adopted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure is occurring. To minimize group pressure the facilitator can probe for alternate views. For example, the facilitator can raise another issue, or say, "We had an interesting discussion but let's explore other alter natives."

Step 6. Record the discussion

A rapporteur should perform this function. Tape recordings in conjunction with written notes are useful. Notes should be extensive and reflect the content of the discussion as well as nonverbal behavior (facial expressions, hand movements).

Shortly after each group interview, the team should summarize the information, the team's impressions, and implications of the information for the study.

Discussion should be reported in participants' language, retaining their phrases and grammatical use. Summarizing or paraphrasing responses can be misleading. For instance, a verbatim reply "Yes, indeed! I am positive," loses its intensity when recorded as "Yes."

Step 7. Analyze results

After each session, the team should assemble the interview notes (transcripts of each focus group interview), the summaries, and any other relevant data to analyze trends and patterns. The following method can be used.

Read summaries all at one time. Note potential trends andpatterns, strongly held or frequently aired opinions.

Read each transcript. Highlight sections that correspond to the discussion guide questions and mark comments that could be used in the final report.

Analyze each question separately. After reviewing all the responses to a question or topic, write a summary statement that describes the discussion. In analyzing the results, the team should consider:

- *Words*. Weigh the meaning of words participants used. Can a variety of words and phrases categorize similar responses?

- *Framework.* Consider the circumstances in which a comment was made (context of previous discussions, tone and intensity of the comment).

- *Internal agreement.* Figure out whether shifts in opinions during the discussion were caused by group pressure.

- *Precision of responses.* Decide which responses were based on personal experience and give them greater weight than those based on vague impersonal impressions.

- *The big picture*. Pinpoint major ideas. Allocate time to step back and reflect on major findings.

- Purpose of the report. Consider the objectives of the study and the information needed for decisionmaking. The type and scope of reporting will guide the analytical process. For example, focus group reports typically are: (1) brief oral reports that highlight key findings; (2) descriptive reports that summarize the discussion; and (3) analytical reports that provide trends, patterns, or findings and include selected comments.

Focus Group Interviews of Navarongo Community Health and Family Planning Project in Ghana

The Ghanaian Ministry of Health launched a small pilot project in three villages in 1994 to assess community reaction to family planning and elicit community advice on program design and management. A new model of service delivery-was introduced: community health nurses were retrained as community health officers living in the communities and providing village-based clinical services. Focus group discussions were used to identify constraints to introducing family planning services and clarify ways to design operations that villagers value.

Discussions revealed that many women want more control over their ability to reproduce, but believe their preferences are irrelevant to decisions made in the male dominated lineage system. This indicated that outreach programs aimed primarily at women are insufficient. Social groups must be included to legitimize and support individuals' family-planning decisions. Focus group discussions also revealed women's concerns about the confidentiality of information and services. These findings preclude development of a conventional communitybased distribution program, since villagers clearly prefer outside service delivery workers to those who are community members.

Selected Further Reading

Krishna Kumar, *Conducting Group Interviews in Developing Countries*, A.I.D. Program Design and Evaluation Methodology Report No. 8, 1987 (PN-AAL-088)

Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research,* Sage Publications, 1988