The Value of Focus Group Discussions for Understanding Barriers to Agriculture-Tourism Linkages in Developing Regions

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Abstract

The value of focus group research is becoming more evident throughout the social sciences, as academicians and practitioners alike search for better ways to investigate and analyze human interactions, beliefs and attitudes in all kinds of business and social situations and contexts. The study of international agricultural development is no exception to this trend. In particular, as agriculture in developing countries evolves and as markets in those countries become affected by industrialization, focus groups provide a credible way for researchers to examine barriers as well as new possibilities regarding relationships between agriculture and new industries. This article demonstrates how focus groups were used to gather information in the U.S. Virgin Islands that helped stakeholders to identify and characterize barriers to developing a stronger relationship between the agriculture industry and the tourism and hospitality industry. The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Mr. Carlos Robles and Mr. Dale Morton who organized and conducted the focus group meetings.

Keywords: Focus groups, hospitality, local markets, research methods, rural development, tourism
Introduction
Since its resurgence in the 1980s, focus group methodology has added a new dimension to the study of public perceptions and public policy. Having originated in the 1940s as a supplement to quantitative research on public perception, this methodology faded, then made a strong return 40 years later, when it became a popular mode of marketing research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Focus groups are now commonly used to examine not only participants’ perceptions but also the underlying attitudes and beliefs that may lead to those perceptions. In the study of international agricultural and extension education, focus group studies have recently been used to characterize the attitudes and beliefs of extension clientele in Mexico (Tuttle, 2007) and Costa Rica (Dragon & Place, 2006). These studies demonstrated that focus group methodologies are particularly well-suited for investigating stakeholders’ perceptions of specific agriculture-related problems or challenges in developing regions.

As another case in point, researchers used focus groups to examine a situation in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The ever-growing tourism industry there has the potential to spark growth in the agriculture industry by employing local farms to supply local foods, yet such growth has not occurred. To identify barriers to stronger linkages between these two industries, researchers used focus group discussions to investigate the perceptions held by farmers, policymakers, and practitioners in the tourism and hospitality industry. This situation provides a good case study demonstrating how focus group methods can be used successfully as “tools of the trade” to examine community-based data leading to the removal of barriers to progress. The balance of this article will use the Virgin Islands case as a framework to demonstrate key concepts related to focus group methodology. This article should serve as a case study for other researchers in the discipline who desire to use focus group research in the future.

Objectives and Methods of the Virgin Islands Focus Group Study
Focus group discussions are group interviews that help researchers describe the consensus of the group (or to describe differing views if no consensus exists). The objective of most focus group discussions is to develop an in-depth understanding of a problem by examining in detail participants’ attitudes and behavior which may have been otherwise difficult to characterize through quantitative survey research (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998; Morgan, 1997). To do this well, focus group researchers must begin by developing a clear, logical questioning route guided by concrete research objectives. The objective of the Virgin Islands study was to obtain responses from the participants following a questioning route focused on three overarching questions: (1) What are the pertinent issues that need to be addressed in order to develop a successful, sustainable agricultural industry in the U.S. Virgin Islands? (2) What are the barriers that limit the development of a successful, sustainable agricultural industry in the U.S. Virgin Islands? and (3) What recommendations would you make to address these barriers?

Participants (between six and eight) were purposively selected based on their characterization as opinion leaders in three stakeholder groups—farmers, policymakers, and tourism and hospitality practitioners. Krueger (1994) recommended that groups of fewer than six participants lack the dynamics necessary to establish a strong discussion and therefore lead to less credible results, while twelve or more may produce too much information and may not be manageable.

The focus group discussions were managed by three facilitators. The first facilitator introduced the purpose of the
discussion and explained what was expected of the participants. He set the climate for the discussion and explained the procedures and rules: questions would be asked, each participant would be allowed to speak, and the facilitator would moderate, but not participate, in the discussion. The second facilitator led the discussion, controlled the flow, and recorded the responses on a flip chart. Detailed, accurate notes on the flip chart were key because they became the raw data that would lead to the focus group research findings. When necessary, the facilitator asked probing questions, encouraging participants to respond in even more detail. A third facilitator kept notes regarding the substance and context of the discussions; these notes also became data that added credibility to the findings.

The three focus group discussions were recorded on video, and transcripts of the recordings, along with the flip chart notes and the notekeeper’s notes, became the textual data that were analyzed for emergent themes. Taxonomic content analysis is a process of coding or categorizing the textual data in an effort to develop a hierarchy of themes and sub-themes (Holloway, 1997). In this study, researchers sought to develop themes leading to a conceptual description of barriers to a stronger relationship between the two industries. To be useful, this systematically induced description had to be a credible, believable characterization of the phenomenon being studied that emerged logically from the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Krueger, 1994). Qualitative data analysis involves “examining, categorizing, tabulating, or recombining the evidence” (Krueger, 1994, p. 140) and systematically following the flow of codes, categories, and themes as they emerge. To assist with this process, researchers employed the qualitative analysis software developed by QSR International called NVivo (Version 6). The software greatly simplified the processes of data coding, indexing, and identifying major themes (Weitzman, 2000) and added certainty to the process while easing the analysis workload and saving time.

Findings of the U.S. Virgin Islands Focus Group Agritourism Project
The focus group discussions proved to be a valuable method to characterize the various viewpoints and issues among the groups of stakeholders. The three groups were led through the same discussion route, and results emerged on what were perceived to be the barriers limiting the development of stronger linkages between the agriculture and tourism industries in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The groups came to some similar and some different conclusions about important barriers; nonetheless, all the perceived barriers that emerged from this project were salient to at least one group and therefore deserved the attention of those working to remove the barriers.

The group of farmers identified critical barriers as (1) lack of land, (2) lack of water for irrigation, (3) general infrastructure needs, and (4) lack of access to capital or financial support for farmers. The policy-maker group identified important barriers as (1) lack of a sound, organized domestic marketing program and (2) lack of political support for agricultural development. The third group—the tourism and hospitality practitioners—identified yet a different set of critical barriers: (1) lack of commodities of the specific variety demanded by the hospitality industry, (2) inability of local farmers to supply food and consistently meet demand, (3) inability of the local producers to meet quality standards, (4) lack of education for restaurateurs and hotel chefs on the availability and potential uses of local crops and foods, and (5) lack of an effective distribution system for local foodstuffs.

Discussion
In qualitative research, it is common to compare findings and conclusions to previous studies to determine if they contribute to an overarching theory (Denzin
& Lincoln, 2005). Indeed, some of the information gathered through this project in the U.S. Virgin Islands confirmed the observations in existing literature that tourism could be an economic engine for agricultural growth in the region (Torres & Momsen, 2004; Telfer, 2000). Yet, the data also showed that several specific perceived barriers may be preventing synergy between the two industries. Ultimately, the focus group results provided a clearer conceptual framework that was used to develop a formal questionnaire, which was administered to a larger sample of the three stakeholders groups. Results from that survey led to empirically based recommendations for developing new public policy to improve relationships between farmers and the tourism sector of the U.S. Virgin Islands. This is an excellent example of how qualitative research can serve as precursor to more in-depth quantitative efforts.

One important auxiliary benefit from employing the focus group method in this case was that the discussants, through the interaction with their peers, obtained a heightened awareness of various issues in both industries. This was especially evident among the policy makers. This educational function of discussion groups was recognized by several of the participants and is likely to be a factor in encouraging the participants to engage in focus group discussions again in the future.

**Conclusion**

This focus group project enabled researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the policy barriers for agriculture-tourism linkages in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Understanding perceived barriers from several different perspectives led to further research, which produced recommendations for action, including improving educational materials for farmers, establishing farmer-chef communications, and educating the tourism and hospitality industry about local foods. Policy makers, especially those who participated in the study, are now more likely to act on these recommendations now that they know the recommendations are the result of a credible research process. As developing countries and regions work to address the many issues related to agriculture’s role in advancing economies and new industries, focus groups will clearly be a useful method in guiding strategic planning and policy making.

**References**


