# Tool C - Qualitative methodologies

Qualitative methodologies[[1]](#footnote-1) are tools to gain information about human behavior, relations, perceptions and attitudes, value systems, concerns, aspirations and culture. Qualitative methods help us understand the world in which we live and why things are the way they are. They allow target beneficiaries and communities to respond spontaneously and with more depth and detail than with a quantitative survey. In turn, you can also respond immediately to what beneficiaries say by tailoring subsequent qualitative questions to the information they provide. Rather than the closed responses of quantitative methods (e.g., surveys with 4-point responses), qualitative methods utilize “open-ended” questions that seek to understand why beneficiaries feel the way they do about the subject.

Four types of qualitative methods are described below:

* Focus group discussions
* Key informant interviews
* Case studies
* Most significant change methodology

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| Focus group discussions |

Focus groups (FGs) are focused discussions with a small group (usually 8-12 people) to get a nuanced sense of participants’ opinions, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and behaviours towards specific issues.[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3) A moderator uses a prepared interview guide (a list of open-ended questions) to lead the discussion. The conversation, opinions and reactions of participants are recorded in written notes or by tape recording (a note taker can help with this). When done well, FGs create an accepting environment that puts participants at ease and allows them to answer questions thoughtfully and truthfully.

In the table below, you can find answers to basic questions about using FGs.

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| Question | Answer |
| When should I use a FG? | * When designing a PS programme, to understand context and needs, and at the end of a programme to document any changes. * When “how and why” (e.g., people’s motivations, range of opinions) are more important than “how many” or “how much”. * When working with groups who may be resistant to written surveys or are illiterate. |
| How many FGs do I need? | Depending upon time and resources, try to conduct at least 2 focus groups per target group. For example, for FGs with youth separated by gender, have at least 2 groups with boys and 2 groups with girls. When you hear the same things from new groups as from previous groups, you are likely reaching a saturation point for new information. |
| How long do FGs last? | FGs are ideally about 1.5 hours (between 60 and 120 minutes). If conducting FGs with children, shorten the time for younger participants. [[4]](#footnote-4)  Also be sure to limit the number of main questions (no more than about 8) so that participants can explore each question adequately, without going over time. You can use probing questions as needed to explore a topic in more depth. |
| Who should participate? | Define the characteristics of your group (e.g., certain age groups, common interest). Then, select members who can provide the best information for the topic, will participate and be reflective. Ensure participants are similar in nature (e.g., gender, power relationships) to help them feel comfortable to join freely in the discussion.  If a large number of people show up and you judge that it’s not possible to go through with a FG discussion, you can convert the session into a community meeting to discuss the topics more generally. You can then reschedule the FG discussion in a more controlled environment with less people, in order to go into the issues in more depth. |
| What kinds of questions should I ask? | Develop a discussion guide (set of questions) based on the key objectives of your M&E plan. Develop about 8 questions that are:   * Open-ended (cannot be answered by “yes” or “no”) and conversational. * Short, clear and to the point. * Non-leading, non-judgmental, non-threatening and not embarrassing. * Focused on ONE idea per question (avoid “and” or “or” in each question). |
| What types of questions are useful? | * One or two general “warm up” questions at the start. These may be specific to the purpose of your FG or the programme, just be sure they are neutral and easily answered by all participants. For example, in a FG to evaluate a PS programme, a warm up question could be: *“What activities have you been involved in?”* * Reflective questions that ask participants to *“think back”* to a to certain point in time when reflecting on personal experiences. * Questions of influence *“what influenced you…”* or attributes *“what features do you…”* (rather than “why” questions that may make some people feel defensive). * *Probe* questions – these are follow-up questions used AFTER participants have given their insights to clarify responses or reveal more depth: *“can you talk more about that?”* or *“can you give me an example?”* |
| What should I remember as the moderator? [[5]](#footnote-5) | * Ensure everyone is seated at the same level to encourage equal rapport, and that participants can all see each other (a circle is best). * Use a natural conversational style to put participants at ease. * Listen actively, respond and probe for more information so that participants know their opinions are important and you want to hear them. * Go from general to specific questions. Summarize and repeat answers to be sure you understood. * Remain neutral: don’t agree/disagree or offer your opinion. Participants are the experts in the discussion, and there are no right or wrong answers. Do not correct or make any judgment (bad or good) on what participants say. * Acknowledge and respect all contributions to the discussion. * Try to hear from all participants, including boys and girls, women and men of all ages (particularly important for mixed gender and/or age groups). * Don't push for consensus; rather seek a variety of views. * Ensure even participation – if one or two people dominate, call on others. Consider using a round-table approach, going in one direction around the group giving each person a minute to answer the question. Ensure everyone gets heard, and, if necessary, moderate the time for each person to respond. * Keep your eye on the time and keep the discussion moving. Remember to keep focused, maintain momentum and get closure on the main questions. * Set ground rules. For example, do not allow for side conversations – rather, keep all discussions within the group. * Use the guide questions in a flexible way, moving out of the question order if participants spontaneously begin to talk about a certain topic. Try to cover each question but do so naturally with the flow of the discussion. |
| What are some limitations and pitfalls of FGs? | Although focus groups are frequently used and often useful in gathering in-depth information about an issue, it is also important to be aware of their potential limitations and pitfalls. Some of the limitations and pitfalls of FGs can be mitigated through careful participant selection, good moderating skills and attention to the setting and ground rules (above). Some pitfalls and limitations are[[6]](#footnote-6):   * + Results from FGs cannot usually be used to make statements about the wider community; in other words, they can indicate a range of views and opinions, but not their distribution.   + Participants often agree with responses from fellow group members (for many different reasons) and so caution is required when interpreting the results.   + The moderator who is not well trained can easily force the members into answering question in a certain way. In addition, participants may try to answer questions in the way they feel the moderator wants to hear, particularly if the setting is formal and the moderator is seen as a learned authority.   + FGs may not be the best method for discussing very sensitive topics or exploring complex beliefs of individuals. Other in-depth methods, such as key informant interviews, may be a more appropriate method for this purpose. If sensitive questions are included in the FG, be sure to ask them in a general, non-personal way.   + FG discussions can paint a picture of what is socially acceptable in a community rather than what is really occurring or believed – called “social desirability bias”.   + Even though this is stressed in the FG discussion with participants, remember that FGs lack anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for FG participants. |

Conducting the focus group[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Welcome and aim:*

* Welcome participants, introduce yourself (and note-taker)
* Explain aim of the meeting (why we are here) and set ground rules (e.g., confidentiality).
* Present participants to each other or let them introduce themselves.
* Explain how notes are taken or about any recording devices.
* Explain the focus group will take about 1.5 hours.

*Question and answer session:*

* Ask one question at a time and facilitate a discussion.
* Repeat answers to make sure you heard correctly.
* Ask the same question in different ways to check consistency of answers.
* Be curious about what meanings and interpretations the participants give to behaviour, events or objects in *their* experience.
* Probe to better understand participants’ underlying thinking.
* Be patient, listen carefully and try to remember what each person says.
* After each question is answered and discussed, summarise what you heard.
* Take comprehensive notes (if you are the note taker) including verbal and non-verbal messages (e.g., body language).

*Closing the focus group*

* When time is up find an appropriate point to pose the closing questions.
* Thank respondents for their time and willingness to participate.
* Repeat the purpose of the focus group and explain how the data will be used.

*After the focus group*

* Immediately after the focus group, moderator and note taker sit down together and expand the notes from the discussion(s).

**Analysing focus group data**

Analysing FG data is about searching for meanings and understandings in the sea of information you have gathered from notes, transcripts and recordings. Analyse the data from each FG and then compile the analysis from all of the FG you conducted by asking:

* What are respondents saying? What did you learn?
* What’s new? What’s surprising?
* What’s confirmed?
* What’s the big take away?

Make the text manageable by filtering according to what is relevant to you, i.e., the purpose of the FG. Try to relate the information gathered to the indicators of interest, but also allow for unexpected conclusions to emerge. Organise the data into themes:

* Look for repeating ideas or similar words/phrases used by different participants.
* Based on repeating ideas, organize the data by common themes (keeping in mind the indicators you wish to measure).
* Present your findings in a narrative with people’s own words, using your themes to organize people’s experiences into a coherent story.

Two samples of FG questions are provided below that you can adapt to the needs of your programme and context.

1. The following sample life skills and wellbeing questions are taken from Ungar and Leibenberg, the Resilience Research Centre, and relate to child, youth and adult CYRM manuals. These sample focus group questions can be used to assess life skills and wellbeing among adults (and children and youth through the alternative questions shown).

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| **Sample Focus Group Questions – Life Skills and Wellbeing** |
| 1. What do I need to know to live comfortably here and be safe? (Child/youth alternative: What do I need to grow up well here?) 2. How do you describe people who are able to overcome a lot of adversity here, despite the many problems they face? (Child/youth alternative: How do you describe people who grow up well here despite the main problems they face?) 3. What does it mean to you, your family and your community when bad things happen? 4. What kinds of things are most challenging for you living here? (Child/youth alternative: What kinds of things are most challenging for you growing up here?) 5. What do you do when you face difficulties in your life? 6. What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community? 7. What do you and others you know do to keep healthy (mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually) |

1. The following sample questions for FG discussions with children are taken from the Children’s Resilience Programme. These questions can be used to monitor and evaluate PS programme activities.

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| **Sample Focus Group Discussion Questions for the Children Resilience Programme** |
| **FG Questions**   1. Which activities do you remember? 2. Which activities did you like/dislike? 3. What was the best/worst about participating in this programme? 4. Have you felt any difference/change in yourself, how you relate to others since going through the workshops?    1. How do you feel going to school now? For example, how do you feel about your teachers, about homework, about the lessons?    2. How do feel in relation to your friends and classmates?    3. How do you feel in relation to your parents and how things are at home?    4. Have you gotten help from friends, teachers and/or parents when needed and how? 5. Do you think other children should go through such and programme – and why? 6. Do you have any good advise for the programme? 7. Anything else you want to add?   **Closing questions**   1. Summary: Is this an adequate summary? 2. All things considered: Reflect on the discussion and offer any new positions. 3. Final: Have we missed anything? |

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| Key informant interviews**[[8]](#footnote-8)** |

**Purpose**

Key informant interviews are in-depth interviews with people who have special information about a particular topic. The purpose of key informant interviews is to collect information from a range of people—including community leaders, professionals, or residents—who have first hand knowledge about the community. These community experts, with their particular knowledge and understanding, can provide insight on the nature of problems and give recommendations for solutions.

Key informant interviews are useful for understanding the motivation and beliefs of the community on a particular issue. It also provides the opportunity to probe for in-depth information from people with diverse backgrounds and opinions. Focus group dynamics may prohibit some people from candidly discussing sensitive topics. However, key informant interviews (individual or small groups of 2-3 people) create a comfortable environment for frank and open discussions.

## Planning the key informant interviews

There are several key steps involved in planning and implementing key informant interviews as a means for data collection:

1. Gather and review existing data – look for information that already exists on the topic from different sources.
2. Determine what information is needed – prepare and formulate the primary questions you would like to answer and determine what type of data is needed (e.g., data on community practice, opinions, existing services and service utilization).
3. Determine target population and brainstorm about possible key informants – choose key informants who are knowledgeable about the target population of interest.
4. Choose key informants – choose key informants who have first-hand knowledge about the community and issues or problems of interest. Diversity is important - try to include a wide range of key informants with different backgrounds and from different groups or sectors to get a variety of perspectives.
5. Choose type of interview – interviews can be face-to-face or by telephone, depending upon the key informant’s availability and preference, as well as your available time, resources and logistical feasibility.
6. Develop an interview tool – this is an outlined script and list of open-ended questions relevant to your topic. Begin with factual and easy-to-answer questions, followed with questions about opinions and beliefs. Use probing questions to help clarify informant’s comments and get detailed information. End with questions asking for general recommendations.
7. Determine documentation method – compile interview information to ensure data collection efficiency, quality, and consistency across interviews. Take notes both during the interview, but be careful that your note taking does not disrupt the flow of conversation. Also take notes directly after the interview and review and fill in details. You may also want to tape record the interview, with the informed consent of the informant.
8. Select designated interviewer(s) – select interviewers who are good listeners, have strong communication skills, can take detailed notes, are detail oriented, and comfortable meeting and talking to new people.
9. Conduct key informant interviews – welcome and thank the informant. Make sure to explain how the information will be used and issues of confidentiality, and gain informed consent. Then conduct the interview based upon the interview tool, listening carefully for recurring and new opinions or beliefs. In order to compare the data collected, be sure to get answers to certain key questions from *every* person interviewed. At the end of the interview, ask the informant if they have any questions or final comments. Let them know what will happen with the information and conclude by thanking them for their time.
10. Compile and organize key informant interview data – Consider at the outset how to manage the data collected, including notes, comments and impressions of the interviewer. Notes should be typed up quickly after the interviews (supplementing with audio tape information, if used). It may be helpful to organize the data from different key informant interviews into categories based, for example, upon the interview questions themselves. Ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of informants in the informed consent procedures, by keeping identifying information in the data in a locked place during analysis and by removing identifying information once the data is compiled.

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| Case studies |

A case study[[9]](#footnote-9) is a detailed description of individuals, communities, organizations, events, programmes, time periods or a story (such as a success or learning story as described in the text box below). These studies are particularly useful in evaluating complex situations and exploring qualitative impact. A case study helps to illustrate a situation or findings, and allows for unexpected results to emerge. However, it provides only an example from one perspective and only when combined (triangulated) with other case studies or M&E methods is it possible to draw conclusions about key results.

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| Examples of stories:  *Success story*: A story detailing a person’s positive experience resulting from a programme in his or her own words.  *Learning story*: A story focused upon the lessons learned from a person’s positive and/or negative experiences with a programme. |

A case study can provide powerful and interesting in-depth information about the results of a programme. In designing a case study, consider making a short list of 4 or 5 bullet points that you would like to address and to help focus the case study on relevant information. Use examples to capture the unique opinions, insights and information of the case study.

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| Most significant change methodology**[[10]](#footnote-10)** **[[11]](#footnote-11)** [[12]](#footnote-12) |

Storytelling is an ancient, cross-cultural process of making sense of the world in which we live, and is familiar to all peoples. Collecting stories from beneficiaries, volunteers and staff of PS programmes can be useful in better understanding perceptions, reflections and unexpected or personally important changes during M&E. One model of collecting stories for M&E is the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach.

Most significant change (MSC) is a participatory approach that involves collecting “stories” about change at regular intervals. It involves the participation of stakeholders at different levels in deciding on the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data collected. It can help in monitoring throughout the programme cycle or in evaluating the impact of the programme as a whole. In evaluations, stories are an ideal way for people to make sense of all the different results of a programme. They also help in understanding the values of key stakeholders – those who participate in or benefit from PS programmes[[13]](#footnote-13).

The MSC process involves collecting stories from beneficiaries at the field level of “significant change” resulting from a programme. Panels of designated stakeholders or staff then systematically select the stories they feel are the most significant of all. They read the stories aloud and discuss the value of the reported changes. In large programmes, stories may be pooled and selected at multiple levels – for example, from the field level (beneficiaries) to staff and stakeholders, to managers and donors – allowing various people involved to reflect upon and analyse the programme’s significant results in relation to the key objectives. Discussing the value of those changes also helps to determine the benefits and/or disadvantages of programmes in order to improve them.[[14]](#footnote-14)

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| Benefits of MSC:   * Beneficiaries/stakeholders can share and reflect upon their personal change stories. * It captures the *values* among stakeholders regarding the main benefits of the programme. The values become apparent when the different stories are described and discussed. This will clarify *why* the story is important and what *value* the story represent * It can identify unexpected changes (positive or negative). * It encourages analysis because participants must explain why they believe one change is more significant than another. * It builds capacity of staff and beneficiaries in analysing data and conceptualising results. * It delivers a rich picture of what is happening with a programme. * It can be creatively documented and disseminated as part of participant-led advocacy. |

MSC method can be used every 3-6 months with both adults and children. The process of helping people to reflect upon and create their stories of most significant change is likely to take 1-2 hours. First, individual stories are developed, followed by a collective (group) sharing and analysis. Stories may be recorded through writing or by other creative means – such as drawings or poems. Stories of most significant change can also be creatively documented after the process with involvement of the stakeholders/storytellers themselves. This can include, for example, the production of a book (perhaps with illustrations), an exhibition or even radio broadcasts of the stories.

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| Key steps for MSC may include:   * Stakeholders are selected and engaged in the process. * The time frame for collecting and reporting on stories is defined. * Participants are individually given paper, pencils, crayons or paints/paintbrushes. They are asked to think about stories/examples that illustrate the most significant changes (either positive/successes or negative/challenges) that have occurred as a result of the programme. *“In your opinion, during the last month, what was the most significant change that took place for participants in the programme?”* * Each participant decides on the most significant change story they would like to share and creatively records the story in writing or drawing. * In small groups, each person presents and explains their story/picture of significant changes. They explain why they chose this story, why it is most significant for them. * Notes from the sharing of stories are recorded by facilitators or by the group themselves (on separate paper or flip chart). Basic information on the background of participants is also recorded, but not their names to protect confidentiality. * After individual storytelling, a facilitator helps the group to discuss similar and/or different experiences, and to analyse the changes and values expressed in the stories. * The analysis may be done by having participants discuss the different stories and group them into domains. For example, the group may identify 3-5 broad *domains* or types of change upon which the stories can be grouped, such as *‘changes in people’s lives’* *or* *‘nature of people’s participation’* or more specific domains like *‘changes in cooperation’, ‘changes in confidence’ or ‘changes in social networks”.* Using domains of change has immediate practical value. It helps organisations to group a large number of SC stories into more manageable lots, which can each be analysed in turn. The domains are used to help describe the nature of most significant change in reporting.   + Analysis using pre-determined domains: You can determine domains in advance. A benefit of pre-determined domains is that they can provide some guidance to the people collecting stories concerning the kind of changes they need to be searching for without being too prescriptive. *However when using pre-determined domains it is important to also include a domain of “any other type of changes”* that allows participants to report significant changes that don’t fit into the named domains.   + Analysis without specifying domains: At the field level, especially where program participants are involved in identifying and selecting MSC stories, it may be useful to start without specifying domains. Instead, see what sort of stories are generated and valued by the beneficiaries, and then divide these into appropriate domains or have the beneficiaries do so. The choice depends on the extent to which the organisation using MSC wants to be led by its participants rather than its own objectives.   + Analysis not using domains: Domains are not essential. MSC stories can be collected and analysed as a group without first being categorised into domains. Participants can be asked to go out and look for significant changes without being given guidance in the form of specific domains of concern. With smaller organisations where there are likely to be fewer SC stories to examine, the MSC approach will probably be easier without domains. * The group can then choose 1-3 stories which best illustrate the most significant changes they feel have been achieved by the programme that they would like to share with others. * When documenting the stories that best illustrate most significant changes, include the following information: 1. Information about who collected the story and when the events occurred (remember to keep confidentiality as appropriate) 2. Description of the story itself – what happened 3. Significance/value (to the storyteller) of events described in the story. * If stories are shared at multiple levels of staff or stakeholders, the process of reading and selecting stories continues, with selected stories filtering up through the typical levels of authority in an organization or programme. Participants at each level review the series of stories sent to them from the level below and select the single most significant account of change (within each domain/heading, if using domains). This involves a process of reading, discussing, deciding and documenting the reasons for the selection so that the criteria are clear and can be fed back in a transparent process to all stakeholders. |

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1. Adapted from: Tool C Example of general guidelines for focus group discussions. M&E package for Health Emergency Response Unit, psychosocial component. IFRC (pending publication) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Monitoring and evaluation guidelines for *The Children’s Resilience Programme*. (2012) IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support and Save the Children: Copenhagen. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *IFRC Project/Programme Monitoring and Evaluation Guide*. (2011) International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Geneva. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Annex 10 of M&E Guidelines for *The Children’s Resilience Programme* (2012) for a more comprehensive guide to conducting focus group discussions with children. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Snider L. and Dawes A. (2006) Psychosocial Vulnerability and Resilience Measures for National-Level Monitoring of Orphans and Vulnerable Children: Recommendations for the UNICEF Psychological Indicator. UNICEF: New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Adapted from: M&E package for Health Emergency Response Unit, Tool C. IFRC (pending publication) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/focus-groups.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Adapted from UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, Section 4. Key Informant Interviews (Tool J M&E Package for Health Emergency Response Unit, IFRC). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. IFRC Project/Programme Monitoring and Evaluation Guide. (2011) International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Geneva. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Adapted from: *A Kit of Tools: for participatory research and evaluation with children, young people and adults.* Save the Children Norway (2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. INTRAC, Handout: Most Significant Change Approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Davies R. and Dart J. The ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) Technique: A guide to its use. (2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dart J. and Davies R. (2003) A Dialogical, Story-Based Evaluation Tool: The Most Significant Change Technique. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 24(2):137-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Monitoring and Evaluation News, <http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)