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connecting resettlement experts

5 Steps for Establishing Productive Research Partnerships

Going beyond routine program monitoring and evaluation, research is a systematic investigation conducted to contribute to or fill a gap in evidence or knowledge. Impact evaluations are common research projects in refugee resettlement work. Regardless of the motivation, research - including impact evaluations - can be difficult for an organization to do on its own, so this tip sheet covers five steps for establishing research partnerships with an external academic institution.

Research in the context of impact evaluation

When a program sees positive outcomes, it may be tempting to attribute them directly to that program. However, these outcomes may be produced by outside circumstances. Impact goes beyond simply achieving results or outcomes—it is defined as the measured effect of an intervention on the outcome for the client population, that is, the changes in an outcome that are *attributable to the intervention*.

An ***impact evaluation*** allows an organization to learn whether a program was effective and to determine with a degree of confidence whether results were the result of the program delivered rather than other factors. They typically use an experimental or quasi-experimental design.

When impact evaluations contribute to the evidence base, they may be considered research, generating knowledge that can be used to inform future program design.

Establishing Research Partnerships

Partnerships with academic or other research institutions can help organizations to carry out research projects if they lack in-house capacity. Partners can also lend credibility to an impact evaluation since they are independent from the organization running the intervention under study.

Step 1: Define your research question.

What are you trying to discover? Identify potential research questions and determine if there may be any potential funding opportunities. For guidance on developing research questions in the context of impact evaluation, see this Switchboard information guide.

Step 2: Identify potential partners.

Choose a research partner that will help you accomplish your research goals, but also benefit from the partnership themselves. You may need to orient partners to your programming and organizational context. Be sure to communicate with team members throughout the process to secure buy-in for conducting a research project.

Step 3: Determine if the research could potentially generate meaningful, actionable evidence.

The following questions are a good starting point when considering potential research projects:

- Does the research have the potential to influence the adoption of effective programs and policies?
- Is the research in line with your organization's learning priorities?
- Does the research address any critical emerging questions?
- What ethical considerations of the research need to be taken into account?
- Do the potential benefits of this research outweigh the potential cost to participants?

Keep in mind that researchers often have different priorities than service providers do, such as publishing in academic journals rather than sharing actionable findings with program staff, which may require additional approval from entities like the Institutional Review Board (IRB). To ensure research is truly useful, a clear, mutual understanding of these priorities is needed from the start.

Whatever research management structure you choose, you will need to clearly determine who is responsible for what.

Switchboard's **Research/Evaluation Roles and Responsibilities Mapping Template** provides a list of tasks involved that may be involved in each phase of your research, and allows you to clarify the duties of different staff within your organization and of your academic partner.

Step 4: Create a research management structure.

Depending on the size and complexity of the project, and on each partner's capacity, you may assign a larger role for the implementing program team or a larger role for your research partner. The research management structure may also reflect donor preferences regarding third-party evaluations. Ensure you will follow all federal requirements related to data sharing, such as the Office of Refugee Resettlement Policy Letter 17-02 on Data Sharing that safeguards personally identifying information, or PII.

Once you have agreed on a research management structure, draft a legal agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (depending on whether payment is involved) in order to establish a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities between you and your partner—this should include who will own data, publish findings, and have authorship of all materials produced.

Step 5: Develop a research budget for each step of the project lifecycle.

Take into consideration each step of the research cycle, from design to dissemination and learning review. Make sure to include provisions for all staff time (including program coordinator or administrative staff); materials, software, or equipment; fees such as travel, translation, incentives for study participants, conference fees, and IRB submissions; and dissemination costs, including validation workshops, dissemination meetings and conferences. For more information on developing a budget for research or evaluation, see Switchboard's Research/ Evaluation Budget Checklist and Research/ Evaluation Time & Effort Calculator.

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