

ICARUS approach to Focus Group Meeting

The Project ICARUS will develop a focus group tool specially conceived for the kind of analysis required by the project and responding to the characteristics of the Trade union environment.

The project Pilot Committee identified some parameters which became guidelines for the structure of the tool.

Characteristics of the adopted method are that the tool:

- Has to be easily usable,
- Provides inputs such as definitions and short descriptions of thematic aspects,
- Has to be flexible concerning the composition of the group (belonging to one or more MNCs; trade unionists of different organizational structures; specific EWC groups)
- Should raise a discussion on issues selected :
 - through reflections and needs of participants,
 - through elements emerged from the results of the questionnaire-based information collection,
 - through the experience and background of coordinators from Icarus partner organisations.

The following methodological description offers theoretical elements which have been intersected with considerations and indications focusing specifically on the intent of the ICARUS focus group meetings. Those specific notes are written in *italic* and represent the most important part of the following text. However, in the other parts of the text further helpful information can be found which is meant to be a support to the highlighted parts of the text.

Following the descriptive text Appendix 1 proposes a first set of possible questions to be posed during the meeting and Appendix 2 (in a separate file) describes the grids proposed by this methodological approach.

What are focus groups?

There are many definitions of a focus group in the literature, but in all cases aspects such as

- organised group discussion,
- collective activity,
- social events and
- interaction





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are considered basic features of focus groups.

Focus groups are designed to gather information from the lay people. The goal in organising focus groups is to investigate concerns, experiences, or attitudes/beliefs related to a clearly defined topic. Thus, a focus group can be defined as a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.

In the case of the ICARUS project, the strategic objectives consist in the improvement of the overall system of interest representation within multinational companies (MNCs). That means that the project addresses all relevant actors and levels of interest representation. The project is aimed at increasing the awareness about the condition of being workers' representatives at a production site or affiliate belonging to an MNC. Thus, a particular challenge regards the improvement of coordination and cooperation between different actors and levels of interest representation.

Focus groups are a form of group interviewing but it is important to distinguish between the two. Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups, however, rely on interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher. Hence the key characteristic which distinguishes focus groups is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants.

Thus, it has to be ensured that participants have a specific experience of or opinion about the topic under investigation; that an explicit interview guide is used; and that the subjective experiences of participants are explored in relation to the research questions.

Focus group methodology is one of many tools. Importantly, focus groups are a tool of qualitative research and differ from quantitative methods such as statistical survey methods. Focus groups can be used either as a method in their own right or as a complement to other methods, especially for validity checking and in-depth analysis. That means that quantitative and qualitative methods can be combined in the context of research projects. *In the case of the ICARUS project the focus group interviews represent, in fact, the second phase of research activities. After the first phase of identifying the major challenges through questionnaire-based research the national focus groups will be aimed at analysing more in depth the specific challenges in the context of the respective national contexts. Furthermore, the focus groups are expected to provide proposals for possible solutions.*





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Why use focus groups?

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' experiences, attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods. These attitudes, experiences and beliefs are more likely to be revealed via the social gathering and the interaction which being in a focus group entails. Focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views within a group context. Focus groups are particularly useful when one wants to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic or possible solutions to a specific problem.

Focus groups can be used at the exploratory stage of a study; during a study, perhaps to evaluate or develop a particular programme of activities; or after a programme has been completed, to assess its impact or to generate further avenues of research. Focus group interviews can also provide valuable insight into whether a law or service has achieved desired goals.

Focus groups are however limited in terms of their ability to generalise findings to a whole population, mainly because of the small numbers of people participating and the likelihood that the participants will not be a representative sample.

The role of interaction

Interaction is the crucial feature of focus groups because the interaction between participants highlights their view of the world, the language they use about an issue and their values and beliefs about a situation. Interaction also enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences.

The benefits to participants of focus group research should not be underestimated. The opportunity to be involved in problem-solving processes, to be valued as experts, and to be given the chance to work collaboratively with researchers can be empowering for many participants. If a group works well, trust develops and the group may explore solutions to a particular problem as a unit, rather than as individuals. If participants are actively involved in something which they feel will make a difference, and focus group research is often of an applied nature, empowerment can realistically be achieved. That implies that focus groups can become a real forum for change.

The moderator has to allow participants to talk to each other and ask questions, while having very little control over the interaction other than generally keeping participants focused on the topic. That means that by its nature focus group research is open ended and cannot be entirely predetermined.





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Recruiting participants

Recruitment is the process of gathering the group together in the same place at the same time. Recruitment of participants will usually not be a problem, if the topic under consideration has immediate benefits or attractions to participants.

In conducting focus groups, it is important to consider if the focus group reflects the target population in terms of the relevant dimensions. A further question is whether to target a heterogeneous or homogeneous sample. Most researchers prefer a homogeneous group with a similar background and common challenges being the issues for discussion. First of all, because participants need to feel comfortable with each other. Meeting with others whom they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a given topic, will be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different. In this approach it is also believed that having too many different voices could detract from the overall purpose. Furthermore, if backgrounds of participants are too different the communication between the focus group members might become difficult.

Those advocating heterogeneous groups argue that focus groups should capture a range of opinions, and that participants should feel able to present their perspective free from the fear of appearing different.

Adaptability

In the case of the ICARUS project, focus groups should be composed of representatives of Multinational Companies (MNCs) having set up a European Works Council (EWC). Thus, the possible participants in focus groups can be divided into European-level and national actors. On the one hand, we have EWC members and trade unionists participating as experts in EWC meetings, on the other hand, there are the workers' representatives operating in the respective national contexts as well as the trade unionists in charge of single production sites. On the basis of the objective framework conditions in the respective countries national partners should feel free to decide on the composition of the focus group. As in most countries only one focus group will be carried out, in principle, focus groups should be composed of EWC members, trade unionists and national workers' representatives. If possible, it might be useful to invite the different actors belonging or linked to the same MNC. Where there is a lack of single actors the composition of the focus group has to be adapted accordingly. Thus, it might, for example, be imaginable that focus groups are composed of only EWC members and trade union representatives, or by Trade union stake holders or/and experts in information and consultation process in MNCs.





The practical organisation of focus groups

In advance of the focus group

Organising focus group interviews usually requires more planning than other types of interviewing as getting people to group gatherings can be difficult and setting up appropriate venues with recording facilities might require time.

The recommended number of people per group is usually eight to twelve, but some researchers have used up to fifteen people or as few as four. It should be tried to achieve a balance between the need to have enough people for a lively discussion and the danger of an overwhelming group size.

The focus group members should be informed in advance by a short description of the project and the focus group methodology. Furthermore, short descriptions of thematic aspects, important definitions and optionally also a list of possible issues to be discussed in the context of the focus group should be provided to participants in advance. Finally, a short set of information on participants profiles should include the following data:

- Male/female?
- Function of interest representation? (all functions covered)
- Trade union function? (for Trade union officers)
- For how many years?
- Name of the MNC? (for workers' representatives and EWC members)
- Sector? (for workers' representatives and EWC members)
- Employment levels? (for workers' representatives and EWC members)
- At which production site do you work/name of the city? (for workers' representatives and EWC members)?
- In which country is the global headquarters of the company located? (for workers' representatives and EWC members)

Reminder telephone calls should be placed the day before the scheduled focus group to secure a commitment from the potential participants. Focus group participants should be informed that the group discussion will last for no longer than (for example) 2 hours, and that time frame must be adhered to. Telling people in advance of the ending time is likely to increase commitment and willingness to participate

Focus group sessions usually last around two hours.

Recording of focus group meetings

On the one hand, there is merit in video recording focus groups as nonverbal communication behaviours are easily missed otherwise, on the other hand, videotaping might be considered extremely invasive, and single

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participants may not be eager to share their comments and concerns if they can see the camera in the room and know that every movement can be captured. Experience reveals that an audio recorder is much less intrusive and less likely to stifle discussion.

The role of moderator and observer

The moderator needs to establish rapport immediately by thanking the participants for coming. As people arrive they should be directed to the name tags (if there are any) and refreshments. The moderator needs to explain that the notes and audiotapes (if the discussion is audio recorded) will be kept completely confidential and that real names will not be used in the report on the outcomes of the focus group. Also, it should be stressed that no other personally identifying information will be used.

The moderator is vital to the success of the focus group. She/he should guarantee that the discussion begins smoothly, flows well, maintains a level of organisation, and ends easily. Additionally, the moderator's role begins long before the actual focus group discussion, for it is usually the moderator (or an assistant) who recruits the participants. An important note is that preferably moderators should have no real vested interest in outcomes. Not having an "agenda" or stake in the outcomes makes it easier to claim a genuinely non-manipulated outcome.

At the beginning there should be a short presentation of the focus group members. Then the moderator should provide clear explanations of the purpose of the group, helping people feel at ease, and facilitating interaction between group members. Warm-up questions should be asked in order to facilitate discussion. Following a brief warm-up period, terms that will be used in the group talk should be mentioned and clarified, if needed. People should be informed that their responses are neither right nor wrong. The moderator's job is to let the group members know that it is okay to agree or disagree with others' responses.

During the meeting moderators will need to promote debate, perhaps by asking open questions. Examples should be used to clarify questions if the group members do not seem to be responding. As participants become more comfortable with responding to questions, the moderator can become more specific.

During the meeting moderators may also need to challenge participants, especially to draw out people's differences, and tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic under discussion. Sometimes moderators will need to probe for details, or move things forward when the conversation is drifting or has reached a minor conclusion. Moderators also have to keep the session focused and so sometimes they may deliberately have to steer the conversation back on course. Moderators also have to ensure everyone participates and gets a chance to speak. At the same time moderators are encouraged not to show too much approval, so as to avoid favouring particular participants. They must avoid giving personal opinions so as not to influence participants towards any particular position or opinion.





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From time to time the moderator should wrap up the discussion by summarising the outcomes to make sure of what the participants said and how to interpret it. Finally, the moderator needs to provide a closing statement, thanking the participants for their time and assuring them that their responses will be kept completely confidential.

The role of the moderator is a demanding and challenging one, and moderators will need to be good listeners, non-judgmental and adaptable. These qualities will promote the participants' trust in the moderator and increase the likelihood of open, interactive dialogue.

The degree of control and direction imposed by moderators will depend upon the goals of the research as well as on their preferred style. It is recommended that the moderator facilitates the discussion. The role of the observer consists in taking notes and checking the recording equipment during the meeting. However, the observer listens not only for the content of focus group discussions, but for emotions, ironies, contradictions, and tensions. In order to take notes regarding the group dynamics the use of a chart with the collocation of the participants might be helpful. Analysing group dynamics enables the researcher to learn or confirm not just the facts (as in survey method), but the meaning behind the facts. This is simplistic, but conveys a major advantage of focus group method: the production of insight.

Finally, there also needs to be consistency across focus groups, so careful preparation is required.



The interview guideline and discussion phases

Interview guideline

The focus group should be conducted following an interview guideline. In most cases, this guideline will be prepared beforehand. In cases in which focus groups consist of experts, it is also imaginable that the focus group agrees on the guideline at the beginning of the meeting.

In the case of the ICARUS project the main question to be addressed by the focus groups regards the possibilities of improvement of coordination and cooperation between different actors and levels of interest representation. More specific aspects to be discussed in the context of the focus groups might regard the

1. *understanding of the respective personal perceptions of the other actors of interest representation;*
2. *approaches to create a two way relationship between the respective actors (EWC members, workers' representatives, trade unionists);*
3. *strategies to solve the problem of the lack of resources;*
4. *attempts of developing new ways of communication by using information technologies (e.g. skype, email contacts, etc..);*
5. *strategies aimed at creating synergies between different actors, in general, and between different trade union structures, in particular;*
6. *ways to use EWCs in order to improve working conditions and wage levels as well as to build local structures of interest representation where they do not yet exist.*

Additional issues for discussion may result from the outcomes of the questionnaire-based research. In any case, all the national focus groups should feel free to interpret the central question of how to improve the coordination and cooperation between different actors and levels of interest representation according to their specific needs which might be determined by the characteristics of the respective industrial relation systems.

Discussion phases

*The focus group meeting can be divided into two basic phases, the phase of analysis and the phase of proposals. At the beginning of the **first phase** the topics of discussion will be presented by the moderator and agreed on by the group. In a second step the respective strengths and weaknesses with regard to the central research question, i.e. the coordination and cooperation between different actors and levels of interest representation, will be discussed in depth. The discussion about strengths and weaknesses should then lead to a reflection on proposals regarding possible solutions to the existing problems. The reflection on solutions can also be considered the starting point of the **second phase** of the focus group meeting which is dedicated to the development of an action plan. The identification of possible solutions should also include a discussion about the necessary actions and the relevant actors in order to put the proposals into*



practice. Finally, the focus group should also discuss what are the necessary tools and resources that are necessary in order to carry out the proposed actions.

Focus group reports

Pre-analysis

First and foremost, notes should be taken during the focus group by the observer. This is crucial because moderators cannot observe the range of behaviours of the group considering they must facilitate the discussion, be focused on probes and follow-ups, as well as ensuring all the participants are given the opportunity to voice their comments. Even if the discussion is being audio recorded, notes should be taken. Important nonverbal behaviours, which can aid in interpretation, can be missed if notes are not taken.

As a final step before the actual analysis can begin, member checks help to ensure the moderator has understood focus group members. The moderator should leave enough time before the closing and dismissal of the focus group to clarify specific questions. This is the time to verify accuracy recording of information brought forward during the discussion.

Data Analysis

The analysis process includes summarising the discussion immediately following the focus group. Because people can forget important details so easily, writing these field notes as soon as possible after the focus group has ended is important. Also, because researchers have the research questions in mind during the summing up process, salient themes of the discussion begin to emerge.

If the discussion is audio recorded it should be tried to transcribe the tapes as soon after the focus group discussion as possible. Following the research questions as guides, every paragraph or other section of text is coded for relevant themes.

The report on the outcomes of the focus group should be structured on the basis of the grid for the discussion about the strengths and weaknesses as well as on the basis of the grid for the discussion about the action plan.

The complete package of documents that serves to report back from the focus group should include

- *the screening forms;*
- *the grid regarding the analysis of strengths and weaknesses;*
- *the action plan grid;*
- *a description of group dynamics;*
- *a one page summary including basic information on participants (taken from the screening forms and the presentation of participants); the description of the discussion on strengths and weaknesses based on the*





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- *respective analysis grid as well as the description of a possible action plan based on the respective grid.*

Ethical issues

Ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of social research. For example, when selecting and involving participants, researchers must ensure that full information about the purpose and uses of participants' contributions is given. Being honest and keeping participants informed about the expectations of the group and topic, and not pressurising participants to speak is good practice. A particular ethical issue to consider in the case of focus groups is the handling of sensitive material and confidentiality given that there will always be more than one participant in the group. Participants need to be encouraged to keep confidential what they hear during the meeting and researchers have the responsibility to anonymise data from the group.

At the end of the research project it should also be guaranteed that the participants in focus groups are informed about the results of the project.

Conclusion

This document has outlined the main features of focus group research, paying particular attention to the benefits of interaction and group dynamics which only this method can offer. Those who participate in this kind of research often find the experience rewarding. The process of research can be more collaborative than other forms of study, and so focus group research can be an empowering process for participants, and a challenge for researchers wanting to gain a different perspective on the field of interest. When implemented correctly focus groups can be an efficient and effective way to gain insights into social processes.



Appendix 1 - Proposals for questions

Improvement of coordination between European and national level

In order to discuss the main question of how coordination and cooperation between different levels of interest representation can be improved the following aspects might be discussed more in depth:

1. Understanding the respective personal perception of the other participants
 2. How to create a two-way relationship between the respective actors (EWC members, workers' representatives, trade unionists)
 3. How to face the problem of the lack of resources?
 4. How to develop new tools of communication by using information technologies (e.g. skype, email, etc..)?
 5. How to create synergies between different trade union structures?
 6. In the case of a lack of unionisation it might be interesting to discuss how the EWC can be used in order to improve working conditions and wage levels and to build local structures of representation where they do not exist.

During the first phase of the project quantitative research methods were used. Via the distribution of a questionnaire the major challenges with regard to the coordination between European and national level have been identified. On the basis of a first analysis of the questionnaires which were distributed among EWC members, workers representatives (WR) and trade unionists (TU) it might be useful to address the following more specific questions and thematic aspects in the context of the focus groups.

- The results of the questionnaire-based research suggest that especially trade unionists do not seem to be informed very well about the activities of the EWCs. That means that the focus groups should try to address this specific challenge of how to improve the coordination and cooperation between EWC members and trade unionists.
 - According to the responses to the questionnaires there seem to be differences between the different countries with regard to the forms in which the outcomes of the EWC meetings are communicated to the workforce and employee representatives. It might be interesting to discuss whether it would be useful to add new forms of communication to the existing ones. In this context it would also be important to ask what resources and rights are available to EWC members in order to communicate the outcomes of EWC meetings.



- The responses to the questionnaires also suggest that the existence of a coordination body at national level significantly improves the possibility of communicating the outcomes of EWC meetings. Therefore, it might be interesting to discuss the role of such a coordination body and how to use it more effectively.

According to the results of the inquiry further relevant questions might also be the following ones:

- What are the information needs of the WR with regard to EWC discussions/transnational issues within the business? (for example information with regard to management strategies and good practices with regard to collective bargaining and participation at other production sites)
 - Where do you see the main problems with regard to coordination and cooperation between the different levels of interest representation?
 - lack of communication structures
 - organisational shortcomings
 - lack of resources
 - lack of cooperation between trade unions
 - excess of workload
 - What suggestions would the workers' representative have for
 - the improvement of communication and consultation processes between the EWC and employee representatives?
 - improving the EWC input (quality of documents, translations...)
 - One-way/two-way relationship between actors (EWC member, WR, TU, workforce)
 - processes/procedures (definition of responsibilities of actors)
 - tools (information technology, intranet, skype)
 - resources
 - competencies
 - making the EWC more relevant to the WR's representative role?
 - developing a two-way relationship
 - improving the feedback
 - How does the WR see the role of the EWC evolving over the next three years?
 - no changes
 - growing importance





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- What would be the main aspects of an action plan?
 - translation of EWC documents
 - to negotiate resources and rights for the EWC (funding for travel, translation, time off, access to production sites etc)
 - to develop binding procedures
 - to organise training courses

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