

Guidance on conducting focus group discussions^{1,2}

NOTE: this annex focuses on ITN use. The principles in the guidance can, however, be applied more narrowly for household registration and/or ITN distribution.

What is a focus group discussion?

A focus group discussion (FGD) is typically conducted as part of qualitative research to gather information about customer or client perspectives and opinions about new ideas, products or services. Focus group participants are asked questions in an interactive setting and are encouraged to discuss thoughts freely with other participants. The open and free discussions typically generate ideas and can provide a wealth of information.

Focus group research is used to develop or improve products or services. The main purpose is to provide data to enhance, change or create a product or service targeted at a key customer group. The value of the information gathered is dependent on defined objectives and the preparation done prior to conducting the focus group discussions.

The objective of focus group discussions is to get as many different ideas and perspectives as possible, so having too many people can limit the ability to get ideas from all participants. Keep in mind that more is not necessarily better in this case. The ideal size group is 8–10 people depending on the demographic and topic being researched. Group size can be as many as 12–15 participants, but it requires a strong moderator to facilitate that many people. Focus group participants should be selected based on their familiarity with a product, service or behaviours. It is recommended to facilitate at least three or four different groups to ensure a good respondent mix in terms of demographics, perspectives and ideas.

Gaining consent

How consent will be granted for focus group discussion should be decided at the outset. Ideally, participants will sign a consent form to participate in the discussions. One copy of the informed consent form should be given to participants and a second copy should be kept by the focus group facilitator. Participants should be informed if any recording will be used for data collection.

Data collection: the discussions can be recorded if agreed by the members of the focus group and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The recordings need to be securely stored until transcribed and then destroyed. The transcription should not contain information that would allow individuals to be linked to specific statements. Confidentiality must be strictly preserved and maintained.

Guide for implementation of a focus group discussion

Participant demographics: once participants have been identified for the focus group discussions – for example, a group of women or men or a mixed group – it is important to collect anonymous

¹ <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/what-purpose-and-advantages-focus-group-interviews>

² Adapted from *Introduction and guidelines for malaria focus groups discussions and key informant interviews to improve understanding of barriers and facilitators or ITN use*, Sudan (2019).

demographic data from participants. Simple questionnaires for this purpose could be handed out as participants arrive, then collected at the end of the focus group and kept with the tapes of the focus group.

Facilitation: running an effective focus group is a skill and requires planning. The facilitator should have the following base and communication skills to ensure a successful group dynamic:

- Knowledgeable – familiar with the topic
- Structured – clearly outline the procedure for the discussion
- Clear – provide simple, easy and short questions to start the discussion off
- Gentle – tolerant, sensitive and patient when receiving provocative and unconventional opinions
- Encouraging – in order to elicit responses from all participants
- Steering – controlling the course of the discussions to avoid digressions from the topic
- Authoritative – to ensure the discussion is shared equally between participants and not taken over by more assertive members of the group
- Interpreting – offering interpretation of what the participants say

Time and place for FGD: the focus group can last about two hours and breaks can be planned for refreshments. Participants need to receive clear details of where and when the focus group will take place and how long it will last. Ensure that the location selected for the focus group provides a comfortable and relatively private environment to ensure open discussions.

Starting the FGD:

1. **Welcome and thank the participants** for taking part in the focus group and remind them that they have been asked to participate as their point of view is important.
2. **Introduce the focus group discussion.** Explain that it is meant to assess their current thoughts and feelings about ITN distribution in the country, through different channels, as well as the reasons for low uptake and use of the ITNs that are made freely available. Explain that the focus group discussion will take no more than two hours. If the discussion will be recorded, ensure that this is explained, and permission granted.
3. **Reinforce that the discussion will be anonymous.** Any recordings will be kept safely in a locked facility until they are transcribed, then they will be destroyed. The transcribed notes of the focus group will contain no information that would allow individuals to be linked to specific statements. Remind participants that it is important that comments of group members are not discussed outside the focus group. Whatever opinion they have, the discussions should remain confidential.
4. **Discuss and sign consent form** (see details in paragraph above).
5. **Underline the importance of open and honest discussions.** Encourage people to try to answer and comment as accurately and truthfully as possible. If there are any questions or points during the discussion that a person or people does/do not wish to answer or participate in, they do not have to do so.
6. **Establish the ground rules for the focus group discussion**, examples of which include the following:
 - Only one person should speak at a time. Although you may wish to contribute when someone is talking, please wait until they have finished.
 - There are no right or wrong answers.
 - You do not have to speak in any particular order.
 - When you do have something to say, please do so. There are many people in the group, and it is important that everyone's views are heard.
 - You do not have to agree with the views of other people in the group.

- You should put phones on silent or vibrate and put as much attention as possible towards consideration of the topics being discussed.
7. **Ask participants to introduce themselves.** In order to get people speaking, you may want to ask them to provide a specific piece of information about themselves, such as their favourite colour or a hobby that they enjoy.
 8. **Start the focus group discussion with an introductory question.** For example: “Take a few minutes to think about your experiences with malaria. How has malaria affected you or your family?” After giving participants sufficient time to consider responses, ask the group if someone is happy to start the discussion by sharing their experience. Allow participants to express themselves about experiences with malaria before moving into the specific guiding questions below.

Focus group discussions: guiding questions

The facilitator must remain active, encouraging participants to explore topics in depth, to reflect, to raise their own issues, etc. Some questions that may be considered to guide the discussion around certain topics related to malaria and ITN use include:

Malaria knowledge

1. How severe is the problem of malaria in this community? Do a lot of people get sick? Is it seasonal?
2. Who is most at-risk? Are some groups more likely to get malaria than other groups? (Probe: adults/adolescents/children, wealthy/poor, geographic location, profession?)
3. What causes malaria?
4. What are the symptoms of malaria?
5. Do you feel you can take actions to be able to prevent malaria in your household, in your community?
6. What can be done to prevent malaria?

ITN behaviours

1. Does everyone in the community own ITNs? How many ITNs do most families have? Do most families have enough ITNs? How often does a family get a new ITN? (Annually? Only during distribution campaigns? What other sources exist for ITNs?)
2. Who sleeps under ITNs in your community? (Probe for differences in ITN use among women/men, pregnant women, adults/adolescents/children, wealthy/poor, geographic location, season.)
 - a. What are some reasons people use ITNs? (Probe: Why? What are the benefits?)
 - b. What are some reasons people do not use ITNs? (Probe: Why not? What are the disadvantages? Prompts: not available, not enough, sleeping patterns in the household, uncomfortable sleep, allergic reactions, the shape, size and/or colour of the net, texture, other reasons.)
3. Who makes the decision about whether to get an ITN?
4. Who makes decisions about who in the family sleeps under an ITN? (Probe: Women or men, role of mother in law?)
5. If there are not enough ITNs for everyone to use, who should get priority for using an ITN? (Probe: Why?)
6. If a pregnant woman wants to use an ITN for herself or her child, but her partner does not want her to, what can she do? What advice would you give her?
7. For those persons who say that they sleep under ITNs:
 - a. Why do you sleep under the ITNs?
 - b. Do you sleep under them all year long?

- i. If not, why not? Which seasons do you use nets/not use nets?
 - c. Do you sleep under ITNs outdoors as well as indoors?
 - i. If they don't sleep under ITNs outdoors, ask why not? What needs to be done in order for them to use their ITNs outdoors?
8. For those persons who say that they or members of the household do not sleep under ITNs:
 - a. Would you like to use an ITN? If so, what are the reasons that you are unable to sleep under an ITN in your home? What help would you need to ensure that you are able to use an ITN every night?
 - b. What would need to change for all members of the household to sleep under ITNs?
9. Did your household receive ITNs during the last distribution campaign? If not, why not? If yes:
 - a. Were you happy with the ITNs that you received? (Prompts: colour, shape and size)
 - b. Did you receive enough ITNs to cover all the sleeping areas in your household?
 - c. Was everyone in your household able to sleep under an ITN as a result of the campaign? If not, why not? (Prompts: Sleeping patterns, insufficient number of ITNs.)
 - d. What suggestions do you have on how ITN distribution campaigns can be improved to ensure that you receive enough ITNs for everyone in your family?
10. Do you still have the ITNs that you received during the last ITN distribution campaign?
 - a. If yes, how long have you had the ITNs? Do the ITNs still protect you from mosquito bites and malaria?
 - b. If no, how long did the ITNs that you received during the distribution campaign last before they were no longer effective to protect you from malaria?

ITN care

1. For those who use ITNs, what happens to the ITNs during the daytime hours?
2. Where are ITNs typically hung?
3. How often do you wash your ITNs? What do you do to limit washing but keep your ITN clean? When you need to wash your ITNs, how do you wash and dry them?
4. Do your ITNs have any holes or tears in them? How did the holes or tears occur? What do you do when an ITN gets torn or gets a hole in it?
5. What makes an ITN no longer usable? How do you go about replacing an ITN that is no longer usable?

ITN community norms

1. When everyone in a community sleeps under an ITN every night of the year, cases of malaria can be stopped. What is the best way to encourage all members of your community to sleep under an ITN?
2. Are there influential people in your community who could successfully promote ITN use? If so, who are they?

At the end of the discussion, ask participants: "What would you say are the most important issues you would like to express about use and care of ITNs?"

Concluding the FGD

Ensure to reiterate the following to the participants:

- Thank them for participating and for a very successful discussion
- Reinforce that their opinions will be important to trying to resolve some problems seen around ITN access and use
- Encourage them to provide feedback, positive or negative, about the FGD
- Remind the participants that their responses will be anonymous

Analysis of the data

If the questionnaire and discussion guide are followed (either fully or partially depending on priorities and time for the focus group discussions), then the responses from groups will already be somewhat structured according to broad groupings of topics (such as malaria knowledge and barriers to ITN use). The key themes and issues that cross-cut the different focus group discussion transcriptions or notes should be pulled out and further information provided around the specific barriers or issues that need to be addressed in future SBC work and messaging.

Providing recommendations

The objective of the focus group discussions is to generate information about the different facilitators and barriers to uptake and use of ITNs that need to be considered for future SBC approaches. The recommendations may relate to areas to be included in key messages, effective channels for message dissemination, appropriate activities to reach all of the intended recipients and target groups.