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# EASE

Empowering Adult Survivors of domestic  
violence through Entrepreneurship

**Guide to conducting focus  
groups with vulnerable persons  
to uncover entrepreneurship  
training needs**

ThinkYoung



Munich  
Business  
School



# What is this guide for?

This brochure delineates individual steps in developing entrepreneurship trainings for vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups are physically, mentally, or socially disadvantaged people who require specific assistance. Due to factors usually considered outside their control, these individuals lack opportunities other, more fortunate groups in society, may have.

Overall, this brochure aims to encourage good practice through clear and practical guidance on how to determine the needs of a specific group for which an entrepreneurship training is designed.

# What is co-creation?

This document advocates for using a co-creation approach to developing entrepreneurship trainings. Co-creation means that the final beneficiaries are included throughout the entire process of the training development. This approach is designed to include and respond to voices that are often marginalized or silenced. Co-creation is a human-centered approach based on a technique called 'Design Thinking', a process for creative problem solving and the development of innovative solutions<sup>1</sup>.

To devise an appropriate training, it is essential to first understand the needs, challenges and expectations of the beneficiaries that will be participating in the training with respect to the content, format, context or obstacles in starting entrepreneurial activities. One of the methods allowing for insights into all these aspects of a training program are focus groups.

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<sup>1</sup> See also <https://designthinking.ideo.com/>



# What are focus groups?

Focus groups are facilitated discussions with small groups of participants. Similar to interviews, they can be an advantageous way to explore different perspectives, attitudes or beliefs in more depth, capturing information about personal as well as group feelings, perceptions, and opinions. They also allow participants to interact with one another, building on each others' ideas and exploring a broader range of topics, similarities as well as contrasts in participants' experiences. Due to the design thinking elements, they are useful for brainstorming possible components and for generating ideas.

Focus groups can constitute the first step in co-creating trainings for a specific target group. A comprehensive co-creation process comprises also other steps, such as a continues outreach to the beneficiaries and an extensive interaction between all stakeholders involved.



# How to prepare the content for a focus group?

When designing a focus group for developing entrepreneurship trainings, two approaches can be combined following two steps:

## Step 1

Utilize interactive methods based on Design Thinking to explore the individual needs, expectations, and challenges of entrepreneurship to the participants through silent brainstorming techniques.

## Step 2

Utilize guided focus-group discussions that build on participants' contributions along with co-creation techniques to connect and deepen the knowledge gained in Step 1.

The concept of a focus group usually draws on existing data, research or needs analyses on the topic. Based on these preliminary insights, a predetermined, sequenced questionnaire with open-ended questions stimulates informal discussions about participants' understandings, perceptions, beliefs, and needs. This questionnaire typically moves from a broader discussion to more specific topics.

Each question in the questionnaire is followed by brainstorming and a short discussion before moving on to the next question.



A typical focus group goes through five stages<sup>2</sup>:

## 1. Introduction

Moderators will prepare participants by explaining the topic, goals, and procedures while creating a safe space where they can feel comfortable.

## 2. Formation

An opening period helps to build a group cohesion and comfort that advance group discussions.

## 3. Storming

Moderators introduce the topic and invite participants to share their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences.

## 4. Exploration

Discussions follow relatively specific questions regarding key topics.

## 5. Conclusion

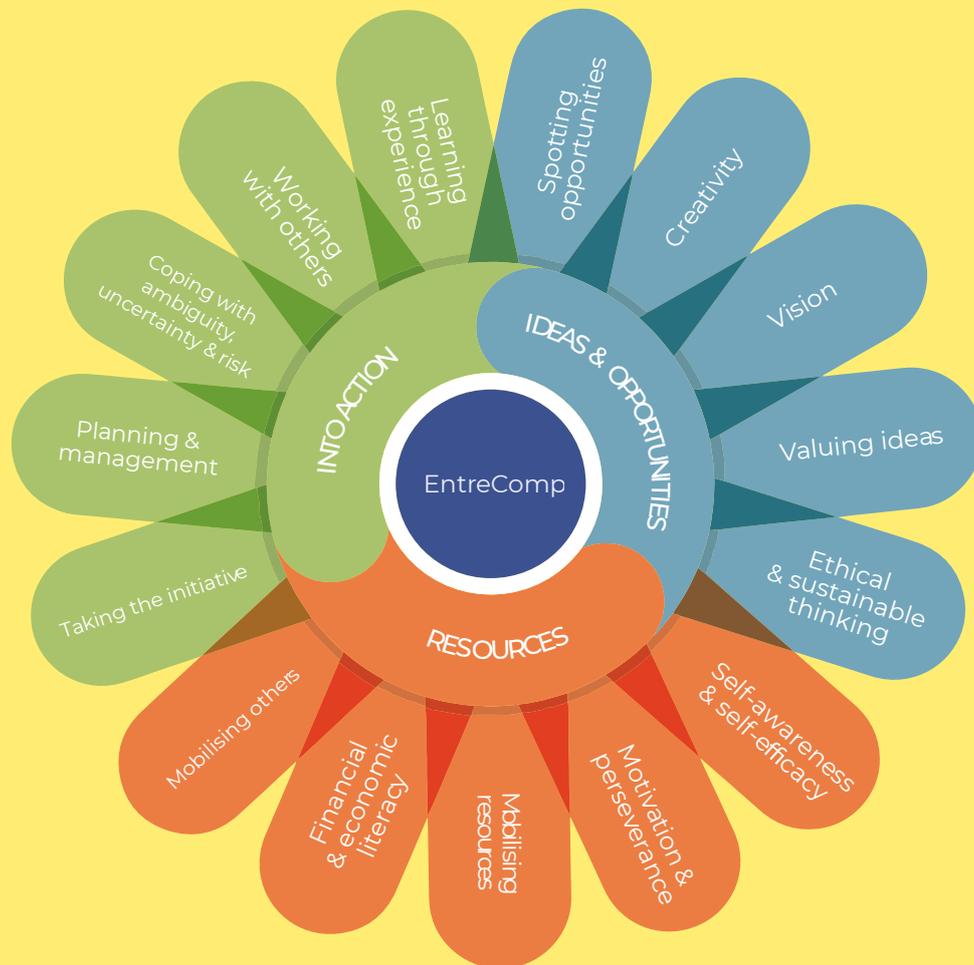
Moderators review the gathered ideas, reflections, and additional comments.

A framework that can help in structuring focus groups on developing entrepreneurship trainings is the EU's ENTRECOMP program framework.

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<sup>2</sup> See also: Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). Focus Groups. A Practical Guide for Applied Research. Sage.

# The European Union's EntreComp Framework



EntreComp offers a comprehensive description of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that people need to start a venture and create financial, cultural or social value for others. It is a free and flexible reference framework that can be adapted to support development and understanding of entrepreneurial competences in any setting.

The framework consists of three competence areas (*ideas and opportunities, resources, and into action*). For the purpose of developing entrepreneurship trainings, it is advisable to focus on the competence area “resources” and “into action” to initiate a discussion on the participants’ needs, challenges and preferences regarding learning content, format, and resources needed to start a venture.

# How to organize the logistics for a focus group?

A focus group usually comprises 5 to 10 participants securing varying demographics. The smaller group size will offer more time and space for each participant to share insights while group composition ensures a diversity of perceptions. Participants should be selected based on certain characteristics they have in common, relating to the focus-group topic. As written input by the participants will be required throughout the focus group, the sampling should exclude persons of restricted literacy. With regard to vulnerable groups, recruits for a focus group should be advanced in their journey to recovery in order to allow for at least a minimum psychological strength and attention necessary for an entrepreneurial endeavor.

Participants should be invited to attend the focus groups for a duration of about two hours. The focus group concept exemplified in this brochure covers 105 minutes with additional 15 minutes allotted for further discussion. It is also advisable to record the sessions in order to use the data for evaluation in a way as close as possible to the original wording. Written consent in line with existing GDPR requirements needs to be provided by all participants prior to the events based on the practices and needs by the participating institutions. The participants must be informed about the recording in advance. It must be ensured and conveyed to the participants that the focus groups, despite the recording, remain a safe space in which the participants can and should openly express their opinions.

A moderator runs a focus group. Observers and note-takers should be present as well to capture information and input. The focus groups can, in theory, be conducted several times with similar types of participants, in order to identify trends and patterns in perceptions, depending on the available resources of the organizers.

# What is the role of the moderator?

The objective of the moderator is to generate a maximum number of different ideas and opinions. Moderators will help structure discussions, prepare scripts, and establish group rules. The goal of the moderator is to create a safe and comfortable environment that encourage participants to share perceptions and points of views without being pressured to share or reach consensus. In this context, titles and job positions should be omitted to reduce power inequalities and to better facilitate a balanced co-creation process.



Furthermore, the moderator needs to keep in mind that the topics discussed can be sensitive for the participants and require specific attention in the facilitation.

Prior to conducting a focus group, moderators should develop a thorough knowledge of the discussion topic, assist in the preparation of focus-group questions and anticipate discussion issues.

In the moderator role, it is helpful to avoid reactions to participants that might channel their responses (such as short verbal rewards like “that’s

good”, “excellent”). Instead, the moderators should try simply to create a feeling of comfort for those who speak (with verbal and nonverbal behaviour like looking at the person talking, slow head nodding to show that the thought is heard – but not rapid nodding showing that the thought is “correct”; look around the room, giving space to silence and encouraging other individuals to step up with their ideas).

The moderator can also reflect back his or her understanding of long, complex or ambiguous comments (by summarizing them) and check whether this is the correct understanding (making sure the thoughts the participants intended were captured correctly).

## Tips for moderators

**Moderators are encouraged to use the following motivational interviewing techniques:**

- Ask open-ended questions and utilize reflective listening skills and summaries.
- Create rapport with group members by respecting hesitancy and ambivalence to change while avoiding confrontation of resistance.
- Respond in language that elicits reason, ability, and commitment to change.
- Facilitate and guide open and safe discussions that feel respectful to all participants focusing on strength, self-efficacy, autonomy and increasing perceptions of choice.
- Promote collaboration, power sharing, empowerment and respect for individual choice and the value of experiential knowledge.
- Guide participants to develop realistic expectations and affinity with other participants through respectful discussions that feel safe and build trust.
- Foster co-creation that enables and makes visible the collective decision-making process focusing on mutual learning and democratic platforms that facilitates collective decision-making.

- View conflict or tension arising the confrontation of multiple views as an opportunity for design rather than constraint.
- Ensure participants feel comfortable by addressing any accommodations for learning needs, sensitivities, abilities, and levels of care or support.
- Be aware of cultural issues and communication challenges for all participants.

**As a moderator, one could encounter some challenges.** In the following, some examples and possible prompts how to react to them are provided:

### **Feedback focuses on a theme not related to the question posed :**

Decide whether to allow the conversation to progress. For example, if a theme that participants agree on arises many times, the moderator may want to gather information on the theme before moving the conversation back to the pre-set focus-group questions.

*“This point has been raised a number of times. Has this been experienced by others?”*

*“What I’m hearing is \_\_\_\_\_. Does this capture your experience?”*

### **A participant is hijacking the conversation to talk about a specific issue:**

State that you have recorded the feedback and want to hear other ideas. Remind the group about the question you are currently addressing and turn to others in the group for their input.

*“Thank you for that input. I have recorded that idea. The question we are focused on at this point is \_\_\_\_\_. Does anyone have additional input that hasn’t been expressed yet?”*

### **Some participants are quieter:**

Ask directly whether other participants would like to share their input on the question.

*"We haven't heard from you yet. Do you have anything you would like to add"?*

## **Participant responses are general or vague:**

Ask follow-up probes to help draw out concrete examples or ideas. A second facilitator can be helpful in asking follow up questions.

*"Tell us more about what you just said."*

*"Please elaborate on that statement."*

*"Can you clarify what you meant?"*

*"Are you willing to provide specific example/ situation/ context?"*



# Observer and note taker/ assistant

At least one person from the local context / local representative known to the participants should be present for every focus group as observers or note takers; more observers are possible.

Observers do not participate in the discussion but rather observe and take notes. They might also help with time keeping and technical issues (if moderated virtually). After each focus group, they debrief with the moderator.

## Tips for observing and note taking

Field notes can contain different types of information:

### **Frequency, extensiveness and intensity (overall topics):**

Some topics are discussed more by participants (extensiveness) and also some comments are made more often than others (frequency). These topics could be more important or of special interest to participants. Also, consider what wasn't said or received a limited attention. Furthermore, participants might talk about a topic with a special intensity or depth of feeling.

### **Key points and themes for each question:**

Typically, participants will talk about several key points in response to each question. These are often identified by several different participants. Sometimes they are said only once but in a manner that deserves attention. At the end of the focus group, an observer or moderator can share these themes with participants for their confirmation.

## Follow-up questions that could be asked:

Sometimes the moderator may not follow-up on an important point or seek an example of a vague but critical point. The observer may wish to follow-up with these questions at the end of the focus group.

## Quotes:

Listen for notable quotes or phrases that illustrate an important point of view. Usually, it is impossible to capture the entire quote. Capture as much as you can with attention to the key phrases. Use three dots ... to indicate that part of the quote is missing.

## Other factors:

Make note of factors, which might aid analysis such as passionate comments, body language, or non-verbal activity. Watch for head nods, physical excitement or other clues that would indicate level of agreement, support, or interest.



# Language

Linguistic diversities can pose complex communication issues as differing cultures express understandings and perceptions in varying ways. Differences in how meaning is expressed through language influence and shape qualitative data. With this awareness, focus groups should be conducted in the respective language of participants. Since it is essential to the accuracy of the data that participants are able to articulate fully their needs, ideas, and obstacles effectively, they must all participate in the language in which they feel comfortable to express themselves without misunderstandings or barriers. It is also important, that the participants can clearly understand the other participants including written interactions (like Post-its) in order to build on individual thoughts and develop the process of collective understandings.

Different languages within one focus group are time-consuming to translate, and often require an additional translator resulting in less time to develop content and further discussion. Since it is important for good results that participants express themselves in their own words, each sentence would have to be translated as literally as possible in order not to falsify the statement with abbreviated translations; all explanations and summaries of the discussion rounds by the moderator would have to be translated as well. Therefore, using only one common language that is easy to understand for everyone leads to better results.

## Running a virtual focus group

Sometimes it is not possible to organize focus groups with all participants being present in-person. A virtual format for focus groups can also provide an added advantage of greater digital participation as well as more flexibility for participants.

In such a case, using a virtual meeting room (such as Zoom or MS Teams) and digital whiteboard (such as Miro or Mural) that produce similar results to in-person formats is advisable.

If focus groups need to take place virtually, the moderator will lead the focus group digitally. Each participant needs their own PC with a camera and a stable internet connection. Participants sit separately and comfortably

with respect to their personal space. This reduces parallel discussions if multiple people share once screen which can create imbalance and disrupt group cohesion and openness. All sessions should be recorded with the consent from the participants to generate data for analysis and evaluation. Safety, anonymity, and confidentiality should be discussed with participants to create a safe space in which they feel comfortable to participate by openly expressing their opinions.

## Debriefing

Immediately after the end of each focus group, the moderator and local representative/observer will participate in a debriefing session focusing on the question what the perceived core elements and central results of the focus group are.

## Analyzing the results

Data analysis will commence after all focus groups are completed. Common themes and core topics as well as differences between different focus groups should be identified. If a report is being written comprising the results, all data should be anonymized.



# Exemplary questionnaire for a focus group

## PART 1

PROGRAMME	AIM AND CONTENT	METHOD AND TOOLS	TIME
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Creation of a welcoming, safe, and open space</li> <li>· Introduction</li> </ul>		30 in total
Arrival of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Settle in the room</li> <li>· Allow participants to arrive and relax</li> </ul>		5 minutes
Welcome and Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Moderator and observer briefly introduce themselves</li> <li>· Moderator reminds everyone of the purpose of the focus groups and the process including agenda, protocols and “rules”.</li> </ul> <p>“Rules” are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· We want to gather individual and diverse opinions, there is no right or wrong, we need and appreciate different perspectives, your honest feedback is extremely valuable for us.</li> <li>· We are not aiming at reaching consensus, but at tailoring the training towards your needs.</li> <li>· Please listen to each other and talk one after each other so that we do not miss anything; you are welcome to add to each other’s thoughts.</li> <li>· First name basis or what is your preference?</li> <li>· Safe space: Everything that you share today will be kept anonymous. We ask that you help protect anonymity</li> </ul>	Slides with agenda and rules	10 minutes

PROGRAMME	AIM AND CONTENT	METHOD AND TOOLS	TIME (IN MIN.)
<b>Welcome and Introduction</b>	<p>and confidentiality by agreeing not to share what we hear today with people outside the room. Do you agree?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the information used for? It will be used without any indication of persons/names. We are (video-) recording this session just for research purposes. The reason for recording is that from note taking should not distract from the actual conversation. The videos will not be shared with anyone and only reviewed by the researcher responsible for the analysis of the focus group in order to support the exact understanding of what has been said. Only with the results of the analysis will be shared with the team, not any names, pictures or videos of participants. After the analysis of the results, the recording will be deleted; any questions or concerns?</li> </ul>		
<b>Icebreaker (energizer)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of a relaxed atmosphere in which participants feel welcome and safe to discuss topics openly</li> <li>• 5 minute mini energizer game</li> </ul>		5 minutes
<b>Introduction of the participants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting a sense of who is in the room</li> <li>• Introduction of the participants (Individuals introduce themselves in a few sentences)</li> <li>• What connections do you have to today's topic entrepreneurship?</li> <li>• Build discussion around the question</li> </ul>		5 minutes
<b>Virtual focus group:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guide the participants to the digital whiteboard</li> <li>• Provide a brief presentation of the relevant functions (a video tutorial should be distributed to the participants in advance)</li> </ul>	Whiteboard	5 minutes

Start the digital whiteboard / explain whiteboard

## PART 2

PROGRAMME	AIM AND CONTENT	METHOD AND TOOLS	TIME
<b>Objective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Empathize</li> <li>· Gather information (thoughts, needs, opinions of the participants)</li> </ul>		75 in total
<b>Round 1</b>	<p><b>Engagement Questions</b> (Focus on entrepreneurship)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>What thoughts or associations come to your mind when you hear the word “entrepreneurship”?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Silent individual brainstorming with post-it notes</p> <p>Sharing with the group</p>	10 minutes
<b>Round 2</b>	<p><b>Exploration Questions</b> (Focus on topics: challenges, obstacles, risks)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>Have you ever tried to start your own business? If not, what has kept you from starting your own business so far?</i></li> <li>· <i>What might stop you in the future?</i></li> <li>· <i>What would be helpful to change?</i></li> <li>· <i>What would help you to feel safer? (optional)</i></li> </ul> <p>(sub-topics might include personal situation, cultural context, role, family)</p>	<p>Imagery exercise:</p> <p>Moderator guides participants</p> <p>Participants rate and rank needs on post-its distributing points</p>	20 minutes
<b>Round 3</b>	<p><b>Exploration Questions topic</b> (Focus on needs and wishes)</p> <p><i>If you could wish for anything, what would help you, what do you need</i></p> <p>Examples/prompts: leadership, rhetoric, negotiation, networking, team, problem solving, dealing with uncertainty, time management, resilience, assertiveness, patience, creativity, infrastructure, contacts, role models, experience, etc.</p>	<p>Note needs and rank on Post-its</p>	15 minutes

PROGRAMME	AIM AND CONTENT	METHOD AND TOOLS	TIME (IN MIN.)
Round 4	<p>Follow-up Questions (Focus on course design)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Short discussion rounds on the topics raised in main discussion</li> </ul>	Note taker captures participants' thoughts	10 minutes
Round 5	<p>Follow-up Questions (Focus on local context and ecosystem)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>Which contacts would you be most interested in?</i></li> <li>· <i>What would particularly help you get into action and start your own business?</i></li> <li>· <i>What support do you need from the ecosystem?</i></li> </ul>	Note taker captures participants' thoughts	10 minutes
Closing	<p>Ending Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>If you could now wish for three things to help you start your own business, what would they be?</i></li> <li>· Allow a few moments for each participant time to individually reflect think for a minute and write on post-its.</li> </ul>	Note taker captures participants' thoughts Post-its	5 minutes
End of the focus groups for participants	<p>End of the session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>Any additional thoughts or input?</i></li> </ul>		5 minutes

## PART 3

Exchange between moderator and observer(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Discuss each round separately, taking into account the following questions:</li> <li>· What patterns or themes did you identify related to the issues/needs of the participants?</li> <li>· What other key points were learned from the group?</li> <li>· What was surprising or unexpected?</li> <li>· What quotes were memorable?</li> </ul>		30 in total
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# References

European Commission (2018): The European Union's EntreComp Framework. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8201&furtherPubs=yes>

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