

Interviews and Focus Groups

Food security is a complex subject. To understand why certain groups or communities do not have enough food, it is important to ask people in communities about their food situation. **Interviews** are one-on-one discussions whereas **focus groups** allow several people to discuss issues at the same time. This infosheet provides some basic information on conducting interviews and focus groups in food security assessments.

Why use interviews and focus groups?

Interviews and focus groups can provide descriptive information that explains the food security situation in more depth than quantitative data such as anthropometric measures (see **tips** 204) or market prices. Interviews and focus groups can provide background information for an initial food security assessment, including possible problems that a project might encounter. They may also provide information for evaluations, such as people's perceptions of a particular program or unexpected ways in which a program affected food security. Interviews and focus groups may suggest questions or indicators for a quantitative study, or they can involve community members in the interpretation of quantitative results.

Who should participate?

As explained in the infosheet on choosing a sample (**tips** 201), participants should be chosen to represent the larger group being studied. Although random selection is sometimes used, non-random selection based on particular characteristics is often appropriate for interviews and focus groups. For interviews, it is often useful to interview key people in the community such as leaders, health workers, and representatives of co-operatives or women's groups. Remember that people's perspectives may be influenced by their social position, level of responsibility and education. Thus, it is important to hear a range of voices in the community. Similarly, focus groups should include a variety of people. Sometimes, having a variety of people in one group can increase the learning as people challenge each other and discuss the issues. However, a diverse focus group might also silence some voices, as people tend to offer socially acceptable opinions. For example, a mixed group of men and women may have very different dynamics than two separate groups of men and women. The number of people in a single focus group is also an important consideration. In general, focus groups include 6-12 people. Smaller groups are best where individuals have more to share, while larger groups are better when a broader cross-section of opinion is desired.

Asking the questions

Interviews may be structured, semi-structured or in-depth. Structured interviews follow a pre-set list of questions and are useful for gathering specific pieces of information in

which the evaluator is interested. Semi-structured interviews ask a few open-ended questions that focus on specific topics of interest. Depth interviews identify a general area of interest and allow the person being interviewed to determine the specific issues for discussion. Further questions generally follow up what the respondent says. The specific, predetermined questions of a structured interview tend to ask 'what' happened, focusing on particular 'facts,' while open-ended questions tend to ask 'why.' Questions for focus groups should generally be open-ended to promote good discussion among the participants.

Keep control of the discussion:

- know what you want to find out
- ask questions that focus on the information you need
- give appropriate verbal and non-verbal feedback

In general, broader questions should be asked first, leading to more specific questions later in the interview or discussion. Also, more important questions should be asked closer to the beginning of an interview or discussion, to ensure that there is enough time and energy to discuss the issues.

Who asks the questions?

The person asking the questions may also influence the interview or focus groups. Beware of situations where participants may be intimidated by the interviewer, or feel the need to please the interviewer by giving positive rather than accurate information. For example, if an interviewer clearly represents the organization providing food or funds for a project, he or she is likely to hear lots of good things about the project! Local interviewers are less likely to encounter this problem, and will have a better understanding of local language and cultural context. It is often worth the extra time required to train local interviewers and make sure they understand the goals of the evaluation. Translators can be used when the interviewer does not speak the local language, but beware of 'editorializing,' where translators insert some of their own beliefs and perceptions into the 'answers.'

To increase confidence in the reporting, information from an interview or focus group can be compared with information from other interviews or focus groups, and with information from other sources such as physical measurements, clinic records or market prices.

Recording the Information

The information may be stored as notes taken during the interview, as actual transcripts of conversation, or as collective records such as notes made on chart paper or overheads. Ideally, an assistant should take notes to

avoid disrupting the interview or discussion. Where it is appropriate, a tape recorder can provide useful information such as exact quotes from the discussion. Creating written transcripts based on taped interviews can be very time consuming and costly, but the transcripts can be very useful in more formal analyses. Quotations – whether recorded by hand or on tape – can illustrate particular points of view in the participants' own words.

Reporting the Information

As in all reports, information from interviews and focus groups should be presented with a clear description of the context and the methods used. It is important that the reader know where the information is coming from and how it was collected.

With some careful planning, sensitive questioning and clear reporting, interviews and focus groups can provide valuable information for food security assessments and project evaluations.

Resources

Stewart DW, Shamdasani PN (1990) Focus groups: Theory and Practice. London: Sage

Goshen University provides a good range of links to participatory methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups:

www.goshen.edu/soan/soan96p.htm

You can order or download Catholic Relief Services' Rapid Rural Appraisal and Participatory Rural Appraisal Manual at:

www.catholicrelief.org/what/overseas/rra_manual.cfm

Also, check out the Food Aid Management website:

www.foodaidmanagement.org (click on *Monitoring and Evaluation*)

For more information on interviews and focus groups or any other planning, monitoring or evaluation issues, contact the Canadian Foodgrains Bank at the address below, or email inquiries to cfgb@foodgrainsbank.ca