Focus Group Discussion (FGD)
Guidance Note for South Sudan

The purpose of this Guidance Note is to provide technical recommendations to cluster members' field staff on planning, designing and conducting the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), including within the context of the Protection Risk Monitoring (PRM) exercise. The document provides basic tips to help field and assessment teams to better structure identification of the data sources, conducting focus group meetings, recording findings and assessments including in the PRMS.

Why do it?
- To better understand the people that we serve, in terms of issues fueling their exposure to protection risks, and through their recommendations to explore the ways how to overcome their challenges.
- Understand the unique experiences of different community groups to ensure that protection risks analysis and subsequent programming and humanitarian aid responds to the needs that are tailored to specific groups.

What are the focus group discussions (FGDs)?
FGDs are the platforms for interaction of a group of individuals with some common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who facilitates the discussion among the group members to collect information about a specific (*focused*) issue. The defining characteristics of each group varies from age to gender, diversity, social identity and specific needs.

Identifying the location for FGD
FGD location needs to be in a safe environment with minimum possibility of interruption, where participants would feel free to express their concerns and views without fear of judgment or prejudice. Some refreshments should be available. Most preferable would be an environment in which roundtable or circular sitting arrangements could be achieved.

Identifying Protection Risks (Topics) for FGD
Whether through a local expert knowledge, reports by cluster members or through results of other PRMS, assessments such as key informant interviews or observation method tools identify the key Protection Risks, which are going to be the topic of discussion of the FGD (full list of Risks and associated contextualization as well as question suggestions, are available in the PRMS Manual 2024). The selection of risks should be from the 10 out of 15 Protection Risks (as listed below). The remaining 5 risks have not been deemed to be appropriate for usage for FGD as a method to be discussed during the session. **It is the recommendation of the Protection Cluster to limit the discussion to no more than three Risks mostly associated with the group composition. It is better to conduct several FGDs than to load the conversation with too many topics.**

FGD Length and Group Size
The ideal length of a focus group discussion is between *1:30 -1:45 hours*. It is long enough to have a rich discussion and short enough to keep the participants focused. Do not forget to inform the participants (at the beginning) that you expect the session to last this long and to obtain a consent.

The ideal size of a group is between 10-15 participants. It is large enough to get information from a relatively diverse angle and small enough to efficiently moderate and navigate the discussions. When identifying certain groups for FGD, pay a special attention in order not to further hurt or stigmatize those groups.

Composition of Participants for FGDs
The main factor in the decision on the group composition is the common characteristics the participants share and whether they represent different segments of the community. Therefore, it is important to understand the population profile before deciding on the compositions. The larger the number of FGDs conducted, the more representativeness of data and findings.

However, when time and human resources are factors in identifying the groups, consider the following as a minimum recommended:

Protection Risk (with links to detailed description)	Group Type	Gender	Age	Other Considerations
Child and Forced Family Separation	Children, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	12-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged.
Child, Early or Forced Marriage	Children, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	12-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged.
Discrimination and Stigmatization, Denial of Resources, Opportunities, Services and/or Humanitarian Access	Youth, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	15-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged. Ensure representatives of minority groups and people with disabilities are well represented.
Disinformation and Denial of Access to Information	Youth, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	15-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged. Ensure representatives of minority groups and people with disabilities are well represented.
Gender-Based Violence	Children, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	12-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged. Make sure men/boys are not present when women/girls are participants, nevertheless, partners are encouraged to conduct FGDs with men/boys as well.
Impediments and/or Restrictions to Access to Legal Identity, Remedies and Justice	Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees. FGDs to be conducted in a blended approach ensuring representatives of both genders, minority groups and people with disabilities as well as IDPs and/or Returnees can all openly express their views and opinions.
Psychological/Emotional Abuse or Inflicted Distress	Children, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	12-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged.
Theft, Extortion, Forced Eviction or Destruction of Personal Property	Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees. FGDs to be conducted in a blended approach ensuring representatives of both genders, minority groups and people with disabilities as well as IDPs and/or Returnees can all openly express their views and opinions
Torture or Cruel, Inhuman, Degrading Treatment or Punishment	Youth, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	15-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged. Ensure representatives of minority groups and people with disabilities are well represented.
Trafficking in Persons, Forced Labour or Slavery-Like Practices	Youth, Adults, Elderly	Male or Female	15-17, 18-59, 60+	Host Community, IDPs, Returnees; Child Protection Officer should be present if unaccompanied children are engaged. Ensure representatives of minority groups and people with disabilities are well represented.

Special Considerations when working with children:

- Parental/ guardian consent must be obtained.

- Child assent should also be collected in an age-appropriate way.

- Include clearly structured referral pathway in case a child discloses need for specific service/ abuse/ distress.

- Emphasize confidentiality with limits (Mandatory reporting in cases such as sexual assault, life -threatening cases).

- FGDs with children should be separated by gender to ensure full and safe participation, especially for girls. Facilitators must be of the same gender as participants to create a comfortable and trusting environment.

- Moderators and note-takers working with children must be trained in child protection and child-friendly communication.

- Breaking down facilitation techniques and tools for early vs. late adolescence - using participatory/visual tools like drawings, storytelling, and games to engage younger adolescents.

Key Principles, Core Elements and Recommendations on information discussion and gathering

Key principles[1] of the FGDs include:

- voluntary participation
- **Do No Harm** approach
- creating a safe and inclusive environment where all participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions openly
- ensuring everyone has a chance to speak
- actively listening to diverse perspectives
- maintaining confidentiality
- avoiding judgment
- focusing on the group dynamic to generate rich discussion through open-ended questions, rather than seeking definitive answers
- avoid topics that could lead to negative sentiments such as ethnical dynamics, politics, religion, etc.

Core Elements:[2]

- Respectful environment: No right or wrong answers, all opinions are valued. Confidentiality is maintained. Participants should feel comfortable expressing their views without fear of judgment.
- Active participation: Encourage everyone to contribute equally. Use techniques to draw out quieter participants. Avoid dominance by a single individual.
- Open-ended questions (especially with children): Ask questions that encourage detailed responses and exploration of different perspectives. Use "why" and "how" to prompt deeper discussion.
- Neutral facilitation: The moderator should not express personal opinions or bias. Focus on guiding the discussion, not leading it towards a specific outcome.
- Group dynamics: Foster interaction and build upon ideas shared by other participants. Pay attention to non-verbal cues to gauge group sentiment.
- Ethical considerations: Obtain informed consent from participants. Respect the privacy of individuals and their responses. **Emphasize confidentiality with limits - children must be told that if they disclose something that places them or others at risk, it will be shared with someone who can help.**

Key recommendations:[3]

- **Be prepared**. Decide among the protection staff team who will be in-charge of moderating the discussion and who will be taking notes. Ensure all have a copy of the questions with the PRMS manual risk section. Go through the questions before beginning the FGDs (again!) and ensure that the questions are appropriate for the group you are facilitating.
- Make an appropriate sitting arrangement. The most preferred sitting arrangements are when people (including the team of facilitators) are sat in a circle. This helps you to make eye contact with everyone and monitor the non-verbal communication. But most importantly, this provides a more level power relationship among the facilitators and participants.
- Introduce yourselves (the team). Ask the participants to introduce themselves. If you are conducting FGDs with community leaders, it is important to understand what the role of each person in the group is.
- Ensure an informed translator is present if FGD members do not understand English, preferably someone from the group.
- Explain the purpose of the FGDs and ask participants for permission for you and your team to take notes of the discussions (if permission is not given, continue with the discussion as planned and try to memorize as much as possible and fill out the questionnaire with colleagues who were present there after everyone leaves).

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[1] Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group – 2005 / https://irep.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/98/2016/05/Trinity_Duke_How_to_Conduct_a_Focus_Group.pdf
[2] IFRC Protection, Gender And Inclusion In Emergencies Toolkit (PGI Focus Group Discussion Guide) / https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/PGI_iE_Tool2-6_PGI_FGD_Guide_LR-web%20%281%29.pdf
[3] Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews - Richard A. Krueger , October 2022 / https://www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf

- Provide context in terms of what the process is and what purpose the FGD with the group serves. Clearly state what you intend to get out of the process and how you will use the information. Communicate clearly that the **FGD will not lead to material/financial assistance**.
- Inform participants how long the discussion is expected to last, noting that it should **not exceed 1h 45min**.
- It is also important that you go ahead with the questions and try to get answers from different participants. Encourage everyone to answer the questions but **avoid singling out individuals**. If someone does not want to speak, **do not put pressure** on them. Look out for non-verbal language. Nevertheless, keep in mind that some people wish to speak but they need encouragement to do so.
- Probe and guide! Sometimes, people prefer to give short answers. It will be up to you to probe by asking follow-up questions and requesting for elaboration. Sometimes, people go off track and would like to discuss other matters. Thank them for bringing up such matters, kindly remind them that this is not the venue for other topics, offer to have a conversation with them about these topics bilaterally or after the FGD, and bring back the discussion to the topic at hand. Setting out the purpose of the FGD at the beginning is important to redirect the discussion without offending anyone.
- **Make questions simpler** for FGD participants to enhance understanding and encourage responses.
- When you hold **FGDs with children, be creative!** Avoid complicated questions and use more interactive methods. Ensure there is a Child Protection Officer in attendance if children are unaccompanied by caregivers (parents or legal guardians).
- At the end of the session, summarize key points to ensure that you captured all the important points discussed. Make sure key points are concrete, relevant to the community and possibly actionable where appropriate, avoid common statements such as 'livelihood access improvement'.

Systematization of Data and Information

In line with the newly developed PRMS, best practice showcased by UNHCR, and information needs for a substantial and relevant FGD outcomes, cluster partners are strongly encouraged to use the PRMS FGD tool to keep records on the information gathered using the PRMS FGD tool (link: https://enketo.unhcr.org/x/0OwwE51l) .

The data needs to include:

- Information on the organization conducting the FGD, location and participating population data disaggregation.
- It is recommended not to select more than 3 risks in a single session. The selection of risks should be from the 10 out of 15 Protection Risks (the remaining 5 have not been deemed to be appropriate for usage for FGD as a method) to be discussed during the session.
- Under each selected Risk, moderating staff are encouraged to steer the conversation and keep records in the following format:
    - Identification of a protection issue pertaining to the risk and provide detailed explanation.
    - Assess the severity of the impact of the issue identified based on GPC severity criteria for each risk available HERE.
    - Explain the capacity (or lack of) of the community to absorb or mitigate the issue.
    - Assess the capacity of the group to cope with the protection issue.
    - Seek practical proposals from the group to mitigate the issue
    - Whenever applicable, add additional issue blocks in the KOBO tool, if necessary, under the same Risk.
    - When inserting qualitative inputs, kindly be concrete, detailed and concise in line with the Protection Cluster guidance on reporting and effective writing.

FGD Recommended Checklist

Activity	Objective	Outcome
Identify Protection Risks	Through KII, Observation or other Expert processes, Identify the most pressing Protection Risks affecting a particular community or population group	List of Protection Risks requiring deep dive in dedicated (or several dedicated) FGD (some of which might be interconnected i.e. several Risks discussed with same group of people.
Identify safe locations and suitable space	Finding most suitable geographical locations and safe sites to conduct FGD.	A representative site to the risk and a safe and dignified location for FGD will be identified and booked.

Identify FGD Moderating Team	To ensure there is an appropriate number of relevant protection staff present to moderate the FGD.	FGD moderating team will be put together featuring relevant skills (translation, child protection if children are part of the group, relevant thematic (Risk) experts, notetaker, gender propriety, etc.)
Prepare FGD themes i.e. propose issues to be discussed within each Risk	Set up a list of themes/questions/protection issues the team will bring to the table to trigger discussions	Sufficient themes will be prepared to initiate conversation in a structured way and open space for previously unidentified issues while maintaining coherence to the risks during the session
Identify and mobilize target population groups	Have the most risk/theme appropriate group of people present during the discussion.	Information will be gathered from people most affected by the protection risk.
Conduct FGD	Familiarize participants with the concept and process of FGD, risks/themes and potential outcomes (including what FGD is not – mitigate expectations)	Participants will participate in the most freewill and open discussion and teams will gain direct knowledge.
Systematize and share information	During and after the FGD, the notetaker will compile, and the rest of team will agree on information to be placed in the FGD PRMS tool and data will be submitted. Participants can be engaged in the finalization.	The information shared will be agreed-upon statements and will carry much larger weight for further processing.
Follow-up	Once the reports are compiled in meaningful formats or become part or larger scale analysis, share it with participants.	Participants will be more committed for further endeavors, and we will accomplish buy-in.

Example of data collection output from a PRMS FGD:

PROTECTION RISK - Theft, extortion, forced eviction or destruction of personal property.

PROTECTION ISSUE 1 (Major Issue – to be assessed by the Protection Officer): Gang groups within the camp specifically target female-headed households, as these women are often unable to defend themselves. These households are typically led by widows, elderly women, or women with disabilities. The gangs usually begin their attacks around 7:00 PM, as the women return from the market, and continue throughout the night. Armed, they break into homes, and the women are often unable to call for help, as the gangs threaten neighbors by positioning themselves at their doors, intimidating anyone who might attempt to intervene. The most stolen items include food, money, clothing, and phones.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY 1 (Medium Capacity -– to be assessed by the Protection Officer): Currently, UNMISS only patrols the area during the day, when women report feeling little to no threat. The women believe that introducing night patrols could help mitigate these incidents. In response to the ongoing threats, the women have decided not to keep valuable items in their homes anymore, though they store small amounts of food to offer to the gangs during attacks. They have also resolved not to resist the gangs' demands to stay safe, as the gangs do not harm them if they comply. Additionally, women now return early from the markets to avoid being attacked on their way home.

COMMUNITY PROPOSED SOLUTIONS 1: The women suggest constructing a fence around the camp to prevent perpetrators from freely entering, threatening, stealing, and raping without being caught. They also advocate for UNMISS patrols both day and night, particularly in unlit areas within the camp.

PROTECTION ISSUE 2: (Medium Issue-– to be assessed by the Protection Officer) Physical violence often occurs to those who resist or attempt to protect their property from gangs, with retaliation usually involving beatings or attacks with machetes. One woman shared her experience of being stabbed after refusing to hand over her phone to a group of boys she identified as members of a gang within the camp. Girls involved with gangs who express a desire to leave are at high risk of physical abuse from gang leaders. They are often forced to pay large sums of money or are physically abused, with family members sometimes targeted as well. Parents who encourage their children to leave gangs are also threatened and may even be attacked by their children, who are manipulated by gang members. This behavior is often a way for the children to prove their loyalty to the gang.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY 2: (Medium Capacity) To prevent children from joining gangs, parents have decided to keep their children indoors, allowing them to go out only in exceptional cases, such as when they need to help with household expenses. The primary reasons identified for boys joining gangs are a lack of activities and hunger. Parents believe that by allowing their children to engage in small jobs like shoe cleaning, they can stay busy, earn money for food, and be less tempted to join gangs. Humanitarian partners in the camp also engage boys in activities to keep them occupied and deter them from joining these groups.

COMMUNITY PROPOSED SOLUTIONS 2: The women proposed the construction of a boys' safe space within the camp, like the girls' space where they are involved in various activities. Additionally, they recommended establishing reform homes within the camp.

PROTECTION RISK - Gender-based Violence

PROTECTION ISSUE 1: (Major Issue-– to be assessed by the Protection Officer) Sexual Violence, Households that cannot afford to buy charcoal rely on firewood, and it is typically the responsibility of women and girls to collect it from nearby bushes. However, gangs hide in these areas and ambush the women and girls, demanding their phones or money. If they are unable to comply, they are raped or gang-raped, with some victims subjected to further degrading treatment.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY 1: (Medium Capacity-– to be assessed by the Protection Officer) To reduce the risk, women and girls now go in groups or are accompanied by men and boys when collecting firewood. Additionally, humanitarian health partners provide healthcare services to support survivors of such violence.

COMMUNITY PROPOSED SOLUTIONS 1: The community suggests regularly clearing the thick bushes to prevent perpetrators from using them as hiding spots. They also advocate for the prosecution of perpetrators to ensure justice is served.

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