

# Evaluation Brief #2

## Asking the right evaluation questions

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### Why do we need evaluation questions?

Evaluation questions help direct the overall evaluation process: what aspects of a program are examined, what methods are used, and how evaluation findings are used.

### What makes an evaluation question 'good'?

Evaluation questions need to:

- focus on the **facts**,
- be **descriptive**, and
- be **open-ended**.<sup>1</sup>

Evaluation questions are developed and prioritized by program teams, evaluation personnel, funders, and other stakeholders. The most useful evaluation questions are those that reflect stakeholder perspectives, key components of your program, your most important information needs, and resources available to answer the questions.

### Types of Evaluation Questions

Evaluation questions depend on the type of evaluation being conducted. There are many types of evaluations, each being relevant to a certain stage in a program lifetime and hence serving a different purpose.

#### Needs Assessment Questions

A needs assessment involves determining **needs** or **gaps** in services/programs and how those gaps could be addressed.<sup>2</sup> It is used during the planning stages to help determine priorities, develop services/programs, or allocate resources.<sup>1-3</sup> Some examples of evaluation questions are:

- What are the characteristics of the population in need?
- What are the needs of the intended population?
- What services are needed?
- What resources are necessary and appropriate for the program?

#### Formative Evaluation Questions

Formative evaluations look at **how** programs are run and what could be done to **improve** them, while they are being shaped or implemented.<sup>1-3</sup> These evaluations include **process evaluations**. Some examples of evaluation questions are:

- What works? What doesn't work?
- What are the challenges and facilitators to program implementation?
- To what extent is the target audience reached? How are staff and participants reacting to the program?
- How does the program, as implemented, compare with the original design?

#### Summative Evaluation Questions

Summative evaluations look at judging the overall **merit** or **worth** of the program after it has been implemented.<sup>1-3</sup> These evaluations include **outcome** and **impact evaluations**. Some examples of evaluation questions are:

- To what extent has the program met participants' needs?
- What factors support the outcomes?
- To what extent have the intended outcomes been achieved?
- How were the outcomes achieved? What led to the achieved outcomes?

#### References

1. Patton, M.Q. (2014). Evaluation flash cards: Embedding evaluative thinking in organizational culture. St. Paul, MN: Otto Bremer Foundation.
2. Rossi, P.H., Freeman, H.E., Lipsey, M.W. (1999). Evaluation: A Systematic Approach (6<sup>th</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
3. Patton, M.Q. (2012). Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

"I keep six honest servicing men  
(They taught me all I know);  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who".

- Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). *The Elephant's*