

10 pointers for designing or requesting monitoring or evaluation research

“Ask an important question and answer it reliably”

Often, charities and funders operate in areas where there is little or no rigorous monitoring or evaluation research and so need to design / commission / produce new research. These are some tips for doing that.

This document was written to go with the [Evidence and Gap Map](#) which Giving Evidence and partners produced about institutional responses to child abuse – though the tips and principles apply to any area.

1. Check whether your research question is adequately answered in the literature.

You may not need to do any research at all.

This is very easy with an Evidence and Gap Map - if your question is a question about ‘what works’ (an impact assessment) about an institutional response to child abuse.

As described [here](#), you can look to see whether your type of intervention has been evaluated before, and the types of outcomes on which it has been evaluated.

For each cell, there will be:

- Summaries of each primary study, if there are one or two primary studies in that cell, or
- Synthesis of the studies in that cell if there are three or more of them.

Those will show how many times the effect of that type of intervention on that type of outcome has been evaluated. The colour of the dots shows the reliability of the studies.

You may want to look at the mechanism by which the intervention achieved those results in those places, in order to form a view of whether that kind of intervention is likely to achieve similar results in your context. For instance, [a programme](#) which was effective in reducing teenage girls in Kenya contracting HIV/AIDS from “sugar daddy” boyfriends worked because, in that country, girls *under*-estimated the risks. But in Rwanda, girls *over*-estimated those risks, so a programme to educate them about the risks might have *increased* their risky behaviour.

Once you understand the mechanism, you can see what you need to test in order to estimate whether that kind of intervention is likely to achieve similar results in your context: in this example, the test might be girls’ perceptions of the risks vs. reality.

If you can form a strong view of whether the intervention is likely to succeed in your context, you may not need to do an impact assessment at all.

For instance, programmes to teach children about good touches vs. bad touches have been evaluated dozens of times in many countries... and the answer is always the same, which is that they succeed in raising children's understanding of the problem. The hope is that children will then know when something bad is happening, so they can avoid it and report it. Those programmes probably do not need to be evaluated again.

2. Check where your intervention is in the life-cycle, and define your research question.

An impact evaluation might not be right at this point.

The right research question depends on where you are in the life-cycle. Notice that only in one of these four stages do you need an impact evaluation:

Life-stage	Important research questions
Before you start delivering anything	You need a good needs assessment: What is the problem here? Why does it arise? Who else is doing what about it? What interventions are known / likely to work against this problem in this kind of context? What does the affected community think?
When you have started delivery and the intervention is young	Monitoring: What does it take to run this intervention? Suppose you are running a breakfast club in a school. Your questions here are operational, e.g.: How many children turn up? What do they want to eat for breakfast? How long does breakfast take? How many people do you need washing up? What are the costs? Are you reaching the most needy children?
Once the intervention is stable	Impact evaluation: what effect/s does this have on the target outcome/s?

	Here you might do an impact evaluation, but only if you can answer this question reliably. (See below).
During scale-up, once the intervention is known to work	<p>Monitoring: Is the intervention being delivered properly, and are the outcomes what you expect?</p> <p>For example, with the Covid vaccines, eventually the main trials cease and we get on with delivery. But we need to check that everybody is getting the right vaccine, that the cold-chain is robust, that everybody gets the right dose, and that there are not unexpected harms / side effects.</p>

3. Identify the research method that is appropriate for your research question.

Only proceed if you can answer your question reliably.

The right research method depends on your question. For instance,

- in the first life-stage, the questions include: what does the affected community think? That will require qualitative research, such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, perhaps anthropological research. By contrast:
- At the third life-stage and want to understand impact, then (and only then) you need quantitative impact evaluation.

Sometimes people think that impact evaluation, such as randomised controlled trials, is always the best research method. This is not correct. Randomised controlled trials are fantastic for reliably answering *some* research questions - but not *all* research questions.

4. Check the cost /benefit: does the benefit of having the answer to this question outweigh the cost of getting the answer?

Not all questions are worth answering. Some are complicated and expensive to answer reliably, yet the answer won't change much, perhaps because only few people run a relevant programme, so they are not worth doing.

Benefits to answering questions include:

- If the answer will influence a lot of delivery / implementing organisations

- If the answer will influence a lot of public policy or funding decisions.

Research is expensive if:


- You would need a massive sample size to answer the question reliably;
- Collecting the data is expensive. (Sometimes the data already exist, e.g., on dates of birth, or are cheap to collect, e.g., via phone surveys. But sometimes they are expensive to collect, e.g., if you have to travel to remote places and collect primary data such as household expenditure or attitudes);
- The data are disbursed. Collecting data on the changed attitudes, or on influence of campaigns which can be across many types of people or organisations.

If the benefits don't warrant the costs, then stop.

5. Can you get adequate sample size to answer your question reliably?

Again, only proceed if you can answer your question reliably. Studies where the sample is too small for the answers to be statistically robust are completely useless and a waste of resources.

If the number of people, or villages, or organisations affected by your intervention is too small, you will never get a reliable answer.

In that case, 

To work out the minimum sample size that you need, you'll need to do a power calculation. These can be complicated. Ask a statistician to do it.

Many many charities serve too few people for their impact to be reliably evaluated. For example, 2/3rds of the UK charities which asked the Ministry of Justice Data Lab to evaluate their impact on reducing crime [serve too few people](#) to get a reliable answer.

6. If you cannot afford a study with adequate sample size, do not do it at all.

Turn the principle around: if you cannot answer the question reliably, do not answer it at all. An "under-powered" study (as studies with too few people / schools / nurses are called) is just a waste of scarce resources.

7. If you do the study, write it up and publish it! Somewhere findable!

An amazing amount of research doesn't ever get published. That wastes the opportunity for others to learn from it.

Publish it, even if it shows no effect, or negative effect, or is inconclusive. Other people can learn from that.

Publish it, and make sure that it goes somewhere findable, and is indexed so that others can find it.

Don't just put it as a PDF on some organisation's website, because nobody will find that.

8. In the write up, include these important elements:

Including the following elements will make the research MUCH more useful and consequential:

- The sample size (e.g., the no. schools), and why you chose that number (e.g., the power calculation, or maybe you had all the schools in the country)
- If you randomised, the method of randomisation. (This affects the risk of bias. If readers cannot see the method of randomisation, they have to assume that it is low.)
- The data that you collect on ALL the outcome measures that you tested, not just the measures which showed improvement. (That is 'publication bias', which is a kind of research fraud.)
- Full details of what your intervention is. This is so that somebody else could replicate it (or avoid it!) Who did what, to whom, where, with what equipment, how many times, in what building, what training did they have, etc. A great checklist for describing an intervention is [TIDIER](#), developed in healthcare but relevant anywhere.
- Costs. The set-up costs, the fixed costs and the variable costs. Obviously anybody considering replicating that intervention needs to consider costs, so it is amazing that so few study reports include this.

9. State in the write-up the theory on which the intervention is based.

This will help other people to estimate whether it is likely to work in their context.

10. Describe the context in which the intervention ran.

This too will help other people to estimate whether it is likely to work in their context. In the example [earlier](#), the [intervention](#) to prevent girls in Kenya from getting HIV/AIDS by sleeping with "sugar daddy" older

boyfriends worked because girls there under-estimated the risks. That is essential information. Anywhere where that condition is not true is unlikely to get the same results.

Notice that that condition maybe completely unrelated to more easily observable factors in that context, e.g., income levels.

Good luck!

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