

How FGDs Are Shaping Saudi's Giga-Project Community Development Plans



Majed Shaabein

Red Sea Global, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Session 552 — Accelerating with Integrity: Strengthening SIA in the face of urgency and misinformation

Abstract 1567 | IAIA26



About Red Sea Global



OWNERSHIP

Wholly owned by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF).

MANDATE

Aligned with Vision 2030 target: tourism = 10% of Saudi GDP by 2030.

SCOPE

Develops resorts, infrastructure, communities, and workforce training.

PORTFOLIO

Three west-coast destinations: The Red Sea (28,000 km²), AMAALA (4,200 km²), and Thuwal Private Retreat.

A Mission-Driven Timeline

Vision 2030, the SDGs, and the national transformation agenda set the pace — community engagement is built to keep up.

Saudi Arabia's transformation agenda — Vision 2030, the SDG commitments, and the country's wider development plans — sets an ambitious timeline for delivery. The Red Sea destination, AMAALA, and the other giga-projects are how that ambition becomes real on the ground.

Working at that pace is a feature of the mission, not a constraint imposed on it. Planning, assessment, and delivery move in parallel so that local communities benefit from the transformation sooner — not after years of sequential review.

That ambition is exactly why methodology matters. To deliver Vision 2030 outcomes with full community legitimacy, the IA community needs engagement practices that are fast enough for the timeline and rigorous enough for the stakes — and that is the discipline this guideline sets out to codify.

Tabuk Province: Regional Context & Demographics

Red Sea North Coast Area — Duba, Al-Wajh, Umluj — within Saudi Arabia's Tabuk Province.

REGION OVERVIEW

Coverage Area

44,250 km²

3 Cities

Duba, Al-Wajh, Umluj

13 Villages

170+ village participants

Community Type

Coastal, multi-tribal, multi-generational

Livelihoods

Fishing, herding, small business, tourism

Aligned with Vision 2030, Saudi Green Initiative, National Tourism Strategy & Local Content requirements.

TABUK PROVINCE DEMOGRAPHICS

886,036

Total Population

72%

Saudi

60%

Male

26.9

Median Age

38.8%

Pop. Growth
(2010–2022)

Community Structure

Coastal heritage settlements and town centres. Gender-segregated public life. Youth and women's voices require deliberate elicitation methods.

OUR FGD PROGRAM

3

Focus Group Discussions

540

Survey interviews across 3 coastal regions

5–8

FGDs per region, parallel with quantitative survey

90–120 min

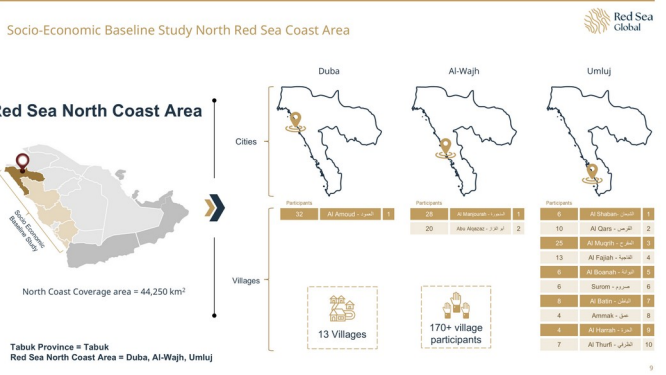
Per FGD; 6–10 participants; Arabic & local dialect

8 + 3

FGD groups + Key Informant Interview tracks

5 Tiers

Community classification by project impact exposure



Why FGDs Are Distinctively Valuable in Saudi Giga-Project Settings

Three features make Focus Group Discussions especially well-suited to this context.

Surveys miss the texture

Quantitative methods establish baselines but do not capture how communities experience change.

FGDs surface the texture that surveys cannot.

Tribal & local social fabric

KSA communities aren't "Indigenous Peoples" in the IFC PS7 sense — no colonization, no displaced first peoples.

They are long-rooted tribes and local families with deep ties to land, sea, and livelihood.

Inside a single town, a fisherman, a grandmother, and a young hospitality worker each see the project differently.

FGDs let each of these groups speak in their own voice — surveys average them into one number.

Trust is built, not surveyed

In Arab culture, candid input comes through majlis-style conversation — sitting together, sharing coffee, speaking face-to-face.

A clipboard or online survey signals an outsider extracting data; an FGD signals respect and invites honesty.

Communities trust processes that include them, not processes that study them.

An FGD is a trust-building event first, a data-collection event second.

Sources: Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, Using Mixed Methods in M&E (World Bank WPS5245, 2010); Greene, Caracelli & Graham (1997) on the epistemological value of mixing methods.

The Communities Behind the FGDs

Tribes, livelihoods, and daily life across the RSG project area — the people whose voices the FGDs were designed to hear.



What We Calibrate For: Six Context Criteria

The local conditions the guideline tests every FGD against — the criteria that decide whether a session will surface candid, usable input.

01

Venue selection

Community-familiar venues — halls, schools, trusted gathering spaces — consistently surface more candid views than project-branded settings.

02

Calendar discipline

Timings respect prayer schedules, the religious calendar, fishing seasons, and school terms — the calibration that determines whether the right people are in the room.

03

Composition of the room

Women's sessions facilitated by female teams. Separate sessions for age groups and influence-holders where hierarchy would otherwise silence junior voices.

04

Language and register

Local Arabic and local dialect, not classical or technical. Project terminology translated into concepts the community uses every day.

05

Confidentiality protocols

Reinforced at the start and end of every session. Essential where participants worry their views could affect relationships or standing.

06

Incentivising local participation

Certificates of contribution, post-session “dine & talk,” and follow-up training workshops. Recognition that visibly lifted attendance and depth of engagement.

Sources: Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, Using Mixed Methods in M&E (World Bank WPS5245, 2010); Greene, Caracelli & Graham (1997) on the epistemological value of mixing methods.

The Three-Role Session Architecture

Every FGD is run by a three-person team with deliberately distinct roles.

Facilitator

Leads the discussion, manages group dynamics, ensures balanced participation.

Discipline: neutrality. Probes without leading; manages dominant voices without silencing them.

Cultural fit (mandatory Saudi/local): acts as a majlis host — sets a tone of hospitality, respects seniority, and reads what is left unsaid.

Native Arabic and local dialect; knows tribal and family sensitivities that shape who speaks first.

Note Taker

Documents what is said and how it is said — body language, agreement, disagreement, silences.

Codes participants anonymously and reconciles notes against audio after the session.

Cultural fit (mandatory Saudi/local): catches idioms, proverbs, and indirect speech that a non-local would record literally and misread.

Recognises when a polite “yes” signals disagreement, and flags it for analysis.

Observer

Monitors the session as a whole: dynamics, ethics, facilitation quality.

Provides feedback after sessions to improve future ones; internal check on quality.

Cultural fit (preferred Saudi/local; can be external for independence): plays the role of a respected witness — present, attentive, non-interfering.

A local observer reassures participants the process is community-anchored; an external observer adds independent assurance.

The FGD Lifecycle: Nine Stages from Question to Plan

How a single FGD moves from a defined research question through design, delivery, and back to the community as a planning input.

01

Define purpose & objectives

Anchor each FGD to a specific research or planning question. Specify what qualitative depth the survey cannot deliver.

02

Identify & segment participants

Demographics, geography, livelihood. Homogeneous within groups. Tier-weighted by exposure to project impacts.

03

Develop the discussion guide

Semi-structured. 6–10 open-ended questions. Warm-up, core, wrap-up. Aligned with project objectives and survey indicators.

04

Logistics planning

Neutral, community-familiar venue. Recording with consent. Transportation, refreshments, informed consent procedures.

05

Recruit & train the team

Three-role team (facilitator, note taker, observer). Local language fluency. Gender-matched facilitation where required.

06

Pilot the guide

Test with a small group. Assess clarity, flow, and cultural appropriateness. Revise before full deployment.

07

Conduct the FGDs

Open with purpose and consent. Probe for depth. Manage dominant or silent voices. Capture non-verbal cues.

08

Data management & analysis

Transcribe. Code by theme and pattern. Track convergence. Link findings to quantitative survey data.

09

Report & use findings

Direct quotes (anonymised). Link to decisions. Return validated findings to the community before they harden into a plan.

Anchors: RSG FGDs Guidelines; IAIA Public Participation Best Practice Principles; World Bank, The Road to Results — Tool 5; Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock (WB WPS5245, 2010).

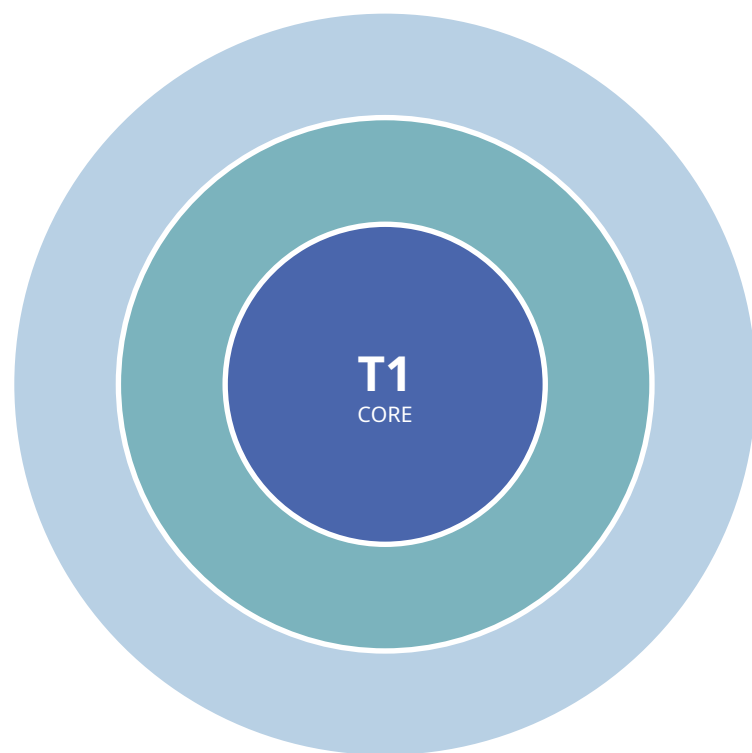
FGDs in Practice

Small-group sessions, plenary gatherings, and community invitations in practice.



Tiered Participant Selection

Weighting FGD findings by actual exposure to the project.



● **TIER 1 • Core**
High exposure & dependence
Most frequent, most intensive FGDs

● **TIER 2 • Adjacent**
Moderate exposure
Regular FGD engagement

● **TIER 3 • Outer**
Lower exposure / partnership potential
Proportionate FGD engagement

Within each tier: youth, women, business owners, and sectoral groups (fishermen, herders, farmers, hospitality workers, craft practitioners).

WHY THIS MATTERS

Tiering ensures findings are weighted by actual exposure rather than by who is most accessible or most willing to participate.

Grounding: IFC PS1 on Area of Influence and risk-based engagement; RSG Impacted Community Identification Methodology; Equator Principles (EP4).

Five-Tier Classification × IFC Performance Standards

How exposure-weighted tiering maps to international scrutiny standards — and translates to FGD intensity.

IFC Performance Standard	Tier 1 Direct impact	Tier 2 Proximate impact	Tier 3 Indirect impact	Tier 4 Project-area broader	Tier 5 Kingdom-level / national
PS1: Assessment & management of E&S risks and impacts	High	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
PS2: Labor and working conditions	Significant	Significant	Moderate	Moderate	Light
PS4: Community health, safety, and security	High	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
PS5: Land acquisition & involuntary resettlement	High	Significant	Moderate	Light	N/A
PS7: Indigenous Peoples / local communities	High	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
PS8: Cultural heritage	Significant	High	Significant	Moderate	Light
FGD engagement intensity	Repeated, multiple sub-group FGDs; validation loops	Multiple FGDs; gender-segregated where relevant	Targeted FGDs on specific issues	Periodic FGDs; survey-led	Survey-led; FGDs by exception

Anchors: IFC Performance Standards (PS1–PS8, 2012); RSG Impacted Community Identification Methodology; Equator Principles (EP4, 2020). Cell values denote the level of scrutiny each Standard requires by tier.

Key Challenges & Actions Taken

Five obstacles encountered in the field and the responses that became documented standard.

01 CHALLENGE

Solo facilitation under pressure

✓ ACTION

Three-role architecture

Single-person sessions produced weaker data. Universalized three-role teams after quality gap was confirmed.

02 CHALLENGE

Age-gap dynamics silenced youth

✓ ACTION

Age-banded sessions

Separate sessions for youth, mid-career, and elders surfaced distinct concerns that mixed groups had flattened.

03 CHALLENGE

Influential figures resisted exclusion

✓ ACTION

Reframed as Key Informant Interviews

Offered leaders separate KII format — honoring their standing while protecting group candor.

04 CHALLENGE

Attendance tied to scheduling

✓ ACTION

Calendar & seasonal protocols

Documented scheduling protocols after attendance variability was traced to timing choices.

05 CHALLENGE

Issues outside RSG remit raised

✓ ACTION

Conveyor role & closed-loop referral

Concerns routed to relevant entities then closed back with the community as a trust duty.

A Traced Example: From FGD Finding to CDP Response

One finding from women-led handicraft collectives, traced across five stages.

Pre-FGD Assumption

Surveys showed strong skills + low income. Misread as a skills gap.

1

FGD Finding

Women explained: skills aren't the constraint — market access is.

2

Coding & Validation

Tested across sessions. Coded: market access is the binding constraint.

3

CDP Response

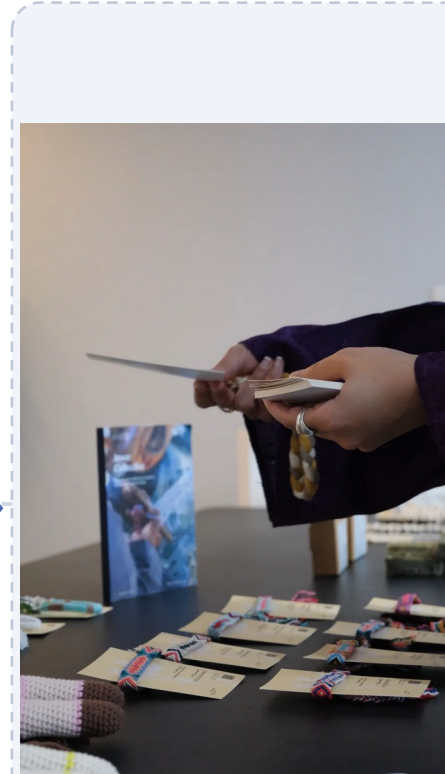
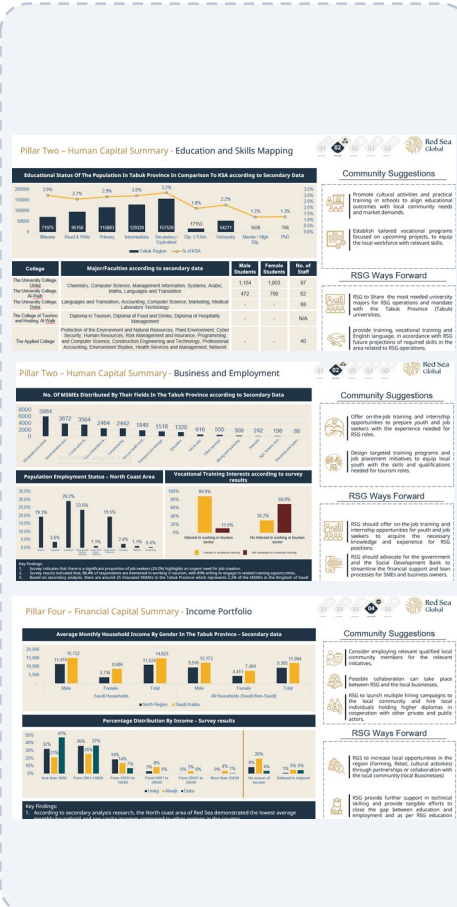
Shifted to digital marketplace, retail integration & logistics support.

4

Outcome Traceability

Tracked income, market access & satisfaction. Fully documented chain.

5



Three Segments of a Comprehensive Approach

This paper is one segment — the Method layer — of a wider research agenda where each piece only works when joined with the other two.

WHY

The Goal Layer

Paper 1991 · Maram Almansour

Public Trust & Social Impact Assessment

Frames public trust as the goal of social engagement — earned through how participation is designed: whose voice is heard, in what setting, and through what local norms.

HOW

The Method Layer

Paper 1567 · Majed Shaabein (this paper)

Strengthening SIA against urgency & misinformation

Adapts surveys and FGDs to Saudi context — gender-segregated discussions, tribal hierarchies, language and religious sensitivities — and analyses the data into evidence.

WHERE

The Evidence Layer

Companion paper · Faisal Alyousef

IA follow-up, ongoing communication, sound information

Receives evidence and distributes it across the four altitudes of the CPCD model — sustained through contractual mechanisms over the destination's multi-decade life.



Let's continue the conversation!

Message m



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nts in the IAIA26 app.

Majed Shaabein

Red Sea Global, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Companion paper: Almansour (1991) — Communicating Information to Build Trust

Companion paper: Alyousef — Beyond the Developer: Cascading Public-Participation Obligations