

Chapter 13

Focus Groups as a Tool for Conducting Participatory Research: A Case Study of Small-Scale Forest Management in Slovenia



Peter Kumer and Mimi Urbanc

Abstract Focus group discussion is a participatory research method that has been effectively utilized in numerous social science disciplines either as a standalone method or more often alongside other methods. The research presented in this chapter used focus groups as the final tool in an extensive study of small-scale forest owners' management practices, examining driving and hindering factors. This issue stems from dispersed and fragmented private ownership with many owners, 89% of whose properties are smaller than 5 ha and are divided into three plots on average. This has posed a considerable challenge to Slovenia's forestry sector. Focus groups sought to obtain stakeholders' reflections on findings from previous research as well as new insights. To this end, nine focus groups scattered around the country were conducted at the local level following the same format. The National Forestry Service's district foresters contributed greatly to recruiting participants and carrying out the discussions. Important outcomes were owners' perspectives on detached owners and their lack of management, as well as new topics that were not identified in previous stages. Despite some limitations—in our case, the inability to attract detached owners and overcome some power-related tensions between owners and the district forester—the focus groups proved to be not only efficient and informative for researchers, but above all supportive of state forest policy being implemented at the local level and greater stakeholder participation in it.

Keywords Forest management · Action research · Research triangulation · Stakeholder participation · Hierarchical spatial organization

P. Kumer (✉) · M. Urbanc
Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Anton Melik Geographical
Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: peter.kumer@zrc-sazu.si

M. Urbanc
e-mail: mimi.urbanc@zrc-sazu.si

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13.1 Introduction

The focus group is a qualitative method of data collection that has been widely used in the social sciences for several decades (Parker and Jonathan 2006). Its origins go back to Columbia University in the late 1940s. The first topics studied were attitudes toward radio soap operas and responses to the government's own wartime radio propaganda programs (Bloor et al. 2001). From a prevailing data collection method in both public and private organizations, it has become a valuable research method in recent decades. Focus groups are commonly used to explore and construct knowledge about a particular phenomenon in small groups (Kitzinger 1995; Liamputtong 2011; Krueger and Casey 2015) or to aid interpretation, critical appraisal, or feedback for survey findings (Bloor et al. 2001). For a researcher, focus groups offer invaluable breadth of learning, and the participants' thoughts complement the originality of researcher's own thinking (Bloor et al. 2001). Moreover, participants have the capacity to identify various (hidden) dimensions of a topic (Longhurst 2010). Because the method is very resourceful and adaptive, and it perfectly complements other research methods such as surveys, questionnaires, and individual interviews (Longhurst 2010). In addition, its time efficiency and low cost have promoted its widespread adoption.

A further reason for the wide use of the focus group method is its inherent participatory nature based on group processes (Chiu 2003), making it an excellent participatory approach. This is additionally strengthened by the fact that focus groups normally address average people, who are assumed to be "ingenuous participants" (Farinosi et al. 2019). Accordingly, the focus group is one of the most dynamic research methods (Farinosi et al. 2019); its group dynamics help researchers to obtain richer and more detailed data (Lune and Berg 2017), making it stand out from other qualitative research methods. Whereas the scholarly benefits of the researcher-participant relationship have been clearly identified, participant benefits have received less attention. However, we believe there are some. The most tangible is in planning procedures by incorporating peoples' needs and expectations. When a focus group discussion is driven by pure curiosity, participants' benefits are confined to new insights and a wider perspective on the issues shared within a group more generally such as empowerment, inclusion, and community building.

The basic element of this method is the participatory aspect, which stimulates dynamic discussion among participants guided by a moderator in such a way that all group members are engaged and active. The discussion is normally semi-structured because the topics are well defined prior to carrying out a focus group (Miller and Sceptur 2016). Usually, a focus group cycle consists of two to ten discussions, but the number varies and depends on the research goals, number of topics, and time and budget availability. The number of participants for each individual focus group discussion varies from an optimal six to eight, to real-life practical modifications ranging from three to fourteen participants. The group size reflects the characteristics of participants as well as the topics being discussed (Bloor et al. 2001).

Although the focus group method is primarily used in the social sciences, its usability nevertheless applies to other disciplines if the research necessitates a human or social aspect. The method has, therefore, also gained popularity in natural resource management. Not only are natural resources generally very complex, but they also touch upon various sectoral policies, which makes them challenging to manage. Forests and their future development are no exception, especially in connection with climate change discourse and accessibility and social equity concerns, among other things.

The usefulness of focus groups in forest management practices and options is widely addressed in the literature. Attention is given to the following aspects: how the management process is developed and steered (Corral and Hernandez 2017), what is considered or neglected in forest management (Mountjoy et al. 2014; Heltorp et al. 2018), whether and how stakeholders are included (Wilkes-Allemann et al. 2015; Awung and Marchant 2018; Ward et al. 2018), what stakeholders' expectations and values are (Bernués et al. 2014; Andrejczyk et al. 2016; Ordóñez et al. 2017; Takala et al. 2017a, b; Soto et al. 2018; Sutherland et al. 2018), which forest interventions are socially acceptable (Miller et al. 2014; Vaidya and Mayer 2016; Kelly et al. 2016), and what the benefits are for people involved in the management process (Egunyu et al. 2016).

Encouraged by the popularity of qualitative research methods for understanding the link between forests and society, and following the latest trends in forest management research (i.e., analytical approaches and methods; Leipold 2014), we used the focus group method to explore the characteristics of small-scale forest management in Slovenia. The purpose of conducting focus groups was to assemble diverse stakeholders that were engaged in forest management and to use moderated discussion to collect their often opposing views of and opinions about selected topics (Nyumba et al. 2018). Therefore, this chapter shows how the focus group method was used in the final phase for studying the management of pocket-sized private forest properties as an efficient complement to other methods. Specifically, focus groups were used to obtain stakeholders' reflections on findings from previous research stages as well as new insights.

13.2 Background

Slovenia is one of the most forested countries in Europe, and forests hold a prominent role in Slovenians' mindset based on the wide variety of services they provide: from economic and environmental to recreational and social. Most of the country's forests (76% of 1.2 million ha) are owned by approximately half a million private forest owners (PFOs), which is a large group within a country of only two million (Medved et al. 2010; Kumer and Potočnik Slavič 2016). Given the high number of forest owners in comparison to the total population, it is not surprising that private forest properties are small (89% of them are smaller than 5 ha). Moreover, private forest properties are also considerably fragmented with one owner having three parcels

on average (Fig. 13.1). The small sizes of forest properties and their parcelization and fragmentation is a result of socioeconomic changes that occurred in the decades after the Second World War. The owners have started to migrate from rural areas to towns, and they lost interest in their forest property. The changes occurred when planned inheritance practices (e.g., by favoring one heir among the children) changed into unplanned practices. Inherited forest properties were divided among children, spouses, and siblings, each receiving an equal but small share. The same thing happened with restitution (denationalization), in which properties were assigned to all of the legal heirs of a single owner that lost land nationalized after the Second World War (Kumer 2019). On top of that, traditional inheritance practices in the past were different among regions. For example, due to Hungarian inheritance law (and despite planned inheritance), the land was broken up into small parcels in the eastern part of the country long before the aforementioned social changes. This has led to a situation in which forest properties in eastern Slovenia are even more fragmented than elsewhere. In addition to all of these forest-related aspects and challenges, there is another one worth mentioning: Slovenian law requires forests to be publicly accessible, permitting not only walking and relaxation, but also collecting berries, nuts, and mushrooms for personal consumption. This fact that Slovenians are very proud of can conversely lead to conflicts between land owners and users (Kumer et al. 2018).

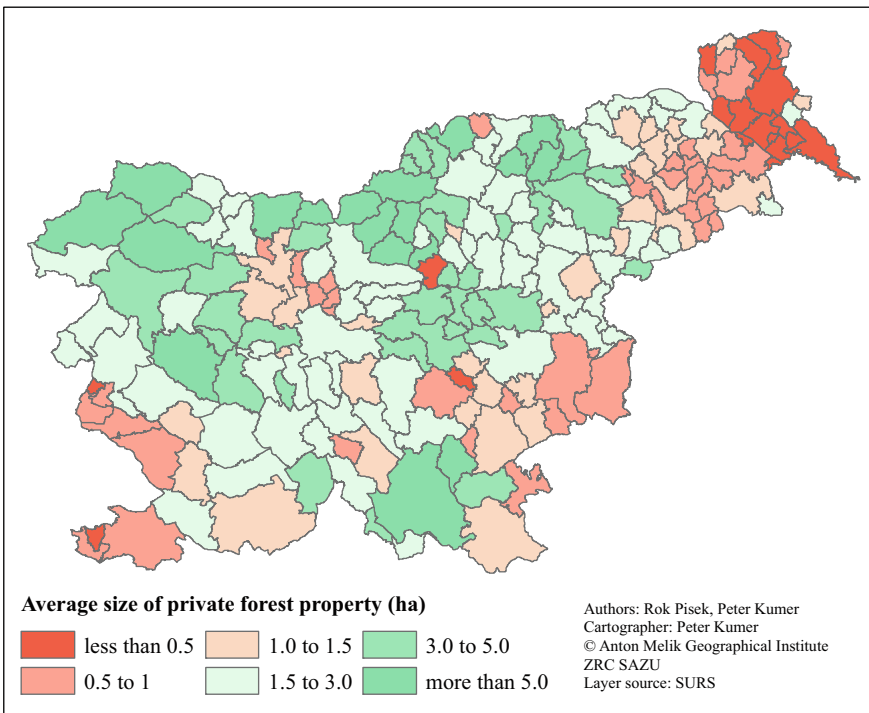


Fig. 13.1 Map showing the ownership fragmentation of forest land

In Slovenia, forest-related challenges have only been subject to quantitative research, and they have predominantly been discussed within the context of production-oriented forestry policy, which has aimed to engage owners in management of their economically underutilized forests. To our knowledge, no qualitative research has been conducted on the attitudes of forest owners, their socioeconomic background, and their understanding of forest values beyond mere timber production. Therefore, focus groups to complement prior surveys, interviews (Kumer and Potočnik Slavič 2016), owner type analysis (Kumer and Štrumbelj 2017), and multi-criteria decision analysis (Kumer and Pezdevšek Malovrh 2018) appeared to be an ideal method to bridge this research gap. The focus groups are an ideal tool when trying to access local knowledge and also detailed and hidden information (i.e., interpersonal interactions and nonverbal communication).

In order to approach forestry stakeholders in an effective and communicative manner, we worked closely with the Slovenian Forest Service. This public institution, whose task it is to outline and steer forest management planning in all forests, irrespective of ownership, is hierarchically organized with a central unit in Ljubljana and 396 forest districts around the country. District foresters are forestry experts that transmit national forest-related policy to the local level. They provide education and training for forest owners, cooperate with rural communities, and foster awareness about forests and nature preservation. Due to their embeddedness in the local situation, they were our key figures for approaching forest owners.

13.3 Implementing the Method

13.3.1 *Designing the Focus Groups*

The essential part of the preparatory phase was developing an implementation guide, as suggested by Crabtree and Miller (1999). Building on the research question, a list of semi-structured questions was prepared based on prior research steps; specifically, on the results of a mixed-mode survey, in-depth interviews, and multi-criteria research analysis for evaluating stakeholders' perceptions.

The questions included in the guide covered the following topics: agricultural affiliation, inheritance practices, gender differences in management, interpersonal relations with co-owners and neighbors, managerial practices, distant management, taxes, and future forestry regulation.

In order for the process to run smoothly and to help the moderator to conduct the discussion efficiently, a series of questions and a strict timeline were outlined. The general outline for the entire cycle was set between March and June 2016. The entire time span allowed flexibility in carrying out individual focus groups.

The focus groups required technical equipment for audio and video recording. Video recording was needed for analysis of interpersonal interactions and nonverbal communication.

13.3.2 Selecting and Recruiting Participants

The quality of the data collected was greatly dependent on the participants, and so the group composition was of high importance. We paid particular attention to participants' heterogeneity and diversity (Table 13.1), which were both acknowledged in the literature (Bole et al. 2017). The internal variety also considered gender and age balance. The common denominator of our stakeholder groups is embeddedness in forest management at the local level. More specifically, partakers were individual small-scale private forest owners (SPFO), members of PFO associations, and members of machinery circles. A top-down legal and decision-making perspective was added by including district foresters, other employees of the public forestry service, and representatives of Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry.

The group composition created a challenge, which is referred to as “power imposition” (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Numerous SPFOs considered themselves less knowledgeable about forestry than the forestry sector professionals and employees. To overcome SPFOs' self-perceived inferior position and subsequent impediment, we emphasized that our goal was only to collect personal attitudes, experiences, and reflections. This proved to be effective and encouraging enough for SPFOs to take part.

The success of the recruitment process, however, depended greatly on the local district forester and his or her credibility, moral authority within the forest owners' community, and other stakeholder communities. It was the district forester, therefore, that functioned as a communication channel. We also reached nonowners through academic contacts, e-mail, and phone invitations. In addition, attendants were further encouraged by simple incentives. These included practical gifts, such as recyclable shopping bags, notebooks, and umbrellas. Professionals were provided with confirmation of their participation, allowing them to integrate attendance into their daily work and have travel costs reimbursed.

13.3.3 Location, Date, and Size

Given the general forest ownership and forest property situation in Slovenia and regionally specific inheritance practices, we paid special attention to the locations of focus groups. Nine focus groups were spatially dispersed and conducted in selected local units of the Slovenian Forestry Service. Nationwide coverage was in line with one of the aims of the research: to obtain a geographical aspect, including understanding regional differences.

The first group—a pilot or preparatory focus group for testing the questions' clarity—was carried out in downtown Ljubljana. The venue was a modern, state of the art focus group facility, which offered a quiet, private, and comfortable environment for participants and an observation cabin with a one-way mirror and audio, visual, and other technical support for the moderator and his supervisors. Despite this excellent

Table 13.1 Date, location, and participants at focus groups

Date	Location	Number of participants	Type of participants	Age	Gender ratio (F/M)
24 March 2016	Ljubljana	6	SPFO (2), public forestry service, Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry, PFO association, district forester	Around 40	2/4
12 April 2016	Bohinj	7	SPFO (3), machinery circles, large property owner, sawmill owner, district forester	42–60	0/7
13 April 2016	Bukovica pri Vodica	8	SPFO (7), district forester	43–78	1/7
18 April 2016	Počakovo	8	SPFO (6), district forester, local development agency	20–66	2/6
20 April 2016	Velesovo	7	SPFO (6), district forester	42–78	3/3
17 May 2016	Tišina	13	SPFO (7), district forester (4), public forestry service, PFO association	40–65	2/11
1 June 2016	Kozina	8	SPFO (4), district forester (2), public forestry service, agrarian community	52–76	0/8

(continued)

Table 13.1 (continued)

Date	Location	Number of participants	Type of participants	Age	Gender ratio (F/M)
14 June 2016	Velike Lašče	8	SPFO (4), large property owner, Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry, district forester, public forestry service	51–76	0/8
28 June 2016	Nazarje	7	SPFO (4), district forester (2), public forestry service	47–69	2/5

technical arrangement, its distance from forest owners' home locations dissuaded us from using this venue for follow-up focus groups.

Based on practical and logistical reasons, the locations for the main part of the focus groups were selected close to participants. Consequently, we had to adapt to the availabilities and capacities of the local facilities. These focus groups, therefore, did not necessarily meet the technical standards of the first one. The chosen venues were different: from local inns to the local branch office of the Slovenian Forestry Service. The local branch offices proved to be a comfortable place to meet and discuss matters due to the participants' familiarity with them. Organizing a group at the local level substantially reduced the overall cost: the participants traveled shorter distances on average.

13.3.4 The Moderator, Key Person, and Group Dynamics

The role of a moderator is to introduce the aim of the focus group and to guide the conversation. Introducing the aim is done with a broad, open-ended question in order to define the scope of the discussion and pitch the topic. In our case, the introductory question was "What does a forest mean to you?" For guiding the subsequent conversation, a moderator should only use the guide to negotiate the group and to create a structured way of collecting responses. However, the discussion might raise unpredictable and unexpected thoughts, and a moderator should, therefore, remain open-minded and receptive, and be able to react appropriately. A moderator can use probes to prompt participants to explain further.

Negotiating between allowing a natural flow of the interaction among participants on the one hand and a focus group guide with a timeline on the other is a considerable



Fig. 13.2 Snapshot from a focus group in Velesovo. *Photograph* Peter Kumer

challenge. The group structure plays a role in this respect. Well-structured groups tend to answer a research question in a straightforward way, whereas less structured ones help reveal the perspectives of the group participants and may assist in the discovery of new ideas and insights (Morgan 1988). In our case, the moderator fostered spontaneous and free-flowing conversation, thereby allowing relatively unstructured discussions (Fig. 13.2).

The role of district foresters was an important one not only in the recruiting process, but also in the implementation phase, but in the latter case, their inactivity was appreciated. They understood that their viewpoints could influence the participants' train of thoughts. Therefore, they refrained from talking, especially from giving informed opinions; however, they helped the moderator to put the attendees' personal attitudes and experiences into a policy context and they brought in the absentee owners' perspectives.

13.3.5 Analysis

We transcribed audio recordings in their entirety and then performed a computer-assisted grounded theory analysis. The theoretical background was based on Friese's (2016) adaptation of a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), which foregrounds researchers' interpretations and their "immersion" in the data in a way that embeds the narrative of the participants in the final research findings.

The ATLAS.ti program was used in the coding process, which is the core of the analytical stage. It included theoretical sampling; initial, focused, and axial coding; and building the category system. The focus groups were analyzed after each session.

13.4 Results

The focus group discussion provided down to earth interpretation of and reflection on findings from previous research stages as well as completely new and unexpected standpoints. By bringing in their personal and family experiences, participants enhanced the grass roots aspect of small-scale forest property management. To a researcher, they provided an in-depth understanding of small-scale forest ownership.

First, the discussion on cluster analysis results yielded two SPFO types—those that are engaged and those that are detached (Kumer and Štrumbelj 2017)—and it revealed other potential owner types in Slovenia. In addition, the notion of detached (absentee) SPFOs that live away from their properties and are not engaged in management gave rise to a broad and lively discussion mostly focusing on the reasons for their disengagement. Among these, the participants singled out past migrations, especially from rural to urban areas or from Slovenia abroad (mostly to western European countries or overseas), changes of permanent residence, and co-ownership, which hinders efficient management.

On the other hand, the important focus group outcomes were emerging topics that appeared relevant for the research but were not identified in the previous stages. One such example is the climate of mistrust among forest owners, which negatively affects their willingness to cooperate. A second circumstance was the landowner versus visitor conflict, which is especially evident near urban centers. Unlimited access to forests as a popular recreational space and a resource of non-wood forest products (such as mushrooms, nuts, herbs, etc.) can result in a collision of different (and often conflicting) ideas among diverse user groups about how to use the forest. This challenge is more severe due to inadequate consideration and a subsequent lack of appropriate monitoring and governance measures.

The participants also benefited from the focus groups by hearing the viewpoints of various stakeholders, and they were informed about the findings of previous research phases, which helped them to learn more about the topic. They could see a complex picture of different interests in the forest.

13.5 Reflection on the Method Used

In our broader research, in which we examined the managerial issues of small-scale forest properties, the focus groups were a final but valuable data resource and interpretation vehicle at the same time. They were therefore planned to be conducted during the last phase in order to allow the juxtaposition of results from previous research phases and *ex post* reflection on them. Surprisingly, new topics emerged. Taking all of this into account, focus groups proved to ideally complement than other methods, especially for issues in which the human aspect is of major relevance. Our

case is closely in line with extensive literature addressing the usefulness of focus groups.

Although the entire endeavor was started and carried out exclusively for research purposes, the process and its activities were also advantageous for stakeholders, especially for district foresters. By participating in the process, they were able to realize some of their general tasks: training and educating owners, disseminating information on forest management, and raising forest-related issues among the public. Moreover, they were given the opportunity to obtain structured and evidence-based insight into current forestry policy from the perspective of owners and other stakeholders.

Nonetheless, some limitations were obvious. A critical limitation is connected with the selection of focus group participants. Despite the valuable assistance of district foresters in recruiting local forest owners and forestry-related stakeholders, the pool of participants did not represent the entire owner population. Detached owners were missing for the most part; absenteeism is inherent in their *modus operandi* in forest-related issues. This gap was partially filled by district foresters, who functioned as a proxy for absentee owners, whose perspective was thereby indirectly considered.

Even though the district foresters were crucial in the process, they were unable to mitigate the uneasiness of participants that were not entirely comfortable in expressing their views openly. District foresters were perceived as officials that supervise activities in private forests. Upon reflection, excluding foresters from the discussion would probably help overcome this gap.

Not only top-down power pressure emerged, but also a powerless feeling in the professional community in charge of implementing state policy at the local level, which revealed certain power relations within the forestry sector. Some foresters refused to participate because they thought their influence on owners was insignificant or that all owners in their district were inactive. It is somewhat surprising that intangible power and the informal position of foresters emerged as a decisive factor for (dis)engaged private small-scale forest management.

Organizing focus groups at the local level proved to be successful due to the familiar environment and participants. There was no need for an icebreaker to start the discussion. The district foresters functioned as a communication channel between the focus group moderator and participants. They often summarized the conversation and put it into the context of modern forestry challenges. Giving priority to local venues with basic technical equipment over a centrally located specialized focus group facility proved fortuitous in many respects.

Moreover, integrating the focus group into the research was generally economically and academically justified, providing abundant knowledge and information for modest financial input. However, the rich material obtained required substantial staff effort for subsequent qualitative analyzes. Focus groups made it possible for new topics to surface (new, subtle topics were identified) and discussions of aspects beyond the topics planned. These aspects were relevant to our research focus. For example, topics such as trust, cooperation, cultural influence, tradition, and globalized individualism proved to be an important managerial factor.

Management of a resource as important as a forest definitely cannot be devoid of public participation, especially management of private forests and particularly in countries with short democratic tradition. Focus groups are a vehicle for extending public participation. They should be further developed by the Slovenian Forestry Service and considered as a format for regular meetings at the local level to promote cooperation and information transfer, thereby positively influencing forest management.

The following conclusions can be drawn from this study. The method would be less appropriate if the topics discussed were personal and the participants did not know one another. Focus groups are also inappropriate if the problem is individualized and does not require previous interactions. This is not the case in forest management because it typically requires aspects of various stakeholders.

Focus groups are appropriate for identifying unknown or suspected and subtle issues as well as for stakeholders' reflection on aspects already identified and research findings. Inclusion of a spatially well-organized hierarchical institution (e.g., the Slovenian Forestry Service) into the research can raise certain power-relation tensions, yet the advantages considerably surpass possible disadvantages, not only by providing communication channels, but also by including experts' opinions and informed experience. Because the issues related to forest management are uniform across the country, the spatial dispersion of focus groups helped us with generalization. Focus groups perfectly connect research, public service, and individual social groups.

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