Focus Groups in the Context of International Development: In Pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals

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The central thought is that of a true science of society, capable, in the measure that it approaches completeness, of being turned to the profit of mankind... in its practical character of never losing sight of the end or purpose, nor of the possibilities of conscious effort. It is a reaction against the philosophy of despair that has come to dominate even the most enlightened scientiﬁc thought. It aims to point out a remedy for the general paralysis that is creeping over the world, and... it proclaims the efficacy of effort, provided it is guided by intelligence. [Ward, 1906]

The legacy of the twentieth century and the promise of the twenty-first century were on the minds of leaders, change agents, and ordinary people around the world as the new millennium approached. The most far-reaching aspirations—the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—were adopted in 2000 by all 189 member-states of the United Nations General Assembly, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank (WB). The Millennium Declaration was designed to throw into relief the values of various organizations concerned with international development and to stimulate concerted action (United Nations, 2000). As the culmination of several major international meetings and summits, the adoption of the Millennium Declaration “was a defining moment for global cooperation in the 21st century” (United Nations, 2002).

Talking to People Systematically

When most of the world signed on to the MDGs, it became more apparent than ever that international development agencies would need to talk to intended beneficiaries about the intended consequences of aid and technical assistance. This has been a large part of our work at Group Dimensions International (GDI) since 1993, as it became clear that much international aid was not “reaching the ground,” but rather was lining the pockets of emerging elites, and that the social dimension of development had not been fully recognized or integrated into projects (Cernea, 2004). Corruption, lack of transparency, and insufficient aid coordination surfaced as major stumbling blocks in achieving national development goals. Lack of understanding
about how culture and context affect development, inattention to the powerful forces of gender and ethnicity, and disregard for social impacts (as opposed to economic gains) characterized most development interventions (Billson and Mancini, 2007).

The MDGs were intended to help both countries and donors/lenders focus not simply on the amount of aid (“disbursements”) but also on outcomes. For example, has poverty been reduced? Are school completion rates for girls catching up to those for boys? Has infant mortality been mitigated? Has maternal health improved? While these and other indicators are certainly susceptible to (and best measured by) statistical means, the how and why of progress toward goal achievement lends itself admirably to focus group and key informant interviews. Talking to people, rather than simply measuring dollars or kilowatts, has steadily gained currency in development evaluation.

Focus group research was developed in the post–World War II period by sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld (who used the term focus interview) and Robert K. Merton (who coined the term focused group interview). Merton and Patricia L. Kendall wrote about the method in a 1946 article that was later expanded upon by Merton, Gollin, and Kendall (1956). The methodology was almost immediately submerged by the discipline’s intense efforts to prove itself a “hard science” through increasingly sophisticated survey and statistical work, but the market research community rediscovered it during the 1960s. Since the 1980s, focus groups, as part of the resurgence of qualitative methods, have gradually become a respected tool that reflects the practice orientation and more qualitative nature of early twentieth-century sociology.

Focus groups can be defined as structured, guided discussions that have as their sole purpose the gathering of data for scientific purposes (Merton et al., 1956). Their success depends on a well-trained moderator who facilitates the discussion through guided interaction so that ideas generated by the group can be pursued. The moderator draws out motivations, feelings, and values behind verbalizations through skillful probing and restating responses but, just as importantly, participants stimulate each other through “discussion, debate, dialogue, and disagreement” (Billson, 2007b) that cannot occur in individual interviews or on questionnaires.

Why focus groups? Of all social science methods, focus group discussions excel in engaging the participation of those who are the intended beneficiaries of various programs and projects. In an era of increasing attention to participatory research and involvement of local stakeholders in program design, implementation, and evaluation, focus groups stand out as a logical vehicle for structured, systematic discussion. Focus groups enable researchers to develop a picture of how things work and then to take that analysis to ensuing focus groups in order to verify, expand, and possibly revise assumptions (Billson, 1991). For example, Mosavel et al. (2005) used a series of focus groups with black South Africans in Cape Town to explore the (perceived) need for cervical cancer screening. By using focus groups and individual interviews to engage community stakeholders in interpretive analysis, the team “developed a research framework that incorporated the community’s concerns and priorities, and stressed the intersecting roles of poverty, violence, and other cultural forces in shaping community members’ health and wellbeing.” The interviews led the researchers