# TOOL 16: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD) GUIDE

#### Contents of this document

1. [Purpose of this tool](#_heading=h.30j0zll)
2. [What](#_heading=h.26in1rg) is a focus group discussion?
3. [How can focus group discussions support community engagement and accountability](#_heading=h.lnxbz9)
4. [Focus](#_heading=h.35nkun2) group discussion roles and responsibilities
5. [Tips for running a focus group discussion](#_heading=h.1ksv4uv)
6. [Focus group discussions with children](#_heading=h.3dy6vkm)

1. [Community engagement and accountability questions to ask in a focus group discussion:](#_heading=h.44sinio)
   * [As part of assessments](#_heading=h.z337ya)
   * [As part of planning](#_heading=h.3j2qqm3)
   * [As part of monitoring and evaluations.](#_heading=h.1y810tw)

#### Purpose of this tool

This tool provides guidance on running an effective focus group discussion (FGD), including organization, roles, and responsibilities, as well as questions to ask to help you plan, monitor, and evaluate community engagement approaches.

#### What is a focus group discussion?

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a method for collecting qualitative data that gathers community members together to discuss a specific topic. Questions are open-ended, with the aim of stimulating an informal discussion and investigating people’s views in more detail than is possible through a survey. An FGD usually lasts for 60-90 minutes and includes between 6 to 12 participants. If possible, hold separate FGD’s with men, women, boys, and girls, and other at risk or marginalized groups and always conduct FGDs in the language the community are most comfortable expressing themselves in.

#### How can focus group discussions support community engagement and accountability?

An FGD can be used during assessments, planning, monitoring and evaluation:

* **During assessments**, FGDs can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the context in the community including people’s communication and information needs and preferences, beliefs and values, social and cultural characteristics, power dynamics, conflicts and tension, capacities, and perceptions of the Red Cross Red Crescent. See Tool 13: CEA in assessments for additional guidance.
* **During planning,** FGDs can be used to identify and prioritize solutions with the community, agree programme outcomes, activities, roles and responsibilities, and how the National Society should work with the community during the programme.
* **For monitoring,** FGDs can be used to discuss how well the programme is meeting people needs, if it is reaching the right people, supporting self-reliance and resilience and if people are satisfied with the quality of information, participation and influence they have over the programme.
* **During an evaluation,** FGDs can be used to assess if the programme met people’s needs, if support was relevant and timely, if they were satisfied with the quality of information, participation and influence they had over the programme and if there is anything they would change or improve in future programmes.

#### Focus group discussion roles and responsibilities

An FGD requires a facilitator and a notetaker.

**An effective facilitator should:**

* Have previous experience of facilitating FGDs
* Rephrase questions if people do not understand or probe further when needed
* Manage the discussion effectively, by keeping people focused on the topic and ensuring everyone has a chance to speak, limiting the interruptions from others
* Ask sensitive questions in a respectful and sensitive way, and recognize when to move on if a topic is making people feel uncomfortable
* Not ask leading questions or react negatively to people’s answers.

**An effective notetaker should:**

* Have good listening and writing skills, able to write quickly enough to take comprehensive notes
* Observe and remain impartial to people’s answers
* Ask a participant to repeat their answer if they do not hear it the first time
* Observe and record group dynamics and alert the facilitator (quietly) if some people are not speaking, or anyone seems uncomfortable**.**

#### Tips for running a focus group discussion

**Before**

* Translate all FGD questions into the relevant local languages and test these with a native speaker to make sure they make sense and are culturally appropriate
* Ensure the facilitator and notetaker can either speak the community language fluently or are able to work with an interpreter. Always run through the questions with the interpreter in advance to make sure they understand them
* It can help to practice the FGD in advance through a role play with the team, including the interpreter
* Plan with the local branch where and when the FGD should take place and who should participate, so they can plan this with the community. Try to avoid participants being selected by community leaders if this could lead to bias
* Consider whether to provide food and refreshments, but do not offer per diems.

**Setting up the group:**

* Identify a private space to hold the FGD to avoid lots of people listening in
* Limit the number of people taking part to a maximum of 12, otherwise the conversation can be difficult to control. Ask the community volunteers or community representative to help you control numbers and offer to organise an additional FGD if more people are keen to participate so they don’t feel excluded.
* The participation of a community leader may affect the answers people provide. A good tactic is to have another member of the team conduct a key informant interview with the community leader at the same time as the FGD
* Have people sit in a circle as per the below diagram:

**Icon

Description automatically generated**

Facilitator

Note

taker

The facilitator and notetaker should sit next to each other

Everyone should be seated at the same level i.e., avoid the facilitator and notetaker sitting on chairs, with everyone else on the ground

**At the beginning:**

* Introduce yourself and explain the purpose and duration of the FGD and allow the participants to also introduce themselves
* Ask for people’s consent to participate and permission to take notes
* Explain clearly that participation in the FGD does not guarantee people will receive support, nor do people have to take part to receive support
* It can help to agree ground rules at the beginning, such as everyone has a right to speak, not to interrupt one another, there is no right answer, people can opt not to answer a question, and that anything shared should be kept confidential.

**When asking questions:**

* Try to avoid phrasing questions in a way that results in a yes/no answer
* Don’t stick rigidly to the questions and rush through them. An FGD is an open conversation, not a survey, so ask follow-up questions if something interesting comes up
* Encourage everyone to speak. If someone is not talking ask for their opinion or if someone is talking too much, ask what the rest of the group thinks
* **Do not judge what people say** - listen openly, even if you disagree
* Avoid leading statements and questions, such as ‘do you agree that’. And try to avoid giving people answers or examples to choose from
* If people raise issues linked to protection or sexual exploitation and abuse, let them talk as much as they want to but do not press them for details in front of the group. Speak to them separately at the end of the FGD and ask their permission to follow up on the issue and take their contact details. You may need to refer this to a Protection, Gender and Inclusion specialist or your manager.
* At the end:
  + Ask people if they have any questions for you
  + Explain the next steps and be careful not to make any promises or raise expectations about what comes next
  + Thank everyone for their time.

**After**

* Debrief with the team as soon as possible and capture any additional information about group dynamics or changes that should be made for the next FGD
* The notetaker and facilitator should review the notes as soon as possible and add any additional details so they are not forgotten
* **Analyze and use the information collected during the FGD**, otherwise it has been a waste of time and could lead to frustration in the community. To analyze:
  + Data collected through FGDs in assessments should feed into the overall assessment report and will provide a deeper understanding of the community context and how to engage people during planning.
  + Data collected through FGDs during planning should be used to inform the programme design including priority activities, delivery approaches and how to ensure good participation, information sharing and response to feedback during programme implementation
  + Data collected during monitoring and evaluations can be organized into what it working/worked well and what is not working well and needs to be changed either during the current programme or for future programmes.
* Don’t forget to provide feedback to the community leader, representatives, or local volunteers on the outcomes from the FGD. Too often communities take part in assessments or monitoring and then never hear from the agency again and this affects their willingness to take part in future discussions.

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#### Focus group discussions with children

The participation of children should always be encouraged in FGDs. Girls and boys have needs and abilities which are significantly different from those of adults and from each other. Communicating with children has some specific requirements including:

* Making sure the child and her or his parents provide consent to participate, know that they can stop participating in a session at any time, and have information to access psychosocial or protection support if they need it.
* Ensuring that all persons in contact with children have signed and been briefed on the institutional [Child Safeguarding Policy](https://www.ifrc.org/document/ifrc-child-safeguarding-policy), [Prevention and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Policy](https://www.ifrc.org/media/48943), and [Code of Conduct](https://www.ifrc.org/media/12226); know how and where to report any safeguarding concerns, and do not commit unsafe and prohibited actions.
* Encouraging the involvement of colleagues / partners who are familiar with working with children in a participatory way.
* Being at ease with children, engaging with them in whatever style suits the child (e.g. by sitting on the ground, through play, going for a walk).
* Using simple language and concepts appropriate to the child’s age, stage of development, disability status, 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 enough trust to communicate openly and it is important to tolerate expressions of distress and frustration.
* 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. For instance, including female and male facilitators when speaking with mixed gender groups; or when more appropriate to have gender specific groups, ensuring that the facilitator is of the same gender.

To adapt FGD content for younger children (such as to activity based approaches) consult this IFRC and partner [guide](https://www.cpaor.net/Child_Participation_Toolkit), presenting tips and tools to start engaging with children and to foster children's leadership; as well as the [IASC Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/events/iasc-guidelines-working-and-young-people-humanitarian-and-protracted-crises).

#### Community engagement and accountability questions for a focus group discussion

**Information to record for an FGD:**

Location: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Red Cross/Red Crescent Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Group name/description: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

# of male participants: \_\_\_\_\_\_ # of female participants: \_\_\_\_\_\_

Were vulnerable groups present (elderly, disabled etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Was everyone able to participate in the discussion equally? Y/N

Were any community leaders present during the discussion? Y/N

#### Example FGD introduction:

Good morning/afternoon, my/our name is/are\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. We work for the [National Society] Red Cross/Crescent. Do you know the Red Cross/Crescent? *[If no, explain – the National Society is a humanitarian organisation that helps people affected by crisis and disaster. The help we provide is always free and given based on need alone.]* We are here today to discuss \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

The information provided will be used by the Red Cross/Red Crescent (and potentially other responders - Government, UN agencies, NGOs) to\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

* Participation in this discussion is free and there is no obligation to respond, you can stop at any point.
* No personal data will be shared with others and the information provided will be analysed anonymously and used confidentially.
* Your views are valuable and important and will contribute to ensuring our services and the information we share meets your needs.

Do you have any questions?

Do you provide consent to document, use, store and share the information provided for reporting and communication purposes? (If NO, say thanks and allow them to leave)

Do you provide consent to take, use, store and share your photos for reporting and communication purposes? (If NO, do not take photos of the person/s at any time)

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| QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSMENTS | |
| **QUESTION** | **ANSWER** |
| 1. **What are the most important needs in this community right now?**   How has the crisis affected different groups? For example, women, children, elderly, people with disabilities (if relevant) |  |
| 1. **What community groups and associations are active in this community?**   Is anyone here a member of these groups?  *Note how many men and women say they are members of committees to understand how well attended these are.* |  |
| 1. **How often are community meetings held here?**   When? Where? Who leads these? Who attends these? Are there people in the community who don’t attend? |  |
| 1. **Are the community leaders supporting you?**   For example, would you be happy for leaders to decide who would receive support and who would not? Who else is trusted in the community?  *This is a sensitive question so may need to be asked differently depending on the context and culture, and who is present in the FGD. The aim is to understand if community leaders are trusted.* |  |
| 1. **How are decisions made in this community about issues that affect the community as whole?**   For example, during community meetings? By the groups and associations? By the leader on their own?  Do you feel like you have a say in decisions that affect your community? If not, why not? Is it important to you to be involved in decisions about your community? |  |
| 1. **What is the best way to make sure people in the community can take part in planning activities?**   For example, should we plan with the leaders? Through the committees? Through meetings like this? |  |
| 1. **How well do people get along with each other in this community? Are there are any tensions or arguments between different groups?**   *This is a sensitive question so may need to be asked differently depending on the context and culture, and who is present in the FGD. The aim is to understand if people trust one another and can work together.* |  |
| 1. **What is the best way for us to share information with people in this community?**   Which channels? Which languages? Are there any people in the community who finds it harder to access information? How do people share information with each other? |  |
| 1. **Is there any information this community people would like to receive or feel they are not getting?** |  |
| 1. **What is the best way for people to share feedback, concerns or ask questions to the Red Cross?**   What if the complaint is something private? For example, about the way we have treated you? |  |
| 1. **What are the different roles and responsibilities of women, men, boys, and girls in the community?**   In the community? In the household? |  |
| 1. **What have you heard about the Red Cross Red Crescent?**   *The aim of this question is to understand what the community thinks and knows about the National Society as this will impact on how they interact with us going forward.* |  |
| 1. **Do you have any questions for us?** |  |

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| QUESTIONS FOR PLANNING (If the questions above were not asked during the assessment, some of these may need to be included as part of planning) | |
| **QUESTION** | **ANSWER** |
| 1. **What are the key problems or issues you would like this programme/response to help you with?** |  |
| 1. **How are people coping now with these problems now?**   What is working well? What still needs to happen? What are the capacities and skills of different groups?  *This question is aimed at understanding the coping mechanisms and capacities in the community for managing the issue the programme or response is addressing i.e., recovering from a disaster, health needs, access to water.* |  |
| 1. **Once activities start, what is the best way to make sure people in the community have a say in what is happening and can participate in decisions?**   How do people normally participate in decisions in this community? Is anyone excluded?  Should we work through community leaders or with the existing committee(s)? Or should we set up a special committee for the project with different members from the community? If so, how should members for this committee be selected?  What would help people to be able to take part in these approaches? For example, would women need childcare to attend meetings?  *Questions about participation can be challenging to understand if people are not used to being involved in decisions about what happens in their community so consider the best way to ask this question for the context and adapt the wording as needed.* |  |
| 1. **If we do not have enough resources to help everyone, what is the best way to manage that?**   How should we decide who receives support and who doesn’t? Can the community leader decide?  *This question is only relevant if the programme or response is using selection criteria. See Tool 18: Participatory approaches to selection criteria* |  |
| 1. **How can the community be involved in activities once they start? What do you think the community can do and what should be the role of the Red Cross Red Crescent?**   Which groups in the community should be involved? Are there groups who would struggle to take part? Are there issues between different groups we should be aware of? |  |
| 1. **Who else is providing services or support in this community and should they be involved?**   For example, local authorities? Other NGOs or community organizations? |  |
| 1. **What is the best way for the Red Cross Red Crescent to share information about the project with the community?**   Which languages? Channels? What type of information would people like to receive? How regularly should we share information?  Are there groups in the community who might struggle to access information? What are the best ways to reach these people? |  |
| 1. **If you have questions, suggestions, or complaints about the project, how would you feel most comfortable sharing these with us?**   Through which channels? How would you like us to reply? What would be an acceptable time for us to reply?  If the complaint is something you would like to keep private, what is the best way to share this? What if the complaint was about the behaviour of a member of the Red Cross? |  |
| 1. **What is the best way for the Red Cross to share information with people in this community?**   Which channels? Which languages?  Are there any people in the community who finds it harder to access information?  How do people share information with each other? |  |
| 1. **Do you have any questions for us?** |  |

|  |  |
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| QUESTIONS FOR MONITORING & EVALUATIONS (For end line evaluations change the question to the past tense) | |
| **QUESTION** | **ANSWER** |
| About the quality of support provided | |
| 1. **How do you feel about the Red Cross Red Crescent activities or support provided in this community?**   Are you satisfied with the support provided? Is it meeting people’s needs? If not, what needs are not being met? Is support reaching the right people? Supporting people to be self-reliant? Is it good quality? |  |
| 1. **How have people been treated by Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers?**   With respect? Is everyone treated equally and fairly? Were you unhappy at any point with how Red Cross Red Crescent staff or volunteers treated you? |  |
| About people’s participation in planning and decision-making | |
| 1. **Did the Red Cross Red Crescent ask you about your needs before activities started?**   How? Was anyone left out of these discussions? |  |
| 1. **Do you feel able participate in decisions about the Red Cross Red Crescent activities in this community?**   Were you involved in planning activities? Are you involved now in making decisions about what happens in the project? About whom should receive support? Or about how activities should be delivered?  Are there groups who don’t take part? If so, which groups and why?  What could the Red Cross Red Crescent do to improve people’s participation in the project? |  |
| 1. **Do you understand how the Red Cross Red Crescent decides who receives support and who does not?**   If yes, how are these decisions made? Are they fair? |  |
| 1. **Is the community committee doing a good job at sharing information between the community and the Red Cross Red Crescent?**   If no, what is not working well? |  |
| Transparency and information sharing | |
| 1. **Did the Red Cross Red Crescent explain who they are and what they planned to do here before activities started?** |  |
| 1. **Do you receive regular information and updates from the Red Cross and Red Crescent about what they are doing in this community?**   What kind of information? Do you get enough information? Is it clear and understandable? Is it useful? Is there information you would like to receive that you are not getting? |  |
| 1. **How is information shared with you?**   Is this a good way to share information with this community? Is anyone missed out? If so, who? Is there a better way the Red Cross Red Crescent could share information with you? |  |
| Feedback mechanisms | |
| 1. **Do you know how to ask questions, make suggestions, or raise concerns with the Red Cross Red Crescent?**   Are there better ways the Red Cross Red Crescent could listen to your feedback? |  |
| 1. **If you shared feedback, did you get a response from the Red Cross Red Crescent?**   Were you satisfied with the response? |  |
| 1. **Do you feel the Red Cross Red Crescent acts on feedback they receive from your community?** |  |
| 1. **Would you feel comfortable raising private complaints through the Red Cross Red Crescent feedback mechanism?**   For example, in relation to the behaviour of a Red Cross Red Crescent team member? |  |
| 1. **Do you have any questions for us?** |  |

#### Links to other focus group discussion guides

* The [COVID-19 Risk Communication and Community Engagement FGD guide](https://communityengagementhub.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/COVID19-IFRC-FGD-FOR-COMMUNITY-GUIDE-FINAL-0603.pdf) includes questions to understand the perceptions, questions, suggestions, and rumours within communities about COVID-19. This information can be used to adapt health messages and activities to better respond to the needs and beliefs in the community. This could be adapted to address other health concerns.
* Protection, gender and inclusion [FGD discussion guide](https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/PGI_iE_Tool2-6_PGI_FGD_Guide_LR-web%20%281%29.pdf) has additional guidance on discussing sensitive topics with communities.
* The Finnish Red Cross have developed [guidance and questions to investigate social norms in communities using short vignettes](https://communityengagementhub.org/resource/focus-group-discussion-guide/). The guide and questions cover sensitive topics such as female genital mutilation, early child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence. Contact Erin Law [erin.law@finrc.fi](mailto:erin.law@finrc.fi) for more information.