Developing Research Questions for Impact Evaluations
IRC Research Toolkit

IRC programming aims to positively impact peoples' lives. Our ability to generate and act on evidence is fundamental to improving the effectiveness of humanitarian programs. Yet, there is little evidence about what actually works to achieve health, safety, economic wellbeing, education, and power in humanitarian settings.

An impact evaluations is a systematic study of the change that can be attributed to a particular intervention. In other words, impact evaluations aim to measure the impact of an intervention on beneficiaries' lives. Impact evaluations ask: "does our program cause or change the key outcome?" or "how does our program cause or change the key outcome?" or "under what conditions does our program cause or change the key outcome?"

What is a good impact evaluation research question?

Strong research questions are specific, testable, and important.

- **Specific** research questions aim to answer a hypothesis, filling a gap in scientific or programmatic knowledge.
- **Testable** research questions can be measured using strong methodology.
- **Important** research questions, if answered, can *impact* beneficiaries' lives in a meaningful way, and *influence* research, policy, practice, and funding in this area.

When is a program "ready" for an impact evaluation?

- There is an evidence gap on whether this program causes the expected outcomes;
- The program is not brand new (new programs can show no effects in an evaluation due to problems with implementation);
- The program can be implemented on a medium scale (more than 100 units, whether it's individuals or communities), but is not implemented at scale in the whole country; AND
- The Country Program is interested in and committed to the evaluation.


Research Questions in Three Steps

First, start by generating a list of potential questions. What are the major gaps in the evidence base? What questions, if answered, could help us improve people's lives? Are these important questions for your organization, in terms of the programming that you conduct, your organizational strategy, etc.?

Second, separate *impact evaluation* questions (the focus of this guidance document) from *process* or *program evaluation* questions[1] (guidance available separately). Each type of evaluation requires different methods, resources, technical expertise, and timelines.

Third, evaluate each potential question according to the criteria in the decision tree:

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[1] A *process evaluation* is an assessment conducted during the implementation of a program to determine if the program is likely to reach its objectives by assessing whether or not it is reaching its intended beneficiaries (coverage) and providing the intended services using appropriate means (processes).
A *program evaluation* is an assessment of a set of interventions designed to attain specific global, regional, country, or sector development objectives.
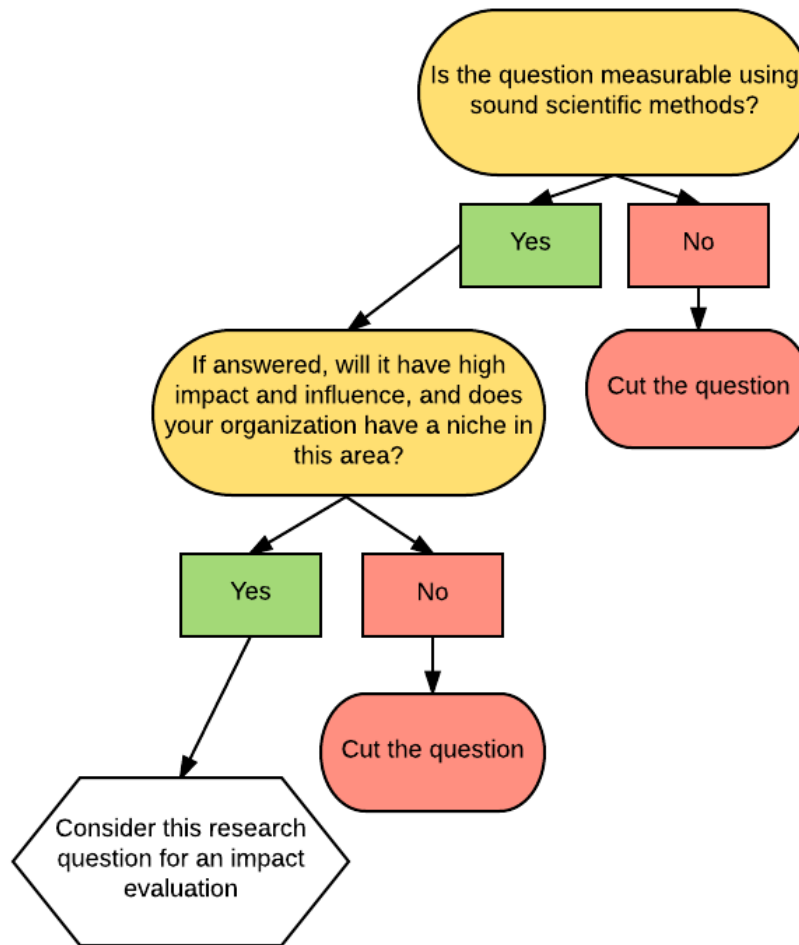
Measureable Outcomes and Hypotheses

Once research questions are defined, define the **primary outcomes of interest** for each question. The primary outcome of interest identifies what change we think our program causes. Primary outcomes are those we need to see in order to consider our program a success. Check IRC's Outcomes and Evidence Framework for theories of change, expected outcomes and indicators.

Next, formulate **key hypotheses** that further specify the direction and intensity of the change we expect to see in the primary outcome.

For example, a hypothesis could be that children in schools where teachers receive training will improve their reading and math scores more than children in schools where teachers have not received training, regardless of other school characteristics. During the analysis, we know that our first priority is compare the reading and math scores of children in schools where teachers were trained to scores of children in schools where teachers were not trained, rather than analyzing how changes in test scores are impacted by school size, resources, or other factors.