

Discussion methods: The Fishbowl

The fishbowl method is an alternative to traditional panel discussions and is a suitable method to engage actively with both small and large audiences. It combines active listening, face-to-face discussion, frequent interventions from the audience and a constant turnover of the speakers.

At a glance

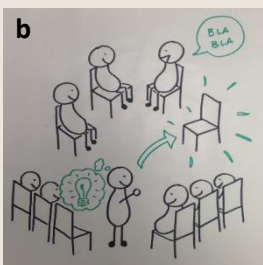
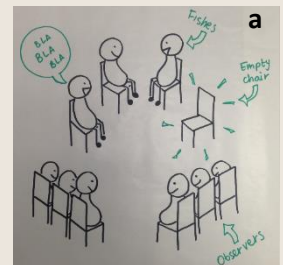
A **group of people (the fish)** sit in an inner circle (**the fishbowl**) and discuss a topic introduced by the facilitator (e.g. through questions). At the same time, a wider group of participants sit in circle and listen to the discussion. People are allowed to contribute to the discussion only if they are sitting in the inner circle. While the discussion develops, **people from the outer circle may join the discussion by taking a seat in the circle**. Every time a person joins the inner circle discussion (*jumps into the fishbowl*), a person must leave the discussion and sit in the outer circle.



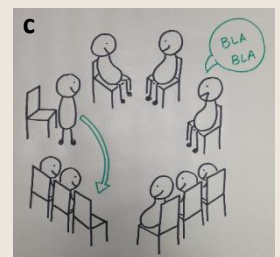
1 Rules of the game

There are many variants to the Fishbowl method: the “closed version” and the “open version” being the main ones. In the **open version**...

1. There are 3 to 5 chairs in the inner circle for the ‘fish’ to have a discussion. One chair is always free. The rest of the participants listen in the outer circle.
2. The fish discuss the questions given by the facilitator and are invited to intervene in a concise way (e.g. maximum 3 minutes per intervention). Further rules concerning a maximum number of interventions per person could also be used.
3. A fish can leave the discussion whenever they want to sit in the outer circle.



4. To intervene in the discussion, people from the outer circle must go to sit on the empty chair in the inner circle. People can do this even while someone in the inner circle is speaking.
5. As soon as possible after the new person joins the discussion, a person from the inner circle should voluntarily leave the discussion and sit in the outer circle.



In the **closed version**, the chairs in the inner circle are all occupied by people. When someone from the outer circle wants to contribute to the discussion he/she enters the inner circle and indicates who he/she thinks should leave (e.g. by tapping on the shoulder of the chosen person). The chosen person should leave the discussion and sit in the audience.

Important: Not everyone may feel “brave” enough to impose his/her decision on who should leave the discussion. These aspects might discourage people to take part in the discussion. The facilitator may have a key role in encouraging people to join the discussion or help to release the tension.

2 General info

You can use the fishbowl method...

- as an alternative to traditional debates
- as a substitute for panel discussions
- to foster dynamic participation
- to address controversial topics
- to avoid lengthy presentations

Participants:

The suggested number of participants is from 15 to 30 but the method might also be used for bigger groups. One facilitator can lead any size group.

Suggested duration:

The suggested time is from 60 minutes to a maximum of 3 hours. Duration depends very much on the topic and the number of participants. It might also depend on the degree to which the discussion seeks to arrive at a consensus.

Room set-up:

- 3 to 5 chairs organised in an 'inner-circle',
- other chairs organised in an outer circle or semi-circles around the inner circle.



Before the discussion starts

Materials:

Chairs are the only necessary "tools" for the Fishbowl method. Flipchart paper and pens are useful for taking notes, for illustrating the rules of the method and explaining the topic of discussion. Microphones can help but are not strictly necessary.

Important: The space between the chairs must be big enough to allow the participants to enter and exit the discussion in the inner circle without disturbing other people. This will ensure a smooth movement of people coming from the audience to the inner circle.



3 The topic

The method is suitable to discuss all kinds of topics in an open and transparent manner. In particular, it is often used to address **sensitive or controversial topics** or to manage **discussions between different social or occupational groups**.

It can be particularly suitable to facilitate discussion where opposite sides sustain their points of view and when participants need to understand other perspectives.

The Fishbowl method merges the **transparency** of face-to-face discussions where people freely interact with the setting of a panel discussion providing a pre-determined topic and guiding questions.

If the group involves both the public and officials or policy makers, the method can help address **complex issues of public concern while increasing trust and understanding** between the participants.

Starting the discussion can be the most challenging part of the exercise. Preferably, a **number of questions will be identified prior to the event to initiate group activity smoothly** (e.g. max 4 questions). For this purpose, some participants can be asked prior to the event **to prepare a little intervention** to kick-off the discussion.

4 Human Resources

The number of people needed to support the exercise depends on the precise objectives, the number of participants and the reporting needs.

A **facilitator** should briefly introduce the method explaining the rules of the game and the topic of discussion. The facilitator is also in charge of encouraging people to participate (or intervene when someone dominates the discussion), reminding participants of the rules and directing the discussion back to the original topic if necessary.

A **harvester** should take full notes of the discussion. If there is a reporting back session during the event, the involvement of a **second harvester** focusing on the most important messages or conclusions is useful.

It is possible to **rotate the roles** between support staff for each question i.e. between facilitating, harvesting and participating.

5 Making it happen: the ENRD experience

During the **1st Networking Meeting** held in Brussels, 5 - 6 November 2014, the European Network for Rural Development Contact Point (ENRD CP) organised 3 workshops using the Fishbowl method. The workshops concerned the three common objectives of rural networks, namely: 'increasing the involvement of rural stakeholders'; 'improving the quality of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs); and 'improving communication about RDPs'.



The participants of the workshops were mainly representatives from National Support Units (NSUs) and Managing Authorities, as well as from the European Commission. The workshops aimed to involve participants in a lively discussion concerning past experiences, networking needs and areas where co-operation between the National Rural Networks and the ENRD CP can add the most value.

The **workshops used the open version of the Fishbowl method.**

• Prior to the event

The ENRD CP defined the topic of discussion **as well as three specific questions** for each of the workshops. An indicative time of 15 to 20 minutes was allocated for each of the questions.

To facilitate the start of the discussion, nine **participants were contacted** and **asked to prepare a short intervention** to be presented at the start of the discussion.

The ENRD CP held **internal meetings for facilitators and harvesters** to discuss and clarify the details of the topic and how the individual workshops would run. Posters explaining the rules of the method and illustrating the topics of discussion were prepared.

• On the day

The agenda of the day included a general introduction to the purpose of the workshop and the 'Fishbowl method' (10 mins), three parallel workshops (1.5 hours) and one plenary session where the three groups reported back on the main findings of the discussions (30 mins).

At the beginning of the workshops, the **facilitators** introduced both the specific topics/questions of discussion and the rules of the method. Questions were posted on the wall as points of reference for the discussion. Discussion of each question started off with short interventions from the selected participants (agreed prior to the event) together with others who volunteered.

The facilitator monitored the discussion, guiding the participants through the method and encouraging people to intervene as appropriate.

The **harvester(s)** noted the most important messages of the discussion for reporting and feeding back during the plenary.

Some of the ENRD CP staff sat in the outer circle and intervened from time to time (in the inner circle) along with other participants. This allowed the ENRD CP to introduce its own ideas on the topic as well as to introduce/shift to new questions within the overall discussion (i.e. to steer the discussion). In some of the workshops, the ENRD CP team members rotated roles between facilitating, harvesting and participating.



• Lessons learnt

The following 'key lessons' were identified after interviews with participants and ENRD CP staff members.

- 1. Aim/expectations:** When planning the event and discussion methods to be used it is important to consider whether the method will help to fulfill both the organizers and the participants' expectations.

The Fishbowl method can create a discussion where each participant adds something to the previous contributions. It can either help participants to reach a common consensus or it

can allow the discussion to flow in different directions (depending on the purpose of the discussion).

At the beginning of the discussion, when introducing the topic and the rules of the method, it is therefore recommended to explain the objectives of the exercise and to explain what participants can or cannot expect from the discussion.

I was a bit disappointed: I wanted to listen more from every body!

Participant

- 2. Timing:** Take care when planning the use of the Fishbowl method, it should be used at a point in the programme where participants are active, not in the so-called 'graveyard slots', such as immediately after lunch or first thing in the morning.



- 3. Number of people:** Although it is not always possible to know who will take active part in the discussion it is important to remember that a minimum number of active people is necessary to generate a good conversation. As a general rule, a group of 20-25 people would need to have at least some 6-10 very active people to keep the discussion flowing.

- 4. Clear rules:** As with any other methods, it is important to explain the rules of the game clearly so that participants understand the purpose of the discussion and the ways of participating. If there are indications that the rules are not well understood, the facilitator may need to clarify these again during the discussion.

- 5. Ice breaking:** At the beginning of the exercise an ice-breaking activity, even a short introduction of the participants (e.g. highlighting their experience), can help the participants to feel more at ease to start to speak in front of other people.

- 6. Make sure the participants are warmed up:** Fishbowl is meant to be a lively and participative method. People engage better in discussions when they are familiar with the topic or after have had the time to develop their opinion. A short introduction to the topic (5/10 minutes) may not be enough to engage the participants well enough to contribute to the discussion. Therefore, it might be worth considering:

- using the Fishbowl method to follow up on an earlier presentation or expert discussion,
- informing all participants about the topic and the questions of the workshops before the meeting.



Harvesting method example

- 7. Shyness and language issues:** In Fishbowl discussions involving international participants, one of the biggest challenges is language. Such issues, however, can arise with any participative methods. Nevertheless, the Fishbowl method not only requires participants to speak in front of an audience, but also to be physically at the centre of attention. This may discourage some people from contributing.

Informing participants about the questions of the discussion in advance might give more people the opportunity to prepare and to intervene.

*New and exciting, never heard about it before!
Even more useful if applied at national level
where everyone speaks the same language!*

Participant

- 7. Facilitation:** In the best scenario (if people are engaged, feel confident to take part in the discussion and understand the rules of the method) very little facilitation should be necessary and the discussion should flow. Even in such cases, the facilitator has a key role to make sure that the discussion is 'on track'



(as far as required) and some people do not 'over-dominate' the discussion. Where discussion is less animated, more intervention will be necessary, e.g. if the participants lack confidence or expertise to intervene. In such cases:

- it may be necessary to revitalise the discussion by asking more/different questions or by involving experts when the discussion falters. The facilitators will have to judge if the questions fit with the participants and adjust the scope slightly if necessary.
- The facilitator needs to understand if the interventions are still of interest for the overall audience and he/she should be ready to

diplomatically intervene in order to create some turnover in the 'fishbowl' (i.e. inner circle of discussion) if needed.

- The facilitator needs to find a balance between intervening and letting the discussion follow its own course.

I didn't want to interfere too much in the discussion but at the same time there was the need to stop the discussion and start addressing the following question.

Facilitator

Important: the discussion and its findings are the most important part of the exercise, not the method itself! If the discussion flows, people are engaged and interesting conclusions are reached, the facilitator should be flexible with the rules and avoid interfering too much.

6 More about the Fishbowl method

The following websites were used as sources for the information provided in this document and provide additional information on the method topic and its creative variations.

- Knowledge Sharing Toolkit: <http://www.kstoolkit.org/Fish+Bow>
- Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl_%28conversation%29
- Share, learn, innovate! Toolkit: <http://slitoolkit.ohchr.org/data/downloads/fishbowl.pdf>
- L&T blog of the ITC-ILO: <https://itcilo.wordpress.com/2009/02/16/facilitate-a-fishbowl-discussion/>