EVALUATION QUESTION DEVELOPMENT WORKBOOK

A set of clear, realistic questions clearly linked to the evaluation purpose can result in detailed findings and actionable recommendations that improve program outcomes. Inversely, questions that are (1) not feasible to answer, (2) too broad in scope, or (3) not adequately clear, will produce evaluations with low confidence, little new information, and reports that deviate from the needs of users. (See figure below). This evaluation question development workbook is intended to help USAID evaluation commissioners develop, refine, and prioritize evaluation questions. This workbook should be used by the primary evaluation commissioner, with input at various stages from other evaluation stakeholders, including members of the technical office, front office, program office, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) teams (including MEL platforms), and Washington-based evidence and learning support. Depending on the evaluation contracting mechanism, the evaluation commissioner may wish to co-create questions alongside the evaluation team.

FEASIBILITY

If the evaluation questions (EQs) aren't feasible, commissioners can't be confident in the answers.

SCOPE

If the scope is too broad, evaluators struggle to tell commissioners information they don't already know.

CLARITY

If questions lack clarity, reports struggle to deliver what commissioners are expecting.

STEP 1: DEFINE THE DECISIONS YOU WILL MAKE WITH THE EVALUATION FINDINGS

All successful evaluations start with a clear purpose. You're investing time and money in conducting the evaluation, so take time in the beginning to make sure you get information you can use! Together with relevant members of your technical or front office teams, clearly articulate the **purpose of the evaluation** and **the decisions you plan to make with the evaluation findings**. Be as specific as possible, as this will make it easier to prioritize and refine your evaluation questions later on.

COMMON EVALUATION PURPOSES

Strategy: Country Development Cooperation Strategy or specific democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) strategy **Design**: Design of future activities

Implementation: Implementation of current or future activities

General learning: Understanding of DRG problems and challenges to addressing them

Beyond identifying the evaluation purpose, you need to articulate what decisions you want the findings to inform. **Some decision questions to consider include:**

- What decisions do we need to make for a follow-on program? This might entail changes to the program components, theory of change, geographical targeting, target population, program scope, or partnership strategy.
- What adaptations might be needed for the implementation? Examples include to increase inclusivity, address implementation challenges, respond to contextual changes, improve adaptive management, improve MEL, increase sustainability, scale the program.
- What questions do we have about areas of uncertainty or assumptions in the theory of change?

Ensure that your timeline matches your evaluation purpose. A basic performance evaluation takes about seven months from tasking to completion. This is in addition to the amount of time needed for SOW development, approvals, and procurement, which varies based on the operating unit and mechanism. Make sure that you will have the results ahead of major decision points for strategy formulation, design development, or implementation workplan development.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS EVALUATION? WHAT DECISIONS WILL THE RESULTS INFORM?

STEP 2: BRAINSTORM QUESTIONS

Now that you know your purpose, hold a brainstorming session for people to write down all the questions they would like the evaluation to answer. This could happen either in a meeting or asynchronously through a Google document. Consult all necessary stakeholders to get everyone's input. Try to avoid bringing people in only at the end, especially those with decision-making power. This is a brainstorming session, so include any questions that people come up with and do not worry about the exact wording or prioritization just yet. Nonetheless, even at this stage, participants should be encouraged to propose questions that fit with the purpose of the evaluation.

Below are some common question types you may want to consider based on the decisions you plan to make:

- Program **outcomes and effectiveness** (both higher- and lower-level).
- Program **implementation and adaptation.**
- Questions about **sustainability.**
- Questions validating the **theory of change** and other assumptions.
- Questions about **inclusivity** (including gender) and program targeting.
- Questions about **partnerships** and stakeholder engagement.

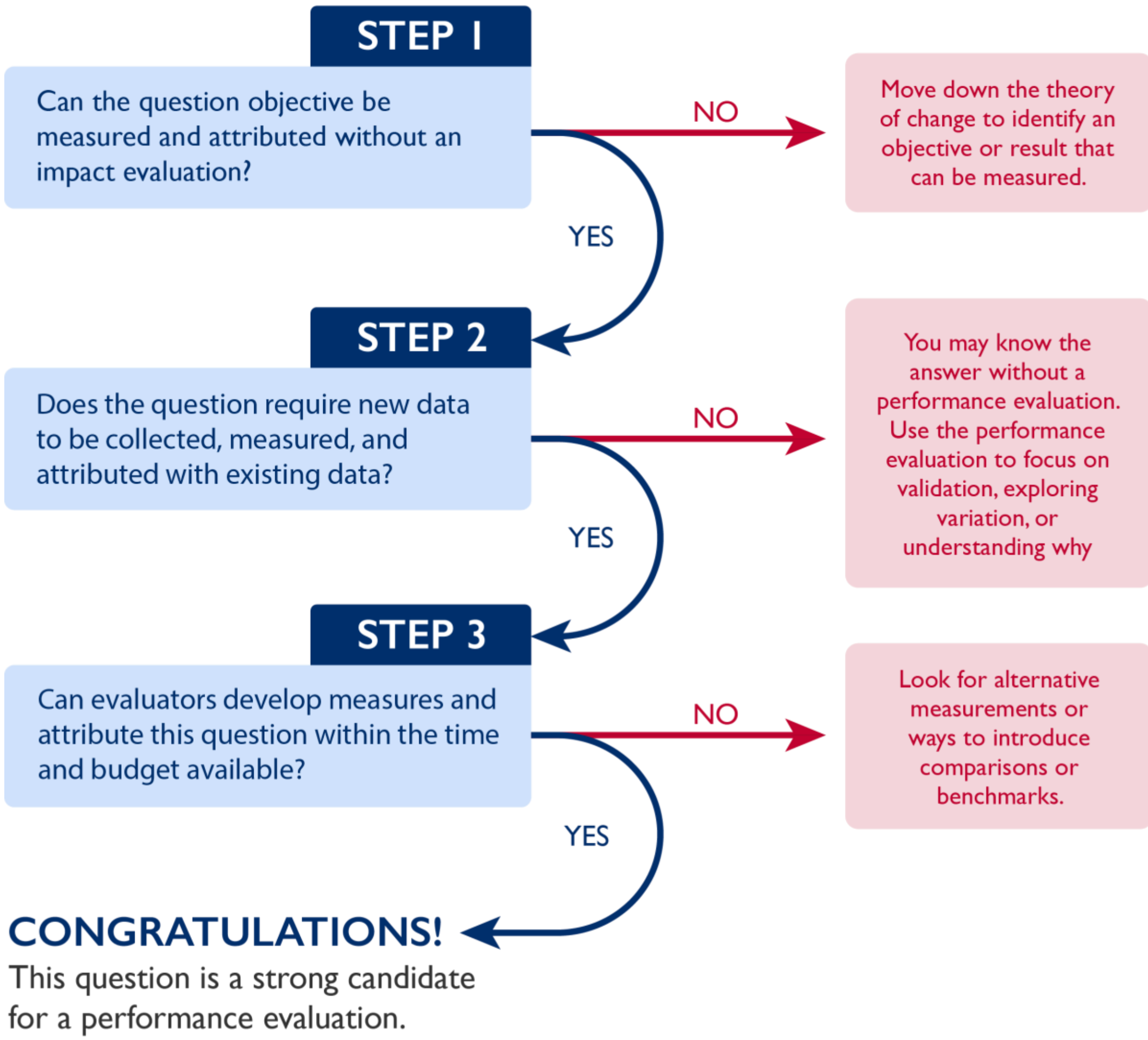
Question 1:
Question 2:
Question 3:
Question 4:
Question 5:
Question 6:
Question 7:
Question 8:
Question 9:
Question 10:

Look over these questions and note any trends that emerge. What types of information seem to be most important? What is more of a "nice to know" than a "need to know"? Are they linked to the evaluation purpose and the decisions you need to make? At this stage, you may also wish to organize questions by theme, eliminate duplicates, and remove questions that are obviously unrelated to your decision-making needs.

STEP 3: CONFIRM FEASIBILITY

Now that you have everyone's input to create a universe of potential performance evaluation questions and have removed duplicates or questions unrelated to your use case, review the remaining questions for methodological feasibility. Feasibility is particularly challenging when asking about effectiveness, results, or outcomes. In these cases, use the following flow chart to determine if a question is feasible. Eliminate or revise accordingly.

To determine if a question is methodologically feasible:



Revise your questions below

Question 1:

Question 2:

Question 3:

Question 4:

Question 5:

Question 6:

Question 7:

Question 8:

Question 9:

Question 10:

STEP 4: PRIORITIZE

Once the universe of questions has been narrowed to those that are methodologically feasible, prioritize questions until you reach a single question set that can be answered with the time and money available.

REACH

What will this question help us learn?

IMPACT

How much will this information impact our decision-making?

CONFIDENCE

How confident are we in the quality of the findings?

EFFORT

What types of data are necessary to answer this question, and does the evaluation have the time and money to collect it?

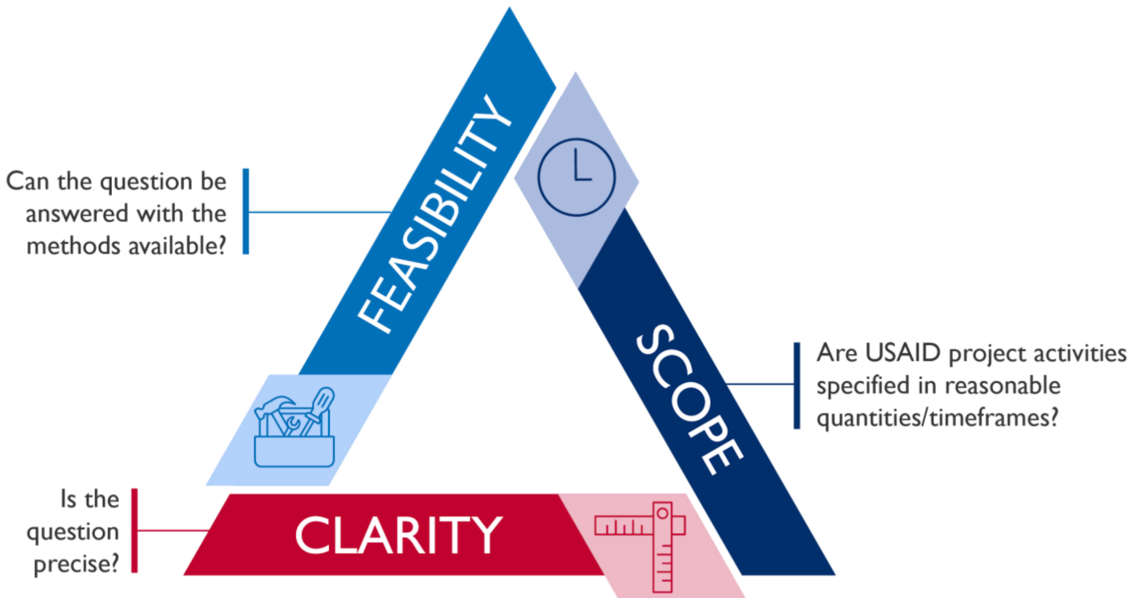
One tool to help prioritize questions is a variation of the popular management prioritization framework, **RICE (Reach, Impact, Confidence, and Effort).** This can be a qualitative exercise to think about the tradeoffs of various questions or a quantitative exercise. For example, if a question requires a great deal of effort but will result in low confidence findings and will not provide critical information for decision-making, then this would be a low priority question. Similarly, a question might be able to be answered with reasonable effort and to a reasonable level of confidence, but if it is not useful and will not impact decision-making, then it would also be a low priority. To quantify questions, score each category by creating a three-point scoring system and multiplying reach by impact and confidence, then dividing by effort using the table below.

	REACH	IMPACT	CONFIDENCE	EFFORT
	What new information would this question tell us? 1=Would mostly confirming what we already are confident we know 2=Would triangulate other data sources like MEL data, contextual evidence, or academic literature 3=Information will be brand new	**How much would the answer to this question help our decision-making?** 1=Would provide context 2=Would provide indicative evidence for design or implementation 3=Would provide critical information for a key decision	**Given the methods available, how confident would we be in the quality of the findings?** 1=Low confidence 2=Moderate confidence 3=Strong confidence	**How much of the evaluation team's time, interviews, and budget would need to be dedicated to this question?** 1=roughly the same as other questions 2= is somewhat more than other questions 3=much more than other questions.
Question 1	-	-	-	-
Question 2	-	-	-	-
Question 3	-	-	-	-
Question 4	-	-	-	-
Question 5	-	-	-	-
Question 6	-	-	-	-
Question 7	-	-	-	-
Question 8	-	-	-	-
Question 9	-	-	-	-
Question 10	-	-	-	-

Depending on your contracting mechanism for the evaluation, you may wish to get additional inputs from your mission, bureau, or independent office MEL specialists, learning experts in Washington, or the evaluation team conducting the evaluation at this stage. They will be well positioned to provide guidance on confidence and effort

STEP 5: REFINE SCOPE AND CLARITY

Once you've narrowed your list to your highest-priority questions (3–5 questions is a good rule of thumb), use the checklist to further refine the scope, feasibility, and clarity of the question. For example, if a question asks about the activity as a whole, can the scope be narrowed to focus on a high priority area that will better support decision-making? Develop a paragraph for each priority question to provide context, define terms, share additional information or nuance, and identify lines of inquiry. Consult the [Three Keys for Performance Evaluation Questions](), which includes a question bank, and the [Performance Evaluation Glossary]() for additional guidance and example questions. You may also wish to consult with MEL specialists at the Mission or MEL platform, learning experts in Washington, or the evaluation team conducting the evaluation to help refine the questions.



Question 1:
Question 1 Context:

Question 2:
Question 2 Context:

Question 3:
Question 3 Context:

Question 4:
Question 4 Context:

Question 5:
Question 5 Context:

Congratulations! You're almost there. Once you have refined your questions, circulate them with the wider group of stakeholders and for any necessary approvals. If your evaluation partner has not yet seen the questions, it can be helpful to note whether your team is open to suggestions from the evaluation team to further refine your questions during the work plan stage or if the question set is unchangeable once approved.