



Focus Groups and Workshops

Description

Focus groups (small discussions) and workshops are techniques commonly used by agency planners, researchers and community leaders to bring people together to participate in discussion on an issue or sets of issues facing the community. The emphasis in these meetings is to gather good quality information relative to tourism planning and management that can contribute to better informed decision making and improved outcomes.

Not every meeting is a focus group or a workshop. These two techniques are distinguished from general meetings and hui by their pre-planning; the selection of participants; the development of guiding questions and workshop exercises; their process and facilitation; and the recording, and subsequent analysis, of the discussion.

How and when the tool is used

In-depth discussion and detailed analysis of issues in small focus groups and workshops are an important part of integrated planning of tourism for localities and host communities. These techniques are most useful if focussed on a well defined problem or set of local issues such as the development of a community vision, or a strategic plan for tourism in an area. Group meeting techniques can encourage community participation in planning by bringing together various actors and groups for an exchange of viewpoints (see [stakeholder analysis](#)). These meetings can take a variety of forms, including small focus groups of similar actors (often around 7-10 per group) in either relatively open or more structured discussion. The techniques also include larger, more diverse groups of participants in facilitated and structured workshops with key speakers or papers, and small group working sessions. A wide variety of workshop techniques can be included if useful.

As with other forms of structured participation, the main issue with these techniques is monitoring and then evaluating ongoing activities and outcomes as identified and agreed to in the focus group and workshop settings. For instance, workshops often end with an action plan, the implementation of which requires some active monitoring by those selected to take responsibility.

Application

Techniques such as focus groups and workshops are consultative in nature and widely used in planning and impact assessment, especially [social impact assessment](#). The most important techniques used in a consultative approach typically fit under the heading of qualitative research. In its simplest form, this research consists of personal interviews with individuals or small groups, as well as observation and participation in local activities and community life. Such research may be supplemented by quantitative techniques such as surveys and use of statistical data. During meetings issues may be identified, data assemblage initiated, explained and facilitated, and findings validated.

Focus groups can be semi-structured or structured around a set of questions and can be formal or informal in nature. They generally enable researchers or facilitators to do most of the things they would attempt during an interview, although this time it is with a group. While allowing observation of the dynamics of the group in action, focus group meetings enable the facilitator a better focus on specific issues and interests. They can also provide opportunities for the group to do more in-depth questioning of the people organising the discussion and promote interaction between local interest groups by bringing together people who can develop new ways to function and interact with each other.

Small groups are usually most effective when they involve five to ten people and have two people facilitating and taking notes between them. It is important to pay attention to the process of the groups. Good meetings are carefully planned and have a focus and clear objectives. They also set out ground rules for conduct during the meeting, such as limiting discussion, dealing with conflict and encouraging creative and divergent thinking. The discussion is usually focussed by preliminary research or scoping work on the part of the facilitator/researcher. Sometimes participants are also sent information about the topic or about the guiding questions prior to the meeting. There is ample guidance about how to facilitate focus groups in the adult education literature.



Larger structured workshops, can allow for:

- wide dissemination of information, providing that good use is made of audio visual presentation methods;
- observation of the community in action, especially the nature of major groups of interest and the operation of community leadership and power;
- direct contact between the community, developer/s, agencies and other stakeholders requiring interested parties to deal directly with community reaction.

Workshop techniques designed to explore visioning, issues and options, and the development of tourism scenarios, are discussed under the tools [charrettes](#) and [visioning](#).

Workshops are a more effective technique for achieving public participation than 'old-style' public meetings, which can be too structured (often in favour of project promoters) and lack opportunities for interaction amongst participants. In these public meeting situations, the hidden personal and group agendas of some participants can make consultation and facilitation difficult.

However, there is potential, as with any type of meeting, for particular interests or voices to dominate. There is also potential for participants to rely on the technical skills of the facilitators or the resource people present, thus limiting their contribution of ideas. Therefore, the use of these techniques requires careful planning and set-up and skilled facilitators. Planning will include venues, timetabling to assist people to attend, and refreshments if appropriate.

In practice, many community planning and consultation exercises are superficial, highly legalistic or based on formal submissions processes ([submissions](#)). Also, there tends to be a predominance of technical involvement, with local people with local knowledge standing aside in favour of technical views (see also charrettes)

There are ample examples of [Resource Management Act Framework](#) processes that do not appear to meet the needs of host communities, with proposed developments far outside the dimensions of change envisaged through processes such as community visioning or an approved district plan.

Our evaluation

Focus groups and workshops are a useful way of bringing people from host communities into the tourism planning and management process. They allow an emphasis on people's views and can bring out fundamental issues, such as the scope and type of tourism people want to see in an area. They also assist the move from identifying issues or problems to finding solutions and strategies.

These techniques are more effective than public meetings, which tend to favour joiners and those few who are willing and able to speak out, and discourage some attendees from participating fully.

Care should be taken with generalising results from a few focus groups or one workshop to the whole population. The techniques are good sources of qualitative data. However, there is a danger that they can be used inappropriately as a substitute for other means of data gathering that are more time consuming, such as personal interviews and surveys.