Participatory Tools

Qualitative information is often overlooked when we work in a results-based framework. Yet there is a lot of important information that cannot be summed up in terms of numbers and percentages. This infosheet does not pretend to provide a complete list of the other participatory tools Interviews and focus groups provides some basic information on conducting interviews and focus groups in food security assessments.

Why use a participatory tool?

Participants in our food aid and food security projects and programs have often been victims of a natural disaster, a conflict, social exclusion and/or chronic poverty. These experiences are often accompanied by a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. Becoming a recipient of food aid can reinforce these negative feelings. This can occur at both an individual and community level. Communities that require food aid are often communities that have been disempowered – either by the initial shock of the problem they are facing or by the damaging coping strategies they have been forced to adopt in order to survive. Communities are not always consulted about how they would like to see relief introduced in their communities. Even when communities are consulted, their views are often solicited in a way that excludes the marginalized voices in their society (eg. talking to villages chiefs). Participatory tools can provide a means of soliciting true participation in the communities in which we work. Meaningful participation in relief and development projects can empower and restore hope in devastated communities.

Participatory tools, when used to solicit information on the situation in the community, on social relations and on the effectiveness of an intervention, often yield amazingly useful, accurate and relevant information to be used for project planning, implementation and evaluation purposes. After all, who knows a community better than its average citizens? Many times this information from the community is known but organizations have no way of documenting, recording and reporting the information to others. Often communities can explain what would otherwise be hard to understand. Often their input will change what a project does or how it does it – often making the project more effective. Yet how do you justify this change if you don't have the information and analysis to prove that the change needed to happen? Participatory tools provide a means not only of collecting information, but of analyzing and recording that information so that it can be useful for the implementing organization as well as for reporting purposes.

There is such a diversity of participatory tools available to use that there is always a tool to be found to fit every circumstance. The two most well-known participatory tools are the interview and the focus group discussion. Because these two tools are already the subject of a TIPS sheet (202), we will not be discussing them further here.

There are lots of other participatory tools that are less well known but very useful. 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.

Which tool should I use?

Of course, which tool you choose to use is going to depend on what kind of information you are looking to collect, who you want to ask and how long you have to collect the information. Here are some tools to consider as well as some examples of when they may be useful.

Community mapping consists of asking community **Transect Walks** are designed to collect observations about **Time Lines** are useful for thinking through when things **Sequencing Diagramming** is a useful way to get people to express **Card Sorting Ranking and Scoring Matrixes** 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.

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Analyzing qualitative information

Regardless of the tool chosen, once the information in collected, you will need to analyze this information in order to be able to draw conclusions from it. Many of the tools described above contain some element of community-level analysis. The focus, then, of the final analysis then

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)*

http://pcs.aed.org/empowering.htm

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

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