

StayOn_

A more inclusive, active
and creative world!

2st Impact Assessment

ITALY

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Giulia Parola & Mine Tülü

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stay-on.eu



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1. INTRODUCTION

StayOn is a transnational project coordinated through the cooperation of eight European partners whose ultimate objective is to create conditions that enable young people to "stay on" rural areas by ensuring access to opportunities, benefits, services, and jobs. With this impact assessment report, we intend to measure and assess Association ATIS' impact to improve it. This report is to be read as part of the project's "Impact management and research" work package, representing a systematic effort to provide credible evidence on the causal impact of interventions meant to integrate young adults, and NEETs¹ especially in the labor market.

The work package is managed by the European Center for Social Finance (ECSF). It encompasses a series of activities, including developing a Theory of Change and related impact management framework, creating periodic impact evaluations, and learning to inform decision-making within and among the organizations involved. This report proceeds as follows. After a brief introduction, Section 2 briefly describes the two types of interventions implemented. In Section 3, the report focuses on detailing the focus group methodology used to conduct the evaluation. Section 4 presents the finding, while Section 5 interprets them and discusses practical recommendations to facilitate the translation of findings into practice for the project's partners.

2. INTERVENTIONS

The project StayOn foresees the implementation of a four-stage community-based development approach (CBD) in five European countries. The first stage is called "community involvement" and includes the implementation of continuous life/career individual coaching support and a series of training courses on digital and environmental topics according to the local needs² aimed at developing soft and hard skills that are useful for personal development and facilitate entry into the labor market. This step includes creating a group of young local NEETs, the "community shapers", who are interested in the social and economic development of their community and will continue their StayOn path through the three following phases: "community catalysis", "community co-innovation labs", and "community entrustment".

Training courses

Association ATIS is an employment agency (*Agenzia per il Lavoro*, APL) founded in 2003 in Palermo in the northwest of the island of Sicily, Italy. The organization promotes youth employment interventions aimed at young people at risk. By the time the focus group was conducted, Association ATIS the following training courses and the coaching concept described in the next section:

- Dressmaking and entrepreneurship
- Digital marketing
- Italian language training for migrants
- Photography and postproduction

¹ Young persons not engaged in education, employment or training.

² See the potentials assessment report for Italy available at: <https://www.stay-on.eu/impact-compass/>

- Crafting wooden boats
- Pottery and creation of artworks

Coaching

The main goal of the coaching in the context of StayOn is to support participants on their journey through the whole StayOn process:

- training, where they gain new skills and knowledge to improve their future career options; and also
- community shaping process, where they further explore their ideas for developing opportunities for youth in their communities.

The StayOn coaching process is aimed at developing a goal-oriented mindset with participants. The suggested methods to be used by coaches range from SMART goal methodology to dialogue groups. All sessions have a suggested outline to follow. However, these guidelines can be adjusted according to the coach's judgment to best use the process for the participants. The coach's role is to support the participants to make a change, learn something new and/or achieve their goals. The essence of coaching is not giving answers to participants but instead guiding them with curiosity and empathy to help them find answers on their own. Coaches in the StayOn project lead participants through the process of training & community involvement, help them identify their potential, and support them in overcoming obstacles to their empowerment.

Through the StayOn project, participants receive, on average, four individual coaching hours, mainly over a series of four sessions with the coach. Coaching sessions are divided into three main categories: I) introductory / starting session; II) implementation support / intermediate session; and III) follow-up/closing session. The coaches and coachees meet preferably in person, but some meetings also take place online. In order to create a relationship and create a more substantial impact, the coachees are encouraged to meet regularly and with a defined development goal, which also supports their training in the context of the StayOn project (or further). Coaches in the StayOn project participate in individual and group supervisions to help them better address the obstacles and opportunities of the coaching process. They help them be more flexible and open to opportunities in the process.

As of November 2022, Association ATIS trained 147 people and coached 15. A selected group thereof will be involved in the focus group discussion at the center of this report.

3. METHODS

Focus group design

A focus group collects qualitative data by gathering individuals together to discuss a specific topic in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. The purpose is to understand better how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product, or service. Questions are open-ended to stimulate an informal discussion with participants to understand their perceptions, beliefs, fears, questions, and information needs. Participants are selected because they have specific characteristics in common (here: participants to training and/or coaching services offered by Association ATIS) that relate

to the focus group topic. The moderator creates a permissive environment that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view. The aim is to generate a maximum number of different ideas and opinions. The group discussion is conducted in a semi-structured manner so that researchers can identify trends and patterns in perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Based on the “Focus Group Content Form” (Appendix A) received by Association ATIS and other project partners, researchers at the ECSF created the focus group implementation concept that covers 90 minutes and is divided into five parts, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus group implementation concept

PARTS	AIM AND CONTENT	METHOD AND TOOLS	TIME (in min.)
Part I	Setting the stage: Introductions and creation of a welcoming, safe and open space	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total
Participants arrive	- Moderator and local representative allow participants to arrive and settle in the virtual room	/	~5
Welcome and moderator’s introduction	- Moderator introduces him/herself (briefly) - Moderator explains the purpose of the focus group and the process, including the agenda and the “rules” - Moderator starts the recording	Optional slide n. 2 (Appendix D)	~5
Icebreaker and participants’ introductions	- Getting a sense of who is in the room and getting feedback on recruitment, the moderator asks: "Could you please introduce yourself and tell us how you learned about the project StayOn in the first place?" - Participants’ introductions	Optional slide n. 3 (Appendix D)	~10
Part II	Getting feedback on minor activities	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total
Getting feedback on minor activities (including day-to-day communication and use of technology in communication, awarding of certificates)	- What do you think of StayOn’s channels of communication? - Was information communicated clearly at all times? - Did you get a StayOn certificate? How important is it to you? How do you plan to use it?	Optional slides n. 4 and 5 (Appendix D)	~20
Part III	Getting feedback on core activities: training courses	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total
Getting feedback on core activities: training courses	- What training contents do you think were the most relevant and why? - What training methodologies do you think were the most effective and why? - What aspects of the training courses could be improved and why?	Optional slide n. 6 (Appendix D)	~20
Part IV	Getting feedback on core activities: coaching	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	20 in total

Getting feedback on core activities: coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did coaching help you in setting goals/overcoming obstacles and why? - Would you continue with coaching if you had the opportunity and why? - What is one defining moment you remember from your coaching sessions? - How can you be supported further after the coaching ends? - What aspects of the coaching could be improved and why? 	Optional slide n. 7 (Appendix D)	~20
Part V	Ideas generation and conclusion	Zoom/Microsoft Teams	10 in total
Generating ideas for new services and concluding the focus group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What new services would you recommend and why? - Closing comments and overall impression - Time for questions - Moderator stops the recording 	Optional slide n. 8 (Appendix D)	~10

Participants

Association ATIS gathered seven participants who:

- share the same language at a high level (Italian);
- are available at the agreed date and time of the focus group workshop;
- have heterogeneous demographic characteristics;
- are willing to openly communicate pain points as well as ready to question the status quo critically;
- possess a PC with a stable internet connection.

We provide a summary of information regarding the seven participants selected in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of participants selected for the focus group

PARTICIPANT #	GENDER (F/M/Other)	AGE	SERVICES USED	LABOR STATUS
1	F	26	Training	Student
2	M	24	Training	Student
3	M	25	Coaching and training	Student
4	M	21	Training	Student
5	F	28	Training	Student
6	F	28	Coaching and training	Student
7	F	23	Coaching and training	Student

Strategy and data analysis

In preparation for the focus group workshop, Association ATIS filled out the “Focus Group Registration Form” (Appendix B). The moderator was provided with optional materials, including the “Focus group Moderator Script” (Appendix C) and the “Focus Group Slides for Moderation” (Appendix D). The latter is a PowerPoint presentation template where slides 3 to 8 are representative of the feedback elicited (outreach and communication, including the awarding of certificates, training courses, and coaching) to stimulate discussion about the participants’ opinions in the specific category. Analysis of the data collected co-occurred with data collection. Researchers at the ECSF were responsible for analyzing the data further using a combination of approaches but roughly

orienting themselves on Krueger's (1994) five key stages: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation. The last two steps required active participation by the project partners.

4. FINDINGS

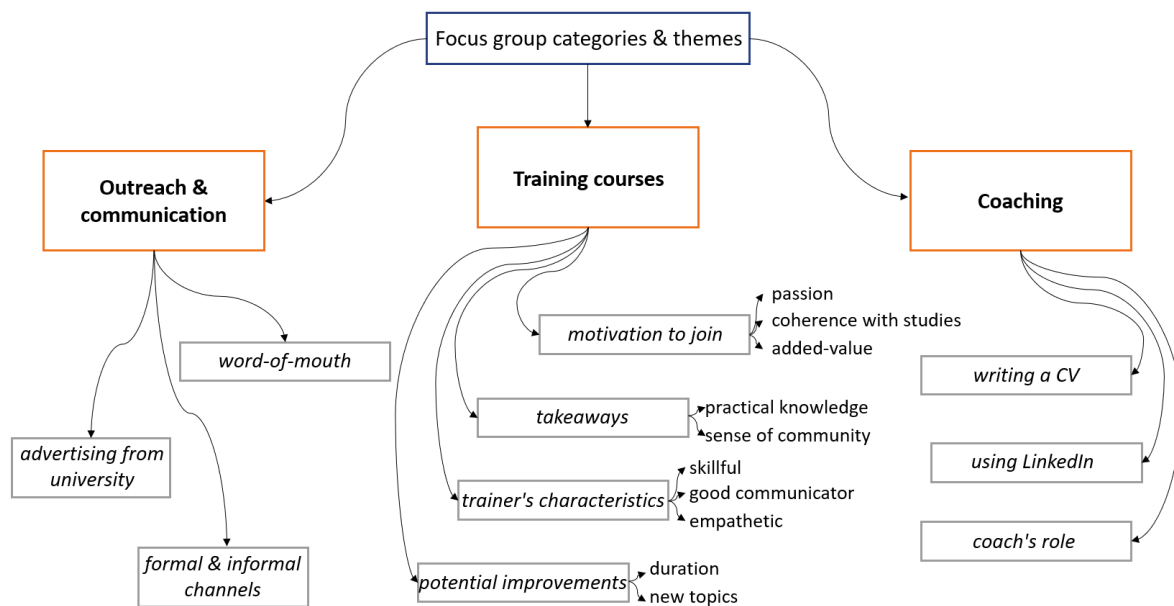
Procedure

The focus group in Italy occurred on 4 November 2022 in an online form. It hosted five participants (two of the seven participants selected dropped out at the last moment) and lasted for about one hour. The event was moderated in Italian via Zoom, recorded and transcribed to use the data best for the evaluation (the participants have been informed about the recording in advance). All information collected has been anonymized for the report. It has been ensured and conveyed to the participants that the focus groups, despite the recording, remained a safe space to express their opinions openly.

Themes

Several themes emerged from the three categories (outreach and communication, training courses, coaching) orienting the focus group discussion. These are described in the following paragraphs and summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Concept map of focus group categories and themes



Outreach and communication. Regarding outreach, three participants in the focus group were recruited for the project on a *word-of-mouth* basis. More specifically, they explained that they personally knew somebody who put them in contact with the Training Consultant within Association ATIS through recommendations. The other two participants clarified that they got to know StayOn and related services through *advertising from the university*. Once in the program, all participants declared that Association ATIS employed an adequate mix of *formal and informal communication*

channels to obtain and deliver information, as Participant 1 explains: “*The communication aspect, in my opinion, is perfect. In the sense that they use a WhatsApp group for pressing messages, while we get somewhat more official communications via e-mail*”. When inquired about the best way to follow up on their employment journey after their involvement with StayOn staff is over, however, all participants emphasized that they would rather be contacted via informal channels, such as a WhatsApp message or a quick phone call.

Training courses. Concerning the *motivation* to join the project, passion for the specific training course topic guided the participants’ decision to join and their choice among the several available courses. However, passion was not the only factor playing a role. At least two participants also emphasized the coherence of the training course chosen with their university studies. Additionally, all participants highlighted the potential value added that the training course and the related certificate would bring when competing in labor market. For example, Participant 2 explains: “*The main reason why I decided to take the course is passion. Of course, it might also come in handy in the job market in the future. This is something additional, in my opinion*”. In a similar vein, Participant 3 said that in a few recent job interviews, he had the feeling that while these certificates add value to his CV, “*they are not a determining point for getting the job*”.

Participants in the focus group also discussed several *takeaways* from the training courses. First, they all highlighted the importance of getting practical knowledge about a specific topic. Courses with practical applications were deemed to be more comprehensive than theory-only courses. For instance, Participant 3 assessed a Digital Marketing course by Association ATIS as follows: “*We covered case studies and real-world examples. But perhaps it would have been more effective if we had been given a chance to put them into practice by doing our own social media posts, for example, or a social campaign as an experiment. [...] Overall, the course remained very theoretical*”. The chance to adopt a practical approach was particularly attractive given its complementary to the theoretical knowledge that university students tend to be mostly exposed to.³

The advantages of a more practical approach to teaching and learning were directly connected to another takeaway pointed out by several participants: the sense of community established within the course. The latter allowed participants to get in touch with new people. The practical applications, often implemented in groups, let the trainees bond when delivering group tasks; Participant 2 called it “*a significant social opportunity*”. Finally, Participant 2 also highlighted the sense of community originating from his ability to attend the course locally in the place where he grew up and still lives represented a chance to connect with the territory and make him experience the local environment in a different way.

During the focus group discussion, the participants conferred many positive *trainer characteristics* that they considered essential for a successful training course. They

³ On this subject, Association ATIS emphasized that the duration of the training courses was agreed upon with the participants, and often the little number of hours did not allow for the addition of a practical part, especially when participants needed more basics of the topic.

agreed that the trainers within Association ATIS possessed all the positive characteristics indicated. First, the trainees emphasized the need for the trainer to be skillful and competent in his or her teaching domain. Second, they pointed out that it was essential for the trainer to be a good communicator. Participant 2 explained that good professionals do not always make for good teachers, and Participant 1 explained that her trainer “*did not only try to convey his expertise but he involve us in the topic in the first person*”. Third, three participants evaluated their trainers positively thanks to their ability to be empathetic and connect with the trainees on a personal level, for example, by detecting difficulties in understanding when topics got too technical, joking around, and being open to sharing their passion with others.

Besides a more practical approach for some of the training courses, *potential improvements* highlighted by the participants include the training duration and attractive new training topics for the future. Regarding the first aspect, one participant wished the training course lasted a few lessons more since some of the knowledge had been 'compressed' to fit the 30-hour timeline. Additionally, the participants discussed potential new topics for teaching. Participants 2 and 3 suggested that Informatics and Information Technology, such as Python Programming courses, could be very relevant nowadays. All participants agreed that they appreciated the in-presence component of the Association ATIS courses since many training courses are available only online and few provide the opportunity for direct interactions with the trainers and peers.

Coaching. Only Participant 3 in the focus group had benefited from Association ATIS coaching services. He explained that the coaching hours had been beneficial in *writing a CV*. More specifically, the coach shared simple and practical tips to make a CV stand out. Additionally, Participant 3 also pointed out that through coaching, he was able to learn *using LinkedIn* effectively. The other participants all expressed their interest in joining coaching and shared their expectations about the process and the *coach's role* in helping without judging. Similarly to the empathy necessary in a trainer, Participant 4 specified, “*I expect some sort of conversation, like some advice that a father can give, for example, to his children. I expect something along these lines*”.

5. MAIN MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, this focus group report provides a positive assessment regarding the services offered by Association ATIS within the context of the StayOn project. This evaluation presents the perspectives of five university students currently involved in training and/or coaching. The students are facing similar experiences and the responses did not differ among sub-groups of participants (e.g., by gender, age). The main messages expressed by the focus group's participants and related recommendations have been discussed with one representative within Association ATIS and are listed in the table below.

Table 2. Summary of participants selected for the focus group

MESSAGE	RECOMMENDATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal networks are crucial for enabling recruiting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a group of “ambassadors” to promote StayOn and Association ATIS in the students’ community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both formal and informal communication channels seem adequate, depending on the type of message. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informal communication channels should be used for follow-up after the end of training and/or coaching.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Passion guides students’ choice regarding the training courses but it is not the only factor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the clarity of the training courses’ alignment with labor market needs, value added during job-search; emphasizing the sense of community originating by the initiative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice opportunities are not available in all training courses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing targeted practice opportunities in all training courses, possibly linking them to social occasions (group tasks, activities, exercises, and projects).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New training topics could be potentially very useful and relevant for students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introducing Informatics and Information Technology training, such as Python Programming courses.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are clearly identified advantages of employing empathetic trainers and coaches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensifying the ways trainers and coaches can show empathy (e. g., repeating how the client feels or by sharing their own similar experiences).

REFERENCES

Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. SAGE Publications.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th Edition). SAGE Publications.

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Content Form

1. Project partner: Insert the organization's name and country

3. Name, surname, and e-mail address of the person filling this form:

2. Focus group main purpose: What is the overall objective of the focus group? Are you interested in improving your services, changing them or generating ideas for potential new services?

3. Organizational services or practices: Are there specific services or practices you would like feedback on? (e. g., recruiting, service delivery, certificates awarding, communication, training, coaching)

4. List of questions: If you could choose anything, what questions would you like the independent moderator to ask?

5. Additional information: Do you have further comments, remarks or ideas?

APPENDIX B: Focus Group Registration Form

1. Project partner (*insert the organization's name and country*):

2. Focus group scheduled on (*insert the date and time*):

3. Local representative's contact⁴ (*insert name, surname, and e-mail address*):

4. Modality (*fully online or hybrid, add the name of the platform you participants would prefer*):

5. Participants (*insert name/s, surname/s, gender, age, and all services used within the StayOn project, e.g., coaching*):

Name and surname	Gender (M/F/Other)	Age	Service/s used
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			

⁴ This refers to the local person responsible for the organization of the focus group.

APPENDIX C: Focus Group Moderator Script

Part I: Welcome and moderator's introduction

Moderator: Hi everybody, and welcome! My name is [NAME] and I work at / collaborate with the European Center for Social Finance. We're a competence center of Munich Business School in Germany, and we help several organizations in Europe evaluate their services and make them better. So, this is precisely why we're here today. I'd like to get your feedback on [NAME OF THE PROJECT PARTNER]'s services to learn how they can be improved in the future. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this focus group. I have a few guidelines and rules to facilitate our discussion:

- The focus group will last about one and a half hours and will be roughly divided into 5 parts.
- I want you to do the talking and we'd like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. We expect and want to hear a wide range of views and don't anticipate consensus, just sharing. You can address each other if you like. We are only here to assist in the discussion.
- I emphasize that what is said in this room should remain here. I will record this session. However, it remains confidential and all information collected will be anonymized for the report. We don't identify anyone by name in our findings. Therefore, you will remain anonymous. The recording won't be shared with anyone besides researchers at the European Center for Social Finance.

Are there any questions? Very well. Let's get started... [*Start recording.*]

Part I: Icebreaker and participants' introductions

Moderator: Could you please introduce yourself and tell us how you learned about the project StayOn in the first place?

Parts III-V: General recommendations

Helpful probes include:

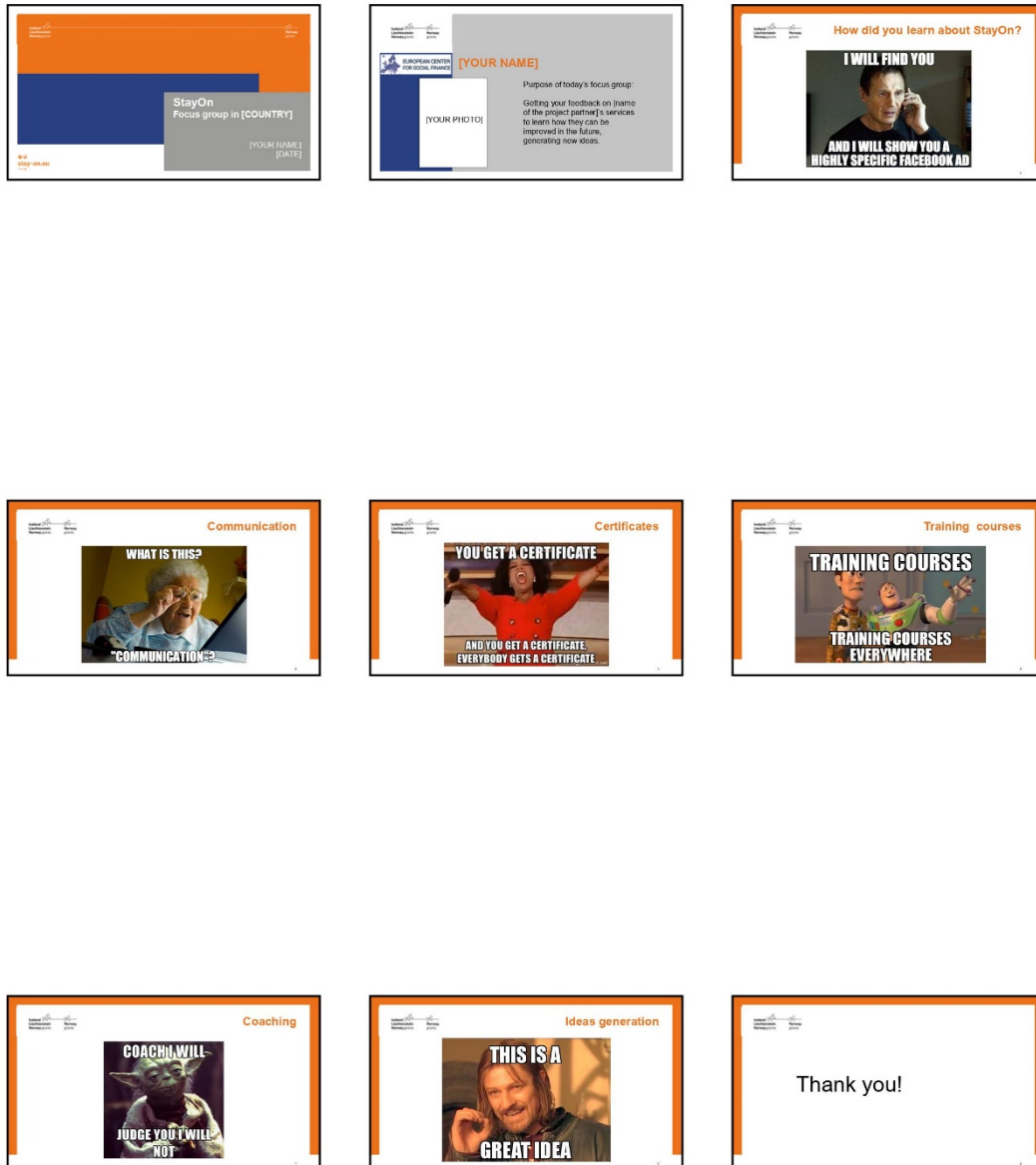
Can you talk about that more?, Could you help me understand what you mean?, Can you give an example?

Strategies to facilitate the discussion include:

- Summarize the main idea of the feedback at the end of each question.
- Reflect the main idea back to the group "Just so I understand, what you are saying is...?"
- Self-appointed experts: "Thank you. What do other people think?" Or "Does anybody else have a different thought/strategy?"
- The dominator: "Let's have some other comments." Stand behind the dominator while addressing the group to elicit participation from others.
- The shy participant: Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them.
- The participant who talks very quietly: Ask them to repeat their response more loudly.

- If the conversation gets off-topic, restate the purpose of the research.

APPENDIX D: Focus Group Slides for Moderation



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