

Documentation on the focus groups



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Introductory Note

This fact sheet has been produced as part of a study to map innovative methods and tools in agricultural advisory services in West and Central Africa. This study was commissioned by CORAF/WECARD (the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development) and carried out by RESCAR-AOC (the West and Central Network for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services) across 13 West and Central African countries.

The overall objective of the study was to compile a descriptive directory of innovative agricultural advisory methods and tools for scaling up agricultural technologies and innovations in West and Central Africa.

Several individuals within CORAF, RESCAR-AOC, and beyond, across the 13 countries covered by the study, contributed to the success of this initiative. We extend our gratitude to everyone involved for their contribution.

1. Overview of a focus group

The focus group is used to identify the specific needs of a given group of farmers so that proposed solutions within the community can take these specific needs into account. In the field of agricultural extension, focus groups contribute to understand the needs, challenges and perceptions of farmers regarding various agricultural practices. For example, they can be used to assess the effectiveness of extension programmes, identify barriers to the adoption of new technologies, or gather feedback on specific initiatives.

Furthermore, the focus group enables the needs of vulnerable groups – such as women, young people and individuals with disabilities – to be taken into account. This allows for an understanding not only of their requirements in terms of agricultural technologies and innovations but also of the specific aspects affecting these groups in the dissemination and scaling up of such technologies and innovations. Beyond vulnerability issues, focus groups can be organised according to other profile criteria such as level of education, primary type of activity, etc.

2. Brief Description of the Types of Beneficiaries Supported by Focus Groups

Focus groups are used with various categories of farmers. The main idea behind focus groups is to form more or less homogenous sub-groups so that each farmer can be

included in a specific group according to factors such as gender, age, level of education, type of activity, etc.

3. Objective of the Focus Group

The primary objective of a focus group is to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences among a more or less homogenous group of farmers (men, women, young people, individuals with disabilities, crop farmers, livestock keepers, etc.). Members of this specific group sharing common criteria can exchange views more easily in a relaxed atmosphere.

4. Steps in Conducting a Focus Group

Conducting a focus group allows a large number of farmers to be reached and encourages their active participation in developing and disseminating agricultural technologies and innovations. To achieve this, the following steps should be taken:

- Identify the innovation to be disseminated;
- Mobilise farmers with the appropriate profile according to the focus group thematic area;
- Mobilise extension officers or agents to facilitate the discussion with the focus group members;
- Enhance the skills of the facilitators in conducting focus groups;
- Carry out the discussion sessions in the field;
- Monitor and evaluate the results of the focus groups; etc.

5. Impacts of focus group

The use of focus groups encourages changes in behaviour among farmers, which in turn leads to greater uptake and adoption of agricultural technologies and innovations, eventually resulting in increased yields and incomes for the farmers.

The focus group tool has enabled facilitators to reach a large number of farmers. Group follow-up is more efficient, saving both time and resources. For example, in one month an extension agent can reach 100 farms through focus groups, compared to 30 via one-to-one support.

6. Technologies and Innovations Promoted Through Focus Groups

Several technologies and innovations are promoted through focus groups. Adoption occurs gradually because initially it is difficult for beneficiaries to share economic information within diverse groups due to concerns about mistrust and ill-will. With focus groups, farmers are more confident (being in smaller, more homogenous groups), which facilitates the sharing of experiences and knowledge. Discussions become smoother, and farmers are more open to innovations and new technologies.

7. Average Costs to conduct a Focus Group

The costs associated with conducting a focus group vary according to the number of participants per group and the organisational structure. The direct costs to farmers are not high and include travel and subsistence expenses where applicable. Other costs relate to the mobilisation and transport of the advisers or facilitators.

8. Strengths and Limitations of Focus Groups

The main strengths and limitations of focus groups, as identified during national discussions and evaluation workshops and through documentation interviews, are as follows:

Strengths of Focus Groups

- They allow the collection of qualitative data: focus groups yield detailed information on participants' attitudes, motivations, and experiences, providing an in-depth understanding of local agricultural dynamics;
- They promote interaction and synergy: group dynamics encourage the exchange of ideas, with participants questioning each other, debating and providing arguments, thereby enriching the discussion;
- They facilitate the identification of consensus and divergence: focus groups help to observe areas where participants agree or disagree, aiding in pinpointing points of consensus and divergence within the agricultural community;
- They are adaptable and flexible: focus groups can be tailored to various agricultural contexts, allowing a range of topics relevant to farmers to be addressed;
- They are inclusive: they enable the inclusion of specific categories based on the subject matter;

- They ensure that the specific needs of the group are taken into account; etc.

Limitations of Focus Groups

- The reach of a focus group is limited (due to the small number of participants);
- The results are too specific to the group and are not often representative;
- There is a risk of dominant participants influencing the discussion: some individuals may dominate while others remain silent, potentially biasing the outcomes and preventing all opinions from being expressed;
- There is a risk of socially desirable responses: participants may be inclined to give answers they believe are expected or socially acceptable, rather than their true opinions;
- There is a risk of potential conflicts: conflicts or power struggles may arise between group members, necessitating effective moderation to maintain a constructive discussion environment.

9. Prerequisites for Success and the Role of Various Stakeholders in the Success of Focus Groups

For a focus group to succeed, certain conditions must be met, including: (i) the availability and dedication of staff to conduct the focus group; (ii) the availability of logistical resources for the transport of agents and an appropriate venue for the meeting and discussions; (iii) the selection of dynamic and motivated farmers to discuss the chosen theme. In this regard, certain innovations are necessary, such as: (i) structuring the farmers, (ii) enhancing the capacities of agents in conducting focus groups, (iii) collecting and analysing socio-economic data from the discussion group, etc. Involving farmers in identifying the discussion topics greatly contributes to the success of a focus group.

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