

Focus Group Discussion: A Research Method in Community Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on recent consensus among development practitioners that for development to be meaningful, it must adopt the bottom-up and community-driven approach. Researchers in community development most often use Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in researches meant to achieve bottom-up and community-driven development through research. They often use this method exclusively or as a complementary tool to collect in-depth information directly from the subjects of a research. For a better understanding, simplified and correct use of the method, this paper presents knowledge on operationalization of focus group discussion as research method in community development. The authors concluded that community development experts, practitioners and researchers need the knowledge as presented in this paper to effectively use focus group discussion to promote bottom-up and community-driven development through research.

Key Words: FGD, Research, Method, Community, Development

INTRODUCTION

One of the recent consensus among contemporary development practitioners is that development must adopt bottom-up and community-driven approach, for it to be meaningful and sustainable. A major discipline and practice that promotes the bottom-up and community driven approach to development is community development. According to Buye (2022) community development is a holistic approach grounded in principles of empowerment, human right, inclusion, social justice, self-determination and collective action. It is against this holistic approach and ever-widening scope of community development that practitioners and theorists in the discipline continue to engage in research to meet the needs of clients and proffer solutions to contemporary community challenges. In conducting research in community development, practitioners and researchers have a wide choice of research methodology to adopt from; especially methods that are closely related to participatory research that fully emphasis involvement of citizens in identifying and finding solutions to community challenges and meeting their needs.

One of such participatory research methodologies is the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method. Researchers in community development most often use this research method exclusively or as a complementary method to collect in-depth information directly from the subjects of study. For a better understanding, simplified and correct adequate use of the method, this paper explores and presents detailed information on focus group discussion as a research method in community development.

RESEARCH

By research, we mean a systematic investigation into and study of materials and events in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions. It is a creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase

the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new application.

The Department of Education and Training of Western Sydney University (2020) described research as the creation of new knowledge and or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This may include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes. In the same vein, the Hampshire College (2022) posits that research is a process of systematic inquiry that entails collection of data, documentation of critical information, analysis and interpretation of the data/information in accordance with suitable methodology set by specific professional fields and academic disciplines. Research according to Fleetwood (2022) is a careful consideration of study regarding a particular concern, event or problem using scientific method (of investigation). It is a systematic inquiry to describe, explain, predict and control observed phenomenon.

In typology, research can broadly classified as quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Quantitative research as observed by Oberiri (2017) deals with quantifying and analyzing variables in order to get results. It involves the utilization and analysis of numerical data using specific statistical techniques to answer questions like who, how much, what, where, when, how many and how. It also describes the methods of explaining an issue or phenomenon through gathering data in numerical form. Quantitative research as noted by cint.com (2020) is the most common research framework in the social sciences. Unlike other research frameworks that can be subjective, quantitative research is more objective. It studies processes through which numbers and often the goals of the research is to produce statistics. Quantitative research design includes the different types of survey, experimental, quasi-experimental, correlation, causal- comparative and case study

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is a research method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication. The method is concerned with the believe and perception of research subjects on an issue of concern. The method deals with the 'what' and 'why' in the thinking of the subject of research on the issue under study. Bhandari (2023) observed that qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions or experiences to gather new ideas.

The Libguides (2023) described qualitative research as a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomenon within their natural settings. It is a research method that relies on the direct experiences of human beings in their everyday lives. According to Patrick and Ugo (2019) qualitative research is multi-method in focus involving an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject matter. It studies things in their natural settings attempting to make sense or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Examples of qualitative research include case study, personal experience, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, visual tests, focus group discussion and action research that describe routine and problematic moment in individual and community lives. Focus group discussion which is the focus of this discourse belongs to the family of qualitative research.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

According to Anyanwu (2002), the concept of community development lacks a precise definition that caters for its ever-expanding field. While no generally accepted definition is available, some important elements

appear again and again in most available description of the concept. Such elements include:

- Community as unit of action;
- Community initiatives and leadership as resources;
- Use of both internal and external resources;
- Inclusive participation;
- An organized and comprehensive approach that attempt to involve the entire community; and
- Democratic and rational task accomplishment.

Based on the re-occurrence of the above listed elements, Ojokheta and Oladeji (2004) observed that there is little or no divergence in how scholars describe the term community development. The National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (2014) described community development as “a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes participatory democracy, sustainable development, human right, equality, economic opportunity and social justice through the organization, education and empowerment of people within their communities whether these be of locality, identity or interest in urban and rural settings”.

Similarly, Straza (2021) describes community development as a process whereby community members come together to take collective actions and generate solutions to common problems. The concept of community development can be described further as anything dealing with people working together to make the community better whether the goal is focused on social or economic needs.

Community development today has gone beyond the traditional boundaries of developing the community and the physical, economic and social conditions of the people to include the psychological and emotional conditions of the people. On this premise, Oyebamiji and Adekola in Adekola and Uzoagu (2022) defined community development as a process by which the efforts of members of a community are united with those of governmental and non-governmental bodies for a gradual and positive re-conditioning process with much reliance on local initiatives, resources and leadership for improvement in the physical and social structure of the community and general well-being of the inhabitants.

RESEARCH METHODS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Research methods are the strategies, processes or techniques utilized in the collection of data or evidence for analysis in order to uncover new information or create better understanding of a topic. It can further be described as a specific procedure or techniques used to identify, select/collect, process and analyze information (data) on a topic. It is a logical, systematic plan to resolve a research problem.

In community development, researchers have the latitude to choose from the long list of research methods in the family of quantitative or qualitative research depending on what the research aims to achieve, structure, scope, timing of the research and interest and ability of the researcher. Often, researchers in community development have shown much interest in survey, case study, correlational, field work, one-on-one and group interview, focus group discussion, community/organizational data and action research. This work focuses on focus group discussion as should be used in conducting research in community development. This is gingered by the fact that reports from practitioners in community development show that they are more comfortable with research reports than research statistics.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD)

The key operational word and action in this research method is ‘discussion’. According to Adekola (2008), a discussion occurs when two or more persons interact verbally with each other. It becomes meaningful and

different from argument when persons involved see one another's point of view and harmonize the ideas to arrive at a consensus to solve group or community problems. Discussion is a process of participants' involvement and thinking about a problem by prodding their memories so as to stimulate the knowledge that already exist in them or creating a situation that encourages the participants to find relation among ideas. Discussion is a method designed to develop group agreement through talks and reflective thinking. Discussion is of different types as noted by Nzeneri in Adekola (2008). The types include guided class discussion, panel discussion, symposium, seminar, spontaneous discussion, debate, colloquy and focusgroup discussion.

In using discussion for research, Hoover in Adekola (2008) identified three broad principles i.e

- i. Analysing the problem
- ii. Examining the possible solutions
- iii. Attempting to arrive at a group consensus.

Consequence on our knowledge of the concept of discussion, one can safely describe focus group discussion as a special type of discussion with a narrowly focused topic discussed by the group members of equal status who do not know one another (Payne and Payne, 2020). In the view of Scribbr (2021) focus group is a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. Focus group involves organized discussion with selected group individuals to gain information about their view and experience on a topic.

FGD as a research method focuses on describing individual experiences and believes, rely on open-ended questions, participants' observations, collect descriptive data and emphasizes descriptive analysis. It is a good way to gather in-depth information about a community's thoughts and opinions on atopic. It is frequently used in quantitative research to gain in-depth understanding on social issues. The method is designed to obtain data from purposely selected group of individuals rather than statistically representative sample of broader population. According to Tobias, Kerrie, Christiana and Nibedita (2018), the method's popularity is closely linked to the rise of participatory research. FGD is sometimes seen as a group interview but it is not the same thing as group interview in terms of structure, organization and operative tendencies.

In group interview, the research assumes the role of an investigator whereas in the FGD, the researcher adopts the role of a facilitator or a moderator. In the interview, the interaction is between the researcher (investigator) and the respondents unlike in the FGD where interaction is among the discussants and the researcher (facilitator) takes peripheral role and not the centre-stage as in group interview.

SAMPLE SELECTION FOR FGD

The process of sample selection in quantitative research like the FGD is one of the challenges in the usage of this research method. This is because the probability sampling techniques used in quantitative studies are rarely appropriate when conducting quantitative research (Marshall, 1996). Sample selection in FGD is usually guided by the size of the population, nature of the population, research questions guiding the study and the expected outcome.

Since the probability sampling is not appropriate in sample selection for FGD the non-probability sample selection methods are the other options available. Non-probability sampling is a sampling technique in which the researcher select sample based on his subjective judgment. It is a method in which all the population do not have an equal chance of participating in the research.

Non-probability sampling techniques available for use in FGD include convenience, purposive/judgmental, theoretical, cluster and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling is widely recommended and

mostly used for sample selection in FGD. This mean you select those members of the study population you think are capable and experienced enough to provide best relevant information on the focus of the study.

STEPS IN CONDUCTING FGD

Researchers in community development adopting the FGD as a research method need to acquaint themselves with adequate knowledge of steps or stages involved in conducting FGD. A simplified summary of the steps include;

- i. Choose a topic of interest
- ii. Clarify the purpose/aim of the study and why using FGD and not any other method
- iii. Define the coverage of the study in terms of contents and location
- iv. Develop the discussion guide/themes
 - v. Appoint a moderator or a co-moderator
 - vi. Identify and select the discussants
 - vii. Determine the discussion site/venue
 - viii. Arrange the venue
 - ix. Host the discussion/collect data
 - x. Transcribe and collate the data collected
 - xi. Analyze data and reports results.

RULES GUIDING FIELD OPERATION OF FGD

For a successful conduct of FGD, researchers must be conversant with and be guided by the established ground rules guiding the conduct of FGD. Opinions of scholars and experts are unanimous on the following as the ground rules;

- i. Participation in FGD by group members is voluntary
- ii. All responses are valid (There is no right or wrong answer)
- iii. All participants must respect the opinion of other discussants
- iv. Participants have the right to abstain from discussing a particular theme or answer a particular question
 - v. Moderator should guide the discussants to stay on the topic
 - vi. Protect personal and participants privacy
- vii. As observed by Stewart and Shamsudani (2015), FGD involves 6-10 participants duration should be 60-90 minutes and should discuss 3-5 probes or themes.

ROLE OF FACILITATOR IN FGD

The role of facilitator in FGD is very important. The ability of the facilitator to make everyone comfortable, encourage everyone to speak, enforce respectful language and manage the pace of discussion to a large extent determines the quality of the discussion and the information gathered. He therefore serves as the programme moderator. Specifically, the facilitator (researcher) according to the Centre for Facilitating Health in New England(2020) is expected to;

- i. Determine and confirm the date, time and venue of the discussion;
- ii. Arrange and make the venue comfortable
- iii. Go with an assistant or note taker?
- iv. Encourage every member of the group to participate in themes discussion;
 - v. Manage self and participants temper
 - vi. Manage time

- vii. Raise discussion theme/questions guided by the hypotheses or research questions of the study. In doing this, the facilitator must avoid Yes/No questions and leading statements that can influence participants responses;
- viii. Guide the participants to remain on track and focus on the topic of discussion;
- ix. Manage the discussion to avoid domination by dominant voice/opinion leader;
- x. Ensure adequate and correct recording of facts and events.
- xi. Where the use of technology is involved, ensure it works perfectly well and does not constitute distraction to the discussants;
- xii. End the discussion by summarizing the high points of consensus;
- xiii. Thank discussants for their participation
- xiv. Collect and save all documents, records and recordings.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING IN FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Focus group discussion is a qualitative research method that lends data collected to qualitative data analysis methods. Qualitative data analysis involves organizing, analyzing and interpreting non-numeric, conceptual information to capture themes and patterns of thinking, answer research questions and identify actions to take to improve situations and events. Qualitative data analysis methods include; narrative analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis,, grounded theory, text analysis and contents analysis.

Most researchers in community development, using focus group discussion, often adopt the thematic analysis method to analyse data/information collected from discussion groups. Thematic analysis is a method that involves reading through a set of data and identifying patterns of meanings across the data to derived themes. Thematic analysis can be inductive, deductive, semantic or latent.

Specifically, using thematic analysis to analyse and report FGD, the researcher is expected to:

- i. describe date, time and recording of discussion sessions;
- ii. transcribe the conversation verbatim. In doing this, the researcher should avoid editing natural speeches, consider confidentiality and where necessary use pseudonyms;
- iii. interpret the themes in context based on the ideas that re-occur across the groups. Where necessary, identify and use quotes that encapsulate themes and trends. Comparison analysis can be integrated especially where there are multiple groups in the same study;
- iv. tie findings to potential outcomes and action points.

CHALLENGES TO USAGE OF FGD IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

Focus group discussion (FGD) have been used in community development research in most cases to explore participants experiences, beliefs and attitudes to stimulate responses and gain insights through participants exchanging views, opinions and perceptions on issues concerning social and development topics. However, Scheelbeek; Hamza and Hill (2020) observed that one of the challenges is that FGDs are commonly conducted as group interview, hence losing the benefits that FGD brings to data collection. Another difficulty in the usage of FGD is that it may be difficult to assemble a truly representative sample due to emphasis on non-probability sampling techniques and the small size of the discussion group. Emanating from the small size of discussion group is the problem of anonymity. Anonymity of opinion becomes difficult because the participants are familiar with themselves thus, participants are always careful about what to say because of post-discussion consequences. FGD is therefore open to bias.

Hadi and Junaidi (2021) further observed that challenges in usage of FGD may include the fact that peer

pressure can influence respondent's opinion, moderator's skills in phrasing themes of discussion can affect responses and skew results; and that psychological barriers such as feeling shy and lack of confidence to express self may affect participants contributions.

FGD if not well managed could turn to debate. Community power gradient as well as norms could also reduce the ability of participants to voice disagreement and personal opinion. In emerging economies like Nigeria and other African Countries, extreme poverty and low literacy level may affect participants knowledge and quality of contributions in focus group discussion session thus having negative effects on the results and findings of the research.

On the part of the FGD facilitator, there is a lot of room for errors in data analysis due to prior thinking, beliefs and conceptions.

CONCLUSION

This discourse is based on recent consensus among development practitioners that for development to be meaningful, it must adopt the bottom-up and community driven approach. Consequently, they emphasize participatory research methodologies like the focus group discussion. For better, correct and adequate use of the method, this paper explores and presents detailed information on focus group discussion as a research method in community development. From the exploration, the authors here concluded that community development experts, practitioners and researchers need adequate knowledge as presented in this paper to effectively use FGD to promote bottom-up and community-driven development through research.

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