



IR TIP #6: FORMULATING IR QUESTIONS

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD GUIDE THE IR?

Formulating the right research question is critical to making sure IR provides the learning you need to take action to address the identified implementation challenge. Because problems that arise when implementing health interventions often result from circumstances specific to a local context, engaging diverse stakeholders will help formulate the right question. This IR Tip provides guidance on how to formulate and prioritize a question for IR, which will in turn support decision makers to find out how and why a health intervention is not achieving what it set out to do and how to get better results.

For instance, in Malawi, policies leading to increased access to and utilization of health facilities for delivery did not produce equivalent gains in newborn survival. Later analyses concluded that facility quality fell substantially short of global standards of evidence-based care. Higher-quality facilities had substantially fewer neonatal deaths than other facilities (Godlonton 2016, Leslie 2016).

Implementation research utilizes real-time data review and reflection to help decision makers to understand why interventions and investments are not achieving their goals in their unique context.

Box 6.1 provides some potential questions IR could help to answer.

Box 6.1: IR can help to answer questions like...

- Why am I not seeing the results I expected from my program?
- How can I develop solutions to the challenges I'm seeing?
- How can I help my program get better results?
- How can I adapt or improve my program as it is being implemented?
- How can I ensure the program is reaching those that need it?
- How do I ensure the program is sustainable in the long-term?

HOW TO FORMULATE IR QUESTIONS

While more traditional research questions focus on the impact of an intervention—for instance, does presence of a skilled attendant at birth reduce maternal mortality—IR questions focus on:

- How an intervention is being implemented (implementation strategies)
- How those implementation strategies affect service outcomes and implementation outcomes (i.e., coverage, feasibility, acceptability)
- How contextual factors affect the intervention and its outcomes

Implementation research questions can explore, describe, influence, explain, or test how implementation is (or is not) working (Peters 2013). Additionally, IR questions can try to address challenges related to program scale-up, sustainability, replication and robustness, program integration, equity, and real-life effectiveness, including cost (University of Washington).

Box 6.2: Examples of good IR questions

- What are the barriers to scaling up implementation of a vaccine program for children under five?
- Is it feasible and acceptable to utilize antenatal care services as a delivery platform to integrate other health services (i.e., HIV, malaria, or nutrition)?
- How and where at the household/ community level should multiple micronutrient supplements be made available for effective coverage during pregnancy?

Once you have identified some preliminary IR questions, you can refine and finalize those questions with the help of an IR framework (see [IR Tip #7](#)) and input from partners/stakeholders. Furthermore, [IR Tip #5](#) addresses stakeholder engagement more specifically, but the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Preskill 2009) and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (2009) have developed practical guidance on engaging stakeholders in developing research questions.

HOW TO PRIORITIZE QUESTIONS

Health interventions can produce multiple, simultaneous implementation problems and questions.

Figure 6.1: How to prioritize IR questions?

<p>The problem is urgent. To know if it's urgent, find out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Is the problem severe? Is it widespread?<input type="checkbox"/> What is the worst thing that can happen if the problem is not solved?<input type="checkbox"/> Who is affected by the problem?	<p>The research is feasible. To know if it's feasible, find out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Are there sufficient resources to do the study?<input type="checkbox"/> Are there sufficient resources to implement the recommendations?<input type="checkbox"/> Is there support from local or national authorities to participate in the IR and implement recommendations?
<p>The results can be used to make the intervention more effective. To know this, find out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Are there any interventions that already effectively addressed this problem?<input type="checkbox"/> Will the results of previous intervention research apply to my context?<input type="checkbox"/> What is the likelihood that recommendations will be adopted?<input type="checkbox"/> How will the findings be used to improve health?<input type="checkbox"/> Can the research be completed quickly (i.e. less than 36 months)?<input type="checkbox"/> Is the research acceptable to relevant stakeholders, including those who will be studied?<input type="checkbox"/> Will the results be shared with the people being studied?	

Figure 6.1 illustrates three criteria to utilize when prioritizing IR questions and some questions that will help to establish which IR questions should be prioritized. **Box 6.3** presents how Indonesia utilized a collaborative process to establish IR questions to support scale-up of a national insurance policy.

Box 6.3: How IR was used to strengthen financing reforms in Indonesia

In 2014, Indonesia began implementing a national health insurance initiative (JKN) aimed at covering the country's entire population by 2019. Implementation research was undertaken to provide crucial information about whether JKN was being implemented as intended. A consultative process with key stakeholders, including national and local policymakers and implementers, contributed to defining the IR questions. The first one-year cycle assessed how JKN regulations were being interpreted and implemented and implications for effectiveness. The second cycle sought to investigate health worker satisfaction and opportunities to strengthen the links that lead to improved service delivery (Eichler 018).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- IR answers why or how an implementation is (or is not) working
- Collaborating with diverse stakeholders helps to formulate the right IR questions
- IR can address many challenges you may be facing. For example:
 - How can coverage of your intervention be improved?
 - How can multiple interventions be effectively packaged and delivered?
 - How can the intervention be delivered more equitably?
- Give priority to questions that meet three criteria:
 - the problem is urgent
 - the questions can be answered and recommendations can be put in practice
 - the research can provide results that can make the intervention more effective

KEY RESOURCES

Canadian Institutes of Health Research. (2009) [A guide to researcher and knowledge-user collaboration in health research. Section 4 engaging in collaborative research design.](#)

Morshed A, Baumann A, and Proctor E. (2016) [Dissemination and implementation \(D&I\) aims toolkit.](#) The full set of [Dissemination and implementation toolkits.](#)

Preskill H, and Jones N, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2009) [A practical guide for engaging stakeholders in developing evaluation questions.](#)

University of Washington Implementation Research Resource Hub. [Frame your question: What is an implementation science question?](#)

REFERENCES

Eichler R, Gigli S, LeRoy L. (2018) Implementation research to strengthen health care financing reforms toward universal health coverage in Indonesia: A mixed-methods approach to real-world monitoring. *Global Health Science and Practice* 6(4):747-753.

Godlonton S, Okeke EN. (2016) Does a ban on informal health providers save lives? Evidence from Malawi. *J of Development Economics* 118:112-32.

Leslie HH, Fink Gunther, Nsona H, Kruk ME. (2016) Obstetric facility quality and newborn mortality in Malawi: A cross-sectional study. *PLoS Med* 13(10):e1002151.

Peters DH, Tran NN, Adam T. (2013) Implementation research in health: A practical guide.

World Health Organization. Implementation research toolkit.