

LEARNING QUESTIONS

TIP SHEET & CHECKLIST

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. For more resources about learning questions and how to address them, see the [USAID Collaborating Learning and Adapting Toolkit](#) section on Learning as well as 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?

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.

Timeout | Remember to ask yourself:

Does the question have clear use/applicability in our work? (Consider using the [Use Case Canvas](#))

Will the question be answered in a timely manner so that answers inform our decision-making and management processes?



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.

Timeout | Remember to ask yourself:

Is the question clear? (Make sure the question is understood similarly by multiple people. Define key terms that could have multiple meanings or varied interpretations.)
Will the question, when answered, help us be more effective?



- Explore questions that have already been answered



- 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. Always check to see if your question has already been answered by someone else to avoid spending unnecessary time and money. Within your organization, check shared drives and intranets or ask colleagues. You can also search the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC) or Google Scholar (for academic articles and books), and general Google search for grey literature.

Timeout | Remember to ask yourself:

Is this question still unanswered?



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



- 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.

 **Timeout | Remember to ask yourself:**

Is the question answerable?

Do we have the resources to answer this question?

Do the anticipated benefits of answering the question outweigh the effort required?

It is beneficial to develop your learning questions and identify learning activities in an inclusive manner. For every question asked, there are individuals responsible for carrying out learning activities to answer the question and those who we hope use the answers to inform their work. Often we fail to collaborate with those stakeholder groups, reducing the likelihood that answers to learning questions will be used to adapt and improve programming.

 **Timeout | Remember to ask yourself:**

Has the question been developed with and/or reviewed by those who will be answering it?

Has the question been developed with and/or reviewed by those who we expect will use the answer in their work?