How-to Guide

Introduction

Formative research is an activity conducted at the beginning of the SBCC project design process. It is used to gain insight into the health issue or behavior the project intends to address; relevant characteristics of primary and secondary audiences; communication access, habits and preferences; and the main drivers of behavior. Formative research is critical to developing program materials, tools and approaches that are culturally and geographically appropriate. This guide is designed for researchers, but program staff will also benefit from a close review prior to beginning SBCC project design.

What types of methods does formative research use?

Formative research can use a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods depending on what program planners need to know to design an effective intervention. Quantitative methods generate numeric data and are often designed to produce information that is statistically representative of the intended audience.

Qualitative methods collect verbal, descriptive information that is often rich in detail but cannot be generalized to an entire population or intended audience.

When should qualitative methods be used in formative SBCC research?

Qualitative research can help researchers and program managers discover and explore themes or processes, generate illuminating and illustrative personal narratives, and uncover attitudes or ideas that are common among members of a population, but they cannot be used to determine the proportion of people in an intended audience who think or act in a particular way.

Qualitative methods may be used when program planners have limited resources, lack formal training to collect
and analyze quantitative data analysis or do not need to estimate the proportion of an attribute in the population. However, using them properly still requires particular skills and sensibilities.

For these reasons, this guide focuses just on methods for qualitative formative research.

**How is qualitative formative research conducted?**

Two of the most common approaches used in formative research are focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

These methods are effective for gaining insight into what motivates individuals and communities to behave a certain way and how they view the world or the community around them. Both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews can reveal vital information that can help shape future quantitative research or they can be used to dig deeper or reveal additional insight into existing quantitative data, such as survey results.

**FGD or IDI: Which one to use?**

The reasons for using a focus group discussion or an in-depth interview are quite different.
Researchers will often opt for a combination of FGDs and IDIs in an effort to comprehensively study the population and their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Although the pros and cons of using FGDs or IDIs are different, the process of creating, executing and analyzing FGDs and IDIs are similar in some regards. The steps below can be applied to the development of both methods for conducting formative research.

**Learning Objectives**

- Create a guide for a focus group discussion or an in-depth interview
- Implement a focus group discussion or an in-depth interview

**Steps**

**Step 1: Identify needs**

**Identify needs**

Before developing any kind of group or individual discussion guide, it is important to ensure that there is a clear purpose driving the discussion.

With that in mind, answer these essential questions:

- What are the key health issues being explored?
- What is already known about the issue and the audience? For example, what is already known about attitudes or determinants of behavior among members of the intended audience regarding the health issue being explored?
- What additional information do you need to know in order to develop your SBCC strategy and program?
• How will the information gathered from this group discussion or interview be used (e.g. to define a strategy, to develop materials, to set priorities, etc.)?
• What information is needed from participants that can inform decisions related to the design or implementation of an intervention?

Step 2: Define objectives

Define objectives

Formative research can have more than one objective, but each must be a clear statement about what you want to learn from the research. Use active words to state your objectives, that is, what you want the research to achieve, for example:

• **Describe** how women search for information about family planning methods.
• **Determine** if men and women make family planning decisions based on different considerations.
• **Identify** reasons why women do not talk to their husbands about family planning.
• **Clarify** how peer relationships affect family planning decisions among teenagers.

Determine whether each objective is:

• **Specific**, focused, clearly described?
• **Relevant** to the goals of the program and to the audience?
• **Feasible** to discuss in an interview or FGD?

*Drop or rewrite any that are not Specific, Relevant and Feasible.*

Put the objectives into order of importance.

• Which need to be answered first for program decision-making?
• Which are useful to know but may not be as essential?

Step 3: Recruit the respondents

Recruit the respondents

Who to recruit for FGDs or IDIs depends on the topic and the homogeneity (sameness) of the participants. Some topics may be relevant only to a specific group of people.

For example, a study on breastfeeding practices will not be relevant to women who have never breastfed. Family planning, on the other hand, is an issue of some relevance to both men and women. But even among women who have breastfed, the issue of breastfeeding practices may be more relevant for some subgroups than for others: women who are currently breastfeeding might have different attitudes, knowledge, and practices than women who
breastfed years ago. If both subgroups of women are part of the intended audience, then more discussion groups or interviews may be needed to understand the differences between them.

**Step 4: Determine the number of focus groups or in-depth discussions**

**Determine the number of focus groups or in-depth discussions**

The number of FGDs or IDIs that needs to be conducted is dependent on the **homogeneity** (sameness) of the participants and saturation of the responses.

When determining how many FGDs or IDIs to conduct, consider the **demographic composition** of your intended audience. Develop a key list of attributes that represent the study’s intended population. If the target group is Aymara women, ages 15-24, then the FGDs or IDIs should only consist of people who fit those criteria. Remember to think through different demographic predictors that can affect the outcomes of interest and form the number of groups or interviews accordingly.

If the sample of participants is more **heterogeneous** (i.e., group members have different attitudes, levels of knowledge or experience with the issue or are geographically or demographically varied), more FGDs or IDIs will need to be conducted in order to capture all of the differing perspectives. If the sample is more **homogenous** (similar with regard to the health issue), fewer FGDs or IDIs will be necessary since a more homogenous population often produces a smaller range of views and opinions.
Saturation refers to the point in the research process when all the viewpoints and information about the issue have been voiced already by participants. Saturation occurs when the last two IDIs or FGDs do not reveal any new insights or ideas that were not mentioned in previous interviews or discussions. Unless the research must explore the views of many different subgroups, most formative research studies conduct no more than 10-20 FGDs or IDIs before saturation is achieved. At that point, if the discussions and interviews are still generating new insights, then more sessions may be necessary.

When putting together focus groups, it is important to consider the size of the groups. On average, 6-12 people participate in each focus group because fewer than six participants generate less than a critical mass of conversation and interaction; groups larger than 8-10 people can be hard to manage and it can be difficult to give everyone a chance to voice their opinions.

**Step 5: Create the questions**

Create the questions

Begin by drafting a list of 20 or so questions that match the research objectives. Once the questions have been drafted, revisit the purpose and objectives of your study. Narrow the list of questions to the ones that are most relevant and important for the research, ideally 7 to 10 questions, keeping in mind that each question will be followed by additional probing questions. You may list some probing questions to keep at hand and use depending on the direction that the discussion or interview takes. Do not overload the discussion guide with too many questions.
A focus group will generally last for one to two hours and an in-depth interview between 30 and 60 minutes. Remember that the goal of qualitative research is to go deep into a few key ideas, not to cover a lot of topics superficially.

Questions should be open-ended (i.e. they cannot be answered simply “yes” or “no”) in order to invite ideas and stimulate conversation. Ensure that the questions are unbiased and do not have leading language that might encourage participants to answer in a specific manner. Once the questions have been refined, order them so that they move from the more general to the specific and in a way that will be comfortable for the participants. The first one or two questions should be simple introductory or warm-up questions that put the respondents at ease, help establish rapport between them and the interviewer, and lead into the more serious questions.

Step 6: Select a facilitator/interviewers

Select a facilitator/interviewers

Facilitators or moderators are employed to lead focus group discussions and interviewers are used for in-depth interviews. Effective focus group facilitation requires a special set of skills that not all interviewers have. In an FGD the facilitator must ensure that all participants share their opinions and interact with each other to generate a group perspective.

Effective interviewing requires its own set of skills at creating personal rapport and trust that will enable the participant to honestly share his or her opinions and feelings. Both facilitators and interviewers should be able to diplomatically keep the discussion on track and ensure that every participant is heard. They must be open-minded, flexible, patient, observant and good listeners. They should also be deeply familiar with the study topic and the larger project objectives so that he or she can help keep the conversation centered on the purpose and needs of the study. Facilitators or interviewers may be staff members, volunteers or third-party professionals, but in any case must have strong interpersonal communication skills, even though their interaction with the participants relies heavily on a script.

Step 7: Develop a script

Develop a script

A script is essential to FGDs or IDIs. The questions created in Step 3 will be part of, but not all of, the script. The script should be structured as follows:

1. **An opening.** Create an opening statement for the facilitator, where he or she will welcome the participants, introduce himself/herself, present the purpose of the study, explain how the focus group or individual interview will work and ask for brief introductions from the participants. If required by a research ethics board, this script may also include the language needed to obtain the informed consent of the respondents to participate in the research.

2. **Questions.** This part of the script consists of the questions created in Step 3. Remember to start with the introductory questions as a way of comfortably easing participants into a more serious and in-depth conversation.
3. **Closing.** When closing, the facilitator should give participants an opportunity for any final words, thank them for their input, inform them how the data will be used and explain how the results will be disseminated.

**Step 8: Choose a location**

**Choose a location**

Ideal locations are places that are:

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<tr>
<th>In-Depth Interviews</th>
<th>Focus Group Discussions</th>
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<td><strong>Accessible</strong> — interviews can be conducted via telephone, onsite or at a pre-arranged location depending on what is most convenient for the respondent. Be mindful of what time is most convenient for him/her. For example, heads of household are generally unavailable during the day due to work commitments. A better interview time might be in the evening.</td>
<td><strong>Accessible</strong> — ensure that the location chosen is in a somewhat central geographic location for the majority of focus group participants. It should be easily accessible by transportation, is in a safe area, and has parking if needed.</td>
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<td><strong>Private</strong> — consider whether or not the location ensures the privacy of the participant. If interviews are conducted door-to-door, find a location in or near the house that can ensure confidentiality.</td>
<td><strong>Large enough</strong> — the location should comfortably fit nine to fifteen people and have enough space so that every person can see each other.</td>
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<td><strong>Comfortable</strong> — make sure the location is both comfortable for the interviewer and the participant as the interview will take 30 minutes to an hour.</td>
<td><strong>Comfortable</strong> — because the discussion can take time, participants should have an accommodating environment.</td>
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<td><strong>Appropriate</strong> — consider whether the chosen location might bias the discussion. For example, if you are conducting FGDs with women, be sure it is a facility they will be comfortable.</td>
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**Step 9: Conduct the FGDs or IDIs**

**Conduct the FGDs or IDIs**

When conducting in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, keep the following in mind:
Step 10: Transcribe the interviews

Transcribe the interviews

Once the FGD or IDI is over and the participants have left the venue, the facilitator or interviewer should immediately write down any impressions or observations made during the discussion that might help the analysis.

The audiotape of the discussions should be carefully transcribed and, if needed, translated. The facilitator is not required to do this, but if a third party provides that service, the facilitator should verify the accuracy of the transcriptions before they are subjected to analysis. The quicker an FGD or IDI is transcribed, the less likely there are to be mistakes due to lapses in the facilitator’s memory.

Step 11: Analyze the information

Analyze the information

Once the FGDs or IDIs are transcribed, they should be analyzed and coded for common themes related to the purpose and objectives of the study. Coding by theme allows for better organization of data when extracting results and key findings. These findings should be put into a report that details the methods of the study, the results of the discussions and/or interviews, and the resulting implications for the health campaign or program.
Conclusion

This qualitative formative research process and the resulting report will allow partners and key stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the target population, especially with regards to the health topic of interest. Once the formative research is complete, it is time to start considering the type of intervention the target population needs as well as what monitoring and evaluation system should be put in place in order to assess whether or not the population’s needs and interests are being met.

Resources

Window of Opportunity Qualitative Research Field Staff Toolkit

Conducting In-Depth Interviews: A Guide for Designing and Conducting In-Depth Interviews for Evaluation Input

Samples

Sample Focus Group Discussion and In-Depth Interview Guides

Tips & Recommendations

- Some health topics may be too sensitive or inappropriate for certain populations or groups to discuss in public. Adjust objectives or methodology accordingly. For example, it is sometimes inappropriate to discuss contraception in a mixed group of men and women together. Consider, instead, having separate FGDs for men and women.

Glossary & Concepts

- **Statistically representative** means that the numbers produced can be understood to reflect the whole intended audience of an SBCC program and not just the people who participated in the research. For example, a audience survey might find that out of 1000 young married women aged 18-24 who were interviewed, 200 of them (20%) reported searching for health information on the internet in the past month. If those 1000 respondents were selected in an unbiased way (usually some kind of random sampling), then we can assume that they represent the entire audience and we can confidently expect the same rate of health information seeking (20%) among all young married women aged 18-24. We often need to calculate proportions of the audience with certain attributes in order to prioritize what the program should focus on.

Sources & Citations

- CARE. Window of Opportunity Formative Research Field Staff Toolkit.
- Lehigh University. Conducting a Focus Group.
- Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education. Steps for Conducting Focus Groups or Individual In-depth Interviews.
- Overseas Development Institute. Research and Policy in Development: Focus Group Discussion.