Focus Group Discussion

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The focus group discussion (FGD) is a rapid assessment, semi-structured data gathering method in which a purposively selected set of participants gather to discuss issues and concerns based on a list of key themes drawn up by the researcher/facilitator (Kumar 1987). This qualitative research technique was originally developed to give marketing researchers a better understanding of the data from quantitative consumer surveys. As an indispensable tool for marketing researchers (Krueger 1988), the focus group discussion has become extremely popular because it provides a fast way to learn from the target audience (Debus 1988; US Department of Health and Human Services 1980). Marketing and media studies have shown that the focus group discussion is a cost-effective technique for eliciting views and opinions of prospective clients, customers and end-users. In agriculture, focus groups have been used to obtain insights into target audience perceptions, needs, problems, beliefs, and reasons for certain practices.

Focus group discussion guide

To keep the session on track while allowing respondents to talk freely and spontaneously, the facilitator uses a discussion guide that lists the main topics or themes to be covered in the session. It serves as a road map that guides the facilitator in covering the list of topics and keeping the discussion on track. The number of items in the guide is generally kept to a minimum to leave enough time for in-depth discussion. It should focus only on relevant research issues. The sequence of topics in the guide usually moves from general to specific (see Box 1 for sample FGD guide).

The following steps are suggested for developing the focus group discussion guide:

1. Specify the objectives and information needs of the focus group discussion.
   Example
   To understand how extension and plant protection officials make decisions in response of pest outbreaks.

2. Break down the major topics into discussion points or themes.
   Example
   a) Reporting of pest outbreaks
   b) Management procedure for dealing with pest outbreaks
   c) Worries and concerns about the BPH/virus outbreak

3. Prepare probe questions.
   Example
   1. Let's talk about reporting of the BPH/virus disease outbreak that hit the Mekong Delta recently … How are outbreaks reported?

- What is the flow of outbreak information from the field upwards?
- And usually how long will this take to reach province directors?
- How do provincial directors act on reports of outbreaks?
- Are reports of outbreaks from the field communicated upwards to the central offices or contained within the province?

2. What is PPD's management procedure for dealing with a pest outbreak? What about the People's Committee?
   - During the BPH/virus outbreak last season, what do you think was expected of you as an extension official? As a People's Committee vice chairman?
   - What steps did PPD take to manage the BPH/virus problem last season? What about the People's Committee in the area?
   - What virus disease management options were preferred and recommended by PPD? (Chemical, escape strategy, etc.) Why was that option chosen?

4. Review the guide and eliminate any irrelevant questions.

Box 1. Sample FGD Guide

Rice Planthopper Outbreaks

1. How are outbreaks reported?
2. What is the flow of outbreak information from the field upwards?
3. And usually how long will this take to reach province directors?
4. How do provincial directors act on reports of outbreaks?
5. Are reports of outbreaks from the field communicated upwards to the central offices or contained within the province?
6. What is PPD's management procedure for dealing with a pest outbreak? What about the People's Committee?
7. During the BPH/virus outbreak last season, what do you think was expected of you as an extension official? As a People's Committee vice chairman?
8. What steps did PPD take to manage the BPH/virus problem last season? What about the People's Committee in the area?
9. What virus disease management options were preferred and recommended by PPD? (Chemical, escape strategy, etc.) Why was that option chosen?
10. What were your worries about the BPH/virus outbreak?
11. What were your worries about the disease management option you have chosen and recommended to farmers?
12. How much was the budget allocation for virus disease control? How was this amount determined? What was the basis for the budget allocation?
13. How was the budget allocation decided in PPD?
14. Who decides the budget allocation for pest outbreaks?
15. What extension mechanisms were used to communicate to farmers about virus disease control?

Asking questions during focus groups. The quality of questions asked in a focus group can make a large difference in the kind of information obtained. Krueger (1988) gives some tips on how to handle open-ended and dichotomous questions in these discussions:

Open-ended questions are most appropriate at the start of the discussion because they allow participants to answer from different angles. As the possible responses are not preconceived, open-ended questions give the participants opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings based on their specific situations. Krueger warns that some questions may appear to be open-ended but are really closed-ended because they include phrases such as "satisfied", "to what extent", or "how much".

Dichotomous questions are ones that can be answered by a "yes" or "no" or other similar two-alternative items. As yes-no questions are dead-ends, they usually do not trigger the desired group discussion. They also tend to elicit vague responses that do not lead to an understanding of the key issues being discussed (Moulton and Roberts 1993).

How to conduct a focus group discussion

Facilitator. In selecting a person to moderate a focus group, it is important that this person have these qualities:

- familiarity with the discussion topic
- ability to speak the language spoken of the area
- cultural sensitivity, including not acting as a judge, a teacher, does not looking down on respondents, not agreeing or disagreeing with what is said, and not putting words in the participants' mouths.
- genuine interest in people
- sensitivity to men and women
- politeness
- empathy
- respect for participants

Steps in conducting the session

Before the focus group discussion begins, the facilitator should obtain the background information of participants such as their age, crops grown, farm size, and other pertinent information. The type of information to collect depends on the FGD topic. Once this is done, this sequence of steps is carried out:

1. After a brief introduction, the purpose and scope of the discussion are explained.
2. Participants are asked to give their names and short background information about themselves.
4. The discussion is structured around the key themes using the probe questions prepared in advance.

5. During the discussion, all participants are given the opportunity to participate.
5. Use a variety of moderating tactics to facilitate the group. Among these tactics that the moderator can use include:

   - Stimulate the participants to talk to each other, not necessarily to the moderator.
   - Encourage shy participants to speak.
   - Discourage dominant participants through verbal and nonverbal cues. The following may be used when the situation permits:
     - Call on other participants
     - Politely intervene by saying, "Maybe we can discuss that in another occasion..."
     - Look in another direction
     - Take advantage of a pause and suggest that the subject can be discussed in detail in another session
   - Pay close attention to what is said in order to encourage that behavior in other participants.
   - Use in-depth probing without leading the participant.

Guidelines in conducting focus group discussion (FGD)

1. The FGD is an opportunity for the research team to listen and learn, and not to lecture or provide team members' interpretation of the local biophysical and social system.

2. The team members agree on various task assignments including: a) facilitator/ interpreter , b) rapporteur, c) logistics in-charge.

3. Each team member must have a copy of the FGD guide. The list of themes to be discussed may be written on the board to serve as guide for FGD participants on the scope and progress of the discussion.

4. Familiarize yourself with local terminologies/names to avoid misunderstanding of what farmers say.

5. Keep an open mind and listen more. Do not push your own agenda (e.g. a new variety you have developed which you think will solve farmers' problems).

6. Avoid questions that yield Yes or No answers.

7. Avoid leading questions. Examples: Don't you think that variety X is an excellent variety?

8. Be sensitive to local norms and customs.

9. Remember that farmers' time is valuable to them. Strive to complete the FGD within the time period that you mentioned to participants.

10. Don't forget to thank participants and local leaders after the conduct of the FGD.

Logistical arrangements for FGD

- **Invitations** - Participants are contacted in advance, at least one to two weeks before the session. A letter of invitation may be sent to each participant, taking into consideration the prevailing practices in the area. Participants are also reminded about the focus group discussion one day before the session.

- **Group composition** - The choice of participants depends on the topic of the focus group. Often, the people who are included are those knowledgeable about the topic but at the same time, it is also wise to gather the views of certain groups in the target population. The optimal number of participants is 8 -10. If a group is too small, one person in the group may dominate it; if it is too big, then it may be difficult to control. Group members should be representative of the intended target population.

- **Transportation** - To ensure attendance, transportation is usually arranged for the participants from their residence to the focus group venue. In rural areas where farm families may reside in distant villages, participants could be asked to converge at a central location to facilitate pick-up.

- **Venue** - Focus group discussions can be conducted in a place where 8 - 10 persons can be seated and assured of some privacy. In the rural areas, the most readily available sites are school buildings, health and community centers and churches. An appropriate venue is a neutral place that is free from distractions and where participants can talk openly.

- **Seating arrangements** - A semicircular seating arrangement facilitates interaction among participants because it allows them to freely see and hear each other.

- **Timing -** The timing of the meeting should be convenient to all participants. While waiting for other participants to arrive, the focus group discussion team can use the time to break the ice by getting information about their backgrounds. To minimize boredom, focus group discussions are generally not stretched beyond two hours.

- **Name tags** - It is best to remember the names of the participants. Often, a seating arrangement will facilitate identifying each one. If the culture permits, providing nametags to participants is useful because it enables facilitators to call on those who may be too shy to express their opinions.

- **Recording** - A trained rapporteur should capture the discussion in writing and note the participants' nonverbal expressions. Situations may occur where the discussion needs to be tape-recorded, but facilitators should weigh the advantages and disadvantages.

- **Refreshments** - **When** resources permit, serving refreshments after the session is a small gesture of appreciation to the participants for having taken time off their work to participate.

Writing the FGD report

After conducting the focus group discussion, the key findings are described, analyzed and written up in a report (see Box 2 for sample FGD report) . Debus (1988) suggests some useful guidelines for analyzing data:

1. Develop a plan for analysis consisting of:
   - background of the research
   - objectives
   - methods
   - discussion details
   - focus group discussion guide

2. Analyze the content of the group discussion by
   - reviewing the notes from the focus group
   - listening again to the cassettes from the session (if tape recorded)
   - grouping research findings according to key themes
   - identifying the different positions that emerged under each key theme
   - summarizing each of the different positions and assess the extent to which each position was held by participants
   - pulling out verbatim phrases that represent each position.

2. Synthesize the group discussion by:
   - reviewing the notes of each discussion made by the moderator
   - identifying the recurrent ideas that came out during the discussion
   - interpreting these recurrent ideas based upon other findings that emerged in the groups

Box 3.2 Sample FGD Report

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In February 2009 we conducted a focus group discussion with 15 directors and officials of the provincial departments of agriculture and sub-plant protection departments in Long An, Tien Giang and Vinh Long provinces in the Mekong Delta to understand how they make decisions in response of pest outbreaks. It appeared that they rely more on procedural rationality and they often displace substantive rationality.

Reporting of pest outbreaks

When a planthopper outbreak occurs, the sub-PPD technicians inform the plant protection stations and announce it to farmers on television and radio and report it by phone and letter to these officials -- the directors of the sub-PPD, the Southern Regional Plant Protection Center (SRPPC), the provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), and the vice-chairman of the People's Committee. The letter is faxed to the plant protection stations and various departments at the provincial level. The reporting process takes a day.

In turn, the provincial directors then verify the planthopper situation and ask the sub-PPD to draw up a plan to control planthoppers. This process takes two days. Each province has a steering committee (SC) on BPH control which is chaired by the vice chairman of the People's Committee. The sub-PPD director, who is also a committee member, presents the plan to this committee. Drawing up the plan and presenting it to the committee takes up three days. The steering committee action on BPH control invariably involves applying chemicals, determining the amount of pesticide subsidy, the area affected and amount of pesticides needed. Each SC member goes to the district in the outbreak area to instruct the farmers on how to control BPH.

Each year, the provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development allocates a budget for emergency pesticides that will cover one-third of its agricultural production area. In Tien Giang province, the annual budget for emergency pesticides in store costs the local government about VND 4-5 billion (USD 286,000). If no pest outbreak occurs, the pesticides are stored for future use and if unused after two years, the pesticides are returned to the chemical company. The company accepts the pesticides as it is stipulated in the letter of agreement with the Department of Agriculture and the chemical company.

Driving forces

A plant protection official narrated how the recent BPH outbreak and pesticide advertising have pushed farmers to apply pesticides. Farmers often use mixtures because they want a quick knock down effect. However, the more they sprayed insecticides, the more the BPH could not be controlled. Besides the farmers' psychological fear of losing their crop and the pesticide companies' aggressive marketing efforts, the MARD guidelines, recommending pesticide application when there are 3 BPH/tiller, also encourage chemical use.

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