



*PROJECT FOSTEX Deliverable*

# D.1.1. The Methodology Pack/ Focus Group Facilitator Guide

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation	Full name
EACEA	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GA	Grant Agreement
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
PC	Project Coordinator
WP	Work Package



# Focus Group Facilitator Guide

Erasmus + Project: “Fostering innovation in the Jordan and Moroccan textile industry [FOSTEX]

598347-EPP-1-2018-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP”

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## Why are we conducting focus group interviews?

Group dialogue tends to generate rich information, as participants’ insights tend to “trigger” the sharing of others’ personal experiences and perspectives in a way that can more easily or readily tease out the nuances and tensions of complex topics and subjects – a dynamic that is not present during key informant interviews.

## The Focus Group Team

Conducting focus groups requires a small team, composed of a:

**Facilitator** to guide the discussion, *promote conversation, perhaps by asking open questions. The facilitator may also need to challenge participants, especially to draw out people’s differences, and tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic under discussion. Sometimes facilitators will need to probe for details, or move things forward when the conversation is drifting or has reached a minor conclusion. Facilitators also have to keep the session focused and so sometimes they may deliberately have to steer the conversation back on course. They also have to ensure everyone participates and gets a chance to speak. At the same time, facilitators are encouraged not to show too much approval, so as to avoid favoring particular participants. They must avoid giving personal opinions so as not to influence participants towards any particular position or opinion.*

**Assistant facilitator(s)** who will make hand-written notes and observations during the discussion, serves as a “back-up” in case something happens with the recording equipment or participants wish not to have their discussion tape-recorded. These assistant facilitators also include those on the local team who may step in to help translate or contextualize a term in the local language or in the local interpretation. [see Appendix A for Roles and Responsibilities of Assistant Facilitator]

## Role of the Facilitator

### **General Roles and Responsibilities:**

- Keep participants focused, engaged, attentive and interested
- Monitor time and use the limited time effectively
- Use prompts and probes to stimulate discussion
- Use the focus group guide effectively to ensure all topics are covered



- Politely and diplomatically enforce ground rules: Make sure everyone participates and at a level that is comfortable, Limit side conversations, Encourage one person to speak at a time
- Be prepared to explain or restate questions (without asking leading questions)
- Diffuse and pre-empt arguments
- Immediately after each focus group, work with the assistant facilitator to complete the Debrief Discussion Tool [see Appendix F]. To facilitate the debriefing discussion, review the notes of the discussion, discussing areas that seemed particularly important or salient given your knowledge of the research questions. Capture these insights using the Debrief Discussion Tool.

**Effective Facilitators:**

- Have good listening skills
- Have good observation skills
- Have good speaking skills
- Can foster open and honest dialogue among diverse groups and individuals
- Can remain impartial (i.e., do not give her/his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say)
- Can encourage participation when someone is reluctant to speak up
- Can manage participants who dominate the conversation
- Are sensitive to cultural issues
- Are sensitive to differences in power among and within groups

**Participants as Experts**

Individuals are being invited to participate in focus groups because they are viewed as possessing important knowledge about particular experiences, needs, or perspectives that we hope to learn more about as a result of the needs assessment. Let participants know that you are there to learn from them. Expressing this to participants helps to establish a respectful appreciation for valuable contributions that they will make to the needs assessment.

**Balancing Rapport and Professionalism**

It is important to present yourself as a researcher rather than a friend or colleague or mentor. You will need to let participants know that you are part of a team that is conducting research. This formality communicates to participants that their participation is important. Of course, rapport is important to the facilitation process, because it can dramatically influence the willingness of participants to answer questions, and how openly and honestly they answer the questions they are asked. The purpose of focus groups is to gain information about the topic(s) of interest from the perspective of participants. Rapport helps achieve this.

Part of your role is to achieve a balance between building rapport with participants and conveying an appropriate level of professionalism. Your role during focus groups is not that of a good conversationalist or a friend who provides feedback, but a professional. If you are too casual, participants may not see you as someone who is prepared to take what they have to say seriously. However, if you are too formal, participants may feel intimidated by you and may not be as willing to reveal information. Strive to achieve a balance between being formal and casual during your focus groups.



## Listening Skills

Good listening is key to conducting focus groups that will result in the collection of useful information. Being a good listener means being an “interested” listener. This is done by demonstrating that you are paying attention to what participants are sharing, staying neutral or impartial, and practicing appropriate silence.

### Listen Carefully to Participants

Active listening allows you to probe effectively and at appropriate points during the focus group. Active listening involves not only hearing what someone is saying, but also noticing body posture and facial gestures (i.e., any changes in nonverbal behavior) that might provide cues as to the appropriate or necessary ways to engage participants.

### The Importance of Neutrality

While showing participants that you are actively listening and interested in what they are sharing, you will also want to remain as neutral or impartial as possible, even if you have a strong opinion about something. Use phrases such as “Thank you. That is helpful.” Comments such as “I can’t believe it!” or “You really think that?!” are not appropriate remarks for a facilitator to make, because they infer your opinion and impose judgment on the participant, which may shut down discussion. You want to gather information during focus groups that is as honest as possible. If participants sense that you have an opinion, they may want to change their responses so that they will seem more socially desirable, rather than reflect what they truly believe or feel about a topic.

## Tips for Facilitating

### Silence Encourages Elaboration

Allowing silence at times encourages elaboration by participants because it gives them a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information. However, it is important to strike a balance between keeping the conversation moving (so that you use your time well) and allowing participants adequate time to share and process what has been shared.

### Using Probes and Asking Clarifying Questions

Probes and clarifying questions have two main purposes: to help clarify what a participant has said and to help get more detailed information on topics of interest. Probes allow the interview respondent to provide more than just a one-sentence answer to the questions you ask.

Examples of Probes:

- “Please tell me (more) about that...”
- “Can you explain what you mean by...”
- “Can you tell me something else about...”
- Repeat the question – repetition gives more time to think.



- Pause for the answer – a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
- Repeat the reply – hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation
- Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions – they provoke more detailed information
- “Anything else?”
- ***If one person speaks a lot, facilitator must be conscious of saying, something like:*** “is it the same for the rest of you?” OR “Have you had different experiences? We want to know the completeness of this story....”
- ***In situations where participant seems ambivalent:*** “Does this component not resonate? Can you identify why?” OR “Is there another facet that is more relevant to your experience?”

As a general rule, you want to interrupt the participants as little as possible. If you feel that you need to follow-up with something they said by using probes, make a mental note of it and ask them about it when they have finished their thought.

Interrupting the participants may influence how they answer and if they answer the questions you ask. If a participant strays off course, encourage them to finish their thought. After they have finished their thought, it is appropriate to bring them back to the question you asked to make sure that they have answered it completely.

Using probes for clarification helps you to gather good information while avoiding the assumption that you understand the meaning of a keyword, phrase, or perspective of the participants. Probes such as the ones above help you see things from the perspective of the participants.

Clarifying questions and probes gives the participants clues as to how specific you would like their answers to be and asking them for clarification, details, and examples. The opinions of the participants should not be assumed by the facilitator. To help ensure that you are not assuming, make small steps in your questioning with simple questions, not big leaps. This way you will get more detail and elaboration from the interview respondent and will keep you from making assumptions about what they have shared.

### Good Probing is Not Leading!

It is important to avoid asking questions that are leading, meaning that they reflect your opinions or assumptions about a topic. An example of a leading question is “Don’t you think...” This presents to the interview respondent that you have an opinion, not that you are there to learn from them as an unbiased listener. This type of questioning may lead the interview respondent to answer questions according to what you expect to hear, rather than how they really feel. The interview respondent may also want you to look at them in a favorable way, matching your opinions rather than sharing what they truly believe or have experienced.

### Managing Time

Individuals love to talk about their experiences and may have a tendency to go on and on about them. Here is where your skills as a facilitator are put to the test. As the facilitator, your job is to structure the focus group in such a way that you elicit a





complete response to questions, probing insightfully so that you get the level of detail you need in order to the issues adequately.

### **Keep the Conversation Moving**

It is also your job to politely move the conversation forward when what the participants are sharing is less useful given your research questions. Sometimes, it is possible to do this by listening for a segue – something that a participant talks about that is relevant to another question or set of questions. Other times, you may want to acknowledge that your time together is waning and there are some other aspects of their work and experience that you want to be sure you have time to learn about and explore, and, for this reason, you are going to move on.

### **Check in With the Participants**

At least once during the focus group session, ask the participants how they are doing with time. Use your perceptive abilities to sense if there is a feeling of strain on the part of the participants.

### **Follow the Focus Group Guide**

The focus group guide [see Appendix B] provides a framework for the facilitator to explore, probe, and ask questions. Initiating each topic with a carefully crafted question will help participants share their experiences but in a focused and meaningful manner. It is helpful to follow the focus group guide as much as possible when facilitating a focus group, to increase the credibility of the research results. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient. If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can probe for fuller, clearer responses (see above for suggestions on how to probe).

### **Other Tips for Guiding the Discussion**

In focus groups, it is not uncommon for a few individuals to dominate the discussion. Sometimes in mixed gender groups, one gender may tend to speak more than the other. To balance participation, and ensure that every participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, you might consider the following strategies:

- Address questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk
- Give nonverbal cues (look in another direction or stop taking notes when an individual talks for an extended period)
- Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion

### **Minimize Pressure to Conform to a Dominant View Point**

When an idea is being adopted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure to conform to a dominant viewpoint will occur. To minimize this group dynamic, the facilitator should probe for alternative views. For example, the facilitator can raise another issue, or say, “We have had an interesting discussion, but let’s explore other ideas or points of view. Has anyone had a different experience that they wish to share?”



## Common Problems—and How to Avoid them--During Focus Group Interviews

The following are some examples of common situations that can occur and what you can do in each of these situations. **What do I do if someone is dominating the conversation?**

Focus groups, ideally, allow researchers to collect the opinions and ideas of a variety of people. If someone is doing a lot of the talking, however, this may prevent others from contributing their thoughts, and limits the usefulness of the focus group. It is important to notice when this is happening and do what you can to try to make sure that other people have the opportunity to say things, even if they seem reluctant at first or insist that what is being said by others reflects what they would have said. It is important to have people say things in their own words as much as possible. If someone is dominating the conversation, you might want to respectfully acknowledge their contribution, and thank them, saying something like, "I really appreciate your comments." Then make direct eye contact with other people and ask something like, "I'm very interested in hearing how other people are feeling about this issue" or "It's very interesting to get a variety of perspectives, and I would like to hear from other people as well."

### **What do I do if no one responds to a question?**

In this kind of situation, it is helpful to try to understand why people aren't responding.

***Did you ask a question that was difficult for the participants to understand?*** If you think this might be the case, you might try asking the question in a different way. The more familiar you are with the research objectives of a particular focus group, the more successful you will be in rephrasing or rewording a question in an appropriate way that ensures that salient issues are explored and the research integrity of the group discussion is maintained.

***Do you think you might have asked a politically sensitive question (i.e., something that people are afraid to answer honestly because it might make other people angry)?*** If you think this might be the problem, you might move to a different question or topic that is less sensitive, and try coming back to the topic later, or use probes, during a different line of questioning, that might get at aspects of the sensitive topic but more subtly. Here, again, it might be helpful simply to rephrase the question or ask a slightly different question. Either approach may make it possible to pose a less controversial question to the group.

***Are people tired of talking about the topic and/or do they have no more to say about a topic?*** In this case, it may be important to simply state, "Is there anything else that you would like to share? [pause] If not, we can move on to our next question." This communicates to participants that this is their opportunity to contribute any additional thoughts and allows you to move on to the next topic more naturally and politely. If you, as the facilitator, think you haven't gotten all of the information you want on that topic, rather than trying to force things, just be aware that there may be an opportunity to elicit salient information in probing that occurs with respect to other questions. In other words, there may be important linkages and connections to explore throughout the focus group that emerge through subsequent discussion.



**Are people feeling uncomfortable about talking?** This typically occurs at the beginning of a focus group and is less likely to occur when focus groups start with an icebreaker (e.g., Place a handful of pennies on the table (make sure the pennies are new---made within the last 15 years). Instruct the attendees to select one randomly. One at a time, they say the year on the chosen penny and something that happened to them in that year) or the facilitator is able to set a comfortable tone and put people at ease in the beginning. If, however, this continues to be an issue during the focus group, you may need to back up and do a little work to make people feel more comfortable. Talk about easier topics, things that you think participants may be more familiar with or comfortable talking about, or, perhaps, things that you know are particularly interesting to them. This may help the participants begin to feel more comfortable talking in a group setting.

If no one responds to a question, and you aren't sure exactly what the problem is, it's okay sometimes to just wait it out. Be quiet for a moment and allow people time to think. Often, someone will speak up, either to answer the question or to ask a question that allows you to have a better understanding of the silence.

**What do I do if the group begins to talk about topics that are not relevant to the research?**

Sometimes the conversation will start to stray away from the topics of the focus group. When this happens, you might take advantage of a pause and say, "Thank you for that interesting idea. Perhaps we can discuss it in a separate session. For the purposes of exploring further the specific topics that are the focus of this discussion, with your consent, I would like to move on to another item." Another strategy is to orient the group to the time you have remaining for your discussion. You do not want the duration of the focus group to extend beyond the amount of time you communicated to participants. You may want to mention this when discussion strays from the intended focus, and then refocus the discussion accordingly or use this as an opportunity to indicate that you want to be sure that you hear from others.

**What do I do if people are having side conversations (i.e., conversations among themselves)?**

If people are having conversations among themselves, it can disrupt the focus group by making the other participants feel uncomfortable, making it hard for people to hear what others are saying, and making it hard for the facilitator to focus on what is being said. One of the best ways to handle this situation is to address it before the focus group begins, when you tell the participants about focus group ground rules (write on the white boards in the room). Stress that it is very important not to have side conversations because it interferes with individuals' full participation in the group discussion and also poses challenges for recording the discussion. If side conversations do occur during a focus group, do not stop the conversation abruptly. You might respectfully remind people of the ground rules and ask that people finish their conversations and rejoin the larger group discussion taking place. This kind of disruption may also signal that it is time to take a break, and you may want to suggest no more than a five minutes' break (so that people can use the restroom – make sure people know where to go – or to stretch). It will be important to make sure people know at one time the focus group will continue and be proactive about bringing people back together so that the focus group can re-convene.

**What happens if a participant skips ahead, providing information relevant to, or even completely answering, a question that I haven't gotten to yet?**

At times participants may skip topics or move ahead of where you are in the focus group guide. You will want to use probes to get detailed information from them on the topic at-hand, and then gently return the person to the topic of interest, falling back on the focus group guide. You do not want to interrupt them; rather, let them finish their thought and remain an interested listener. If they have already answered a question on the focus group guide you will still want to ask the question when you get to it, acknowledging that relevant information may have already been shared, but you want to make sure that the group has an opportunity to explore the issue more fully, if need be. You will want to make sure that all of the topics in the focus group guide are discussed as completely as possible during the discussion.

**What do I do if I ask a question and the participant says that they do not feel comfortable answering it?** A respondent may not feel comfortable answering a question from the interview guide. Or, it may be an issue of permission from a spouse to discuss the topic. This must be honored according to research ethics and informed consent, a respondent may elect to not answer any question at any time. Before the focus group begins, participants who would prefer an individual interview could opt for that format to provide more comfort for addressing sensitive questions. At the beginning of the discussion make it clear that they may decline to answer a question(s) or choose to stop the interview at any time. If this happens, say "thank you" and that you acknowledge and appreciate their honesty. Then, ask them if it would be okay to move on to the next question in the focus group guide.



## APPENDIX A: Roles and Responsibilities of Assistant Facilitator

- Bring to the focus group: Materials to record the focus group, including writing utensils (more than one, in case a pencil breaks or a pen runs out of ink) and a lot of paper, a flip chart as well as markers of different colors for recording information (as needed) on a flip chart or dry erase board and markers, recording equipment (tape recorder, extension cord, extra tapes, and extra batteries), and “number” tents.
- Distribute consent forms and collect them from participants.
- Give each participant a “number tent.” This will be used to identify the participant’s comments and link them to her survey (on which she will also write her number).
- Ensure that ground rules for the focus group are written clearly and neatly on a flip chart (it may be helpful to do this beforehand)
- Assist the facilitator in arranging the room (e.g., seating, flip chart stand and paper, placement of the ground rules, etc.)
- Assist with interpretation or contextualization in the local language/vernacular of any unclear terms
- Record major themes, ideas, comments and observations regarding group dynamics and non-verbal communication in hand-written notes using the Focus Group Note Taking Form [see Appendix C]. The assistant will also have to keep track of who says what, by indicating the number of the participant who is speaking. (If there are two assistants, these tasks can be divided.)
- Complete Appendix E and the Debrief Discussion Tool [see Appendix F] with the focus group facilitator immediately after each focus group. To facilitate the debriefing discussion, review your notes with the focus group facilitator. Capture any new insights that emerged as a result of this discussion with the facilitator.
- Do not throw away any papers with notes of the focus group discussion. These will be stored with other data collected through the needs assessment.

### Effective Assistant Facilitator:

- Has good listening skills
- Has good observation skills
- Has good writing skills
- Is able to take notes that are comprehensive but not word-for-word
- Uses the note taking form provided
- Acts as an observer, not as a participant
- Records the number of the speaker as she speaks, with 1-2 initial words that the speaker says to help transcribers
- Remains impartial (i.e., do not give her/his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say)







## APPENDIX B: Focus Group Schedule and Protocols

### Introduction

#### STEP 1: Welcome/Confidentiality Statement (15 minutes)

Introduce self and assistant(s). Say who we are and what we're trying to do (in general terms), what will be done with this information, why we asked you to participate [insert actual script]

Explain process:

- We want to learn from you (positive and negative)
- Not trying to achieve consensus, we're gathering information
- We are asking you to also complete a short survey to gather background details about you.

Explain confidentiality and expectations of focus group participants; obtain verbal agreement from participants that no one will reveal any information of the discussion about other participants outside of the focus group.

Pass out name cards to each participant.

Explain the use of any recording devices and the role of other people in the room who are not participants.

Cover logistics (where is bathroom, water fountain, help self to refreshments, etc.)

Outline ground rules. These ground rules may be presented to the group, and displayed throughout the discussion, on a flip chart page that is taped or hung on a wall in a clearly visible location. Once the above ground rules have been presented, it will be important to ask participants if they have anything to add to the list. The note taker should add these to the flip chart page.

Ask the group to suggest some ground rules. After they brainstorm some, make sure the following are on the list:

#### Ground Rules

- Everyone should participate.
- Only one person talks at a time.
- It is important for us to hear everyone's ideas and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers to questions – just ideas, experiences and opinions, which are all valuable.
- Information provided in the focus group must be kept confidential; "What is shared in the room stays in the room."
- It is important for us to hear all sides of an issue – both the positive and the negative. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers.



- It is important for ideas to be respected.
- Stay with the group and please don't have side conversations
- Turn off cell phones if possible
- Have fun

**STEP 2: Rapport Building (approximately 10 minutes)**

Allow each participant to introduce themselves (with their first name only if they want to).

Begin with one or two easy, broad, and open-ended questions to get people accustomed to talking and sharing with each other (ice-breakers).

**STEP 3: Turn on Tape Recorder and back-up recorder**

Before moving on, ask the group if there are any questions, and address those questions.

**STEP 4: In-Depth Discussion (approximately 90 minutes)**

Follow the guide(s) below and repeat the question if needed. DO NOT revise the focus group guide questions without prior approval.

- Ask one question at a time
- Allow for the question to be fully explored and answered before moving on to the next question
- Give participants a chance to think about the question before probing for response
- If needed, probe for responses using guides above in this document.
- Include all women in discussion (how to do that also outlined above)

STEP 5: Distribute surveys and ask participants to complete before leaving





## FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL FOR TEXTILE INDUSTRY FOCUS GROUP

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**In the first set of questions, we will ask about the status and the future of the textile industry in the country.**

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Q1. Let us start by discussing how you see the status of the textile industry in the country.

Q2. Now let us discuss how you see the future of the textile industry in the country.

Q3. How do you see the competition of the local products vs the imported ones?

Q4. Can the local textile products be exported? If no, please elaborate why

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**In the next set of questions, we will ask about the needed steps and regulations from the government to help the textile industry in the country.**

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Q5. Do you think that the government is promoting and helping the textile industry in the country?

Q6. How do you think the government can help the textile industry in the country?

Q7. How do you think the Commerce of Industry or other associations can help the textile industry in the country?

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**In the next set of questions, we will ask about the collaboration with the universities**

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Q8. Do you think that collaboration with universities can help the textile industry in the country?

Q9. What services do you need from universities?

Q10. What are the important tests that you need and do not have?

### **Closure (approximately 10 minutes)**

Summarize main points of the discussion and ask participants to confirm their agreement or make corrections



Thank participants for sharing thoughts and dismiss them.

**STEP 7: Complete Appendix F and G below**



## APPENDIX C: Focus Group Note Taking Form

### “Each Focus Group” and related fields.

*“in this section you will summarize the answers of each question for each focus group”*

Date of Focus Group	
Location of Focus Group	
Number of Participants	
Moderator Name	
Note Taker Name	

Responses to Questions

**# of set of questions**

Q1. ....

Brief Summary/Key Points	Notable Quotes



## APPENDIX D: Focus Group Checklist

### Remember to bring the following:

- ☐ Writing utensils
- ☐ A notepad with sufficient paper for recording the number of the person talking and recording any additional notes during the entire focus group
- ☐ A flip chart and markers
- ☐ Number tents
- ☐ Tape for affixing flip chart pages to the wall, as needed (ground rules).
- ☐ Recording equipment: a tape recorder/ backup tape recorder, extra tapes, extra batteries, 2 USB drives for saving/backing up data
- ☐ Consent forms
- ☐ Extra pens for participants to sign consent forms
- ☐ Discussion guide
- ☐ Note taking forms (Appendices C and E)

### Remember to do the following:

- ☐ Arrive at the focus group location a few minutes before participants to organise the room and your materials
- ☐ Write ground rules on flip chart/white board
- ☐ Welcome focus group participants, inviting them to get something to eat
- ☐ Explain, in a general and brief way, the purpose of the focus group and how information collected will be used and toward what goal
- ☐ Introduce yourself and the note taker
- ☐ Explain participants' rights and what participating in the focus group will entail



- ☐ Remind participants of the duration of the focus group, emphasising the importance of their participation during the discussion
- ☐ Let people know where the closest restroom facilities are located
- ☐ Obtain written consent to participate and have the focus group recorded
- ☐ At the end of the focus group, give the participants the contact information in case of questions. They will be emailed signed copies of the consent forms as well
- ☐ Do the debriefing with the note taker
- ☐ Ensure that tapes are labelled appropriately





The assistant facilitator(s) should conduct a debrief session with the facilitator after the focus group. This should begin 15 to 30 minutes after the discussion ends, after all participants have exited the room. Debriefing will help to identify any non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions. Debriefing also helps to identify any issues that came up during the discussion, and new topics that arose during the focus group.

*Questions to consider:*

- (1) What are the main themes that emerged from this focus group? That is, what did we learn? What was surprising?
- (2) What did participants say that was unclear or confusing to you?
- (3) What did you observe that would not be evident from reading a transcript of the discussion (e.g., group dynamic, individual behaviors, etc.)
- (4) What problems did you encounter? (e.g., logistical, behaviors of individuals, questions that were confusing, etc.)
- (5) What questions or issues are there for follow up in the future?
- (6) Does the assistant facilitator have any suggestions for the moderator and vice versa?
- (7) What seems to be our next step?

**Courtesy of**

- 1. NSF Award # 1561430/ 1561507-HRD, Title:** Women's Engineering Participation in the US: What can the US Learn from Women's Decisions to Pursue Engineering in Diverse Cultural Contexts?
- 2. Erasmus+ Project:** Innovation for the Leather Industry in Jordan and Egypt [INNOLEA]  
585822-EPP-1-2017-1-EL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP"

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