

Focus group discussion in built environment qualitative research practice

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Abstract. Focus groups discussion is a useful way in built environment for qualitative research practice. Drawing upon recent reviews of focus group discussion and examples of how focus group discussions have been used by researchers and educators, this paper provides what actually happens in focus group discussion as practiced. There is difference between group of people and topic of interest. This article examines the focus group discussions as practiced in built environment. Thus, there is broad form of focus group discussions as practiced in built environment and the applications are varied.

1. Introduction

The data are numerical information needed to make a good decision in certain situations [1]. In fact, important data is needed in the decision-making process. There are many methods used to obtain the required data. The data is obtained from various sources and collected through various techniques. Data are grouped into two types, primary data and secondary data. Primary data is data obtained or collected by researchers directly from the data source. Techniques that can be used to collect primary data includes observation, interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and through questionnaire. Secondary data are data collected from documents such as journal, books and any published articles.

This paper mainly focuses on the understanding towards FGD as a basis in determining the qualitative research practice in built environment. The qualitative research is an exploratory rather than conclusive type of research and helps in understanding not only what people think, but also how and why they think that way [2]. The process of data collection in qualitative research gives researchers the opportunity to get the following data:

- Unexpected data by researchers
- In-depth data can explain the issues of research topic [3].

FGD can be useful to gather certain types of data or when information is difficult to obtain in certain circumstances using other methods for data collection [4]. According to Overseas Development Institute [5] 'the FGD in built environment is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest' [1]. Focus groups are rarely used in isolation. FGD is an integral part of gauging public perceptions. In obtaining qualitative information, FGD may be held with a cross section of community groups from a small group of participants on particular themes [6].



2. Literature Review

There are five (5) characteristics/features of focus group interviews [7]:

- people, who
- possess certain characteristics
- provide qualitative data
- in a focused discussion
- to help understand the topic of interest [p.6].

Focus group discussion (FGD) is one of the most popular qualitative research methods [8]. According to [9] in her study ‘FGD is a structured discussion used to obtain in-depth information (qualitative data-insight) from a group of people about a particular topic’ [p.4]. The aim of FGD is to study a topic in-depth and intensively. It is a discussion guided by the moderator according to the prepared interview guidelines [8]. FGD is not open to public meetings, because the selection of participants whose meetings present characteristics which it is important to ensure that participants in group have something in common to each other [10].

FGD is a group discussion of eight (8) to twelve (12) participants with guidance from a facilitator, which discuss a certain topic among participants [11]. A focus group is not a group interview; focus groups are successful when participants are able to talk to each other about the topic [12]. In addition, it provides opportunities to share and make comparisons about the participants' experiences, idea and views as well as provide opportunities to talk about something [13] which is effective in supplying information. However, the facilitator's expertise is very important to stimulate and support discussion but cannot act as an expert on the topic [4].

FGD is to gain a deeper understanding of a topic, such as motivation, behaviour, feeling, decision-making strategy, or opinion of a particular person on an issue or topic [9]. ‘FGD techniques can be used to develop relevant research hypotheses by exploring in greater depth the problem to be investigated and its possible causes’ as explained by [4 p.61].

According to [14], the process of FGD is as shown in Figure 1. It involves identification of goal/objectives, identify questions, identify people, select time, place/environment, conduct research, evaluate findings/data and preparation of report. Meanwhile, Figure 2 shows the FGD in practice that consisting moderator, observers and participants. Generally, FGD in practice starts with schedule groups, create plans, invite participants, moderate and report [14].



Figure 1. The process of FGD.

Source : Glynn, Shanahan and Duggan (2015)

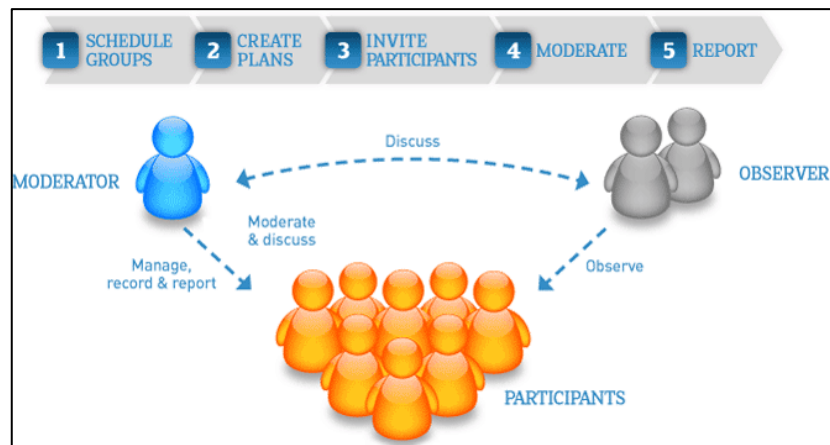


Figure 2. Focus groups in practice.
Source ; Glynn, Shanahan and Duggan (2015)

3. Research Methodology

This paper examined the methods applied during the data collection applying seven (7) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) practiced in two different built environment qualitative researches. Based on the previous researches, FGDs have been applied to obtain in-depth information on the research. The first research project with four (4) FGDs was conducted for Longterm Research Grant Scheme (LRGS) -2013-1016 on the topic of Recreation Facilities for Youth in Malaysia. The respondents were youth, community leaders and other stakeholders. The second research project conducted three (3) FGDs for The Research on the Water Bodies in Selangor State : Ex-Mining Land (2016-2017). The group members representing the stakeholders were from government agencies, town planners from Local Authorities and Land Administration Officers from Land Offices.

3.1. FGD for Long-term Research Grant Scheme

In the LRGS research, four separate FGDs for youth and stakeholders were carried out to allow respondents to cooperate in giving their most precise answers. The youth participants were selected to share their opinion and to report on the imperfection of physical environment around them. The youth were students, employed and unemployed and some are married people. In this study, the youth need to respond so as to achieve the required research aim. They were selected randomly according to several criteria which representing both female and male gender, age between 15 to 25 years old and consisted of the Malay, Chinese and Indian races. The LRGS research started with the FGD for a case study of Lembah Pantai Kuala Lumpur which represented the urban area and followed by Kota Samarahan as the rural case study area [15]. These FGDs were held between September 2014 and November 2014 at different venues. The first session for Lembah Pantai was at community hall of PPR which is accessible to youth in the afternoon between 3-5pm. The time was appropriate for the youth as most of them were in schools in the morning. The second FGD with stakeholders group was held at 10am-12pm at Armada Hotel in Petaling Jaya which is accessible to all respondents.

The focus group discussions (FGD) were held in two sessions with two groups involving twenty-one (21) respondents. The first meeting was attended by 12 (twelve) youth who were the residents of the low-cost public housing in The Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. This site selected was the PPR Kerinchi (*Projek Perumahan Rakyat Kerinchi*), Lembah Pantai. The youth participants were chosen from each PPR block and they were to express their opinion and share their feeling regarding their neighbourhood living environment. The second FGD representing the stakeholders consisted of nine (9) participants. Among them were three (3) the PPR Residents' Committee members, a Town Planner from Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), a Town Planner in Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur and four (4) members of the Malaysian Youth Council Committee. Meanwhile, the third and fourth FGD were held at the Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kota

Samarahan Sarawak. The morning session was with the stakeholders while the afternoon was with the youth [15]. The morning session consisted of twenty-two (22) related stakeholders including professional such as policemen, health officers, planners, parents, Malaysian Youth Council Committee and residents committee's members [15], while the afternoon session consisted of twenty-four (24) youth respondents.

3.2. FGD for the Water Bodies in Selangor State: Ex-Mining Land research

The research on The Water Bodies in Selangor State: Ex-Mining Land (2016-2017) was carried by conducting three FGDs. The first FGD was held on the morning on the 10th May 2016. It was held at the Mines Resort. It was attended by The Director and officers of the Selangor State Town and Country Planning Department, five (5) research consultants, an officer from *Institut Penyelidikan Hidraulik Kebangsaan Malaysia* (NAHRIM) and fifty-one (51) officers representatives from related departments and agencies. The second FGD was held on 24th August 2016 at The INTEKMA Resort and Convention Centre. The respondents were twelve (12) Town Planning Officers from nine (9) Local Authorities in the State of Selangor which involved in the research. Town Planning Officers from the Shah Alam City Council were also invited to share their experiences. The third FGD was conducted on 9th September 2016 also at The INTEKMA Resort and Convention Centre. This FGD group consisted of five (5) Land Administration Officers from Land Offices in the State of Selangor.

Figure 3 below shows the research process where all the three (3) FGDs for The Research on Water Bodies in Selangor: Ex -Mining Land (2016-2017) were held during the second stage of the study.

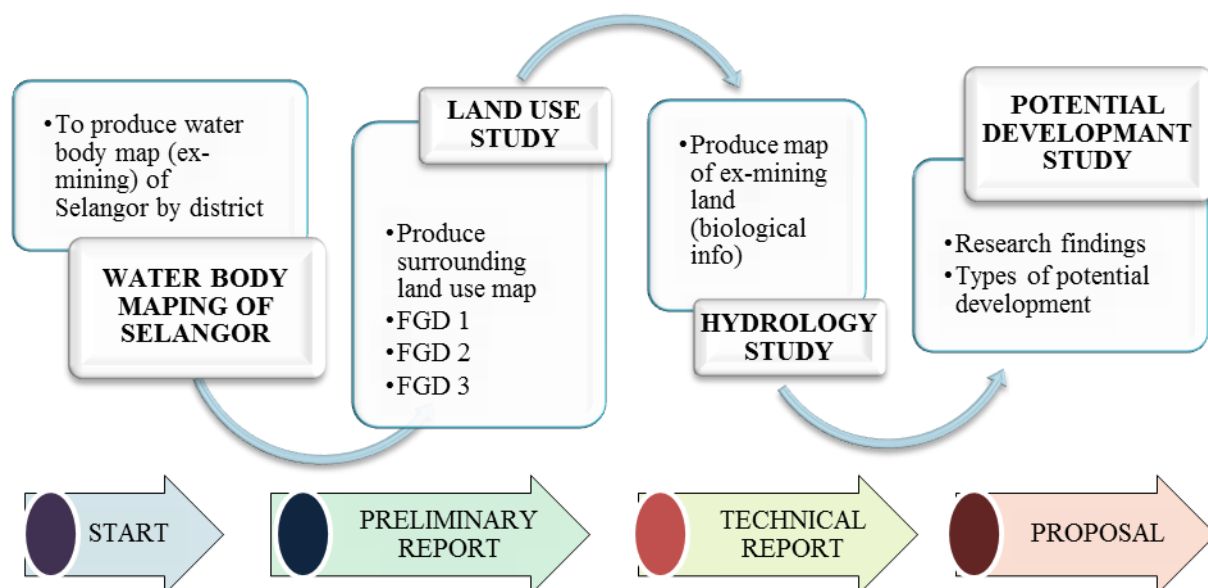


Figure 3. FGD 1, 2 and 3 for The Research on Water Bodies in the State of Selangor: Ex -Mining Land (2016-2017)

4. Result and Findings

4.1.1. LRGS (2013-2016)

The analysis found that from the overall understanding and review by all FGD sessions the outdoor features seem to be limited in number and are not properly maintained [p.4]. The research on public users was to highlight 'space' as a keyword to interpret respondents' feeling and understanding regarding their surrounding environment [16]. Figure 4 shows the space thematic analysis of the youth neighbourhood living environment [16].

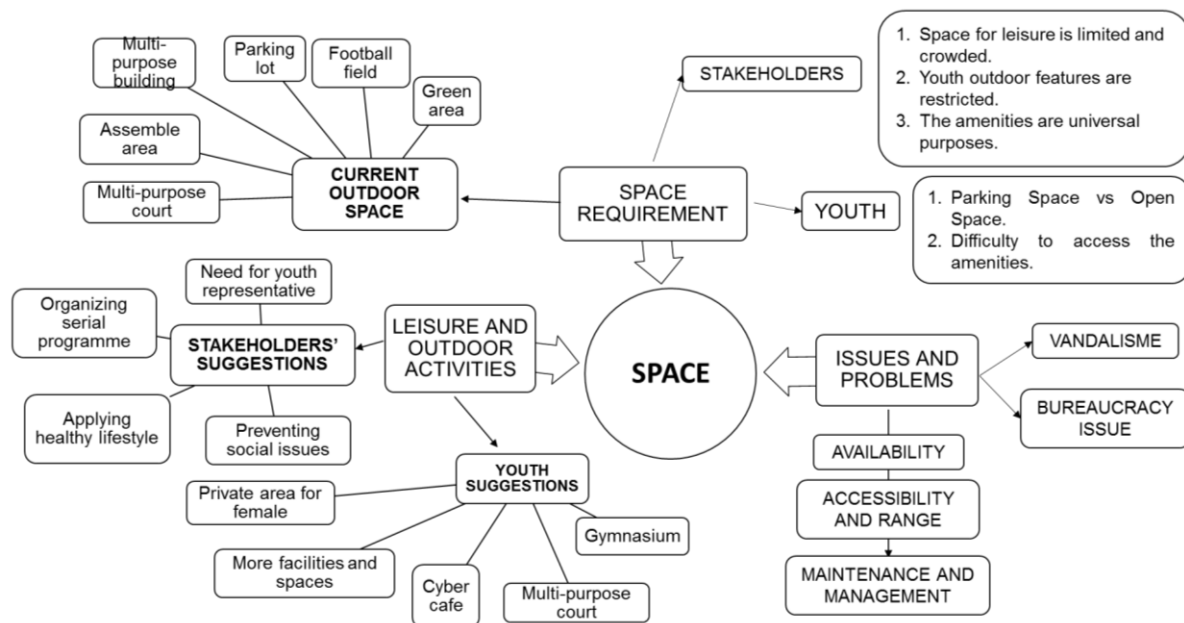


Figure 4. Space thematic analysis [16, p.4].

The space includes soccer field, playground, multipurpose courts and any green area appeared proximate to the neighbourhood surrounding [p.4]. The assessment was carried out on other related issues such as accessibility and range; maintenance; space provision; outdoor features requirements; and suggestion from all respondents of the FGDs.

According to the respondents from the stakeholders group, they stated that space for leisure was limited and crowded, youth outdoor features were restricted and the amenities were for common purposes. However, the youth focus group discussions concluded that parking space were treated as open space and they had difficulty to access some of the amenities. Table 1 show all related issues and problems raised during the FGD sessions.

The FGDs agreed that youth were directly related to the problems identified [18]. The FGDs showed that the youth should be given the chance to voice out their opinions and ideas. Their needs should be highlighted during the neighbourhood development planning for better youth participation in the neighbourhood community. In addition, the respondents from the Youth Association suggested that the involvement of youth should be encouraged. They stated that more attention should be given to the youth. This can solve the problem raised by the residents association committee that conflict with the request made by youth. Based on the discussions [18] the sense of neighbour and family are needed as a preventive measure on the issues and problems that occur in the neighbourhood community [p.6].

Table 1. Issue and Problems

Issues	Problems	
	Youth	Stakeholders
Availability	The existing outdoor spaces were less compared to the number of users.	Provision of facilities and amenities were limited due to space availability.
Accessibility	The location of spaces is strategic but the pathways were blocked by physical barriers.	Access to some outdoor features being blocked by residents' cars, motorcycles, and stalls.
Comfortable	Female youth respondents were requesting for safety and separate space for leisure.	The existing features and space for leisure and physical activities were shared by all residents.

Maintenance	Some outdoor features were broken and damaged and were not fixed or not maintained properly.	Maintaining the outdoor features was not continuously practised.
Bureaucracy	Residents' committee members were focusing more on parking and cleanliness issues.	Youth should find their own way to have leisure and should not be given special spaces to avoid social issues.

Source: Omar et al. [16, p.5]

4.1.2 The Research on the Water Bodies in Selangor State: Ex-Mining Land (2016-2017)

Three (3) FGD sessions were held during the study period. The first FGD session was for stakeholders from government agencies and as the introduction for The Research on the Water Bodies in Selangor: Ex -Mining Land (2016-2017). The topic of the session was on the information and experience on the ex-mining land re-development programme by each government agency. Based on the overall conversation recorded, listed below are the issues that had been highlighted by respondents from the first FGD session:

- There were no guidelines to bathymetric measurements
- All location of ex-mining lands need to be analysed
- There are parameters and standard for the determination of water quality
- NAHRIM and LUAS have guidelines for water sampling and sediment
- The information in the Local Plan was inconsistent
- Illegal aquaculture activities at the ex-mining land
- GIS attribute for mining and hydrography
- There are acts and guidelines relating to ex-mining land

The second FGD session was held for more detail information for the preparation of the Technical Report. This FGD involved with twelve (12) Town Planners from Local Authorities. The results expected from the FGD was on the issues and technical input on town planning aspects, development potential and legislative proposals, policies and guidelines for ex-mining land. Each site of the water body was checked meticulously by the town planner from the related authority where the water body is located. Below is the list of issues raised during the FGD session.

- Land use should be based on zoning map rather than current land use map
- The use of zoning map to facilitate the future development to be implemented by Local Authorities
- Land gazetted by agency such as *Lembaga Urus Air Selangor (LUAS)* should be identified
- The location of each water body of mining land need to be reviewed for accuracy
- The data to exclude type of soil and water quality
- The land title must be detail and to list all the activities
- North point should be simple and on the right side of the map
- Should get the location of mining land from land office

Based on the third FGD session, the topic highlighted the issue on information about land title for each water body (ex-mining land) which involved five (5) the Land Administration officers from Land Offices. The aim of this session was to determine the status of land title of each water body (ex-mining land) by district. The ownership status was needed in this research to confirm whether the land belongs to government or private ownership. In addition, from the discussion the list of lot numbers for each water body (ex-mining land) was completed with the cooperation of those involved. During the FGD session the potential development for the ex-mining land such as recreation, water reservoir, agriculture and township was also discussed.

5. Conclusion

The paper highlighted the Focus Group Discussions as practiced in the Built Environment Qualitative Research. Generally, the participants of FGDs were selected from related target groups. The FGDs'

results should be used to support the aim of the particular research. The different FGDs were for the different purposes. The different participants were for different FGDs in order to get clear, detail information and views. Thus, there is broad form of FGDs as practiced in built environment and its application is varied.

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