

Tip Sheet:

3 Steps for Developing Key Evaluation Questions

Evaluation questions, also called **key evaluation questions or KEQs**, are the high-level questions an evaluation project is designed to answer. KEQs are not the individual questions you ask during data collection, such as those used in a survey questionnaire, interview or focus group discussion. Instead, KEQs define what the project team seeks to learn and serve to guide the entire evaluation process, informing decisions about what data to collect through which methods, how to analyze and interpret it, and how to disseminate and report your findings. Evaluation and program staff should ideally develop and agree on the KEQs at the start of evaluation planning.[1]

Evaluability is the extent to which a credible evaluation can feasibly be conducted.[2] A key factor to consider in determining program evaluability is whether or not the program design is clear. It is difficult or impossible to evaluate a program if its expected results are not specific and measurable, or if you have not developed a clear strategy for achieving them. Therefore, before planning your evaluation, you should carefully review your program to first confirm that you have defined what your program is expected to achieve and how.

Taking the time during program design, or prior to the evaluation planning process, to develop a logically sound **theory of change diagram** that clearly outlines the causal pathways between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and objectives is a great way to make sure that your program is evaluable. Program objectives, outcomes and outputs should be SMART. For more guidance on creating your own theory of change, take META's e-learning module Developing Theories of Change.

Case Study: Step 1

Sana manages the Helping Hands Youth Program, a program whose main objectives are to improve the ability of school-aged refugee youth to navigate a new school system, to build social bridges at school, and to have academic confidence. The program consists of three main interventions: a refugee after-school and summer school program, teacher professional development workshops, and school-related support for parents of enrolled youth.

Sana and her team want to find out if their program is effective, so they sit down to review the program documents to make sure they're prepared to embark on an evaluation project. They developed a theory of change and detailed logical framework (logframe) for their most recent application for funding. They walk through these materials together, then turn to the topic of evaluation planning.

[1] Adapted from BetterEvaluation, Specify the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs), 2016.
[2] For a more comprehensive look at evaluability assessments, see the Department for International Development (DFID) report *Planning Evaluability Assessments,* 2013.

Step 1: Brainstorm as a team: what do we want to learn about our program?

With a strong theory of change in place, you can begin brainstorming evaluation questions. The goal of brainstorming as a team is to create a long list of things you may want to learn about your program. Don't worry if the initial questions that emerge aren't polished.

Start by gathering people with a variety of relevant backgrounds and perspectives, such as program managers, direct service staff, and monitoring and evaluation staff. Consider involving stakeholders such as local community leaders, recipients of your program's services or interventions, and others whose lives are affected by your project.

Engaging stakeholders in this way is one step in **participatory evaluation**, an approach to evaluation that incorporates the needs and perspectives of your program's intended clients and the community as a whole.[3] Participatory evaluation allows you to gain more insight into clients' initial needs and to more thoroughly understand and anticipate the specific ways in which your program may affect them.

To begin your brainstorming meeting, clearly state the objective of the session, which is to generate as many ideas for potential evaluation questions as possible. It's a good idea to begin by reviewing your program's theory of change so that your team can refresh their knowledge of the program objectives and outcomes.

Then, give participants time to come up with ideas before sharing them with the group. You can suggest they focus their thoughts around broad questions such as:

- What do we need and want to learn about our program?
- What do we already know about what works or doesn't work?
- What questions do we commonly receive about our program and wish we could answer?
- What information about our program do we want to be able to communicate and share with others?

One way to guide the brainstorming session is to use a large whiteboard and sticky notes. Give each team member a stack of notes upon which they can write any questions, ideas, or comments that come to mind.

Then, each person should stick the notes on a whiteboard for everyone to read. This method allows questions to be easily added, modified, or grouped in different categories according to their similar characteristics or intentions.

Regardless of your meeting structure, ensure that you choose a note-taker to document the brainstorming session and the potential KEQs that emerge.

Research vs. Evaluation

In the course of brainstorming possible questions, it's possible that you will identify questions that fall outside the scope of program evaluation and that would be better answered through research. While an evaluation aims to assess a specific program, research projects typically try to answer a given question in order to produce generalizable findings.[4]

Research and evaluation are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap. An impact evaluation, which includes the collection and analysis of control group data in order to answer questions about the effectiveness of different programs, is often performed in conjunction with researchers or research institutions. And needs assessments can be considered formative research and can be used to inform program design and implementation.

[3] Adapted from Community Toolbox, *Evaluating Community Programs and Initiatives, Section 6. Participatory Evaluation*.
[4] For more discussion on the relationship between evaluation and research, see Patricia Rogers' BetterEvaluation post "Ways of framing the difference between research and evaluation," 2014.

Step 2: Categorize questions by evaluation type.

Once you have completed your brainstorming session, determine what specific type of evaluation would be needed to answer each drafted KEQ. Program evaluations typically fall into three categories:

Outcome evaluation – An evaluation of the extent to which a program has achieved its outcomes and/or objectives. Outcome evaluations focus on results, including unintended results, to judge program effectiveness. Examples of outcome questions are:

- Did we see the changes we expected to see?
- How valuable or substantial were these changes?
- Did we see any unintended results?

Process evaluation – An evaluation conducted at specific points during or after program implementation to determine if the program has operated or is operating as planned. A process evaluation has no control group and is non-experimental. Some examples of process questions are:

- What factors influenced the project's results?
- Was the project cost-efficient and cost-effective?
- Did we reach the people we intended to reach with the intended services? If not, why not?
- How is the program perceived by the target group?

Impact evaluation – An evaluation of the changes that can be attributed to a particular project, program or policy and can tell us whether our project, program or policy is effective compared to no program, or whether one type of program is more effective than another. Impact evaluations are experimental and typically involve data collection from an intervention group and a comparison or control group, at both baseline and endline. Impact evaluations seek to answer the following type of question:

- Did we see the changes that we expected, and can we say that those changes happened because of our program? (That is: What is the *impact* of our program?)

When you decide upon an evaluation type for your program, you will need to make sure that each of your questions relates to your evaluation's goal.

Case Study: Steps 1-2

After spending an afternoon brainstorming, Sana and her team have come up with a long list of potential evaluation questions and have categorized each by evaluation type:

Outcome

- Did we see improvements in the ability of school-aged refugee youth to navigate their new school system?
- Did children participating in the program build social bridges at school?
- Did children reached through the program have improved academic confidence?
- Were there any differences in outcomes for boys and girls?
- After participating in the program, did parents have improved capacity to help their children adjust to life in their new schools?

Process

- What changes did teachers trained through the program make to better support refugee students in navigating the school system, building social bridges, and having academic confidence?
- Do teachers think the professional development workshops are useful?
- Was the program accessible to refugee youth, including girls?
- To what extent did youth and their parents regularly attend after-school programs and academic support meetings? What factors influenced attendance?
- How was the program implemented in different schools? To what extent was the program implemented as planned?

Impact

- What is the impact of our program on refugee youth? Does our program have a measurable impact on our key outcomes, compared to no intervention?

Step 3: Refine and prioritize your questions

After you have identified your evaluation questions, you can start refining and prioritizing them. Evaluate each draft KEQ against the following criteria:

Is the question specific? Strong KEQs aim to answer a specific hypothesis, filling a gap in scientific or programmatic knowledge. The questions should be framed using enough detail to clarify exactly what the key stakeholders of an evaluation hope to learn.[5]

Is the question important? Remember to keep the focus on *purpose*. A good KEQ will lead to data-driven decisions that will influence the way you plan or implement programs. Consider whether the information will be truly useful, and for whom. Will answering these questions lead to meaningful changes to your work, and ultimately to improvements in clients' lives?

Is the question feasible? Finally, determine whether you and your team have the available resources to properly address each KEQ within an appropriate timeframe. Is the necessary data available or able to be obtained? If the data is available, is it good quality data? Do you and your team have enough human and financial resources to effectively answer your questions?

Once you have refined your evaluation questions, the next step is to develop a detailed evaluation plan in which you will outline your evaluation methods, create a data collection, analysis, and dissemination strategy, and formulate roles and responsibilities for each member of your team. Download META's forthcoming Evaluation Plan Template for a comprehensive guide.

To learn how the team in our case study approached this step, see the box on the following page!



Monitoring Data

While program evaluations often involve collection of new data, they also rely on good quality data collected through routine program monitoring processes.

Monitoring refers to the process of regularly and systematically collecting, managing, and analyzing information about a project in order to adjust or shape project implementation as needed.

You can use META's M&E Plan Template and Checklist to plan for monitoring and evaluation processes throughout the life of a project or funding period.

Monitoring data must be high quality in order to inform decision-making. To learn more about maintaining data quality in case management programs, download META's 4 Tips for Improving Data Quality in Case Management.

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[5] Different frameworks exist for developing strong evaluation questions. For one example, the PICO framework for impact evaluation questions, see the Tribal Evaluation Institute's "Using PICO to Build an Evaluation Question."

Case Study: Step 3

Sana's team review each of their questions against the criteria of specificity, importance and feasibility. They come up with:

Question	Specific?	Important?	Feasible?
Did we see improvements in the ability of school-aged refugee youth to navigate their new school system?	Y	Y	Y
Did children participating in the program build social bridges at school?	Y	Y	Y
Did children reached through the program have improved academic confidence?	Y	Y	Y
Were there any differences in outcomes for boys and girls?	Y	Y	Y
After participating in the program, did parents have improved capacity to help their children adjust to life in their new schools?	Y	Y	Y
What changes did teachers trained through the program make to better support refugee students in navigating the school system, building social bridges, and having academic confidence?	Y	Y	Y
Do teachers think the professional development workshops are useful?	N	Y	Y
Was the program accessible to refugee youth, including girls?	Y	Y	Y
To what extent did youth and their parents regularly attend after-school programs and academic support meetings? What factors influenced attendance?	Y	Y	Y
How was the program implemented in different schools? To what extent was the program implemented as planned?	Y	Y	Y
What is the impact of our program on refugee youth? Does our program have a measurable impact on our key outcomes, compared to no intervention?	Y	Y	N

Sana and her team decide to move forward with the questions that meet all three criteria—those assigned a "no" in any column will not be considered. They decide that the question "Do teachers think the professional development workshops are useful?" is not specific enough, and the team will revise it before moving forward.

And while the team would like to determine the impact of their program on refugee youth, they realize that given their resources it is not feasible for them to explore this question. They lack the budget and capacity to conduct a rigorous impact evaluation, so they will strike this question and plan to revisit it should additional funds become available.

Now, the team will move forward with their other questions by developing a detailed evaluation plan, and will further revise the questions as needed.