



Policies
to Promote
Sustainable
Consumption
Patterns

WP 3.2 Focus Group Manual and Guideline

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0 Focus group manual and Guideline

1 Objective and background of the manual

Focus groups are widely used in social sciences and market research. According to their broad application there are various understandings of what a focus group is and how it should be carried out. Within this manual we sketch some key points for a common design of the focus groups within the eupopp project. Our main objective is to safeguard the consistency of the focus group design and the comparability of results. Moreover we want to provide advice to those partners of the eupopp research team who are not familiar with the focus group methodology and support them to plan and organize their focus groups successfully.

The paper is structured in two parts. The first part contains the focus group manual, dealing with technical and methodological aspects which might be useful to prepare and organise a focus group. The manual starts with a short introduction into focus groups as an instrument of social research and provides a more detailed specification of the instrument in the context of the eupopp. At the end of this manual you will find some key issues for a specification of tender for subcontractors.

The second part contains the focus groups guideline. The guideline offers a general framework for the content of the focus groups which shall be carried out by the eupopp partner. The guideline also supplies some basic questions and topics which are to be adapted and elaborated for the different instruments by each partner of the eupopp project.

1.1 Focus group definition

1.1.1 What is a focus group?

A focus group is an organised and structured discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences of a topic. The group setting stimulates participants to articulate ideas, beliefs and experiences that would be less accessible otherwise.

1.1.2 Why and when to use a focus group?

Focus groups rely on the interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher. The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions. Compared to individual interviews, focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context. The method is particularly suited for obtaining various perspectives

about the topic under investigation. It also allows for gaining insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation.

Focus groups enable a researcher to gain a larger amount of information in a shorter period of time than by carrying out individual interviews. They are particularly useful when the everyday use of language, culture or consumption practices of particular groups is of interest, and when one wants to explore the degree of consensus or disagreement on a given topic.

Focus groups are rooted in the paradigm of qualitative social research. They can help to explore or generate hypotheses. They 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.

Unlike surveys or other standardized methods, focus groups can be used to investigate issues which are not familiar to a broader public. The moderator can provide information on the topic under investigation to the group members and study how the participants react to the given input.

In the context of the eupopp project focus groups are particularly useful to carry out an in depth analysis of innovative instruments for sustainable consumptions. Focus groups allow for understanding of how these instruments are perceived, how and why they affect individual consumption practices and what the limitations and barriers to their effectiveness are.

1.2 Focus group organisation

The organisation of a focus group requires more planning than other types of interviewing: The outcome of a focus group is strongly influenced by the participants. Therefore, the selection of members is a critical factor of success. Getting people to group gatherings can be difficult and setting up appropriate venues with adequate recording facilities might turn out to be a time- and resource-consuming exercise.

1.2.1 Number of participants

The recommended number of participants per group is six to ten (but this number might vary, ranging from four to fifteen participants). For the eupopp project we suggest to limit the number of participants to six to eight persons. This size should allow all participants to take part in the group discussion.

1.2.2 Selection of participants

It is important to keep in mind that focus groups do not claim to be a representative survey. Participants of a focus group are not selected at random, but have to be care-

fully chosen according to criteria or quota being defined by the researcher in advance. However, it is not always easy to identify the most appropriate participants for a focus group. If a group is too heterogeneous the differences between participants can make a considerable impact on their contributions. Alternatively, if a group is homogenous with regard to specific characteristics, diverse opinions and experiences may not be revealed.

The focus groups in the eupopp project have primarily an explorative function and there is only a limited budget available. Therefore we suggest focusing on “informed lay persons” as participants. "Informed lay person" are consumers who already have some experience with the topic under study. This might be volunteers from consumer or environmental associations or other persons who are concerned with consumption and environmental issues.

1.2.3 Recruitment criteria

Even if this might be a cheap and easy way of recruiting participants, we would not recommend selecting students from your faculty. We rather suggest selecting participants according to a set of recruitment criteria which were applied successfully in many empirical studies in consumption research. The following list gives you a set of criteria which can be enhanced and adapted according to the instrument under study. The given ratios are supplied for orientation, but they don't have to be implemented exactly.

- Gender: Men and women 50:50
- Age: below 30, 30-60, 60 plus (33% each)
- Households with children and households without children (singles and couples) (50:50)
- Unemployed person should be represented (10-20%)

"Informed consumers" might be identified according to the following criteria:

- Membership in an environmental or consumer association (max. 50% of participants)

The other participants should at least 3 of the following 5 answers answer with "yes"¹

- In general, how much do you know about the environmental impact of the products you buy and use
 - a) I am fully aware
 - b) I know about the most significant impacts
 - c) I know little about this
 - d) I know nothing

¹ These items are taken from EUORSTAT surveys. With the exception of Latvia there is a broad range of about 30 and 60 per cent for the different items and countries. Latvia has lower values at about 25 per cent for almost all indicators. Therefore participants of the focus groups in Latvia should give at least two positive answers to the five questions.

Answers a) and b) are counting as "yes"

- Have you done any of the following **during the past month** for environmental reasons?
 - Separating most of your waste for recycling (yes / no)
 - Cut down your energy consumption (f.e. turning down heating, not leaving appliances on stand-by, buying energy efficient appliances (yes / no)
 - Chosen an environmental friendly way of transport (by foot, bicycle, public transport) (yes / no)
- Eco-labelling plays an important part in my purchase decisions (yes / no)

These criteria are to be refined once the instruments which are to be investigated are selected. For example the selection of participants should be focus on those groups whose agency is directly or indirectly affected by the instrument. For example, the focus group on the building directive should be focused on private home owners, because the regulation interferes with their refurbishment decision.

1.2.4 Identification of participants

Once it has been decided what type of participants will take part in the focus group, they have to be identified, which might present a problem. Considering that participating in a focus group does not have any immediate benefits or attractions to the participants the search can be time-consuming. Participants might be recruited by the use of key informants or through existing social networks. Otherwise this task might also be delegated to professional service organisations in the field of market research.

Please keep in mind that incentives, whether expenses, gift vouchers or presents, will usually need to be offered to focus group participants!

1.2.5 Duration and venue

Focus group meetings usually last two or two and a half hours. Neutral locations can be helpful for avoiding either negative or positive associations with a particular site or building. Otherwise the meeting can also be held in a variety of places, for example in the rooms of a research institution, a rented facility or a university.

1.3 The role of the moderator

The moderator (or group facilitator) plays a very significant role for the outcome of a focus group. Good levels of group leadership and interpersonal skills are required to moderate a group successfully.

The moderator's role is to structure the group discussion, helping participants feel at ease and facilitate the interaction between group members. He or she promotes the debate, asks questions and may also need to challenge participants, especially to draw out people's differences, and tease out a diverse range of meaning on the topic under discussion. He or she probes for details, keeps the session focussed and might have to steer the conversation back on course. Furthermore he has to ensure that all members of the focus group participate and get a chance to speak.

The moderator structures the group discussion according to a guideline. The guideline contains open questions that help stimulating a debate on the most important aspects of the research topic. It is also useful to include additional questions or issues to the main topics that can be asked to deepen these aspects.

The role of the moderator can either be performed by a person from the re-search team who has the required skills and experiences, or might be carried out by a third person. It is also possible to split the role of the moderator: One person might keep the discussion going, while another person – e.g. from the research team – participates as an expert in the discussion.

1.4 Data collection

1.4.1 Recording and transcription

The focus group discussion should be recorded and transcribed into protocol that should allow identifying the different members of the discussion. Otherwise the analysis becomes a difficult task. Please take care that primary data (recorded tapes, files and other material) is provided to you and can be documented.

1.4.2 Statistical data

Some basic statistical data should be collected from all focus group participants in order to document the composition of the focus groups which might also provide useful information for the interpretation of material.

In order to collect these data a short standardised questionnaire can be handed out to the participants at the end of the focus group session. The questionnaire should include the following items:

- Gender
- Age
- Total number of persons in household
- Number of children living within the household
- Education
- Profession

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- Professional Status (full time / part time employed, unemployed, retirement etc.)
- Income (net household income (per month))
- Number of cars in household
- Membership in an environmental or consumer organisation

1.5 Analysis and interpretation

Focus groups are a qualitative method of empirical research. Their main objective is to find out why an issue is salient to the participants and what is salient about it. Accordingly, the analysis should not ask for quantities “how many per-cent state that x is ...”, but should rather work out the understandings, attitudes, beliefs and motivations of different groups of actors.

It is often underestimated that the analysis of focus groups requires specific methodological skills. The analysis of the group discussion should be based on qualitative and interpretive methods, such as qualitative content analysis. Thus, it should be carried out by a member of the research team who is experienced with this type of methods. If these skills are not available within the research team, a raw interpretation can be commissioned to an external institution. Guiding questions for the analysis of the focus group material are provided in section

1.6 Factors of success and limiting factors

1.6.1 Factors of success

The interaction between participants highlights their view of the world, the language they use about an issue as well as their values and beliefs about a situation. Through this interaction, participants can ask questions and might re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences.

To take part in a research group also benefits the participants: the opportunity to be involved in decision-making processes (forming a forum for change), to be valued as experts, and to be given the chance to work collaboratively with researchers can be empowering for many participants. A group which works well, develops trust and may explore solutions to a particular problem as a unit. However, not everyone will experience these benefits, as groups can be intimidating at times, especially for inarticulate or shy members.

1.6.2 Limiting factors

Some limiting factors are unavoidable and cannot be over-come, even by careful planning and moderating.

- The researcher has less control over the data produced than in quantitative studies or in one-to-one interviewing. He or she has very little control over the

interaction other than keeping the discussion and participants focussed on the topic. By its nature, focus group research is open ended and cannot be entirely predetermined.

- Focus groups (along with other forms of qualitative research) are characterized by observer dependency: The results obtained are influenced by the researcher, raising questions of validity. The design of the focus group study (e.g. respondent selection, the questions asked, how they are phrased, how they are posed, in what setting, by whom, and so on) affects the answers obtained from respondents. In focus groups, researchers are not detached observers but always participants. Researchers must take this into account when making their analysis.
- It should not be assumed that the individuals in a focus group are expressing their own definitive individual view, as they are speaking in a specific context, within a specific culture and so sometimes it may be difficult for the researcher to clearly identify an individual message.

1.7 Specification of task

1.7.1 Specification of tasks

The eupopp focus groups might either be organised by the national research partners themselves or be carried out by subcontractors. If this case the tender should include the following tasks:

- elaborating a focus group guide according to the eupopp concept
- translating and adapting the guide to a national context
- recruitment of -8 persons each focus group according to criteria defined in section 1.2.3
- incentives for participants
- reception of participants and small catering for participants
- moderating the focus group by a professional moderator
- rent for the room for focus group
- audio recording of group discussion (incl. recording equipment)
- transcription of record
- analysis and interpretation of transcript according to eupopp criteria and hypotheses
- written report in English language according to eupopp standards (approx. 10 to 12 pages / instrument)

1.7.2 Expertise

Applicants should fulfil the following requirements:

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- Experience in moderating of focus groups
- Experience in qualitative methods (e.g. qualitative content analysis)
- References in consumer and / or social research
- References in the fields of investigation according to the selected instruments under study (housing, food)

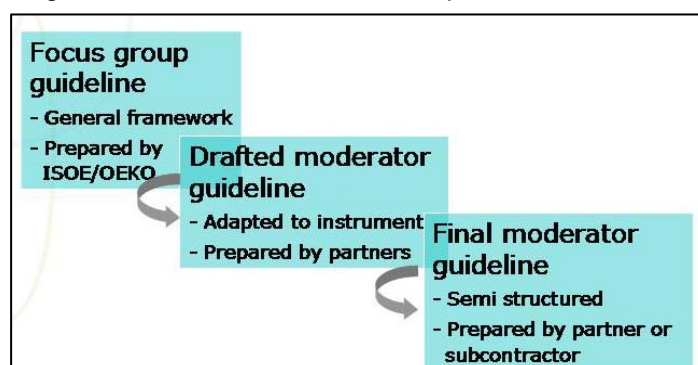
2 Focus Group Guideline

2.1 Some notes on preparing guiding questions for focus group discussions

This focus group guideline is meant to support partners in setting up the specifications for the contents of the focus groups whether they are carried out by the respective partner or subcontracted. Particularly for those partners subcontracting the focus groups it is very important to provide sound and concrete inputs in order to ensure a successful focus group exercise. Similar to the interview guideline, this document is not instrument-specific, partners will need to supplement, elaborate and/ or specify the proposed interview questions, so as to do justice to their selected instrument(s) and the participants of the focus group sessions.

Figure 1 gives an overview on the set up of the moderator guideline for the focus groups which will be elaborated in three steps. As a first step, the focus group guideline with guiding questions is provided within this document. In a second step, a drafted moderator guideline in English language will be prepared adapting this general framework to the instruments under study. The drafted moderator guideline will be elaborated by the eupopp partner drawing on the insights already generated in the earlier steps of the impact assessment. Based on this document the final moderator guidelines will be elaborated in national language containing the final questions for the focus groups.

Figure 1: Elaboration of Focus Group Guideline



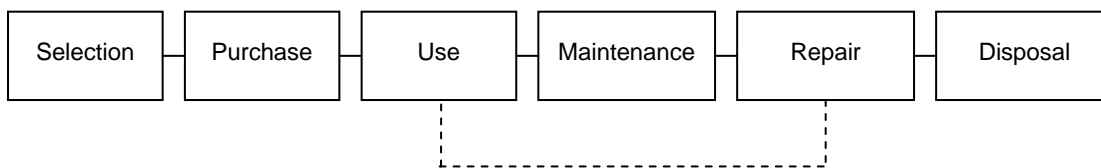
Own Source

So please use the proposed sets of guiding questions with discretion. Please select and adjust those guiding questions which are most suitable to a) the instrument in question and b) the respective composition of the focus group. Of course, the chosen sets of questions will need to be translated into your own language, too, as appropriate.

The focus group discussion will be semi-structured, that is the guide is flexible. It allows new questions to be brought up during the group discussion as a result of what the group says. If necessary, the order of questions can also be changed as a result of group dynamics (e.g. group discussion having already covered aspects that were foreseen to be asked about at a later stage). However, questions should not “get lost” and neither should you convey the impression that there is no ‘red thread’ in the questions.

The focus group guideline draws on the “Steps” of our Impact Assessment Tool (see Figure 2) as well as on the hypotheses included in the same document (see Figure 3). Please note that, different from the interview questions, the focus groups are apt to gain deeper knowledge on some hypotheses, while others are irrelevant for this exercise. Please keep in mind that the focus groups are designed to explore the interference of an instrument with consumption practices from a consumer perspective. The main objectives are to learn how the respective instrument is perceived and adopted by different groups of consumers and to understand how and why the instrument affects different stages of the consumption process (see Figure 1).

Figure 2: Different stages of the consumption process



Source: Schultz and Stieß (2009): *Gender Aspects of Sustainable Consumption Strategies and Instruments*

In order to do so, you have to put questions in ordinary language not using the analytical terms of the impact assessment tool. And most important, you must not stick to your own pre-understanding of causes and effects from your earlier investigation. The practical consciousness of everyday life follows its own logic which can differ considerably from what experts think. Therefore, you should tend to establish a consumer perspective in an open, independent and unbiased way, like you would explore the ideas and habits of a foreign culture.

Figure 3: Steps in assessing and explaining SC instrument effects (EUPOPP ‘IA tool’)

- | |
|--|
| <p><u>I. Examine the instrument’s intervention logic and implementation: Output analysis</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analyse the instrument’s intervention logic. 2. Evaluate the instrument’s intervention logic. 3. Examine the instrument’s implementation. <p><u>II. Measure instrument effects and establish causality: Outcomes, impacts, side effects</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Develop outcome parameters and impact indicators. |
|--|

5. Identify the (intended and unintended) changes in outcome parameters.
 6. Establish causality between changes in outcome parameters and output.
 7. Identify the (intended and unintended) changes in impact indicators.
- II. Assess instrument effects
8. Value the (intended and unintended) outcomes and impacts.
- IV. Explain instrument effects
9. Explain the instrument's effects, guided by hypotheses on success factors and barriers for SC instruments.

Source: Wolff and Schönherr (2009). *Impact Assessment Tool for SC Instruments (2nd Draft)*.

Figure 2: WP 3.2-hypotheses: Factors influencing the achievement of SC instrument effects

- A valid intervention logic underlying the instrument
- Involvement of stakeholders in instrument development and implementation
- Acknowledgement and accommodation of the diversity of consumers' everyday needs and practices in instrument design
- Consideration of the framework conditions of consumption in instrument design
- An environment of synergetic other policies and instruments, possibly through instrument mixes and policy packaging
- A favourable market context

Source: *ibid.*

2.1.1 A note on everyday needs and practices

Most of the questions in this section naturally deal with consumer everyday needs and practices. The aspects of everyday needs and practices that are relevant with regard to an SC instrument's effectiveness vary strongly with the need area and the specific instrument. This makes it difficult to give guidelines on which kind of evidence confirms or disconfirms our hypotheses. But a starting point for inquiring into the issue is when the instrument is not very successful (despite a plausible intervention theory). For example, if grants are available, but only few households use them. Then it might be worthwhile to examine in more detail which groups of addressees are not using them and why not. You might e.g. identify that older people do not use them because their time horizon is too short to make any investments (or they are uncertain of what will happen with their house when they die or are taken into care). Or that young people do not use the grants because they are up to their ears in debt and think they will deal with this 'later' when they are more solvent.²

² Eva gives a further example: "I have been grappling with a similar problem in the case of heating system upgrades in Finland. There are lots of competitive technologies that reduce costs and CO2 available, and quite a lot of advice available, but people do not invest - ultimately, I think - because of the (real and perceived) risks involved. Even if on an aggregate level there are no significant risks in e.g. air

2.1.2 A note on gender and diversity

As already mentioned, focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes about the topic under investigation. In order to understand these various perspectives properly, observers should pay special attention to how the differences in opinions of participants are related to their social context in terms of gender, age, or social class. We would not recommend you to ask questions on gender and diversity in a separate section, but to integrate them into all topics. Therefore, the moderator should take care to encourage explicitly men and women to give their opinion. For example, if a topic is discussed by men, she might ask a woman in the group whether she shares this view or not. Another issue which is closely linked to gender and diversity aspects is the compatibility of an instrument with the needs of small children, the elderly or physically handicapped persons. And of course, gender and diversity aspects raised in the group discussion need to be carefully elaborated in the analysis of the focus group.

2.1.3 A note on integrating focus group data with the overall IA

Of course, you will need to critically contrast the focus group data against empirical evidence you gather at the other stages of the impact assessment. If contradictions between a consumer and an expert view arise, this can – and should - be carefully elaborated in the analysis of the focus group results, but never during the focus groups themselves! Please note that focus groups can be used to particularly address points that you found difficult to assess through the expert interviews and thus may feed in information on previous steps of the impact assessment. The emphasis should be, however, on step 9, i.e. explaining instrument effects on the level of outcomes (i.e. changes of consumption patterns) and assessing success factors/barriers.

2.2 Guiding questions of the focus groups

Text in square brackets and italics has only explanatory value and is not meant to be part of the final set(s) of questions. If you do not fully understand the questions and their intention, please read up the respective sections (IIA-Steps/ Hypotheses) in the “Impact Assessment Tool for Sustainable Consumption Instruments (2nd Draft)” by Franziska and Norma.

heat pumps, groundsource heat pumps or pellet boilers, the personal experience is very different. Things might go badly wrong due to incompetent installers etc. Then, the nice calculations of how cost-effective the new solutions are lose their point. Even if the risk is small, the probability of its actually materialising is quite irrelevant for the individual. So risks of new technologies look very different in the aggregate and on the individual level: you only “roll the dice” once. The solution, I think, would be certification of service providers (something which I think works better in Germany than in Finland with the Meisterprüfung, at least). Or some sort of guarantee or insurance to compensate if things go wrong.”

2.2.1 Knowledge on the instrument in general

[In the beginning we suggest to explore the knowledge on the instrument. This gives you a first whether participants have a clear idea of the instrument and how they understand the instrument.]

- What do you know about the instrument xyz?
- Do you feel well informed?

[You should start by asking this question in an open way in order to learn how familiar the instrument is to participants. At this early stage, the focus is on knowledge only. Issues of evaluation will be topics of later stages.]

In case your own analysis before the focus groups resulted in the assessment that

- *central concepts on which the instrument is based are unclear and contradictory,*
- *the instrument could achieve more effects by targeting a greater target group, more artefacts, or by aiming at more substantial change in the behaviour of the target group,*

you should carefully monitor the understanding that participants have of these issues. When it turn out that there is only a very vague idea of the instrument the moderator might provide some additional information on the instrument to the group.]

2.2.2 Interference with the consumption process

[In a second step, the interference of the instrument with the consumption process should be explored. Please keep in mind that the question has to be adapted to the character of the instrument. If the instrument is non mandatory, focus group participants might be requested whether they make use of it. If the instrument is mandatory or compulsory, the focus should be on compliance with the instrument]

- Did you make use of the instrument? / Do you comply with the instrument?
Have you done things differently, since the instrument was enacted?

[Even if the instrument under study only addresses a single stage of the consumption process, it is important to understand its effects on the entire consumption process. Therefore, the question should first be asked in an open way. It should then be specified going through the different stages of the consumption process,

- *Selection (including information gathering)*
- *Purchase*
- *Use (including storage, accommodation, preparation etc.)*
- *Maintenance (if applicable)*
- *Repair (if applicable)*

- *Disposal (if applicable)*

using a question like the following]

- If you think about the different stages of the consumption process [*needs to be specified for the respective instrument*] how did you change your habits compared to the way things had been done before the instrument was enacted?

[*Changes might relate in particular to one or several of the dimensions listed here-under:*

- *Purchasing decisions (shifting to alternative products or services; buying less or abandoning certain kinds of products/services altogether)*
- *Personal behaviour and routines (e.g. turning heating off, when leaving home; eating out more or less frequently; shopping at other places; storing things longer at home before disposal etc.)*
- *Distribution of housework responsibility: Who in a household is affected? Who cares? What are the implications for men and women? What are the implications for the distribution of duties between parents and children?]*

[*In order to learn more about the compatibility of the instrument with everyday practices, you might ask whether the instrument fostered the emergence of new consumption routines, using a question like the following:]*

- Have these changes in your behaviour, habits etc. been stable or did they occur only transitory? Why (not)?

2.2.3 Compatibility with everyday life

[*Having once explored whether an instrument has lead to changes in consumption behaviour, the compatibility of these changes with everyday life practices, attitudes and beliefs etc. should be explored in greater detail.]*

- If you think about how you changed your behaviour in connection with the instrument, have these changes been easy or difficult for you?
- Has the new behaviour been compatible with your everyday habits, routines, needs, practices? Why (not)? Where do you see the most critical problems?

[*The aspects of everyday needs and practices that are relevant with regard to an SC instrument's effectiveness vary strongly with the need area and the specific instrument. The following list of aspects can give you an idea what kind of issues might be at stake:*

- *Expenditure of time*
- *Tangibility*
- *Health (promoting) issues*
- *Cleanliness and decency*
- *Taste and aesthetic appeal*

- *Comfort*
- *Safety*
- *Financial expenditures or savings*
- *Compatibility with existing (shopping, travelling, storing, etc.) routines*
- *Compatibility with the established distribution of responsibility among household members*
- *Compatibility with the needs of small children, the elderly or physically handi-capped person]*

2.2.4 Context factors

- Were there other factors, such as public campaigns, new products or services etc. that made it easier for you to adopt new routines as a response to the instrument? Why?

[Here it is important to note that focus group participants will not conceive the differentiation between instrument interaction and context factors that we have made for analytic reasons in the EUPOPP Conceptual Framework. Therefore, information gathered from posing this question might yield inputs for addressing both issues.]

2.2.5 Effect of the instrument

- Do you think the instrument can help consumers to consume more sustainability *[has to be specified for the respective instrument]*? What are the pros and cons/ strengths and weaknesses?
- In your opinion, is it easy/difficult to make use of/comply with the instrument? For whom in particular? Why?
- What would have to change in order for you to be better able to make use of/comply with the instrument?

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