Conduct of Focus Group Discussion:

A Guide

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1.1 What are focus groups

In this project, a focus group is a technique for exploring issues with a community or group for a couple of purposes:

- Get responses from farmer/community groups about the results of trIals and planned activities conducted by the project.
- Evaluate farmer perceptions of the suitability, benefits, costs and risks of the technologies being developed by the project.
- Explore issues that help develop quantitative investigations of factors affecting the adoption of technologies being developed by the project.
- Prioritize the farmers/communities needs within project objectives at local levels

The information from focus groups will provide rich and detailed qualitative information about the factors, constraints and opportunities to be used in assessing the strategies and options for extending the research findings from the project.

Focus groups are good for:

- monitoring participant perceptions, beliefs and feelings over time
- generating a wide range ideas of where to go in the future
- understanding the reasons why participants are (or are not) keen on adopting a technology
- collecting data quickly
- providing background and wording for the design of questionnaires.

Focus groups are not good for:

- generalising to people not represented in the focus groups
- providing quantitative information on most issues
- solving community conflicts or overcoming social constraints
- analysis can be difficult and time consuming

1.2 Purpose of a focus group

One of the first tasks is to decide on a purpose for the focus group. This will help you decide if the focus groups will help you answer the research question you are hoping to address with the focus group. The purpose of a focus group answers questions such as:

- Why are we having the focus group?
- What are we trying to understand?

Examples of purpose of a focus group conducted with ‘core’ farmers associated with SRFSI nodes might be:

- To feedback the results of the previous seasons trial activities to farmers and to get farmers’ perceptions of the reasons for the results and what their perceptions are of the technologies tested.
- To outline the plans for the next seasons’ activities and to get farmer views on the suitability of the plans.
- To know what are the technological modification that will be needed as per their experience and local situations
- To investigate their concerns and perceptions about the innovations being trialled.

1.3 Selecting the team

Preferably two people are all that is required to conduct a focus group; an experienced moderator/facilitator who has the knowledge and skills to manage the discussion and the observer/recorder who can understand the local languages and is experienced in recording and observing people. The moderator/facilitator must be able to: manage dominant group members; encourage all members (both men and women; people of different age groups) to participate; ask open-questions, and ask appropriate follow-up questions required to stimulate conversation and to obtain more in-depth answers. Additional people are not required as they may remove the focus from the participants. None of the team should be biased or have a role that might discourage people to speak. Their role is to ask unbiased questions and listen, not to present their opinions.

1.4 Choice of participants

Focus groups can vary in size from about 6 to 30, although for this project about 8-12 would be a suitable size. The choice of who to select for the focus groups will depend on the purpose of the focus group. The other choice is to consider whether to have mixed (& gender balanced) or single gender groups. We believe it would be preferable if we can continue our initial practice of having six focus groups per node (2 males; 2 females and 2 mixed groups[2]) for this component. If it is decided to do more the same relative balance should be achieved.

Attendees at a focus group of ‘core’ farmers should include a balanced combination of female and male farmers from the relevant households. For non ‘core’ focus groups the choice of participants will be suggested by the researchers guiding the particular investigations for which these will be a part. With them you can develop screening criteria such as:

- the number of people you want to attend
- the gender balance of the group
- characteristics of participants that will suit the research objectives
- the number with particular characteristics
- location or group membership.

1.5 Attracting participants

Since focus groups use people’s time, which is valuable to them, consider what benefits the attendees will get out of attendance. For ‘core’ farmers in this project there will be direct benefits in receiving feedback about the trial results and plans, but for ‘non-core’ farmers and farmers from other villages other incentives will need to be provided. Project management has decided that cash payments will not be made, but in-kind payments such as drinks and food or perhaps an opportunity to ask questions about their farming problems may be possible. The key is to develop rapport with potential participants as they may be future participants in the scaling out phase. You could consider:

- What issues may be sensitive in the focus group community.
- What might help develop rapport with the different ages and genders likely to be involved.

When contacting potential participants, provide a brief, general description about the what, where and when of the group. Also outline the expected length of the session and any incentives that will be offered if they attend. Where possible, the length should be kept to a maximum of two hours, so as to keep the interest of participants.

In deciding on the number to invite you will need to allow for the number who will not turn up to the session.

[2] The number of groups will be decided in the next planning meeting.

1.6 Preparation

Other key factors to consider as part of the planning include:

- For this project, there will be a number of focus groups to be run at around the same time. This means you will have to have a couple of teams. Make sure the approach is consistent between the teams so that the results will be more comparable. Some preliminary training may be needed so the same protocol is applied.
- Pick a suitable time and location. Ask potential participants what will be most convenient time for the session. For mixed groups, in particular, it is important to consider availability of both men and women, taking into consideration their responsibilities (e.g. certain times in the morning may be inconvenient for women as they may need to take small kids to school). The location should be convenient, comfortable, quiet and preferably private so that non-participants can't listen in and comment. Avoid the peak seasons to conduct FGDs.
- If possible contact participants, or ask a local contact, to remind them of the time and location the day before and confirm their attendance.

1.7 Design of focus group guide

The purpose of a focus group guide is to provide a structure for the discussion and to ensure that important questions will not be forgotten. However, unlike a survey questionnaire the point is not to stick rigidly to the order or even the exact wording of the guide. Instead the emphasis is on exploration of the issues and the depth of information you can learn. The moderator/facilitator should allow the participants to follow a train of discussion provided it is generally consistent with the objectives of the focus group. Sometimes you may get valuable answers to questions you hadn't considered asking. You may also probe to gain further information to aid your understanding.

The key components of a focus group guide include: introduction, ice breaker, main questions, final questions and closure.

1. An introduction outlines:

- purpose of the discussion – relates to the purpose of the focus group
- reasons for their involvement – their information will be critical to the design and implementation of the project so that it will be of more value to them and also for the spread of the information more broadly
- their permission is required to involve them in the discussion and to record their views (either written or on tape recorder). Emphasise the confidentiality of the information; that the researchers will be the only people to see the raw transcripts; and that any published or circulated reports will not identify individuals.
- ask if there are any questions or issues that require clarification.

2. Establish ground rules, and display them. Participants should be invited to develop their own ground rules, but they probably should include:

- One at a time
- No side conversations
- Respect others opinions and allow them to have their say
- How we will operate – no right or wrong answers, need to hear all sides, both positive and negative
- Recording – maintain confidentiality.

3. Ice breaker – the need for this will vary with the group involved. At a minimum you may ask them to introduce themselves, their farming background and what they are hoping to get out of the meeting.

4. Main questions – depend on the purpose of the focus group but principles in designing the focus group guide include:

- A structured guide helps to channel the discussion and makes the results easier to analyse.
- For this project it will be important to have a structured guide to improve consistency between teams.
- Begin with a general question that will help:
    - transition from the introductory part to the main part
    - provide information about the participants perspectives
    - may lead to new ways of thinking about the issues.
- A maximum of four or five distinct topics or questions, with probes for each main topic or question. These will largely be determined and provided by the research team, but may require local minor variations. Probes can help clarify or get more detailed information, e.g.:
    - Please tell me more about that …
    - Could you explain what you mean by …
    - I think you are saying that this is a problem because …. Is this correct?
- Both open-ended (to allow problems and issues to arise from the audience) and structured questions (to focus on a particular issue) can be used.
- Remember it is a guide only and does not have to be followed in a predetermined way. This and the use of open-ended questions help overcome the issue of facilitator dominated focus groups.

5. Concluding the discussion:

- Provide a clear indication of when the session is ending.
- One option is to allow all participants to make a concluding statement without comment or interruption.
- Discussion may be allowed to continue for a short period after each person has made their statement if the discussion is still providing valuable information.
- Thank them for their support and attendance and let them know about any follow-up that will occur, e.g. key results of the discussion, next focus group discussion.

1.8 Interview management/process

1.8.1 Facilitators

The role of the facilitator/moderator is to:

- Establish rapport with the group and set the scene for discussion.
- Encourage participants to be engaged, focussed and interested.
- Monitor progress and time to ensure all topics are covered.
- Follow conversations closely and use prompts and probes to encourage quieter members and to stimulate or expand discussion.
- Listen and not comment and ensure the discussion is non-judgemental.
- Be alert to group dynamics and ensure everyone participates and that discussion is not dominated by a few.
- Discourage side conversations and ensure only one person talks at a time.
- Observe body language and expressions.
- Listen to their concern and take note of any question related to project and crop management in general (e.g., fertilizer, crop management, nutrient deficiency, etc)

1.8.2 Recorders/note takers

The role of the recorder or note taker is to:

- Ensure the materials and equipment are available to record the group.
- Ensure the equipment is operating throughout the meeting.
- Write the ground rules for the focus group on the paper chart.
- Take notes on the demographics of the group and obvious group dynamics and power differences.
- For the purpose of this project, please also record the food security status of the respondents based on food availability from their own produce (i.e., A Category = Food enough plus surplus from their own produce; B= Food enough for 6-11 Months; C = 3-6 Months and D= Food enough for <3 months. So that after one or 2 years we could see whether there has been any improvement in household food security due to the SRFSI-trialled technological interventions.
- Take notes even if it is being recorded (in case the recording equipment fails) and ensure they reflect what was said as closely as possible, without being word for word. However, try to capture quotable comments that reflect particular views.
- Observe, record, do not participate, and remain impartial.

1.8.3 Managing difficult situations

- Intervene when someone is dominating by acknowledging their contribution and encouraging other opinions.
- If one gender is speaking more than the other, use the same techniques as for people who dominate; making eye contact with the dominated gender and encourage them to speak or even ask individuals direct questions.
- Reorient the group if it begins to talk about irrelevant topics by focussing on the short time available, refocussing on the task at hand and perhaps ask if that discussion can occur later.
- If no one responds to a question you will have to assess why and take the appropriate action.
- Do not worry if the discussion skips around provided it is on the topics you wish to cover, but use probes or prompts to ensure you get adequate detail and return to a topic if it has not been covered sufficiently. Ensure all the topics have been covered before ending the focus group.

1.9 Debrief

The facilitator and note taker must conduct a debrief immediately after the focus group. This could include:

- Review the notes of the group membership, group dynamics, and discussion and add extra comments and notes if necessary.
- Discuss and write down notes about the nature of participation, problems and surprises.
- Assess the wording of the interview guide questions and any improvements. Report these back to the researchers.
- Assess whether improvements need to be made to the supporting materials (including these notes) to include or change them to reflect local circumstances, problems and issues.

1.10 Analysis and write-up of report

For this project, at least six focus groups will be conducted per node on the same or closely related topics so that the process will need to go through a few stages depending on the nature of the issues being covered in the focus groups and the number of locations involved. For example the focus groups conducted with 'core' farmers associated with SRFSI nodes, may need to be analysed:

- Firstly by node
- Secondly by district
- Thirdly by country
- Finally for the project as a whole.

Project management will need to determine who undertakes the analysis at each of these stages and the format and the key themes to be considered.

1.10.1 Report content

A focus group report may consist of the following components:

- A brief background and objectives of the focus group(s)
- A brief report on how and where the focus group(s) were conducted, including:
  - location and time of the discussion
  - demographics of those who attended
  - comments on group dynamics and problems/issues that arose
  - the focus group guide in an appendix.
- Discussion of the main themes and sub-themes under appropriate headings:
  - normally derived from the focus group guide, but may include extra themes not covered in the guide
  - include relevant quotations, but without the person(s) being identified
  - district, country and project level reports, may also be grouped by the relevant level of analysis
  - node and district reports should not be lengthy.
- A summary of the key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

1.10.2 Analysis and synthesis

If the focus groups were recorded, they may need to be transcribed and translated to English before analysis, but this is not essential unless some software (e.g., NVivo) is used to assist analysis. In fact it is preferable to categorise answers in the local language first since this will lessen the chances of translation caused errors in categorisation. Otherwise, start by using the interview guide questions and probes to group responses under appropriate headings by reviewing the notes and listening to the recordings. Analysis will consist of:

- grouping findings according to key themes
- identifying the different perspectives of a particular issue, the strength and extent of opinions and if they are held by a particular group or gender
- using quotes that represent particular positions
- recording any inconsistencies between comments and reported behaviours
- summarising each of the different positions.

Synthesise the findings by:

- distinguishing what participants find interesting and what they think is important using non-verbal cues, speech patterns and emphasis as indicators
- distinguishing between minority views and majority views
- identifying the recurrent ideas that emerged
- interpreting the recurrent ideas in relation to the project/focus group objectives and findings from other sources and focus groups

- be careful of your own biases in interpretation
- discussing new avenues of investigation or revision of questions
- check back against the notes and recordings to verify accuracy.

1.11 Check list of arrangements

- Invitations
- Transport
- Venue
- Refreshments and/or in-kind payments
- Recording device
- Microphone
- Battery pack/ spare batteries
- Extension lead
- Portable chart stand, chart paper, marker pens, tape or blue tack
- Cardboard for names
- Note paper for recording ideas
- Focus group guide (2)
- Audio-visual materials for presenting findings

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