THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE'S

RESEARCH QUALITY PLUS (RQ+)
ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

Original Version from June 2014

Updated January 2022

INSTRUMENT PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

This document – the RQ+ Assessment Instrument – outlines a framework and practical guideline for assessing the quality of research for development. This RQ+ Assessment Instrument serves as a tool to guide the work of external evaluators hired by IDRC. With appropriate adaptation for context, it may be of interest to those outside IDRC with similar research quality evaluation needs. Still, this document provides a technical tool. Readers should note the full context, rationale and overview of RQ+ is presented in IDRC's position paper: McLean, Ofir, Etherington, Acevedo & Feinstein 2022. We encourage readers to consult this position paper, and other RQ+ materials by visiting www.idrc.ca/RQplus.

"RQ+" is based on the premise that a credible, balanced and comprehensive assessment of the quality of research for development requires the consideration of elements beyond the research outputs only, or the use of conventional metrics. These additional elements include important aspects of the research process related to design, execution and the sharing of findings.

RQ+ was first used in IDRC's external program evaluations in 2015. Since then, it has been adapted for formative evaluation, monitoring, and other research management processes[1] within IDRC and in other organizations. This specific document lays out the steps for using RQ+ in summative evaluations at IDRC. It is a revision from an original guidance document from 2015. It was revised for the *IDRC RQ+ College of Reviewers* to use in the 2020-21 Evaluation of the Quality of IDRC-supported Research. This revision clarifies a number of the RQ+ rubrics, while maintaining as much consistency as possible with the 2015 assessments. Our intention is to use RQ+ in a consistent way – to the degree appropriate – to allow for detailed understanding of the quality of IDRC supported research over time, discipline, geography, and other variables of interest.

The design of RQ+ was influenced by the nature of the research that IDRC funds. Studies conducted in the previous phase of IDRC's "Strategic Evaluation for Research Excellence" (Ofir & Schwandt, "Understanding Research Excellence at IDRC: Final Report," December 2012; Singh, et al., "Excellence in the Context of Use-Inspired Research: Perspectives of the Global South," 2012) yielded insights that formed the background for the development of this instrument. More recent IDRC work to advance Southern perspectives on research quality (Kraemer-Mbula, Tijssen, Wallace & McLean "Transforming Research Excellence" 2020) have been published in open access, and this remains an active area of interest for IDRC.

For IDRC, excellent research has technical merit (e.g., methodologically sound, empirically warranted conclusions) and is effective, where the latter refers to use, influence, policy relevance, "relevance for development", actionable knowledge, or impact. It understands that technical quality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an overall determination of research excellence. Yet IDRC as a research funder also recognizes that the assessment of research quality focused on what is within its sphere of control is critical for learning and improvement, in addition to its typical emphasis on evaluating outcomes in the sphere of influence (outcomes are examined in project/program evaluations, which go beyond their research components).

As shown in Figure 1, technical quality of research is within the control of IDRC and its research partners. However, the uptake, use, influence and impact of research are not under their control because of the interaction of multiple actors, agencies, and socio-political circumstances. It is unrealistic to hold IDRC and its research partners accountable for what they cannot control. However, it is not unreasonable to hold them accountable for taking steps to increase the likelihood that the research will be used - in other words, for positioning the research findings for influence and impact.

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[1] Such as project selection or portfolio building.

Thus, this instrument is a guide to assess quality of the research IDRC funds in light of the way that research is designed and positioned for uptake and use. It also considers factors that contextualize a research effort; hence, the label, "RQ+".

Figure 1. The spheres of control, influence and interest in the assessment of research
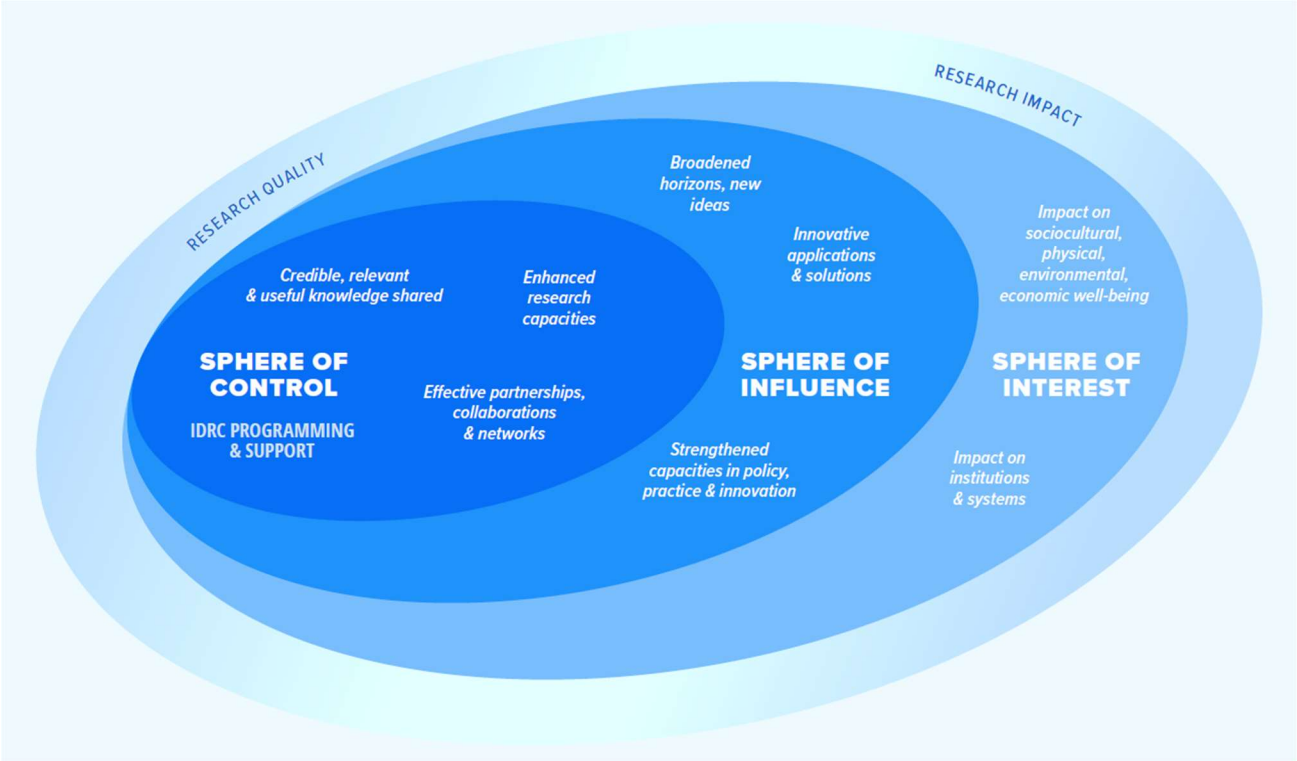
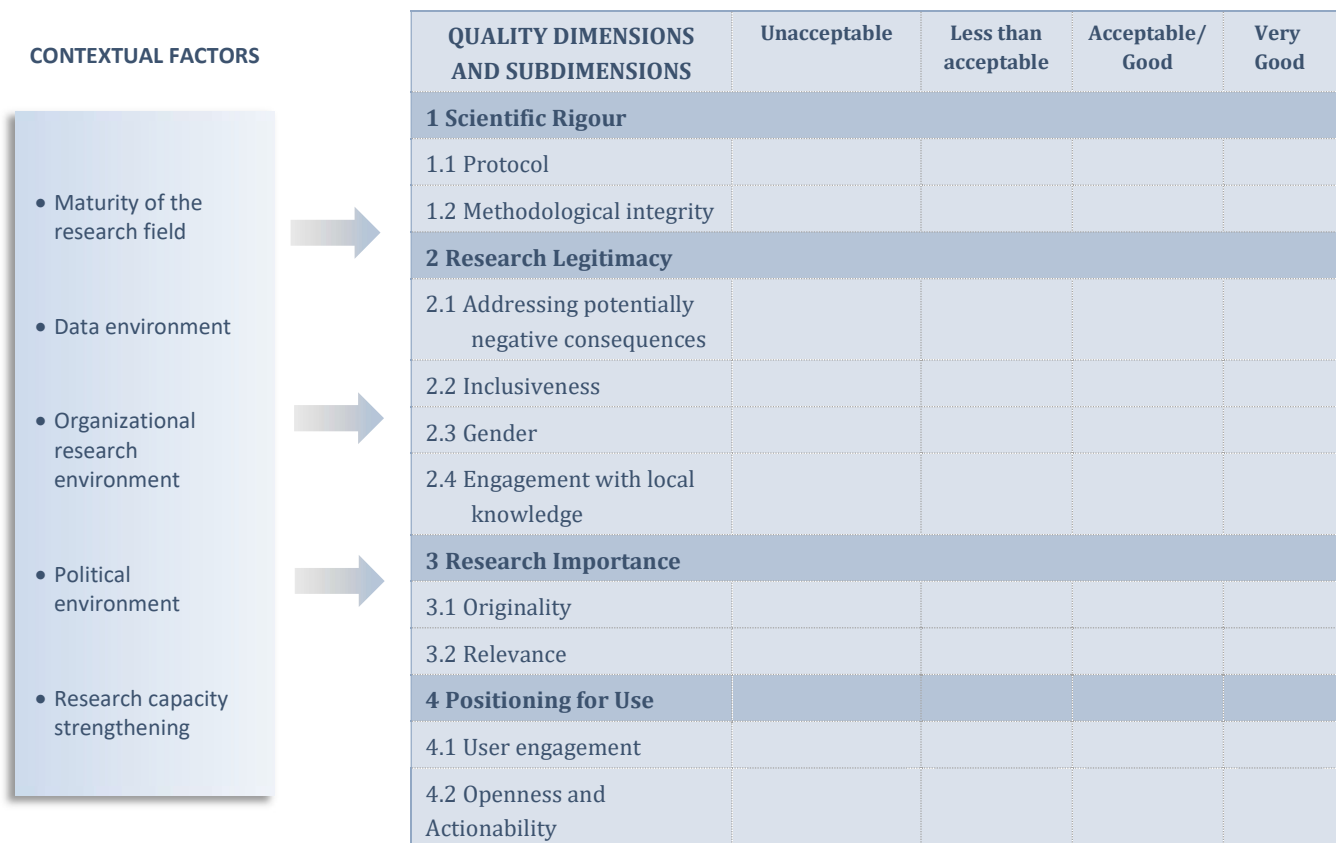Source: McLean, Ofir, Etherington, Acevedo & Feinstein 2022

THE RQ+ ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

The RQ+ assessment Instrument is based on the RQ+ Approach[2], which encompasses three components:

1. Key contextual factors that have significant potential to affect the quality of research for development. These need to be considered as part of the assessment.

2. Dimensions and sub-dimensions that characterize research quality, as relevant in the context of IDRC-funded research for development.

3. Ratings on a scale defined by rubrics, to indicate the level at which a project performs per dimension or sub-dimension.

To undertake an RQ+ evaluation, these three tenets of the RQ+ Approach are essential. However, it is critically important these tenets are tailored for purpose prior to implementation. Different evaluations will have different objectives. Different research efforts will hold different visions of what is desirable and what comprises quality. The RQ+ Approach has been operationalized by IDRC into the RQ+ Assessment Framework (see figure 2 below). This document, the RQ+ Assessment Instrument, was prepared for the *IDRC RQ+ College of Reviewers* to use in the 2020-21 Evaluation of the Quality of IDRC-supported Research[3].
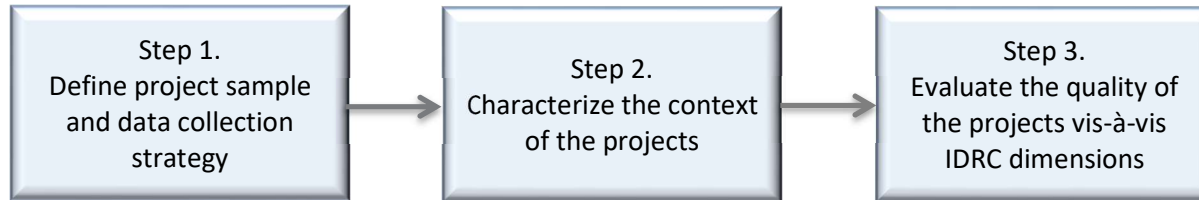
Figure 2. The IDRC RQ+ Assessment Framework

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

- Maturity of the research field
- Data environment
- Organizational research environment
- Political environment
- Research capacity strengthening

QUALITY DIMENSIONS AND SUBDIMENSIONS	Unacceptable	Less than acceptable	Acceptable/ Good	Very Good
1 Scientific Rigour				
1.1 Protocol				
1.2 Methodological integrity				
2 Research Legitimacy				
2.1 Addressing potentially negative consequences				
2.2 Inclusiveness				
2.3 Gender				
2.4 Engagement with local knowledge				
3 Research Importance				
3.1 Originality				
3.2 Relevance				
4 Positioning for Use				
4.1 User engagement				
4.2 Openness and Actionability				

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[2] In brief: Research Quality Plus (https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/handle/10625/56987)
[3] https://www.idrc.ca/en/global-call-applications-idrc-college-reviewers

The 2020 RQ+ assessment involves three primary activities:

Step 1. Define project sample and data collection strategy	→	Step 2. Characterize the context of the projects	→	Step 3. Evaluate the quality of the projects vis-à-vis IDRC dimensions

STEP 1. SELECTING THE RESEARCH PROJECTS IN THE PORTFOLIO

Most IDRC program portfolios consist of too many grants and outputs for a comprehensive assessment of the research performance of all. Moreover, not all grants are research projects; a number of grants in a portfolio support events, product development, training opportunities, scholarships, evaluation, and so on. For the 2020 summative evaluations this instrument supports, the unit of analysis is the research project. Thus, a sample of completed research projects must be drawn.

This will require a preliminary review of strategic program documents and project grant proposals. A discussion with the program team will help to understand how the program was conceptualized and how the program portfolio evolved over time.

Evaluators will be expected to create a sample of projects to review for research quality, and record and defend the rationale for their selection. The make-up of the project sample will change from program to program, but a good, representative sample is key for the successful implementation of the RQ+ approach. Here are some guidelines to consider:
- From a provided project list, identify a suitable and representative sample of projects based on the research portfolio.
- The sample should be representative in terms of key program considerations, such as (i) project size, (ii) geographical location, (iii) strategic importance, (iv) thematic areas. Thus, a directed sample will be preferred to a random sample.
- Generate a set of research outputs (3-6) per project. Select projects that have academic outputs. These will probably detail the methodology of the research more clearly than other types of outputs. But other types of outputs (reports, working papers, reviews, presentations, videos, blog posts, etc.) should also be examined, particularly to include projects that are more practice-oriented than research-oriented, for example, a project aimed solely at policy influence where its key outputs might be policy briefs, blogs, etc.

It is necessary to gather sufficient information and insights about a project in order to properly use RQ+ to assess the quality. For IDRC projects, a short list of primary sources includes:
- Project Approval Document (PAD) - produced by an IDRC program officer
- Project Completion Report (PCR) - produced by an IDRC program officer
- Final Technical Report (FTR) - produced by the grantee/project leader

It will also be necessary to develop a data collection strategy that will likely involve interviews with project staff, external stakeholders (or research users) and relevant IDRC counterpart among other sources (see Figure 3).

As part of the preparatory work to apply the RQ+ assessment instrument, it is suggested the review panel carry out a trial run. This will contribute to building confidence in applying the instrument, and achieve greater uniformity in the assessments done by each reviewer.

Reviewers can apply the RQ+ assessment to a whole project, but there will be times that it will make more sense to apply RQ+ at a sub-project level. Reviewers will have to use their judgment in conversation with the program team about the portfolio. The following are some examples.
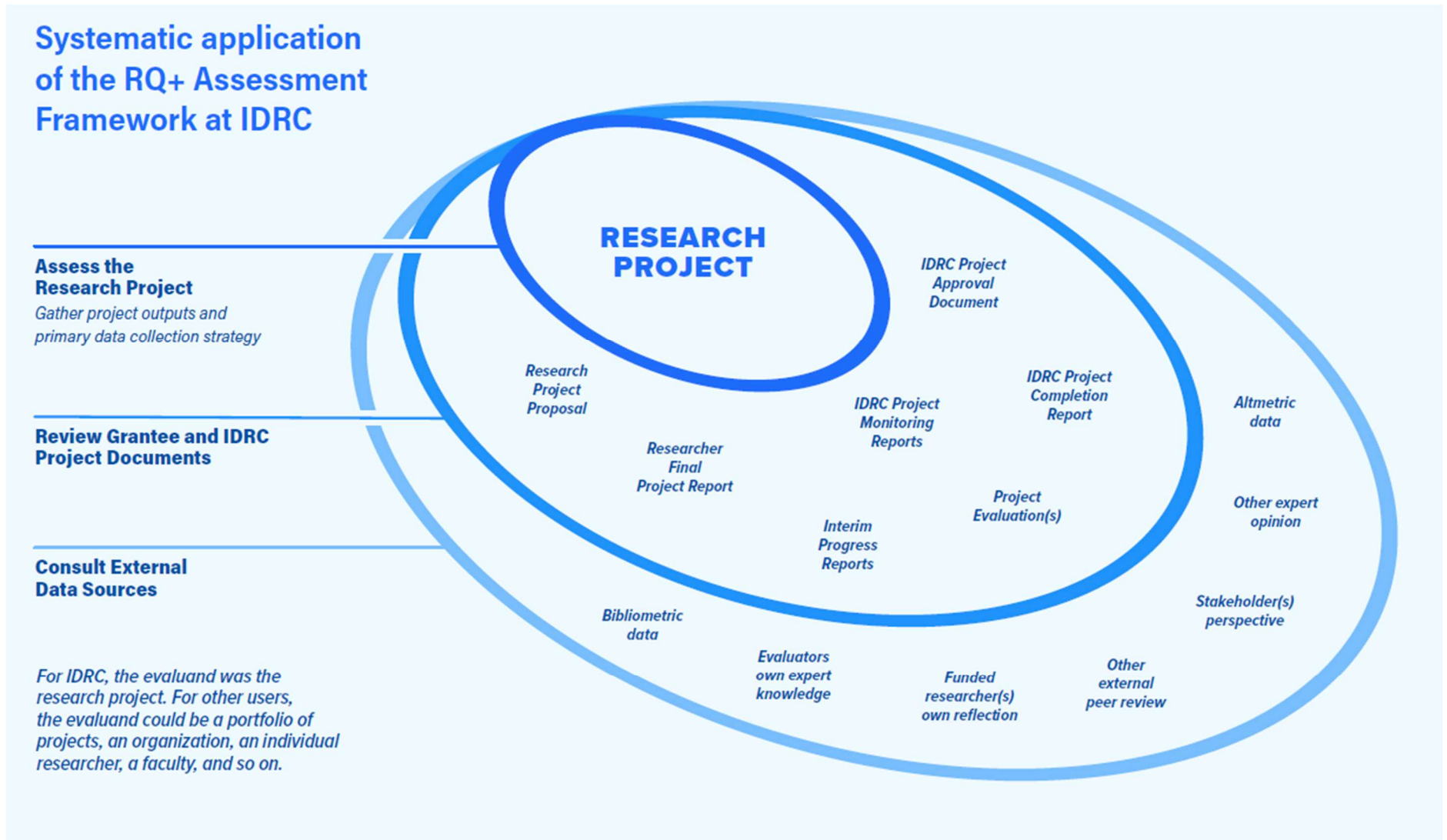
Apply RQ+ to the whole project	Some projects are straight forward – a single recipient in a single country, a coordinated work plan and influence strategy, with a set of outputs that summarize the research.
	Some projects are multi-site, multi-country, multi-recipient, with a coordinated methodology, substantial meta-level analysis, coordinated influence intent and joint publications.
	Some projects are networks in which a central coordination hub selects a series of sub-projects; the network hub coordinates joint analysis and synthesis into meta-level research outputs. A book or journal special edition summarizes the research. There is an influence objective at the level of the network, in addition to influence objectives for sub-projects.
	Some networks support a set of independent research projects. There is minimal coordination or synthesis or influence intent at the network level. The network's role is to support the subprojects.
Apply RQ+ to individual subprojects	Some projects are "umbrellas" – a central fund from which the program issues a call for proposals. The projects funded are called "components" of the overall project. The components are independent projects, with limited connection or synthesis among them. Each individual project has a substantial budget and research outputs relate to the component. There may be workshops or a final event that bring the components together, but joint analysis or influence is not a central objective.

Figure 3: Potential data sources

Systematic application of the RQ+ Assessment Framework at IDRC

Assess the Research Project
Gather project outputs and primary data collection strategy

Review Grantee and IDRC Project Documents

Consult External Data Sources

For IDRC, the evaluand was the research project. For other users, the evaluand could be a portfolio of projects, an organization, an individual researcher, a faculty, and so on.

RESEARCH PROJECT

IDRC Project Approval Document

Research Project Proposal

Researcher Final Project Report

IDRC Project Monitoring Reports

IDRC Project Completion Report

Altmetric data

Project Evaluation(s)

Other expert opinion

Interim Progress Reports

Bibliometric data

Evaluators own expert knowledge

Funded researcher(s) own reflection

Other external peer review

Stakeholder(s) perspective

Source: McLean, Ofir, Etherington, Acevedo & Feinstein 2022

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STEP 2. CHARACTERIZING THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH PROJECTS: CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Once a sample of projects has been confirmed, reviewers should attempt to characterize the context of each project. Considering the context will ground the assessment and serve two purposes: (1) to understand and define the program portfolio by identifying project clusters by contextual factors. Scatter diagrams, or similar visual aids can be used to build profiles; and (2) to understand patterns of performance in different contexts (e.g. what is the quality of research in the portion of our portfolio situated in a data-poor environment?). In a previous application by IDRC, consistent characterizations of context allowed useful insights to be developed through the meta-analysis of independent reviews (McLean & Sen 2019).

Assessment of the contextual factors should be done separately from those of the research quality dimensions, i.e. a given rating for a contextual factor (e.g. political instability) is not meant to modify a specific rating for a given quality dimension (e.g. research importance).

The RQ+ Accumulator tool (specifically developed for the 2020 evaluation) asks for the systematic inclusion of brief explanations for each contextual factor rating (also for the research quality dimensions), including when a reviewer feels that an assessment cannot be made. Such comments serve as a reference for later (as in a memory aide) and to share/justify the assessment to others in the evaluative process as well as provide qualitative data for collation and meta-review. Normally it won´t extend beyond 2-3 sentences.

Five contextual factors of interest

Maturity of the research field
Maturity refers to whether there are well-established theoretical and conceptual frameworks from which well-defined hypotheses have been developed and subjected to testing, and whether there is already a substantial body of conceptual and empirical research in the field. A mature field of research could be characterized by having many researchers active in that field for several years. Interpretation of this contextual factor must consider local and global differences.

☐ (1) Mature field	☐ (2) Established field	☐ (3) Emerging field	☐ (4) New field
- Well-established and recognized theoretical and conceptual frameworks - A substantial body of conceptual and empirical research - Discernible knowledge sharing outlets (journals, conferences, curriculum) - A vibrant community of experienced researchers.	- Theoretical and conceptual frameworks in development but generally recognized. - A body of conceptual and empirical research that reflects significant growth. - Discernible knowledge sharing outlets (journals, conferences, curriculum) - An ample community of active researchers who easily associate with the field, and are connected to each other	- Theoretical and conceptual frameworks gradually being recognized and still debated - A growing yet not ample body of conceptual and empirical research - Discernible knowledge sharing outlets are emerging - An emerging group of active researchers associate naturally to the field and are starting to connect to each other	- Very limited theoretical or conceptual frameworks are being debated or rapidly changing and largely unrecognized - Scarce empirical or theoretical body of research - Few dedicated journals or academic programs - Few active researchers are seeking to be recognized and connected

Data Environment
This refers to whether the instrumentation and measures for data collection and analysis are widely agreed upon and available; and whether the research environment is data rich or data poor.

☐ *(1) Flourishing*	☐ *(2) Developed*	☐ *(3) Limited*	☐ *(4) Weak*
- Instrumentation and measures for data collection and analysis are widely agreed upon and available - Body of data is well developed, stable and with significant open data resources - Abundance of national and international data sources	- The necessary instrumentation and measures for data collection and analysis are generally available - Body of data has reasonable availability and is generally credible - Diversity of international data sources, but few at the national level	- There are few instruments and measures for data collection and analysis available - Limited quantities of data, and/or some credibility gaps. - Few international and national data sources	- Instrumentation and measures for data collection and analysis are generally unavailable - Data scarcity and with lack of credibility - Data sources are scarce

Organizational Research Environment
This is an assessment of the extent to which the organizational/institutional context in which the research team(s) works is supportive of the research; where "supportive" refers to institutional priorities, incentives, infrastructure, regulations, and so forth. This is an assessment of internal risk.

☐ *(1) Empowering*	☐ *(2) Supportive*	☐ *(3) Unsupportive*	☐ *(4) Restrictive*
Research environment (organizational priorities, infrastructure, norms, incentives, etc. related to research) is fully established and enabling for researchers.	Research environment is well developed and generally supports researchers with their needs.	Research is not an organizational priority, yet the organization tends to comply with acquired commitments or external requests.	Research environment is weak or largely under-developed, not supportive of researchers or possibly even works against them.

Political Environment
This refers to external risk related to the range of potential adverse factors that could arise as a result of political, commercial and governance challenges and that could affect the conduct of the research. These range from electoral uncertainty and policy instability and industry interference to more fundamental political destabilization, economic crisis, human security threats or a humanitarian crisis. Alternatively, the nature of a research topic may be politically contentious within its context. It should be considered relative to the global context, not to a historical context in the same country or discipline etc.

☐ *(1) Stable*	☐ *(2) Moderately stable*	☐ *(3) Unstable*	☐ *(4) Volatile*
Stable political environment with solid governance practices, lack of significant social conflicts, and no personal risks to researchers.	Generally stable political environment, with established governance practices, unusual major social conflicts, and no personal risks to researchers.	Political environment that features some levels of instability and recurrent change, some major social conflicts, and minor risks to researchers.	Very unstable or unpredictable political environment with weak governance practices, social conflict, and/or potentially significant risks to researchers.

Research Capacity Strengthening

Research capacity strengthening refers to financial and technical support given to grantees so that they can increase their ability to identify and analyze development challenges, and to have the ability to conceive, conduct, manage and communicate research that addresses these challenges over time and in a sustainable manner. The focus here is to categorize the intensity of the effort put towards capacity strengthening (of individuals and/or organizations). This does not require any assessment of the capacity of the research team or whether capacity outcomes were achieved. It is important to recognize that unlike the other contextual factors, research capacity strengthening does not inherently pose a risk.

☐ *(1) Strong focus*	☐ *(2) Significant focus*	☐ *(3) Limited Focus*	☐ *(4) Low focus*
Research capacity strengthening was an explicit objective and counted as one of the priorities of the project. There were capacity building activities throughout the project.	Project design included research capacity strengthening explicitly (but not as a priority), and there were some activities related to it.	Research capacity strengthening was considered to a minimum in project strategy, but there were few activities dedicated to it.	Research capacity strengthening was not an objective, and no discernible activities related to it.

STEP 3. RATING RESEARCH QUALITY

The instrument for rating the quality of research in each project consists of four dimensions (with sub-dimensions) rated on an 8-point scale from "Unacceptable" to "Very Good." Ratings are based on the examination of relevant evidence, both primary and secondary.

Dimension 1: Scientific Rigour

This is an assessment of the technical quality (technical merit), appropriateness, and rigour of the design and execution of the research as judged in terms of commonly accepted standards for such work (e.g. standards for experimental research, ethnography, survey research, etc.). It embraces the notion that reliable knowledge is generated from multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, and thus asks reviewers to assess the appropriateness of trans-, inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to the work. Although the quality of the research design as evident in proposals is important, evaluators should be equally concerned with the execution of the research, and the extent to which attention to scientific rigour is reflected in the research outputs. To facilitate the process of making this assessment, the review team might also consider the flowchart shown in Figure 5.

Ways of judging scientific rigour will differ for qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods designs; care should be taken to ensure that appropriate standards are applied for each case. In making this assessment, reviewers should consider the following:

- There is an explicit, comprehensive and accessible account of the research design and methodology.
- There is an appropriately presented literature review.
- Evidence, in sufficient amounts, was systematically gathered and analyzed.
- There is a clear and apparent relationship between evidence gathered and conclusions reached or claims made.
- Sufficient and appropriate steps were taken to ensure methodological rigor, considering issues such as validity, reliability and transferability or generalizability, and integration (in mixed methods design).
- Adaptation (if required) of the original research protocol was reasoned and documented.

Scientific rigour includes two subdimensions:

1.1 Protocol is about the structural quality of the <u>research design</u>, reflected in its clear presentation, observed methodological standards, openness, and framed by the examination of present knowledge on the issue.

1.2 Methodological Integrity refers to the technical quality of the <u>research implementation</u>, with criteria related to (i) adequate data collection/generation, (ii) relevant analysis, (iii) grounded conclusions and (iv) accurate writing – all linked by clear and consistent logic throughout the process.

This dimension is critical to research quality. Yet, even if a project fails on scientific rigour, IDRC expects evaluators to carry on with the rest of the RQ+ assessment. We value understanding the other dimensions of quality in addition to scientific rigour. For both efforts to improve all areas of research quality, and for meta-review, reviewers must prepare a full set of ratings for each project.

DIMENSION 1.1: PROTOCOL (research design)							
Unacceptable		**Less than acceptable**		**Acceptable/Good**		**Very Good**	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
- There was no clearly articulated research design* - The research design was shrouded from transparency. - The research design did not adhere to methodological standards expected of scientific research. - Literature/documental review, if at all evident, was insufficient and largely outdated. - The design presents a wasteful (duplicative, unusable) effort.		- Research design was articulated but left some gaps. - Adherence to methodological standards for the field was not fully established. - Literature/document review was partially insufficient.		- Research design was clearly articulated and transparent. - Adherence to methodological standards for the field was established and largely achieved. - Literature/document review was appropriate and shows how the project contributes new/valuable knowledge (relevant, up-to-date, structured, etc).		- Research design was clearly articulated, and the research protocol was open, and accessible where appropriate. - Adherence to methodological standards was consistently demonstrated, and innovations were considered and introduced were appropriate. - Literature/document review was appropriate and comprehensive, presenting the state of knowledge on the research topic and the importance of this particular contribution.	

* Proper research design should clearly articulate a research problem, research questions, a data collection strategy, an analytic framework, and a plan/prospect for communication/use of the expected research results

| DIMENSION 1.2: METHODOLOGICAL INTEGRITY (research implementation)							
Unacceptable		**Less than acceptable**		**Acceptable/Good**		**Very Good**	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
- Data collected did not satisfy research needs (i.e., match the research questions). - The analysis was deeply flawed. - Conclusions are weak, largely unfounded by the data, and bear little relevance to the development problem. - The research results are presented inaccurately. - The research work did not exhibit logical consistency*.		- Data and information collected left some gaps. - The analysis performed left some important aspects unexamined. - Some conclusions are not consistent (with data, hypothesis, etc.) or present little value. - The presentation of results needs improvement and/or clarification. - The logical consistency of the research left some important gaps.		- Data and information collected were sufficient. - The analysis was adequate overall. - Conclusions are useful, pertinent and linkable to the data and evidence. - The presentation of research results is overall satisfactory, with little improvement needed. -The research work exhibited a clear logical consistency		- Data and information collected covered all research objectives and could be used in other studies - The analysis was comprehensive and well matched to the research questions. - Conclusions are relevant to research objectives and have the potential to stimulate further debate and/or action. - The research results are presented accurately and are clear to the intended user. - The research work exhibited a clear/precise logical consistency.	

* Logical consistency of research implementation establishes a clear path connecting objectives, hypothesis/questions, data collected, findings and conclusions

It is important for reviewers to consult a variety of research outputs as proxies to assess scientific rigour. In this respect, there are typically three options:

(1) **Products that have gone through peer review and were published in an academic journal**. We assume that a research product published in an established, academic, peer-reviewed journal has gone through an assessment of whether it meets methodological standards and exhibits scientific merit. Established academic journals do not only include mainstream, top-tier journals. External evaluators will be knowledgeable about reputable journals across the world in their respective fields. Peer reviewed products published in an academic journal for an audience of (largely) researchers might be further examined using bibliometrics. Care needs to be taken when reviewers are using bibliometrics to comment on the reach or uptake of research. In some cases, not enough time will have elapsed for research to have reached such outlets; in other cases, the project may have chosen other outlets to publicize research findings (e.g. blogs, policy maker fora, etc.)

(2) **Products that were peer reviewed but published in some other outlet** (e.g., book chapter, proceedings, book, etc.). If a peer-reviewed knowledge product did not appear in a refereed journal, then the review team should attest to the *integrity and legitimacy of the process by which the product was peer reviewed*. Again, we assume that the review team would have, or can readily obtain, the knowledge necessary to make this judgment. In some cases, peer review would have been conducted within a network of peers established as part of the project. In such cases the merit of the review process should be carefully considered.

(3) **Products that were not peer reviewed**. In examining non-peer reviewed knowledge products, evaluators should check the quality of the literature review, data collection and data analysis procedures indicating whether the evidence for each is sufficient, insufficient or absent. The external reviewer should also examine the composition of the product in terms of whether the purpose of the document is clearly stated, the audience is clearly identified, the content is clearly written and logically composed, and that claims made in the knowledge product are based on evidence. The quality should be checked against the description of the methodology *as executed*, rather than what has been captured in the project proposal. Where the description is insufficient to make an assessment, program and research grantee teams can be consulted.

Figure 5.
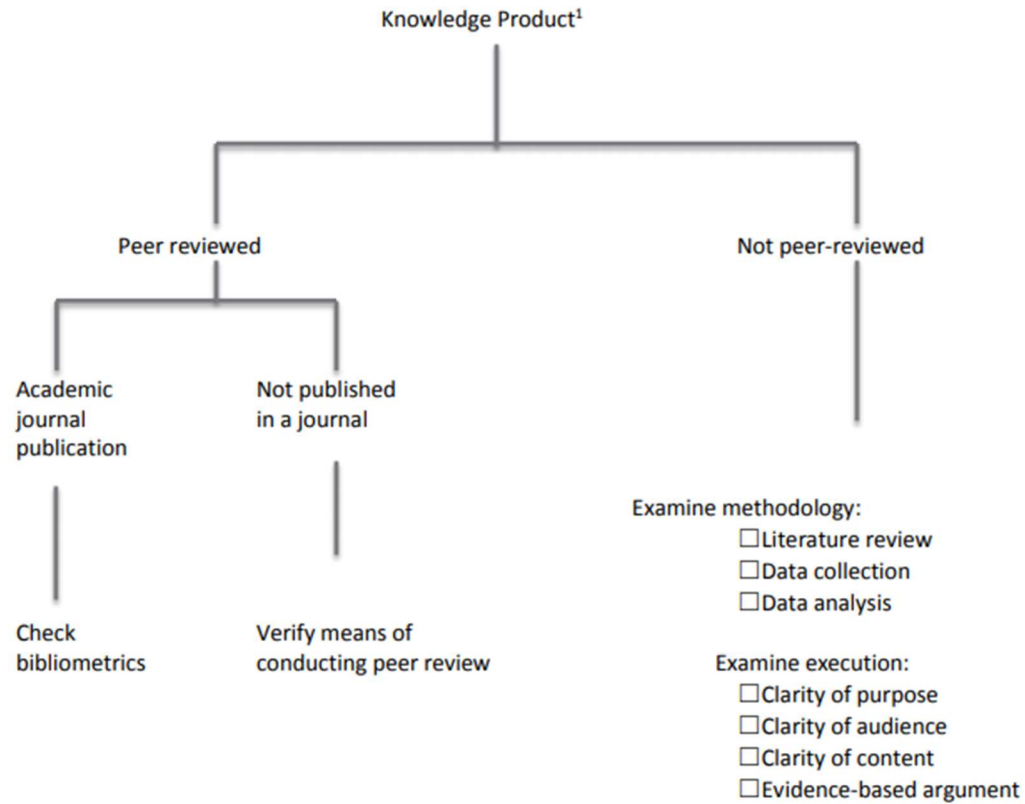
[1]Knowledge products can include journal articles, book chapters, books, conference papers, conference proceedings, technical reports, training manuals, and policy briefs. Knowledge products should be sorted into categories and a composite rating on scientific rigour should be given for the project overall, considering this set of products.

Dimension 2: Research Legitimacy

Research legitimacy involves assessing the extent to which research results have been produced by a process that took account of the concerns and insights of relevant stakeholders, was deemed procedurally fair and was based on the values, concerns and perspectives of that audience.

Audiences tend to judge legitimacy based on who participated, who did not, the process for making choices, and how information was produced, vetted and disseminated. 'Localizing' knowledge and respecting local traditions and knowledge systems are also important. Mistrust between the researchers and potential users of the research can also affect its legitimacy (and, hence, ultimately its reach).

2.1: Addressing potentially negative consequences and outcomes for research participants, affected populations, and natural environments

Evaluators should look first for evidence of research ethics approval and oversight by an institutional or alternative research ethics board. Often (but not always) project files will include a record of Research Ethics Board review and approval. Evaluators should look for evidence of strategies employed by the research team (particularly in cases in which there appears to have been no REB involvement) to address the risk of potentially negative consequences of either research processes or outcomes for affected populations and natural environments. Evidence for this sub-dimension may not be available from the research product itself; it is likely to be found in project documentation (monitoring reports, etc.) and/or from key informant interviews.

Wherever applicable, evaluators should look for signs that appropriate measures have been taken to ensure compliance with free and informed consent processes and privacy of research participants. This includes looking for evidence of procedures employed by research teams to avoid any undue coercion or influencing of a vulnerable person, community or population through, for example, incentives, inducements, financial benefits or financial costs for participants that might not be appropriate in the cultural context. In circumstances where the research may impact natural environments, evaluators should look for evidence of appropriate environmental assessments.

In addition, the researchers should anticipate potential consequences of the research execution and outcomes. For example, if a new product or technology is likely to have serious side effects or affect the wellbeing of vulnerable populations, information should be made available and precautions proposed when the results are made public. Such potential problems should be systematically identified during the course of the research process. Although negative consequences or outcomes are frequently dependent on how the research results are used and therefore out of the control of the research team, those involved need to attend to this issue where it can reasonably be done, and solutions or precautionary measures suggested.

	SUBDIMENSION 2.1: ADDRESSING POTENTIALLY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES AND OUTCOMES FOR AFFECTED POPULATIONS AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS						
	Unacceptable		**Less than acceptable**		**Acceptable/Good**		**Very Good**	
IIA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient Information to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	There has been no apparent effort to address what could be serious negative consequences from the research process or results. The researchers appear to have been insensitive to this aspect of the research.		The research was sensitive to this issue. Some efforts were made to address what could turn into negative consequences or outcomes, but they were not as comprehensive or thorough as they should have been. Environmental assessments were not conducted, informed consent was not adequately assured, and coercion of vulnerable populations was not adequately avoided.		The research was sensitive to this issue. Appropriate and timely measures have been taken in almost all instances to eradicate or mitigate foreseeable negative consequences or outcomes of the research. Measures have been taken to ensure compliance with the free, prior and informed consent processes and privacy of research participants. Environmental assessments were conducted if necessary. There is no sign of coercion of a vulnerable person, community or population.		Appropriate and timely measures have been taken to eliminate or mitigate foreseeable negative consequences or outcomes of research. There was a systematic effort by the research team to mitigate negative consequences and outcomes. Measures have been taken to ensure participants' free, prior and informed consent and to ensure their privacy. There are no signs of coercion of a vulnerable person, community or population. The natural environment was appropriately considered in and through the research process.	

2.2: Inclusiveness

Research can be potentially oppressive if inclusion is not taken into account.

In particular, marginalized and/or vulnerable communities need to be given due consideration in the research design, execution and findings. Taking into account the scope and objectives of the research, and whether there is REB involvement, the project research team should:

- Ensure that inclusion and exclusion criteria match the context of the research question
- Be inclusive in selecting research participants or potential beneficiaries – not excluding anyone on the basis of culture, language, religion, race, economic status, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, linguistic proficiency or age - unless there is a valid, defensible reason for the exclusion. (Gender is considered in a separate sub-dimension)
- Avoid any undue coercion or influencing of a vulnerable person, community or population through for example incentives, inducements, financial benefits or financial costs for participants that might not be appropriate in the cultural context
- Ensure that the interests of vulnerable, marginalized communities or populations are a priority, unless there is a sound justification for the contrary.

For some research projects, reviewers may not be able to assess this sub-dimension because it is not an area of focus. In this scenario, reviewers should mark the project as such (i.e. area of focus = NO) and provide a brief explanation on why inclusiveness was appropriately not taken into consideration. We expect this to be an exception to the norm.

SUBDIMENSION 2.2: INCLUSIVENESS

Inclusiveness is an Area of focus	Unacceptable		Less than acceptable		Acceptable/Good		Very Good	
Yes/No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient Detail to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	Relevant selection processes and the prioritization and safeguarding of vulnerable or marginalized communities has not received sufficient attention in the research design and execution.		Inclusiveness has been partially addressed in the research design, execution and findings. Weaknesses remain, e.g., in selection processes, and/or the prioritization and safeguarding of vulnerable or marginalized communities demand more attention.		Inclusiveness has been appropriately addressed in research design, execution and findings. A few opportunities remain to strengthen selection processes, and/or the prioritization and safeguarding of vulnerable or marginalized communities.		Inclusiveness has been intentionally and systematically addressed in the research design, execution and findings. There are no weaknesses in relevant selection processes, and/or the prioritization and safeguarding of vulnerable or marginalized communities.	

2.3: Gender

IDRC funds research that supports gender equality[4], facilitates women's empowerment, and builds the capacity of women researchers to become leaders.

At IDRC, "*there is no such thing as a gender-neutral project*." No research project should be gender blind, but, projects may be appropriately gender aware, gender sensitive, gender responsive or gender transformative. As such, a rating of the Gender sub-dimension of research quality begins with categorization of the project according to its intended aims and structure (aware, sensitive, responsive, transformative). In post-2017 project approval documents (PAD) the IDRC project officer has been asked to reflect this categorization of the project. The reviewer should use this self-assessment at the outset of the problem in any post-2017 approved projects in their sample. In pre-2017 approved projects in their sample, a categorization of the project should be drawn by the reviewer following data collection related to the project. This will likely include asking the IDRC project officer.

Only once the project is categorized, the reviewer will turn to rating the Gender sub-dimension.

The Gender rubric examines the extent to which gender considerations were integrated in the design and implementation of research, in relation to one of the four categories specified in the PAD (or otherwise determined):
- Gender aware: gender (the differentiated and intersectional experiences of women, men, boys, and girls) is considered in the research project's rationale, but is not an operative concept in the design and methodology;
- Gender sensitive: gender is considered in the research project's rationale and is addressed in the project design and methodology, but does not (yet) extend to analysis and action to address gender inequalities;
- Gender responsive: gender is considered in the research project's rationale, design, and methodology and is rigorously analyzed to inform implementation, communication, and influence strategies. Gender responsive research does not (yet) address structural power relations that lead to gender inequalities;
- Gender transformative: examines, analyzes, and builds an evidence base to inform long-term practical changes in structural power relations and norms, roles and inequalities that define the differentiated experiences of men and women. Gender transformative research should lead to sustained change through action (e.g. partnerships, outreach, and interventions).

Gender-transformative research unpacks social inequalities, provides space for women, men, and non-binary genders to learn, and engages with people across the socio-economic spectrum to change the norms that enable inequalities. A research project is "gender-transformative" if these considerations are addressed in its rationale and methodology and if it includes a rigorous analysis of root causes, gender power relations, and intersectionality (multiple vulnerabilities experienced by individuals or groups, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, alongside gender). Not all IDRC supported research aims to be gender transformative, but this is a growing area of focus for the Centre.

Given the categorization of the specific project, evaluators should look for evidence in project design/implementation/communication of how research work addressed issues of sex, gender roles, norms and identities, through aspects that may include:
- Project design is sensitive to the needs and special situations or people of different genders and incorporates consideration of gendered power relations
- Collection of data sensitive to, and as appropriate is disaggregated by gender

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[4] https://www.idrc.ca/en/research-in-action/gender-equality

- Engagement with research participants using a gender lens, including in using safety protocols
- Systematic gender differentiated analysis of research activities and findings
- Solutions developed are cognizant of the different situations and needs related to gender
- Gender balance in the research team and process, including capacity building or leadership opportunities

SUBDIMENSION 2.3 GENDER							
Check the category from research design (from PAD or other means[5]): ☐ gender aware ☐ gender sensitive ☐ gender responsive ☐ gender transformative **Insufficient Detail to Assess** Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	**Unacceptable**		**Less than acceptable**		**Acceptable/Good**		**Very Good**
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	The research was gender blind. - Gender considerations were not included in the research questions or objectives - Data collection did not register differences related to gender - No evidence of gender analysis; data was not disaggregated by sex - There was no consideration of gender balance and roles in the research team.		*(Based on the category selected in the 1st column)* Gender was considered in a limited way with notable weaknesses. - Data collection minimally accounted for differentiated situations related to gender - Limited gender analysis; few data were disaggregated by sex - Limited gender consideration was shown in the composition and roles of the research team.		*(Based on the category selected in the 1st column)* Gender was adequately considered in most phases of the research cycle, and gender balance in participation. - Gender was appropriately incorporated into the research questions and objectives - Data collection accounted for differentiated situations related to gender - There was reasonable gender analysis; data was generally disaggregated by sex - Gender considerations are noted in the composition and roles of the research team.		*(Based on the category selected in the 1st column)* Gender was fully considered in all aspects of the research cycle, and in participation. - Gender was explicitly and comprehensively incorporated into research questions and objectives - Data collection accounted for differentiated situations related to gender - Rigorous gender analysis; data was disaggregated by sex wherever possible - Emphasis was given to gender balance and appropriate roles in the research team

2.4: Engagement with local knowledge

This sub-dimension asks evaluators to consider how contextually grounded the research is in relevant knowledge systems. This should be considered relative to the scale at which the research was designed, whether that be community-level, national, regional or global. It refers to the need to:
- Address well identified needs and/or priorities, given the scale of the research
- Engage communities, populations or stakeholders in an appropriate and credible manner, including indigenous and minority ethnic or social groups, and building their capacities where appropriate
- Respect traditional knowledge, wisdom and practices, as well as local contexts, researchers and contributors to the research; and

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[5] If the category was not indicated in the PAD because the project started before 2017 or for other reasons, the reviewer should either:
- A.   choose one of the four categories based on her/his own judgement and by checking with the program officer or other project actors; or
- B.   determine that the project was gender-blind, in which case the rating will be 'Unacceptable'

- Ensure, to the extent possible, appropriate benefits for stakeholders from their participation in the research process (such as access to research findings in appropriate formats and through appropriate processes).

For some research projects, reviewers may not be able to assess this sub-dimension because it is not an area of focus. In this scenario, reviewers should mark the project as such (i.e. area of focus = NO) and provide a brief explanation on why engagement with local knowledge was appropriately not incorporated. We expect this to be an exception to the norm.

SUBDIMENSION 2.4 ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Area of focus	Unacceptable		Less than acceptable		Acceptable/Good		Very Good	
Yes/No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient detail to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	Engagement with appropriate contexts has been neglected during the research process. Several major weaknesses can be found, related to how research needs and questions were identified, communities or populations engaged, contexts and knowledge systems considered, and benefits from the research process assured.		Contexts and engagement have been considered during the research process, but some weaknesses remain related to how research needs and questions were identified, communities, stakeholders or populations engaged, contexts and knowledge systems considered, and/or local benefits from the research process assured.		Context and engagement have been appropriately considered in the research process. Few, if any, minor weaknesses remain related to how research needs and questions were identified, communities, stakeholders or populations engaged, contexts and knowledge systems considered, or stakeholder benefits from the research process assured.		Context and engagement have been carefully and systematically considered in the research process. Research needs and questions were clearly identified, communities, stakeholders or populations effectively engaged, contexts and knowledge systems considered and respected, and stakeholder benefits from the research process assured.	

Dimension 3: Research Importance

This dimension refers to the perceived importance and value of the knowledge and understanding generated by the research to key intended users. Importance is defined here in terms of the perceived relevance of research processes and products to the needs and priorities of potential users, and the contribution of the research to theory and/or practice.

3.1: Originality

Originality refers to the generation of new insights and knowledge for theory and practice given the current state of knowledge in a given field. It may involve:
- Building on existing knowledge in a field in a unique and imaginative way;
- Making connections that advance understanding in minor or major leaps;
- Breaking ground in a completely new field of work;
- Making iterative yet useful changes to existing technologies and techniques.

In certain contexts, especially in science and technology R&D, such advancements in knowledge, whether major leaps or small iterations, are referred to as *innovation.*

SUBDIMENSION 3.1: ORIGINALITY

	Unacceptable		Less than acceptable		Acceptable/Good		Very Good	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient detail to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	The research fails to build on and extend on existing knowledge. It does not break new ground or make improvements in existing technologies and/or methods.		The research marginally adds to what is already known in the field. The research is not innovative and is not well connected to what is already known.		The research presents fresh ideas, brings an innovative approach to solving existing challenges, and/or deals with a new, emerging issue worth pursuing. It challenges taken-for-granted assumptions, builds on existing knowledge and is well connected to what is already known.		The research is innovative and ground breaking. It builds on existing knowledge in a substantive way, making significant advancements to technologies and techniques.	

3.2: Relevance

Research is salient (important) to user decision-making. Relevance pertains to the alignment of the research to pressing social, environmental and economic problems. Scalability of findings may be a factor in determining relevance. Relevant research is more likely to resonate with one or more audiences, and to link to issues on which policymakers, businesses, or civil society organizations focus. There will thus be evidence that the research objectives and research questions are targeted at real-world needs, priorities and challenges, or place focus on emerging problems that are likely to demand solutions in the foreseeable future.

SUBDIMENSION 3.2: RELEVANCE

	Unacceptable		Less than acceptable		Acceptable/Good		Very Good	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient detail to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	The research does not contribute to a key development priority, or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the foreseeable future. Justification for the work is absent or unconvincing.		The research makes little contribution to a key development priority or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the foreseeable future. Justification for the work is not well substantiated.		The research contributes to a key development priority, or an emerging area of significance that will likely demand solutions in the near future. This area of work is justified.		The research makes an important contribution toward a key development priority, or an important emerging area that is highly likely to demand solutions in the near future. This area of work is comprehensively justified.	

Dimension 4: Positioning for Use

Determining whether uptake of research findings and products actually occurred (and how), as well as tracking their influence and impact is largely outside the scope of this assessment of research quality. However, it is reasonable to assess the extent to which the research process has been managed and research products prepared in such a way that the probability of use and influence is enhanced.

This requires attention to user contexts, accessibility of products, and 'fit for purpose' knowledge mobilization strategies. 'Fit for purpose' strategies refer to careful consideration of the best platforms for making research outputs available to given targeted audiences and users. Successful Positioning for Use often calls for strategies to integrate users into the research process itself from design to implementation.

4.1: User Engagement

An important consideration here the degree to which the project built meaningful, two-way connections with intended knowledge users (e.g., scholars, business and industry leaders, government officials, civil society organizations) at appropriate stages of the research process and shows evidence of using viable mechanisms to do so (e.g., accessible workshops, plain language and timely briefings, etc.). This implies the research enabled ways in which users could contribute. This sub-dimension must be considered vis-à-vis the intentions of the work – some studies may require high degrees of participation from multiple stakeholders holding varying perspectives, other studies may seek input from a single predominant user at only a few designated checkpoints. In other words, engaging users is always effective in research for development, but the intensity of the engagement is determined by the research questions, objectives and user needs. An examination of the qualities of the partnership is essential, including avoiding tokenism, avoiding researcher privilege, and showing effort to develop an understanding of epistemological and practical working differences. This criterion is concerned with the extent to which:
- Research design and process is informed by mapping and analysis of intended knowledge users and reflects an understanding of their contexts
- Opportunities for meaningful, two-way exchange and engagement are realized (both proactive and opportunistic)

SUBDIMENSION 4.1 USER ENGAGEMENT							
Unacceptable		**Less than acceptable**		**Acceptable/Good**		**Very Good**	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient detail to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	The research was not initiated and conducted with use in mind, i.e., no evidence of understanding of the context(s) within which the results are likely to be used; no evidence of stakeholder or user mapping. Potential users have been ignored.	There was insufficient effort to map, understand and engage stakeholders or key potential user groups, and limited engagement with understanding the larger context within which they operate. Potential users have been poorly engaged.		The project mapped and understood stakeholders and potential user groups. Researchers appear to have a credible understanding of the context within which key potential users/user groups operate. Potential users are engaged using appropriate means.		The research was initiated and conducted with use in mind, and with an emphasis on engaging with the contexts of potential users. The research included sophisticated/highly differentiated stakeholder mapping. Users have been engaged appropriately in the research, with sensitivity and attention to each groups needs. Two-way learning between researchers and users is evident.	

4.2 Openness and Actionability

The potential for use, influence and impact of research depends in part on whether researchers have analyzed and reflected upon the current and future knowledge use environment. Promoting actionability requires deliberate intent to ensure research generates useful knowledge and is translated into products that are timely, comprehensible and attractive to knowledge users. This sub-dimension also considers issues of research openness, including how the research addressed open access publication, data and code sharing, and supported process transparency (if appropriate).

SUBDIMENSION 4.2 OPENESS AND ACTIONABILITY							
Unacceptable		**Less than acceptable**		**Acceptable/Good**		**Very Good**	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient detail to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	The plan to support research use was inadequate and there was no consideration of the knowledge use environment. There has been no attention to translating research in appropriate products for potential knowledge users. Open access has not been considered.	There is evidence that some analysis of the user setting was undertaken; however, consideration was incomplete and did not adequately inform the translation of knowledge. Insufficient attention has been paid to making research findings available in appropriate formats to targeted potential user groups. Open access was not sufficiently considered.		There is evidence that the user environment has been examined and strategically connected to plans for moving the research into policy or practice in an effective and timely manner. Research findings were made available to well-targeted knowledge user groups in appropriate formats. Open access was sufficiently considered.		The analysis of the user environment and contingencies is exceptionally thorough, well-articulated and dynamic. The research is well positioned to respond to emerging opportunities for influence. There was thoughtful translation of the implications of research for user groups. Research findings were appropriately available to well-targeted and influential potential user groups in highly accessible and user-friendly formats. Open access was thoroughly considered.	