

Online Resources for Integrating Gender into Energy Operations

Step 1: Gender Assessment Resources | Data Collection

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FOCUS GROUPS AND OTHER PARTICIPATORY TOOLS¹

This section contains some information on how to conduct focus group discussions and other common participatory tools which are used as tools for gathering mainly qualitative data. These approaches can be used in combination with quantitative household surveys.

Focus Groups

A focus group should consist of a homogeneous group of people based on a common characteristic eg fishermen, women street vendors. Depending on the community you may be able to hold a focus group of women and men together but one should precede this with separate women and men's meetings. If there are too great a degree of variation, discussion can be too one sided, for example,

A group is anything from 5 to 15 individuals (not more). You will need to identify your group(s), usually through a key informant who knows the community well. You then need to organise a meeting that is at a time convenient to the group not to you. Remember women are particularly time poor. If the meeting is after dark you will need to give some thought as to how women will get to and from the meeting.

Be clear what the purpose of the focus discussion group is about. Do not raise expectations that participants can expect to benefit directly as an outcome of participating the meeting. The aim is to gauge people's opinions only. Indicate the length of the meeting (maximum 2 hours – people get bored if it goes on too long).

Make a list of the questions you want to bring to the discussion or issues about which you need information. Consider carefully how you will express these questions (do not use terms like 'empowerment' and 'efficiency' which will clearly not be understood). It is a good idea to try out the wording of your questions with someone who is familiar with the village, before the session takes place. Use concrete terms rather than abstract ones and always have examples from the local context to explain any terms you using.

Identify, possibly with the help of village leaders, suitable candidates who are willing to take part in the focus group. Verify that they are indeed members of the group intended. Arrange a time which is convenient for the participants, and schedule about 2 hours. It is particularly important to check when women can attend since they are generally more time poor than men.

Make sure the meeting place is reasonably comfortable and provide some refreshments (cool drinks)

The facilitator should make it clear by seating position and body language that he/she is there as facilitator and not as leader of the discussion. It may be sensible to use female facilitators in female groups and vice versa but this is not always necessary. The facilitator should have a good grasp of the local language, or have a translator on hand who is sensitive to the gender issues being discussed. Note that women are less likely to speak the national language than men.

¹ University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands (1997) Gender in Energy Training Pack (Technology and Development Group, Occasional Paper No.9)

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Someone should take notes. This could be a colleague of the facilitator, or one of the group members (if the group is large and if there are people who are really skilled at note taking). If the facilitator doubts the ability of the note-taker, he/she can interrupt the discussion occasionally by saying to the group “I think that’s an important point, don’t you? Shall we ask XXXX (the note-taker) to record that?” Thereby ensuring that a good record is kept. The note taker should read out the notes before the session ends, so that people can make comments and corrections.

Introduce the session by explaining in general terms what the discussion is going to be about and why it is being carried out; also why this particular group of people has been chosen (mention that other groups are also discussing the same issues elsewhere or at other times).

Start with a general question which is easy to discuss (not necessarily a simple question, which can be answered with a yes or a no – the idea is to get people used to the idea of discussing). Do not start with a controversial issue. If you have controversial issues leave these till later or even to another session, when people are used to the idea and to you.

Encourage different points of view and explore the reasons behind these to find out whether they are really differences of opinion, or just different ways of using words.

If one or two people begin to take over most of the conversation while others remain quiet, trying to bring this more into balance. You can quite openly say, “Mrs X has contributed a lot of useful ideas to the discussion, but I would really be interested to hear also what Mrs Y has to say”. Do not blame people for not speaking up.

If some people really persist in silence, you need to find out whether this is because they disagree with the way the discussion is going but are afraid to contradict. You cannot do this during the session itself; do not embarrass people by asking such a question, especially not in public. Another reason could be that they really do not understand the issues that are being discussed. It is also possible to ask a key informant with knowledge of the community (eg teacher) for clarification.

People also use "body language" to express disagreement, for example, quiet laughter or shuffling in their seats.

You can use a variety of PRA methods within a focus group, such as priority ranking and pebble ranking.

If the conversation goes off-track, ie if people start to talk about things that are really not on your agenda, you have to use a lot of tact. Make sure the point they make – even if totally irrelevant to your view – are taken down in the notes. If it goes on too long, ask the permission of the group to return to the matters in hand, and suggest that the other points are discussed on another occasion.

Priority ranking

Priority ranking is a very simple way of getting people to say which things are more important and which are less important. The number of items should not be more than five (with more than five the technique does not work well, and pebble ranking is a better method).

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First of all the items which have to be ranked are discussed so that it is absolutely clear to people what they are. For example, women might be asked which task takes up most of their time: preparing grains, cooking, fetching firewood, fetching water, working in the field. First some discussion may be needed to ensure that the differences between these activities are distinct. This may not always be the case: for example, firewood may be fetched on the way home for working in the fields; preparing grains may be considered part of cooking (eg parboiling of rice). This has first to be sorted out.

Then each activity is indicated by a symbol: perhaps a cooking pot for cooking, a small bag of flour for preparing grains, a twig for fetching firewood etc.

Discussion then starts: “which is the most time consuming?” and the groups must collectively decide which this is, and place the symbol on the ground (or on a table). Then ask what the least time consuming activity is and place the symbol for this activity at the opposite end of the space.

Pick up one of the remaining symbols and ask where this should go. There will always be discussion at this stage – but by this time people will have got the idea, and the remaining 3 symbols will be placed in their correct order between the two extreme ones. If the group is really on the ball, they might even space out the symbols to represent the relative differences in time taken!

This technique can also be used for questions of value: for example, priorities between different wishes for the future: What is more important; a new school building, a clinic, a public telephone or street lighting.

Or for preferences with regard to close substitutes for each other: for example, different models of improved stoves.

The trick with using this kind of technique is to get people not just to make the ranking but to explain their reasons for the ranking.

The note-taker should note the final ranking and also the reasons that were given.

Pebble ranking

Pebble ranking is useful when there are more than five items to consider.

Again symbols are agreed which represent the items to be ranked. For example, the importance of different fuels (how often each type of fuel is used for cooking). In the worked example given in Unit 2.3, there were seven different types of fuel being used in the village.

The symbols representing the items are lined up in any order, in a straight line.

The group is given a small bucket full of pebbles of approximately the same size (any other counters will do just as well: grains of maize would do, but slightly larger, heavier and more visible counters, which will not blow away or get eaten by a passing chicken are to be preferred).

If there are seven items, the group is asked first to take seven pebbles out of the bucket and place them all beside the item which is most important. Allow time for discussion about this.

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Then ask the group to take out six, and place them all by the second most important item, and so on.

This method gives simple ranks. If several different focus groups perform this exercise, it may be possible to combine the results. This is what was done in the example given in the worked example on the different kinds of fuel used. In that example, there were six groups each of which made a ranking of seven types of fuel. The results for each fuel were simply summed across all the groups.

A variation on this method which is a little more sophisticated but which may give more reliable quantitative results, is to given the group a fixed number of pebbles, say 100, and ask them to distribute them over the various items so as to represent the relative importance of each of them. Thus if one item gets 20 pebbles and one get 10, one is saying that the second is only half as important as the first – this is in practice a very difficult concept.

Village meetings

Although focus groups are very helpful and informative, there will be cases when meetings involving a whole community need to be held.

The difficulty in such meetings is (a) that they are usually more formal than focus group meetings and (b) often, large numbers of people will not contribute to the discussion but wait for the 'elders and betters' to do the talking. Women in particular might feel reluctant to speak. This is just the way things go normally and you cannot do much about it.

Village meetings are particularly useful at the beginning of the process, to legitimate the whole process that you are beginning: they are a kind of protocol which is necessary to start work, and if you have not had such a meeting, at which normally the village leaders preside, people may not be willing to participate in focus group type meetings later. Such a meeting is necessary to give the villager leaders blessing to the work and to inform the villagers what the whole thing is about.

Village meetings are also very useful at the end of the process, to present the findings, and to allow people to discuss these findings and make adjustments in them.

With more than 20 people or so it is difficult to use PRA techniques so you have to rely on simple old fashioned presentation and discussion.

Village mapping

For some aspects of village energy planning a map may be very useful. In most cases there is no detailed map of the village which shows the relevant resources.

For example, if the aim is to improve the supplies of firewood, it may be necessary to know where firewood at present comes from.

Participatory mapping is best done outside in a flat, sandy (preferably shady!) area. The facilitator draws one or two (only one or two) highly recognisable land marks on the sand – for example, the road that runs through the village, with the mosque (symbolised perhaps by a stone) and the café at the other end (represented by a coke bottle).

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Participants are then asked to place symbols for other landmarks – their houses, the river, the well etc, in the immediate vicinity of the village. Different people should be asked to do this – do not let one well-meaning individual do all the work.

Then ask where the fuel wood comes from and use twigs to cover the area indicated. The facilitator should try and check the accuracy of the scale of the map by asking: how far is it? How long does it take to walk to that area? And then pointing out the distance between the mosque/church/temple and the café/health centre/school for reference. Absolute accuracy will never be obtained, but some sense of order of magnitude as regards distances is not hard to get, in this kind of exercise.

This might also be useful for getting indications of where things might in the future be placed, for example, if the project is planning to start a woodlot, the location of this can be debated with the help of the map.

Areas of forest or other land which need special attention – eg degraded areas, can also be identified in this way.

An alternative is (if they are available) to use aerial photographs (not remote sensing satellite images which are confusing and too small scale). Air photos especially if they are blown up to 1:10,000 or so can easily be understood by people who have had no experience of them at all. Allow time for the group to orientate themselves – “here’s the road.... There’s the river.....that must be the reservoir! Etc. Such aids can be very stimulating because they are intrinsically interesting and challenging. People like challenges of this sort.

If you have a duplicate photograph, it is a nice "thank you" gesture to make it a present to the village.