

LEARNING QUESTIONS

TIP SHEET

This resource is intended for use by USAID staff and implementing partners as they develop or review learning questions during monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) planning processes. It complements the [Learning Questions checklist](#), and is geared primarily to strategy-level learning. For more on learning questions and MEL, see also the USAID Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Toolkit section on [Learning Agendas](#) and [M&E for Learning](#), the [USAID Monitoring Toolkit](#), and the [USAID Evaluation Toolkit](#).



DON'T

- Ask about 'nice to know' issues



INSTEAD

- Ask about 'need to know' issues in order to be most effective
- Seek information that can inform decisions and clearly links to programming

EXAMPLES:

*How can the donors in this sector share knowledge and lessons?
Are Government of Country X's investments in this sector effective?*

*What are pathways for bridging indigenous justice systems with the formal justice sector? Which are the most effective?
What set of interventions are most effective in increasing youth employment in Country X? Why?*

For any development program, there are likely a number of issues or questions that technical or program staff are interested in exploring. But, with limited resources, it is best to focus on questions that can directly inform programming choices or affect decisions. Answering learning questions should help us be more effective and contribute to evidence-based decision making.



DON'T

- Ask forms of 'What is our Theory of Change?'



INSTEAD

- Be more specific about what aspects of the development hypothesis or theory of change need exploration in order to make sure we are on the right track
- Ask questions that test assumptions or explore risks

EXAMPLES:

*Which interventions will lead to improvements in health outcomes?
Did we achieve our objectives under Project X?*

*What are common challenges encountered in encouraging equitable growth in Country X?
How do gender dynamics within a household affect energy choices that consumers make?
Which interventions are effective in increasing citizen confidence in public institutions? Why?*

Theories of change are usually just that--theories, or best guesses about how a set of interventions or activities might work together to produce a result. Strong learning questions attempt to explore aspects of the theory of change or development hypothesis that we need more information about, or where there is little or no existing evidence. The assumptions or risks that are identified in drafting a development hypothesis may also need further exploration through learning activities.



DON'T

- Explore questions that have already been answered



INSTEAD

- Use the existing technical evidence base to inform your theory of change and programming decisions
- Explore identified gaps in knowledge, related to the development hypothesis

EXAMPLES:

*Which interventions are most effective at preventing tuberculosis?
How can USAID leverage diaspora community resources to achieve development objectives?*

*Who are the two percent of children in Country X who never enroll in primary school?
What are the barriers that prevent them from enrolling?
What context-specific factors drive effective engagement with the private sector to deliver services to targeted/high risk populations?*

Development hypotheses and theories of change should be informed by existing evidence, but often, we do not have information about how certain activities will work together, how they are affected by the context, or how they might impact various populations differently. Strong learning questions explore these types of focused gaps in knowledge.



DON'T

- Explore issues that can't be addressed in the timeframe in which we need the answers



INSTEAD

- Ask questions that are answerable, in a timeframe which aligns with decision making

EXAMPLES:

*How can farmers adapt to climate change?
How does the context influence interventions?*

*What type of workforce development interventions are the most effective in short to medium term job placement for youth in Country X? Why?
What is an effective livelihood approach or combination of approaches for reducing forest dependency and enabling women's empowerment and inclusive participation?*

Some questions may require an extended period of inquiry, or require an impact evaluation. If the question can only be answered after key decisions are made, then pursuing it has less utility. Additionally, the learning activities required to answer some questions may involve extensive effort or resources. In those cases, staff should consider whether the benefits of pursuing the question outweigh the costs.



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