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# SAFETY/SECURITY-SENSITIVE AND TRAUMA-INFORMED STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS WITH MEMBERS OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS

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This document was produced with the inputs of organizations serving marginalized groups and clinical psychologists working on trauma-informed approaches with marginalized groups. Abir Aldhalimi, PhD. and Anthony Cotton served as the lead authors.





## Safety/Security-Sensitive and Trauma-Informed Stakeholder Consultations with Members of Marginalized Groups

This document outlines practices that will assist USAID staff and implementing partners to conduct consultations with individuals and organizations of marginalized groups in a manner that is sensitive to their safety/security concerns and prior experiences of trauma.

Because marginalized groups may be particularly subject to stigma, persecution, harassment, and/or violence, ensuring high levels of protection may be necessary. Therefore, when conducting stakeholder consultations, USAID staff and implementing partners should be mindful of both the 1) real safety and security concerns, and 2) potential history of trauma experienced by members of marginalized groups in-country. This document may also be used to ensure safety/security-sensitive and trauma-informed stakeholder consultations for communities and individuals who are not marginalized but have experienced exclusion, violence, and conflict.

**USAID defines marginalized groups** as people who are typically denied access to legal protection or social and economic participation and programs, whether in practice or in principle, for historical, cultural, political, and/or other contextual reasons. To be effective, USAID's efforts should follow the lead of marginalized groups who understand the risks, opportunities, and priorities associated with this work. As such, an important step in developing programming that aims to prioritize the inclusion of marginalized groups starts with consulting stakeholders that represent marginalized groups to ensure that their strategies and needs are incorporated into project design. When conducting stakeholder consultations with members of marginalized groups, it is important to take an approach that is appropriate, secure, and safe.

Conducting stakeholder consultations following these practices allows USAID to abide by its principles of "do no harm" and "do nothing about us without us," and mitigates the risks of unintentionally increasing a stakeholder's visibility or re-traumatizing them.



Photo Credit: Benoit Almeras, Handicap International

## When setting up stakeholder consultations with members of marginalized groups:

- Make phone calls or send individual personalized emails (as opposed to group emails—which can appear distant and create a risk of sharing contact information inappropriately).
- Allow the stakeholder to identify a location in which she/he/they will feel safe and secure; be willing to meet the stakeholder at the location they identify, and that is accessible to them. Related to accessibility, stakeholders with mobility disabilities may need a location that is wheelchair accessible. Consider not only the meeting space, but also safety and accessibility of bathrooms, and whether safe and accessible transportation to the location is also readily available.
- Inform the stakeholder of everyone who she/he/they will meet (it is important that the stakeholder is aware of everyone who will be attending the meeting—you should not add additional attendees without informing and receiving consent from the stakeholder. If sign language interpreters, personal assistants or other support staff will be in the meeting, explain to stakeholders that their role is to support the participation of stakeholders with disabilities, and ensure that those support staff are aware of the confidentiality of the discussions).
- Provide information in advance about the purpose of the consultation, length of the consultation, and the themes of the questions that will be asked to ensure that the stakeholder can make an informed decision about participating. Ensure this information is provided in accessible formats as needed, e.g. large print, braille, plain language, electronic format accessible to screen readers etc.
- Request that stakeholders not wear perfume or other strongly scented products to the meeting, in order to facilitate the participation of stakeholders with environmental sensitivities.

## During stakeholder consultations with members of marginalized groups:

- Ensure the meeting area is sufficiently private; close doors and windows as necessary to make the stakeholder feel safe and secure (and ensure no one can listen in)
- Allow the stakeholder to settle into the meeting space
  - Let them know where they can go to take a break if needed and ensure they have some control during the meeting (e.g., where they sit and when to take a break. Ensure that at least one break area is quiet for those who may need a break from sensory stimulation. Consider availability of appropriate outside access for stakeholders with service animals who may need to toilet their support animals).
  - Ensure that scheduled breaks are clearly communicated, and of sufficient length to e.g. allow wheelchair users ample time to use the bathroom.
- Thank the stakeholder for taking the time to meet with you
- Introduce yourself
- Establish transparency by providing the stakeholder with information about the purpose of the meeting, the types of questions you will ask, and topics you will cover at the onset of the meeting
- Explicitly ask if you have their permission to proceed with the meeting to ensure informed consent
- State that if the stakeholder is ever uncomfortable and/or does not want to answer specific questions or engage on certain topics, they may skip the question or stop the meeting
- Establish trustworthiness by providing a thorough discussion of confidentiality to help create a safe environment for the stakeholder
  - Explain that all information shared during the meeting is confidential, off the record, and anonymous, and that you will not share any identifying information about the individual
  - Explain that you are writing a report for internal use only and that the report will not contain identifying information about any individuals or groups
  - Ask them if they have any questions about confidentiality
- Ask if you can take notes; only take notes if the stakeholder consents (for safety/security reasons, when taking notes do not write the full names of individuals or organizations). If live captioning/transcription is needed to facilitate the participation of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, explain its purpose, and that the transcript will remain confidential and not be shared with others.
- Establish rapport with the stakeholder:
  - Inquire about the reasons they are participating in the consultation
    - ▶ Doing so will create an interpersonal exchange between you and the stakeholder and provide an opportunity to reinforce to the stakeholder that they have a sense of control in meeting
    - ▶ Ask: What are the reasons you decided to participate in today's meeting?
  - Engage in positive nonverbal communication (e.g., inviting sitting posture, good eye contact, appropriate facial expression)

- Ensure that all communication during the meeting is predictable to create a sense of safety
  - Cluster questions thematically during the consultation so you are able to inform the stakeholder when transitioning from one set of questions to the next
    - ▶ Say: We're going to transition to questions about [theme of questions or topic]
- If the stakeholder becomes distressed (i.e., agitation, irritability, poor concentration, daydreaming, blanking out, or mood swings) attend to their immediate needs
  - Allow for reflection, normalization, and empathy:
    - ▶ Reflection–Say: It sounds like you feel [frustrated, upset, angry, sad etc.,] because of [repeat what they shared]
    - ▶ Normalization–Say: What you are experiencing is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. People who have experienced a traumatic event often feel overwhelmed when thinking or remembering the event.
    - ▶ Empathy–Say: I can understand how overwhelming this must be for you right now.
  - You can ask them what typically helps them regain their composure when distressed
    - ▶ Say: I understand that discussing this may be upsetting for you, we can take a break if you wish
    - ▶ Say: Let's take a moment to take three deep breaths together
    - ▶ Ask: What has helped you get grounded or feel better when feeling this way before?
  - Consider provision of items that individuals can fidget with, which can assist people in concentrating and self-soothing, as needed (e.g., fidget spinners, stress balls).
  - Ensure that the stakeholder gains a sense of safety and security before moving on with the remainder of the consultation
- If the stakeholder reveals that they have experienced a traumatic event, do not inquire about the details about the trauma
  - Say: I'm sorry that [event] has happened to you. Experiencing a situation like that can be very challenging and can impact every aspect of your life. I don't want to upset you further by having you retell the details.
- At the end of the stakeholder consultation:
  - Thank them for their participation and willingness to share their experience
  - Ask them if they are ready to end the interview or whether they need a moment to reflect about the meeting
  - Consider asking participants what we can do to improve accessibility or to create a safe/secure environment during consultations and incorporate feedback for future consultations.



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