IAIA26 — International Association for Impact Assessment
Quebec City, Canada — 2026 Annual Conference

How Focus Group Discussions Are Shaping Saudi's Giga-Project Community Development Plans

SESSION	Session 552 — Accelerating with Integrity: Strengthening SIA in the Face of Urgency and Misinformation
ABSTRACT ID	1567
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Note to the reader. This paper is one of three coordinated contributions from Red Sea Global to IAIA26, and the three are intended to be read as a set. This paper examines the method — focus group discussions adapted to Saudi conditions, and how their findings inform Community Development Plans; a companion paper by Almansour (Abstract 1991) examines the goal — how communication design contributes to public trust; and a companion paper by Alyousef (Abstract 1748) examines the system — the governance arrangements that distribute participation obligations across the project ecosystem. Together they describe one coordinated approach to credible social impact assessment under Vision 2030 conditions; individually, each stands on its own and is cross-referenced where the arguments connect.

Abstract

Saudi Arabia's giga-projects operate under a tension that defines much of contemporary impact assessment: the speed required to deliver the Vision 2030 agenda, and the integrity required to ensure that transformation reflects authentic community voice rather than externally imposed planning (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Vanclay, 2003). Drawing on field experience along Saudi Arabia's west (Red Sea) coast — anchored in a socio-economic baseline programme of roughly 1,620 household interviews across three coastal regions, complemented by focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (Red Sea Global, 2025b) — this paper argues that Saudi conditions require deliberate adaptation of standard FGD practice (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1997). It presents a localised model now documented in internal guideline form: a three-role session architecture, a nine-step preparation protocol, culturally calibrated session design, tiered participant selection aligned with IFC Performance Standards (IFC, 2012), and a structured pathway from FGD insight to Community Development Plan (CDP) priorities. It traces one example — women artisans in Tabuk Province — from finding to response, offers five lessons for practice under urgency, and discusses the limits of project-led inquiry.

1. The Speed–Integrity Tension

Saudi Arabia's giga-projects operate under conditions few impact assessment (IA) frameworks were designed to handle. Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016) has set ambitious targets across tourism, employment, women's economic participation, and enterprise development. The projects expected to deliver them often run on timelines in which planning, assessment, and delivery overlap rather than proceed in strict sequence,

while the information environment fills with claims and counter-claims about what the projects will and will not do for local communities.

This produces a tension central to the integrity of social impact assessment (SIA) in Saudi conditions (Vanclay, 2003). Acceleration without integrity produces planning that is rapid but disconnected from community reality; integrity without acceleration produces planning that is rigorous but arrives too late to shape decisions already taken. The discipline being asked for is a methodology both fast enough to keep pace with delivery and rigorous enough to resist the pressures of urgency (André et al., 2006). This paper argues that, adapted to Saudi conditions, FGDs — formalised by Morgan (1997) and developed across applied social research (Krueger & Casey, 2014) — are among the most useful instruments for navigating it. The contribution is not the general claim that FGDs matter, but the specific adaptation that field experience has required and that is now documented in guideline form (Red Sea Global, 2025a).

2. Why FGDs Are Distinctively Valuable — and Why Standard Practice Is Insufficient

Three features of Saudi giga-project communities make FGDs valuable. First, quantitative methods establish baselines and measure change but do not, by design, capture how communities experience that change — a survey records that income is low, but not why a household believes it is low, what it fears, or what it hopes (Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, 2010); in giga-project communities, that texture is precisely what planners need. Second, communities are heterogeneous in ways that matter: within one coastal town, fishermen, women artisans, youth, business owners, and hospitality workers experience the same project differently, and FGDs let distinct sub-groups speak in their own voice (Morgan, 1997). Third, trust requires direct engagement, not only data collection; a moderated discussion in a respectful setting is an engagement event before it is a data-collection event (IFC, 2012; United Nations, 2011).

Three features of Saudi conditions, however, make standard practice insufficient when imported unmodified. First, gender-segregated engagement is a deeply held norm, so mixed sessions suppress women's participation. Second, the religious calendar, daily prayer times, and seasonal patterns govern when communities are available and willing to meet. Third, dialect and register choices determine whether participants speak freely or guardedly. The model in Section 4 is the adaptation that responds to these three conditions.

3. Empirical Setting

The model has been developed across an ongoing socio-economic baseline programme with three integrated components (Red Sea Global, 2025b). A household survey targeted roughly 540 respondents in each of three regions, producing a baseline of about 1,620 interviews spanning demographics, livelihoods, awareness of project programmes, service ratings, and self-reported skills. A qualitative component ran five to eight FGDs per region — 90 to 120 minutes, six to ten participants from homogeneous sub-groups such as youth, fishermen, farmers, SME owners, craft practitioners, and herders. A complementary key-informant programme addressed family and tribal leaders, the non-profit sector, and case-study informants, following the recommendation that group discussion be supplemented with one-on-one inquiry where social position makes group settings inappropriate (Krueger & Casey, 2014). What follows is a structured retrospective on operational adaptations rather than a formal study of FGD methodology; its limits are discussed in Section 8.

4. The Saudi-Adapted FGD Model

4.1 Three-Role Session Architecture

Every session is run by a three-person team with distinct roles (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morra Imas & Rist, 2009). The Facilitator leads the discussion, manages group dynamics, and ensures balanced participation, holding to neutrality — probing without leading, managing dominant voices without silencing them. The Note Taker documents not only what is said but how it is said, with participants coded anonymously. The Observer monitors group dynamics, ethical compliance, and facilitation quality, and feeds back after the session. This architecture is the first integrity safeguard: it distributes cognitive load, prevents the Facilitator from also being the recorder, and creates an internal check on quality. Sessions run by a single individual produce systematically thinner data — an observational pattern, not an experimental finding.

4.2 Cultural and Linguistic Calibration

Sessions are designed for the specific cultural context, not generic focus groups translated into Arabic (André et al., 2006; IFC, 2012). Women's sessions are facilitated by female teams — a methodological precondition for valid data, consistent with the literature on facilitator effects (Hollander, 2004). Venues are community-familiar rather than project-branded. Timings respect prayer schedules, the religious calendar, and seasonal rhythms. Sessions are conducted in local dialect, with technical terms translated into community-recognisable concepts. Where elders or authority figures would suppress junior voices, separate sessions are arranged by stratum, and influential individuals are engaged through key-informant interviews. Confidentiality and voluntary participation are reinforced at the start and end of every session (United Nations, 2011).

4.3 Tiered Participant Selection

The Impacted Community Identification Methodology (Red Sea Global, 2024a) classifies communities by exposure, dependence, and partnership potential, reflecting the IFC Performance Standards' treatment of the Area of Influence (IFC, 2012) and the Equator Principles' risk-based approach (Equator Principles Association, 2020). Higher-impact tiers receive more frequent and intensive engagement; lower tiers receive proportionate engagement. Table 1 sets out the analytical alignment between the five tiers and the most relevant Standards, with the bottom row translating scrutiny into FGD intensity. The matrix is a practitioner synthesis to support judgement, not a published IFC standard.

IFC Standard	T1 Direct	T2 Proximate	T3 Indirect	T4 Project-area	T5 Kingdom
PS1: E&S risks and impacts	High	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
PS4: Community health & safety	High	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
PS5: Land & resettlement	High	Significant	Moderate	Light	N/A
PS7: Indigenous / local communities	High	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
PS8: Cultural heritage	Significant	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
FGD intensity	Repeated; disaggregated	Multiple; segmented	Targeted	Periodic; survey-led	By exception

Table 1. Analytical alignment of the five-tier classification with IFC Performance Standards and corresponding FGD intensity.

4.4 Nine-Step Preparation Protocol

The adaptations are codified in a nine-step protocol now documented in the RSG FGDs Guidelines (Red Sea Global, 2025a), converting tacit practice into an auditable workflow (André et al., 2006; IFC, 2012). The full sequence — from defining the purpose of each session through to returning validated findings to the community before they harden into a CDP — is summarised in Figure 1. The guideline is a living document, updated as field experience generates refinements (Morra Imas & Rist, 2009).

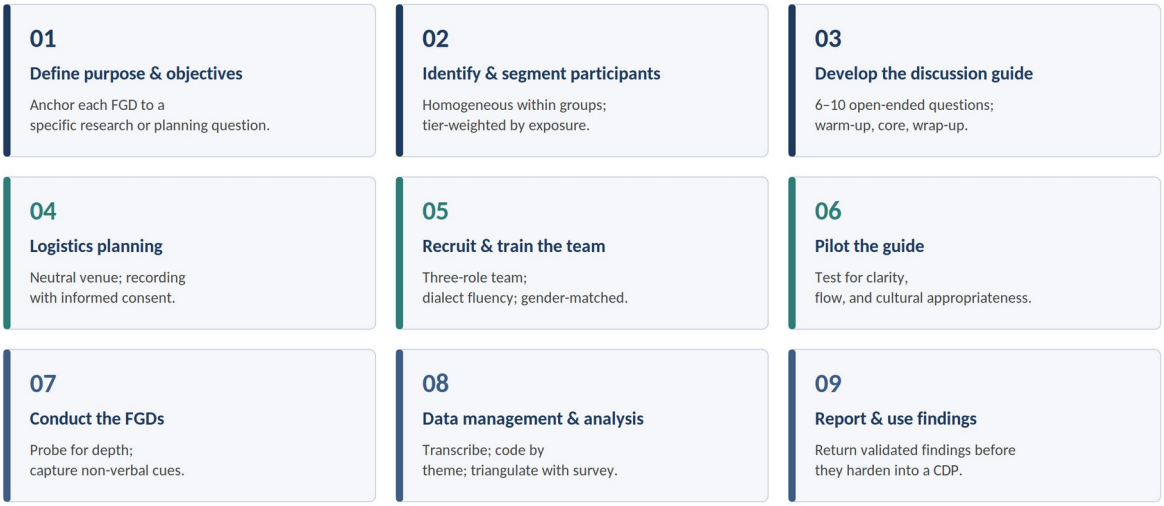

Figure 1. The nine-stage FGD lifecycle, from research question to planning input, as documented in the RSG FGDs Guidelines.

5. Translating FGD Insight into Community Development Plans

Methodological discipline produces value only when findings translate into decisions. Where Figure 1 sets out the lifecycle of a single session, the translation pathway that follows describes how the findings from many sessions become planning inputs, in four steps. Notes are structured against the question guide and coded thematically across sessions (Saldaña, 2016) to surface recurring concerns. Findings are integrated with the Socio-Economic Baseline Study (Red Sea Global, 2025b): the baseline provides scale and benchmark, the FGDs provide texture and mechanism, a combination well established in the evaluation literature (Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, 2010; Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). Priorities are then aligned across national goals, sector priorities, destination scope, and corporate objectives, following the Social Interventions Methodology (Shaabein, 2025). Finally, draft findings and priorities are returned to communities through follow-up sessions — the member-checking principle from the qualitative tradition (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) — the most reliable safeguard against interpretation drift.

6. A Traced Example

Survey data on women artisans in Umluj, Al Wajh, and Duba (Tabuk Province) had shown strong craft skills, low income, and limited access to modern tools, and were widely read as a skills problem; this interpretation entered early CDP discussions. FGDs with the artisans — in culturally appropriate venues, by female facilitators, in local dialect — produced a different finding: skills were not the binding constraint. They could produce more than they could sell; the obstacles were buyer relationships, retail channels, and logistics. The finding was coded across sessions and confirmed in validation meetings (Saldaña, 2016). The CDP response was reshaped accordingly: training was repositioned as supplementary, and the primary interventions became market-linkage instruments — partnerships with local NGOs supporting small enterprises, the Jewar platform to widen

reach, and retail space provided by destination hotel operators — supported by capacity-building to raise production quality. Without the cultural calibration of session design the binding constraint would not have surfaced; without the validation loop it would not have been confidently translated into a planning response.

7. Lessons for SIA Practice

1. **FGDs are an investment in delivery speed, not a tax on it.** They surface issues early that would otherwise emerge as costly disputes or delays (IFC, 2012).
2. **Discipline matters most when urgency is greatest.** Under pressure the temptation to shortcut design is strongest and the consequences most damaging (Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, 2010).
3. **FGDs can counter misinformation.** Communities that have spoken directly to project representatives are, in our experience, more resistant to external misinformation — an observation, not a tested hypothesis.
4. **Validation loops are among the most important safeguards.** Returning findings for confirmation is the most reliable way to ensure interpretation is accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
5. **Findings only matter if they shape decisions.** A perfectly executed FGD that does not influence the CDP is, in effect, a betrayal of participants; translation deserves as much attention as the session itself.

8. Limitations

Five limitations should be flagged. First, the inquiry is project-led, raising risks of social-desirability bias, project-favourable framing, and selective reporting; the three-role architecture, validation loops, and external alignment with IFC Standards mitigate but do not eliminate them, and independent verification remains preferable where feasible (IFC, 2012). Second, the comparative claims — that single-person teams or mixed-gender facilitation produced thinner or narrower data — are observational, based on practitioner judgement across field rounds rather than controlled comparison (Smithson, 2000). Third, the tier–Standard alignment in Table 1 is a practitioner synthesis, not a published IFC standard. Fourth, focus groups have well-documented limitations independent of context — conformity pressures, articulation advantages, and self-selection (Hollander, 2004; Smithson, 2000) — which is why FGD data are integrated with survey and key-informant data. Fifth, replicability and generalisability beyond Saudi giga-project conditions are unestablished, due to the deeply context-specific nature of the adaptations; the contribution is a transferable orientation, not a transferable protocol.

9. Conclusion

In Saudi giga-project conditions, FGDs are a foundational method for connecting community voice to Community Development Plans, but the conditions require deliberate adaptation of standard practice (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1997). The localised model — three-role architecture, gender-aligned facilitation, calendar discipline, dialect calibration, tiered selection aligned with international standards, a nine-step protocol, validation loops, and structured translation into planning decisions (Shaabein, 2025) — is offered as a contribution to practice where speed and integrity must be reconciled. The communication design that makes findings credible to communities, and the governance arrangements that translate findings into operational obligations, are treated in the companion papers. Read together, the three describe a coordinated response; read individually, each stands on its own.

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