



## 3 Steps for Developing Key Evaluation Questions

Program evaluations assess the impact or implementation of resettlement services. This guide outlines three practical steps to help refugee service providers develop clear, purposeful evaluation questions that strengthen program learning. Developing strong evaluation questions is essential to build a shared understanding of your evaluation goals and to guide your entire evaluation process. Evaluation and program staff should develop and agree on the key evaluation questions at the start of evaluation planning.

### Introduction

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 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 the findings.<sup>1</sup>

**Evaluability** is the extent to which a credible evaluation can feasibly be conducted. A key factor to consider in determining program evaluability is whether 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 confirm that you have defined what your program is expected to achieve and how.

To ensure that a program is evaluable, take the time during program design or prior to the evaluation planning process to develop a logically sound **theory of**

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Community Toolbox, [Evaluating Community Programs and Initiatives, Section 6. Participatory Evaluation](#).

**change diagram** that clearly outlines the causal pathways between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and objectives. Program objectives, outcomes and outputs should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART). For more, take Switchboard's course [Intro to Theories of Change](#).

## 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, program participants or clients, 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 their communities.<sup>2</sup> [Participatory approaches](#) allow you to more thoroughly explore the ways your program may affect the people it aims to serve.

To begin your brainstorming, clearly state the objective of the session, which is to generate many possible ideas for potential evaluation questions. Then, review 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 on broad questions such as:**

- What do we 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 share with others?

One format for the brainstorming session involves a large whiteboard and sticky notes. Give each team member a stack of notes on which they can write any questions,

ideas, or comments that come to mind. Then, each person should stick their notes on the whiteboard for everyone to read. This method allows questions to be easily added, modified, or grouped into categories according to their similarity. Regardless of your meeting structure, choose a note-taker to document the session and the potential KEQs that emerge.

## Step 2: Categorize questions by evaluation type

After your brainstorming session, determine what type of evaluation would be needed to answer each draft KEQ. Program evaluations typically fall into three categories:

### Process Evaluation

**A process evaluation is conducted at specific points during or after program implementation to determine if the program has operated or is operating as planned.**

Some examples of process questions are:

- What factors influenced the project's results?
- Did the project make the most of available resources?
- Did we reach the people we aimed to reach with the intended services? If not, why not?
- How is the program perceived by the target group?

### Outcome Evaluation

An outcome evaluation assesses the extent to which a program has achieved its outcomes and/or objectives.

**Outcome evaluations focus on short- and medium-term 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?

### Impact Evaluation

An impact evaluation identifies the changes that can be attributed to a particular project, program, or policy. It can tell you whether your program is effective compared to no program, or whether one type of program is more effective than another.

**Impact evaluations focus on long-term effects and causal relationships. They are experimental and typically involve data collection from an intervention group and a comparison or control group**, at both baseline (program start) and endline (program end).

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Community Toolbox, [Evaluating Community Programs and Initiatives, Section 6. Participatory Evaluation](#).

They 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? (i.e., What is the *impact* of our program?)

**Keep in mind that your KEQs need to align with the goals of the evaluation type you choose.**

### Research vs. Evaluation

While brainstorming potential 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 by producing generalizable findings.**

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

Remember that where data collection meets the definition of **human subjects research**, it is a legal requirement to obtain ethical approval from an Institutional Review Board, or IRB.

### 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.

**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 to answer?** 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 obtainable? 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 Switchboard's [Roles & Responsibilities Template](#) for a comprehensive guide.

**See Switchboard's accompanying [case study](#) for an example of these steps in action!**

### Resources

[Ways of framing the difference between research and evaluation](#): This resource from BetterEvaluation provides more discussion on the relationship between evaluation and research.

[A Guide to Designing Effective Evaluation Questions](#): Deepen your learning with this guide from EvalCommunity, which includes descriptions of different types of evaluation questions and guidelines for including stakeholders in developing your questions.

[PICO Question Worksheet](#): This worksheet from Stanford Medicine helps you use the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome (PICO) framework to develop evaluation questions. PICO is a common framework, especially in fields related to health and medicine.

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