

This document provides a general overview of methods for conducting workshops and focus groups related to restoration projects. You have likely entered this document thinking about planning for or monitoring a particular outcome (e.g. recreational fishing), however the method may be relevant for additional outcomes as well (e.g. environmental education, subsistence fishing, mental health). Make sure to consider additional outcomes relevant to your project context before organizing a workshop or focus group with a particular set of stakeholders so you can get as much information out of the process as possible.

You will likely benefit from partnering with community groups when using these methods. These partnerships will allow you to more effectively talk with a representative group of community members about effects of changes in outcomes of interest. This includes (actual and perceived) benefits and unintended consequences of changes in target outcomes. Be mindful of and defer to the expertise of your community partners on how to best develop and implement these methods. This can include allowing them to lead while you provide support as necessary.

Background

Focus groups and workshops are organized around a discussion with a group of individuals, typically meant to represent unique and diverse stakeholders within a project service area.¹ In workshops and focus groups, participants are prompted to share and gain information about their perceptions and experiences with a given restoration outcome. This type of data collection process obtains multiple perspectives about a topic, to identify shared understanding and differences among groups, and to discern ways in which certain groups may be affected by other groups when it comes to a given project outcome. At a minimum, a basic understanding of facilitating meetings and cultural sensitivity is required to conduct this type of work.

Focus groups are often smaller and more homogenous than a workshop, which brings together more diverse perspectives. Each project will need to decide which type of engagement makes sense in context. We use the terms focus group and workshop interchangeably in these documents.

If you are applying these methods at the planning stage of your project:

Conducting focus groups or workshops in advance of or at the outset of a project is useful for understanding what stakeholders care about with regard to potential outcomes of a project, and how they perceive access to and distribution of particular outcomes prior to project installation. This type of engagement can help a project set goals with the community with regards to the types of outcomes they want to prioritize in project design, or adjust project plans to maximize benefits to the community and minimize disruptions to existing uses and values.

If you are applying these methods for monitoring a particular outcome:

Workshops and focus groups can be used as an outcome assessment tool for understanding how stakeholders experience the outcomes of a project, whether they perceive the project to be inclusive and accessible, and whether the project has met community expectations with regards to outcomes. The findings can be used to make future adjustments to a project.

¹ The geographic boundary containing those stakeholders for whom a particular project outcome is relevant

Considerations for Focus Groups and Workshops

Each individual [GEMS measurement protocol](#) suggesting focus groups or workshops offers tailored adjustments to the basic considerations provided below. Every workshop will be different based on the particular outcome(s) being discussed and stakeholders involved, but important considerations that need to be made before hosting a workshop or focus group are outlined here.

In some cases, you may need to get approval for focus groups and workshops from whatever entity oversees human subjects research for your organization. This is often an Institutional Review Board (IRB), but other oversight bodies may be relevant for certain organizations. This step is important to ensure that no harm will come to subjects through participating in a workshop or focus group and that these engagements follow ethics rules of the organization running it.

Recruiting and Accommodating Representative Participants

During the [stakeholder assessment](#) step, the project should identify marginalized or underserved groups that should be represented in a focus group. In prioritizing accurate community representation, it is important to actively recruit participants from these groups, and to ensure that their needs are accommodated. For example, if there is a significant population who will not be able to or will feel uncomfortable participating in a focus group or workshop in English, focus groups should have translators or be held in different languages. It is likely that multiple workshop sessions or focus groups may be necessary to ensure a representative sample. Focus groups can therefore be targeted to each community and facilitated as small group discussions with peers where people may speak more openly about experiences and opinions and their values, **or** comprised of participants with demographics proportionately representative of local communities.

Other ways to make focus groups more inclusive are to schedule sessions outside of a traditional 9 to 5 work schedule, to offer [childcare](#) during the workshop, and to provide some form of compensation to participants, whether in the form of a financial payment, meal, gift card, and/or transportation voucher.

Facilitation Guidance

Facilitation by at least one person who is trained in facilitation, diversity, inclusion, equity, and cultural sensitivity is instrumental for executing a workshop that helps answer any “Who” questions actively and does not do harm to participants engaged in the focus group. When appropriate, ASL interpreters and translators for non-English languages should also be present to facilitate participation.

Prior to beginning any focus group, informed consent should be obtained from all participants.

Participants should be made aware that they may stop participation and leave at any time and for any reason. At the end of the focus group, facilitators should provide an opportunity for feedback. This can take the form of a discussion forum, exit survey, or comment card.

Discussion Prompts

Discussion prompts should target a specific theme and be as clear as possible. Facilitators should pose open questions and try to avoid putting any participant on the spot. Prompts focusing on outcomes’ access and distribution can be tailored from the following:

- Do individuals feel that they and/or their communities have benefited from an outcome since the implementation of a project?
- Do individuals feel they and/or their communities have been excluded from possible benefits of an outcome since the implementation of a project?

- Do individuals feel they and/or their communities were adequately represented or considered during the project design and implementation? This can include consideration of their perspectives, values, interests, and priorities as they relate to the project
- What are barriers to access and engagement at the project site? Are participants willing to share any experiences of exclusion?
- What are possible changes that can be made at the project site can better improve or facilitate access or distribution of the project outcomes?

Resources

Resources for Conducting Focus Groups and Workshops

- [Data Collection Methods for Racial Equity Tools](#) offers further in-depth considerations regarding equitable, ethical, and efficient [focus group design](#) along with other methods in data collection regarding social equity.
- A general [guide for designing a focus group](#), with attention to designing a group that ensures participants feel comfortable participating and sharing openly, attention to reducing barriers to attending and participating in a focus group, and other relevant concerns.
- NOAA [guide for conducting focus groups](#)
- [Template for conducting diversity planning focus groups](#) from University of Texas at Austin's Office for Inclusion and Equity.
- [Community-Driven Engagement Processes](#) from Georgetown Climate Center's Equitable Adaptation Legal & Policy Toolkit

Examples of equitable development and ecosystem services projects using focus groups as a primary methodology

- [Perspectives on Focus Group Participation and Remuneration](#)
- [Local Preferences and Strategies for Effective, Efficient, and Equitable Distribution of PES Revenues in Vietnam: Lessons for REDD+](#)
- [The livelihood impacts of the Equitable Payments for Watershed Services \(EPWS\) Program in Morogoro, Tanzania](#)

For more information on the GEMS project metrics and protocols, visit [this page](#).

