TOOL 5

GUIDANCE ON RUNNING A FOCUS GROUP

Community Engagement and Accountability / IFRC / June 2016

This guidance document is intended to support staff and volunteers when organising focus group discussions. It is based on a document from the Canadian Red Cross[1] and also relies on a number of other sources. For further information and reading please refer to the references contained within this document.

HOW TO CONDUCT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS[2]

If possible, conduct a few focus groups and compare the information you are collecting from these and other sources.

What is a focus group?

Six to twelve people are invited to discuss specific topics in detail. The focus group can bring together people who have something in common. They may share a particular problem, or be unable to speak up at larger meetings (for example, younger people, women, or minority groups), or are people only peripherally involved in the community, such as nomads. It is best not to have leaders or people in authority present – interview them separately. Why only six to twelve people?

In a larger group:
- Speaking time will be restricted and dominant people will speak most
- The facilitator will have to play more of a controlling role
- Some members of the group will become frustrated if they cannot speak
- Participants will start talking to one other rather than to the group as a whole
- The group may stop focusing and start talking about something else

What do you need?
- An experienced facilitator: a native speaker who can lead, draw out the people who are not talking, and stop others from talking too much
- Time to prepare open-ended questions and select focus-group members
- One, sometimes two, people to note in writing what is said
- A common language
- A quiet place where the group will not be overheard or interrupted
- To sit in a circle and be comfortable

Shared understanding and agreement about the purpose of the discussion
- Ground rules, for example: everyone has a right to speak; no one has the right answer; please don't interrupt

---

[1] How to conduct focus group discussions, Canadian Red Cross Beneficiary Accountability Manual, Annex 8.
[2] Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies: Good Enough Guide, Tool 3. ECB (2007).

ICRC

International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

- Permission from the group to take notes (or maybe use a tape recorder)
- About one to one-and-a-half hours and some refreshments

What happens?

- The facilitator makes sure everyone has a chance to speak and that the discussion stays focused
- The note-taker writes notes
- At the end of the session, the facilitator gives a brief summing up of what has been said in case someone has something to add
- The facilitator checks that the written record has captured the main points and reflected

How to facilitate a discussion on a specific theme[3]

- Introduce the theme selected for the focus group discussions;
- Before asking about the theme, ask questions about the background of the individuals participating in the focus group or semi-structured discussion (such as what they do, how they earned an income before the disaster, who they live with, where they live and how old they are);
- Ensure that everyone has a chance to speak on the theme, encourage everyone to expand on certain points and avoid moving quickly through a list of questions. It is important to be sensitive to cultural norms when conducting the sessions to ensure that no one feels rushed or excluded;
- Ask open questions, such as how, what, where, why as much as possible, especially to clarify or to check understanding. Do not judge people who speak; accept what they say;
- Avoid leading statements and questions; questions should guide the discussion rather than solicit direct answers from each of the participants;
- Avoid dominating the discussion; ask simple questions and only one question at a time;
- Steer the group towards analysing the causes of the identified issues/problems/ risks, the skills they have at their disposal to resolve them, and the role of the community in developing solutions;
- Ensure that the protection risks discussed and analysed are linked to possible solutions that can be formulated in recommendations and follow-up activities;
- Ensure time for participants to raise their own questions and concerns;
- Ask the participants which of the issues raised they consider to be the most pressing.

Communicating with children[4]

Children and youth should always be included in participatory assessments. Girls and boys have needs and abilities which are significantly different from those of adults and from each other. Communicating with children has some particular requirements which include the following:

[3] UNHCR tool on Participatory Assessments in Operations, 2006, page 35
[4] UNHCR tool on Participatory assessments, 2006, page 34

ICRC

International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

- Being at ease with children, engaging with them in whatever style of 5suits the individual (e.g. by sitting on the ground, through play, going for a walk) and tolerating expressions of distress, aggression;
- Using simple language and concepts appropriate to the child's age, stage of development, and culture;
- Accepting that children who have had distressing experiences may find it extremely difficult to trust an unfamiliar adult. It may take time and patience before the child can feel sufficient trust to communicate openly;
- Understanding that children may view their situation in distinctly different ways from adults: children may fantasize, invent explanations for unfamiliar or frightening events, express themselves in symbolic ways, emphasize issues which may seem unimportant to adults and so on;
- Being sensitive to gender, culture, ethics, and the power relations between adults and the child;
- Encouraging the involvement of colleagues/ partner staff who are familiar with working with children in a participatory way.