Evidence-based decision-making
Useful tools to help innovators

Toolkit

elrha

Contents

Contributions

The development of this toolkit was led by Joanna Knight and Liddy Greenaway, at merl.

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions made by the Steering Group who supported the development and testing of the toolkit. The members included:

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- Remya Sasindran (Words. Rhythms. Images.)
- Dan Amias, Shirin Maani, Spencer Huchulak and Daniel Shaharudin (Elrha)

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Acronyms

Humanitarian innovation	In the humanitarian context, innovation refers to the process of creating, adapting, or improving products, services, processes or paradigms that address challenges faced by crisis-affected populations and the humanitarian system. Innovation may involve developing new approaches or adapting existing solutions to new contexts, to better serve the needs of vulnerable communities, enhance efficiencies and increase the impact of humanitarian response.
Data	Facts, numbers or information that have been collected but not yet interpreted or analysed. Data on its own doesn't necessarily tell us anything; it's just the raw material.
Evidence	Data that has been interpreted or analysed to support or refute a specific claim, question, idea, or hypothesis. When data is organised and used to draw conclusions, it becomes evidence.
Evaluation	A systematic assessment of an initiative, typically measuring a set of criteria such as relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact, and based on a theory of change. While standard programmes are evaluated at a specific time point, such as mid-term or end-line, innovation initiatives benefit from more flexible approaches, such as real-time or developmental evaluation. These methods allow for adaptive feedback, providing regular insights to inform continuous adjustments.
Learning	A process of reflecting on, analysing and applying insights gained from monitoring and evaluation processes. Learning focuses on understanding what worked, what didn't and why, with the aim of improving future programmes or interventions. Learning often happens very frequently and informally, especially when innovating and is a core part of innovating at every stage of the process.
Impact	The long-term effects of an initiative or programme on individuals, communities, actors and/or systems. In humanitarian response, this typically refers to positive changes in the lives of crisis-affected communities, such as improved health, wellbeing, resilience or recovery.
Decision-making	The process of choosing a course of action, typically based on available evidence, available resources and capacities, stakeholder needs and priorities and project goals. Effective decision-making is transparent, considers the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders and supports accountability by documenting the rationale behind the choice. This is a key component of testing and adapting an innovation, enabling innovators to learn as they go and respond to changing or complex contexts.

Acronyms

HIF	Humanitarian Innovation Fund
OOS	Out of school learners
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
FGD	Focus group discussion
CPI	Centre for public impact
WRI	Words, rhythms, images
BAR	Before action review
AAR	Action after review
PwDs	People with disabilities
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
UCCE	User centred community engagement
SBF	Syria Bright Future
IDP's	Internally displaced persons
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation

About the toolkit

About the toolkit

The Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) provides funding and support to innovation initiatives across the humanitarian sector. It aims to increase the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of aid delivery to improve the lives of affected communities. Initiatives are funded across different contexts, crises and thematic areas, contributing to sector-wide learning about what works, and, through adoption and scaling, improvements in humanitarian aid delivery.

Humanitarian innovation often takes place in unpredictable contexts and within complex systems, and involves trialling interventions where cause and effect is often not well known. This requires a continuous cycle of testing, adapting and re-testing. Innovation is, in itself, a learning process.

Funded initiatives often generate valuable data and insights about a context and a potential solution. However, evidence is not always utilised to its full potential. Teams working in difficult environments with limited resources often have to prioritise immediate project demands over structured, evidence-driven approaches to refining and scaling their innovation. Complex and nuanced qualitative insights can also be hard to capture, interpret and incorporate into analysis and decision making processes. As a result, opportunities for evidence-based decisions can be missed, and valuable lessons lost.

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide innovation teams with a set of simple, practical tools to enhance evidence-based decision-making. It provides a selection of tools that innovation teams can pick up and use in their day-to-day work to improve the way data is processed, analysed and applied. By using these tools, innovators can capitalise on their evidence to make more informed choices, strengthening the relevance, scalability and impact of their innovations and boosting their chances of success.

About the toolkit

The aim of the toolkit is to provide a resource for innovation teams, to:

Support the development of relevant, needs-driven innovations

Drive scaling and adoption

Enhance the documentation of learning throughout the innovation pathway

Increase the participation of crises-affected communities in evidence collection, analysis and decison making

The toolkit is made up of three main sections: mapping your evidence needs, making sense of your evidence, and documenting your learning and decisions. Each tool is designed with the specific challenges of humanitarian innovation in mind.

Traditional programme research and evaluation approaches can be too rigid for humanitarian innovation, and often overlook features most relevant to innovation, such as iterative learning, impact and being problem and user-driven[1.]

With this in mind, the toolkit focuses on tools that support adaptive management practices and problem solving, drawing on systems-aware methods, human-centred design principles and emergent learning to support iterative, contextually relevant evidence generation and use.

1 Obrecht, A. with Warner, A. and Dillon, N. (2017) 'Working paper: Evaluating humanitarian innovation' HIF/ALNAP Working Paper. London: ODI/ALNAP.

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How the toolkit was developed

How the toolkit was developed

The toolkit was co-developed in 2024 through an iterative and participatory process, led by the co-production and anti-oppressive evaluation consultants, merl, together with a steering group composed of HIF staff and humanitarian innovators working on different innovations in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Syria and Uganda.

Firstly, merl undertook a scoping exercise to collate current best practices in evidence-based decision-making in innovation practice and the humanitarian sector. This scoping identified gaps in practical tools already available, and the challenges that innovation managers face in generating and using evidence. The findings informed the chosen focus areas and tools developed (see Annex 1 for the full findings).

The Steering Group was made up of six HIF-funded innovators, four Elrha staff and one member of the HIF Community-Led Innovation Partnership. The Steering Group helped guide the design of the toolkit and tested the tools to refine and improve them and ensure they were fit for purpose. Members were engaged through a series of toolkit development workshops, together with input and feedback between sessions.

It's very clear, not only for innovative projects, but also for other projects. It can be used as an innovative approach for M&E – especially collective sensemaking and emergent learning, can be used as new ways to demonstrate how our organisation can actually monitor and evaluate the current projects we have. If I'm writing a proposal in the future, I'll be adding these tools – it's very helpful.

Syria Bright Future

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How to use the toolkit

How to use the toolkit

The toolkit is designed to be used by any team member, regardless of their prior experience or expertise in research and data analysis. The tools are structured to support users to manage and analyse data and translate it into meaningful, high quality insights and decisions. They can be adapted to suit different types of innovation at any stage of innovation.

See Annex 2 for suggested uses of the tools based on your innovation stage.

The toolkit is made up of five sections:

Mapping out your evidence	Understanding your evidence	Documenting your learning and decisions	Facilitation tips	Useful resources
Tool 1: Mapping your evidence needs **Tool 2:** Assessing confidence in your evidence	**Tool 3:** Collective sensemaking	**Tool 4:** Before and after action review **Tool 5:** Emergent learning table	Guidance against five principles of good facilitation Facilitator's checklist	Links to existing tools for data collection and use

How to use the toolkit

Tool 1: Mapping your evidence needs

When to use this

This tool should be used at the start of any new round of funding to identify your stakeholders' evidence needs and help identify and prioritise the data you collect and methods you use.

Revisit this tool each time the project changes course, for example, with a new round of funding, if the business model changes, if new scaling plans are introduced, etc. to update the map with new stakeholders or changing needs.

Questions this tool can help answer

What data collection should I prioritise?

What do stakeholders value or prioritise about the innovation?

What data should I share with funders in our annual report?

Tool 2: Assessing confidence in your evidence

When to use this

Use this tool as you start to build an evidence base about your innovation and establish a case for continued development and scaling. This will help assess the quality of your data and evidence to inform decisions and communications, and help improve future data collection exercises.

Revisit the tool as you gather new pieces of evidence. This could be done on a rolling basis, e.g. after an evaluation or testing phase, or reviewed on a six monthly basis.

Questions this tool can help answer

Is our evidence of impact high quality?

How could we improve our data collection and methods?

What external evidence and research can I draw on?

Tool 3: Collective sensemaking

When to use this

Facilitate collective sensemaking with your stakeholders and the communities affected by your innovation at any time you are exploring data and evidence, and thinking about what it means about the problem and the potential solution. For example, it can be used to build a better understanding of the problem and existing data at the problem recognition and search stage, or to make sense of community feedback as you test and refine the solution.

Questions this tool can help answer

Are there different interpretations of the evidence?

Are communities supportive of the decisions we're making based on the data?

What does our survey data mean for our next steps?

How to use the toolkit

Tool 4: Before and after action reviews

When to use this

Carry out before and after action reviews as a team before and after any key piece of work, such as launching a new pilot phase, attending a conference or event, or convening stakeholders, to identify and document a shared vision of what success looks like and what you are learning.

This tool is most powerful when it is used regularly and repeatedly around small but important events and milestones.

Questions this tool can help answer

Do we have a shared vision of what this phase intends to achieve?

Are we embedding our past experiences and learning into our activities?

Do we have a shared understanding of what is going well?

Tool 5: Emergent Learning Table

When to use this

This tool brings people together to facilitate a conversation around a shared 'framing' question, reflecting on a set of past experiences, data or research findings, learning from these past events, and applying learning to upcoming opportunities. It is particularly useful at or towards the end of each stage of the innovation journey, to consolidate learning and plan your next steps.

Questions this tool can help answer

What do we know so far?

What different views and learning do team members have from their current and past experience?

When and where are our next opportunities for action?

Having all of these tools in one document is very important. We come across a lot of tools that we need for our work and we don't have a particular framework for using them, so having a framework that is collected together in one toolkit is very good.

International Foundation for Recovery and Development

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1. Mapping out your evidence

1. Mapping out your evidence

In general, there is a lack of consensus in the humanitarian sector about what kinds of evidence innovators, funders, partners and other stakeholders need to make decisions (see Building Evidence for Scaling). Funders have different frameworks for making funding decisions and this will also vary widely depending on the type of innovation.

Identifying what evidence you already have access to, what data you need to collect and what to prioritise can help streamline your evidence generation efforts and ensure it fulfils a clear purpose.

Tool 1 Mapping your evidence needs

Purpose of this tool:

Document and reflect on who your key audiences are, how they engage with you innovation, why they need evidence and what evidence they need to build a picture of the evidence you need to prioritise and for whom.

Reflect on and incorporate your own evidence needs in order to understand whether and how your innovation 'works'.

Prioritise and tailor the evidence you gather so that it is relevant and useful to the audiences you engage or need to engage to implement and scale your innovation.

Who uses it?

- Innovation teams or staff supporting innovation teams.

How is it used?

- Independently filled in by a member of the team
- Filled in during a team meeting to enable collaboration and shared discussion

When to use it?

- Independently filled in by a member of the team
- Filled in during a team meeting to enable collaboration and shared discussion

Time needed:

→ 1-2 hours

Resources needed

→ Tool template

Sources

→ Building Evidence for Scaling
→ Decision-making Stakeholder Matrix

Tool 1 Step by step process

The tool template provides a structure for thinking through and recording the needs of your different audiences and stakeholders.

1 List your current stakeholders

This should include all stakeholders who are involved in your project and/or have an interest in the outcomes of your project. This includes your own organisation and innovation team(s) and implementers, as well as partners, funders, government, private sector actors, community leaders, affected communities, etc. Add each new stakeholder as a new row in the spreadsheet and mark in Column A that these are existing stakeholders.

2 Add potential takeholders

Think about future potential stakeholders that you're aware of, such as potential adopters or people you need buy-in from. Add these as additional rows and mark in Column B that these are potential stakeholders.

3 Record what you know against each of the questions in the table

Draw on what you already know; where you struggle to answer a question or have limited information, this indicates an area where you may need to do some more thinking or investigation. This can come from desk research, conversations with other people in your organisation or speaking to your stakeholders directly. Even where you are able to respond, it may still be helpful to share the information you record in the table with other team members, partners or experts to sense-check your understanding.

The questions in the table are intentionally broad to allow for different contexts and innovation stages. However, some questions may highlight areas where additional foundational work is needed. For example, you will need to have a shared understanding of your outcomes and what success looks like to answer your stakeholders relationship with your innovation and the role they play in enabling success. This can be a useful process to highlight these gaps and you may need to make time for these steps, before coming back to the table to continue the mapping process.

4 Keep the table up to date

As you move through your innovation journey. Update it at the beginning of a new phase or new funding cycle to add new stakeholders and revise or add new information as you develop a better understanding of your innovation, business model and/or your audiences and their evidence requirements and needs.

Tool 1 Table 1. Mapping table and examples

Column	Description	Example 1	Example 2
Stakeholder	This may be an individual or an organisation.	Local community leaders	Funder name
Existing/ potential	Mark whether this stakeholder is currently engaged in your project or is a potential stakeholder.	Existing	Potential
What relationship do they have with innovation?	Briefly describe how they do or might (in the future) interact with your innovation.	They provide insights and feedback and facilitate community engagement	They may fund the scale-up of the innovation if it aligns with their goals for improving education outcomes
What role do they play in enabling success?	Briefly describe how they do or might (in the future) contribute to the success of your innovation.	They act as advocates for the innovation, encouraging community buy-in and participation	Funding to develop and scale the app in new regions
What's important to them?	Think about what this stakeholder values and priorities. This can be identified through documentation or conversation and experience.	Trust and transparency in how and why the new water system will benefit the community, minimising disruptions and costs to the community	Reaching out of school (OOS) learners, improving learning outcomes, gender and disability inclusion

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Tool 1 Table 1. Mapping table and examples

Why do they need evidence?	Record why this stakeholder needs to see evidence about your innovation. See Table 2 below as a useful guide.	To understand that the system is safe, cost-effective and sustainable	Justification for funding decisions
What do they want to know?	Identify the types of evidence of stakeholder values and priorities.	– Effectiveness in delivering safe drinking water – Long-term maintenance requirements and costs – Accessibility for different community groups – Examples of successful implementation in similar contexts	– Learners reached (disaggregated by gender, disability of OOS status) – Quantitative improvements in learning outcomes – Qualitative insights from teachers and carers, demonstrating buy-in – Inclusion and accessibility metrics – Scalability and sustainability models
When do they need evidence?	Record if this stakeholder needs to see evidence by a particular time, such as in a funding application, or an annual report.	Updates before community meetings - next on 10 February 2025	Next Education in Emergencies grant application deadline: June 2025

Table 2. Examples of innovation stakeholders and the typical evidence requirements of different stakeholders from Building Evidence for Scaling (Mwenda and Tanner, 2020)

Examples of stakeholders	Why does this group need evidence?
Innovation team	Learning, decision-making and iteration of the innovation.
Donors and other ‘buyers’	Funding prioritisation; financial risk management; measuring impact of investment.
Users	Assessing the potential value and cost of using the innovation; To select which product or service to use.
Target impact group (normally the affected population)	Understanding the impact of an innovation on their work, lives and communities.
Other supporters (including host organisations)	To decide whether to support the innovation or not.
Wider humanitarian sector	For the design and development of other programs and innovations; To share learning and build an evidence base.

Tool 2

Tool 2. Assessing confidence in your evidence

Purpose of this tool:

This tool is intended to help teams document the different information and data they have access to about the challenge they are trying to solve and/or their innovation.

The tool guides teams through assessing their confidence in each piece of evidence based on a set of five evidence principles. This helps teams identify which pieces of evidence to prioritise in decision making and communications.

Through this mapping, it also helps teams identify areas where there may be gaps in their data and evidence that need to be filled or where processes could be improved to increase the confidence and usefulness of evidence.

Who uses it?

- Innovation teams or staff supporting innovation teams.

How is it used?

- As a facilitated session with team members, to provide different perspectives and reach a shared consensus.
- Independently by a member of the team with a good overview of evidence (i.e. a M&E officer).

When to use it?

As soon as you start compiling evidence about the problem and your innovation and routinely update as you build the case about your innovation. It can be useful to revisit when preparing donor reporting or external communications or in strategic decision making.

Time needed:

→ 2 hours

Resources needed

→ Tool template plus optional post-it notes if facilitating an in-person meeting.

Sources

→ Bond Standards of Evidence

→ Raising the Bar

Tool 2 Quick start summary

This tool will help you and your team go through the evidence you have access to and assess your confidence in this evidence based on five principles of quality evidence. These are principles of good-quality evidence, they are a guide to consider, not all evidence will meet all principles all the time. Your evidence becomes stronger the more data is collated and analysed with other sources. The purpose of this tool is to help teams identify where and how evidence can be strengthened in the future. It does not mean that low rated evidence cannot be used; but it can help spark ideas of what could add to and enrich it.

The process can be facilitated with your team or completed independently.

It involves five key steps:

Before

1 Schedule and prepare for the session

During

2 Write down the main pieces of evidence you have access to.

3 Reflect on your confidence in your evidence using the five principles

4 Identify strengths / weaknesses in your evidence and plan next steps

After

5 Share the completed tool and a summary with participants

Tool 2 The five principles

In the tool template, you will assess your level of confidence for each piece of evidence against the five principles, from low, medium, high to very high confidence. By exploring your level of confidence in your data, this can help inform whether and how you use it in decision making and communications and potential areas for improvement in the future. The table below explains each principle in more detail.

Reflection questions Questions to ask yourself to help reflect on each piece of evidence and your confidence related to this principle	**Low confidence** Definition of evidence that would be low confidence	**Very high confidence** Definition of evidence that would be very high confidence	**Example: Very high confidence** An example description for a piece of evidence (such as an evaluation report) that is high confidence
1. Voice and inclusion: The perspectives of innovation users and (if different) crisis-affected communities are included and valued			
Whose voice is included and what role did they play? Are minoritised voices meaningfully included? Are the voices of those we ultimately seek to impact included and how?	The perspectives of innovation users and/or affected communities are not incorporated.	A diversity of innovation users and/ or affected communities provide their perspectives and engage in analysis – drawing conclusions about how change is emerging and lessons learned.	Evidence was generated through participatory processes and directly included innovation users and people ultimately impacted by the innovation, making sense of their experiences through facilitated reflection sessions. For example, people with disabilities were involved throughout and in the final analysis that informed the findings and recommendations.

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Tool 2 The five principles

2. Triangulation: Multiple sources of data and perspectives are included

What different methods and types of data contribute to the evidence? What different voices and opinions contribute to the evidence? How are conflicting findings dealt with?	A single method is used to collect data from one type of actor.	A variety of data collection methods are used to explore the innovation, gathering different perspectives, building a robust narrative for how change is emerging and for whom.	Evidence comes from community surveys, meeting documents, facilitator journals and interviews with affected communities and innovation users. The implementation team and key stakeholders were involved in making sense of the data and developing conclusions or recommendations. It was then written up by an external evaluator.

3. Transparency: The way the data is collected is clear and structured

Are the methods and limitations clearly documented? Would someone else be able to pick it up and understand how and why the data was collected, analysed and reported?	The data collection methods are inconsistent or not described.	A clear explanation is given on who collected the data, who data was collected from and how, how data was managed and analysed and why the methods were selected.	How the data was collected and who was involved in collection and analysis is described in detail. There is a discussion of the development of the tools, how they were tested and adapted, who was involved and how they were selected (sampling methodology) and how the data was analysed and with whom.

Continued on next page

4. Contribution: The evidence explores how different factors contribute to change[2]

Does the evidence show how your innovation is contributing to change and how? Does the evidence reflect on how change happens? Does the evidence explore positive, negative and unintended changes?	No data is used to make a comparison and no causal links or assumptions are explored.	There is a point of comparison (eg, a baseline); causal links between the intervention and positive, negative and unintended changes are explored, including an analysis of contributions outside of the intervention.	The evaluation compared health outcomes in communities with new water filtration systems to baseline data from the prior year, revealing a 40% reduction in waterborne illnesses. The study explored other potential contributions, such as seasonal rainfall and other water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) practices, but this was found to be comparable to the previous year.

5. Appropriateness: The methods, type of data and sample size is appropriate for the context and questions

What data collection methods and analysis techniques are used? What sample size is used and is this appropriate to the methodology? How is bias considered and reduced?	The methods lack relevance to the inquiry's objectives and there is a misalignment between the data and conclusions; the sample size does not support reliable insights; bias is not considered.	Methods are carefully chosen and align with a clear understanding of the inquiry's objectives; appropriate quality controls are applied and the sample size and data type are proportional to the conclusions sought; bias is actively minimised.	The study used a representative sample of 300 students and a mixed-methods approach of standardised tests and semi-structured interviews, aligned with the program's goals to assess literacy outcomes; the tools were piloted and refined and bias was minimised through random sampling and interviewer training, ensuring reliable, contextually relevant findings.

2 To note, this principle will be less relevant for problem recognition research.

Tool 2 Step by step: Facilitating a session with your team

Before

1 Preparation

1 hour

→ **Allocate a facilitator:** This person will run the meeting and should read through the guide before the meeting. It is a good idea if this person is familiar with your evidence.

→ **Download the tool:** Tool template

→ **Select participants:** These should be team members who play a role in decision making, implementation and/or gathering evidence.

→ **Set up a team meeting:** Find a convenient date and time. We recommend allowing two hours for the meeting, online or in person.

→ **Prepare the team:** Send the tool template to the team in advance and explain the purpose and activities of the session.

During

2 List your evidence

30 minutes

→ **Introduce the session:** Start the meeting by re-explaining the purpose and activities and setting some ground rules (such as, active listening, mutual respect and participation).

→ **List your evidence:** In the spreadsheet, start with Column A, 'Our evidence'. Add the sources of evidence you currently have available to you, that tells you information about the challenge you are trying to solve and/or your innovation.

→ **What to include:** This can include external research reports or internal reports and analyses where you have brought different pieces of data together. If you have not done this, you can add individual data, such as a survey. Ask everyone in the meeting to contribute - ask for this verbally or ask people to write this down, either in a shared document online or on post-it notes.

3 Reflect on the five principles

1 hour

→ **Go through each piece of evidence, principle by principle:** Starting with the first piece of evidence, go through each principle one by one (see table) and facilitate a discussion. Ask your team the question in the first column. Make notes about how this evidence meets or does not meet the criteria. Based on this discussion, rate how confident you feel in this data, from low, to very high.

→ **Note on rating scale:** This is an approximate scale. If there is disagreement in the team, you may need to vote, or come to a middle ground. Allow time for the team to share their thoughts and reach a shared consensus.

→ **Note on meeting the principles:** Not all pieces of evidence will meet all the principles. For example, a single survey will not meet the triangulation principle until it is analysed with other data sources, such as interviews. That is ok; the tool should help you identify these gaps.

Continued on next page

Tool 2 Step by step: Facilitating a session with your team

During

4

Identify strengths and weaknesses

20 minutes

→ **Review the scoring:** When you have filled in the principles, look at the aggregate score column. This gives you a score out of four, for each piece of evidence, based on the principles.

→ **Review where your confidence in your data is high:** Highlight these pieces of evidence. This is evidence that is particularly valuable for decision making and communications.

→ **Review where your confidence in your data is low:** This data may help paint a picture of what is happening and add to your overall perspectives and understanding, but shouldn't solely be relied on to make decisions.

→ **Reflect as a team:** Ask the team to share their thoughts on how you could improve your data collection and analysis, or what you could do differently to fill the gaps. Make a note of any practical next steps you could take to improve or expand your current approaches.

After

5

Share your findings

30 minutes

→ **Share the completed tool and a summary:** Following the meeting, the facilitator should send a summary of the session and the filled out tool to participants, as well wider members of the team where useful. Make a note of any action items and who will be responsible for this, including realistic timelines for this action.

→ **Plan how and when you will review and update the map:** It is also a good idea to plan for when this tool should be reviewed or revisited, for example, at the end of the next data collection or testing phase. We recommend that the tool is revisited on at least a six monthly basis.

Tool 2 Step by step process: Using the tool independently

1

Preparation

20 minutes

→ **Download the tool:** Tool template
Familiarise yourself with the tool and the five principles.

2

List your evidence

20 minutes

→ **List your evidence:** In the spreadsheet, start with Column A, 'Our evidence'. Add the sources of evidence you currently have available to you, that tells you information about the challenge you are trying to solve and/or your innovation.

→ **What to include:** This can include external research reports or internal reports and analyses where you have brought different pieces of data together. If you have not done this, you can add individual methods, such as a survey.

3

Reflect on the five principles

40-60 minutes

→ **Go through each piece of evidence, principle by principle:** Starting with the first piece of evidence, go through each principle one by one (see table). Make notes about how this evidence meets or does not meet the criteria. Rate how confident you feel in this data, from low, to very high.

→ **Note on rating scale:** This is an approximate scale. If there is disagreement in the team, you may need to vote, or come to a middle ground. Allow time for the team to share their thoughts and reach a shared consensus.

→ **Note on meeting the principles:** Not all pieces of evidence will meet all the principles. For example, a single survey will not meet the triangulation principle until it is analysed with other data sources, such as interviews. That is ok; the tool should help you identify these gaps.

Continued on next page

Tool 2 Step by step process: Using the tool independently

4

Identify strengths and weaknesses

20 minutes

→ **Review the scoring:** When you have filled in the principles, look at the aggregate score column. This gives you a score out of four, for each piece of evidence, based on the principles.

→ **Review where your confidence in your data is high:** Highlight these pieces of evidence. This is evidence that is particularly valuable for decision making and communications.

→ **Review where your confidence in your data is low:** This data may help paint a picture of what is happening and add to your overall perspectives and understanding, but shouldn't solely be relied on to make decisions.

→ **Reflection:** Think about how you might improve your data collection or analysis or what you could do differently to fill the gaps. Make a note of any practical next steps you could take to improve or expand your current approaches.

5

Share your findings

30 minutes

→ **Share the completed tool and a summary:** Once you have completed the tool, share the filled out tool to relevant members of your team who are involved in decision-making, communications or data collection. Make a note of any action items and follow up with relevant members of the team who need to be involved.

→ **Plan how and when you will review and update the map:** It is also a good idea to plan for when this tool should be reviewed or revisited, for example, at the end of the next data collection or testing phase. We recommend that the tool is revisited on at least a six monthly basis.

Case study: Yakkum

Background to the innovation

Yakkum Emergency Unit is one of Elrha's partners through the Community-Led Innovation Partnership. Yakkum works with local teams in Indonesia working on disaster risk reduction and community resilience. Yakkum provides support to these teams as they develop and test innovations to address environmental problems in their communities, such as landslides, flooding, crop failure and waste management issues.

The progress and success of these innovations is monitored through community surveys to assess whether communities benefit from these innovations and feel more confident and well prepared for potential disaster risks. Yakkum also collects monthly narrative reports from innovation teams and has worked with an inclusion advisor to ensure their work reaches all community members effectively.

Testing the tool

In October 2024, Yakkum tested the tool as an internal team. The session was facilitated by the Project Manager, together with three Field Officers, the Communications Officer and the Finance Officer. The team identified three main evidence sources and the facilitator guided the team through the five evidence principles for each source, rating their level of confidence based on the guidance.

Example completed tool

What went well?

- All the participants in the session had a good understanding of the project and the sources of evidence and were able to reach consensus about the evidence on each principle.
- The team found the session to be a helpful point for reflection that inspired several ideas and opportunities for future data collection, including increasing the survey

Case study: Yakkum

sample size and incorporating more qualitative data collection methods.

What did we learn?

The distinction between the different evidence principles was unclear, eg, between 'voice and inclusion' and 'triangulation'. The tool was updated to make the definitions clearer and to provide additional examples.

The team were unsure how to score 'triangulation' for the survey as a single source of data. We discussed that triangulation is done during analysis, when the data is explored against other sources, eg, existing secondary research or qualitative data. A single source of data will score 'low' against this principle. However, just because a source doesn't meet all the criteria, does not mean it has no value or can't be used – but additional steps could be taken to strengthen it.

Overall, the team found value in using the tool for internal reflection and planning purposes. The exercise helped identify specific areas for improvement. The team plans to continue using the tool regularly to assess their evidence quality and improve their data collection strategies.

"We found this really useful so that we can reflect and really see which pieces of evidence or documentation that we already have and which ones that we are confident in using."

Evidence-based decision-making
Useful tools to help innovators

2. Understanding your evidence

2. Understanding your evidence

In complex, rapidly changing humanitarian settings, making sense of data and information together with the people who use your innovation or are affected by your innovation helps ensure your analysis, learning and subsequent decisions are fully thought through, relevant and appropriate. The collective sensemaking tool in this section provides a process to engage your users and end users in identifying and interpreting patterns in the data, challenging assumptions and co-creating a shared understanding of the opportunities and next steps.

Tool 3

Tool 3. Collective sensemaking. Facilitating group discussions to make sense of your evidence together.

Purpose of this tool:

This tool is intended to help you plan and facilitate a group discussion to understand and make-sense of your evidence further and record the session findings and actions.

By facilitating 'sensemaking sessions', you can work with your team, users, crisis-affected communities and their representatives or other stakeholders to understand your evidence together. This can help you to draw out meaning and ultimately make decisions together based on that collective understanding.

Who uses it?

- Anyone who wants to facilitate a process to gather multiple perspectives and views on evidence gathered.

How is it used?

- Innovation users – people who directly use your innovation.
- People ultimately impacted by your innovation (people living in crisis/affected communities).
- Relevant key stakeholders (funders, government bodies, researchers, partners, affected communities, community representative organisations, etc.).

When to use it?

- When you want to consolidate learning and understanding based on the evidence you have gathered. This could be as part of routine team meetings, learning workshops, evaluation moments, conferences, team away days, community feedback sessions, participatory context analysis sessions etc. Sensemaking can be added to existing spaces for learning, reflection and probing specific aspects of the innovation with users.

It can be used for:

- Exploring survey results.
- Analysing multiple stories or case studies.
- Drawing together different evidence types
- Context/problem analysis.
- To understand innovation processes with participants or peer researchers (for example gathering feedback on innovation design).
- Sense-checking themes identified and action planning in evaluations or research.

Tool 3

Tool 3. Collective sensemaking. Facilitating group discussions to make sense of your evidence together.

Why Sensemake?

- Reduce bias.
- Draw on multiple diverse perspectives and experiences.
- Triangulate different evidence with experiences.
- Generate a larger pool of ideas for problem solving. Increase buy-in and build trust, supporting accountability towards knowledge holders (innovation users and those impacted by the innovation).
- Demonstrate a commitment to putting results into action.
- Identify knowledge gaps.

The sensemaking process enables collective understanding that consolidates evidence into knowledge and action which is informed by users and/or end-users, those ultimately impacted by the innovation.

What is collective sensemaking?

"Collective Sensemaking" is when a group of people work together to understand a problem, situation or process. They share their ideas, discuss different viewpoints and try to agree on what the evidence means and what they should do next. It is a process where we can bring together team members, users or people ultimately impacted by the innovation in order to "make sense" of the evidence we have.

"Sensemaking is an activity and a process that extracts insights, induces learning and creates meaning from experience." [UNDP Asia-Pacific Regional Innovation Centre]

"A collective process of turning data into meaning. It involves creating space for listening, reflection and the exploration of meaning beyond the usual boundaries, allowing different framings, stories and viewpoints to be shared and collectively explored. Sensemaking is about creating space for listening, reflection and the exploration of meaning beyond the usual boundaries, allowing different framings, stories and viewpoints to be shared and collectively explored." [Centre for Public Impact Foundation]

Time needed:

At least one hour per question developed is a general guideline.

Resources needed

→ Whiteboard / flipchart or virtual whiteboard session summary template.

→ Facilitators checklist

Sources

→ How to facilitate a sensemaking workshop

→ UNDP sensemaking workshop guide

→ What is sensemaking?

Tool 3 Quick start summary

This tool will help you facilitate a process to gather insights, collectively analyse and understand the evidence available. The sensemaking process involves five key steps:

Reminder

Using tools like collective sensemaking doesn't eliminate the need to plan out the purpose and design of data collection exercises from the outset. Use this tool alongside the tools in Section 1 to make sure your data collection is purpose-driven and tailored to the needs of your innovation, your stakeholders and your community. This ensures you're not collecting data 'for data's sake' and reduces the risk of data collection fatigue.

It involves five key steps:

Before

1. Define the purpose of the session
2. Organise your evidence

During

3. Facilitate a discussion with your participants
4. Record the key point, conclusions and actions

After

5. Feed back your findings and decisionsto participants

Tool 3 Step by step process

1

Define the purpose of your session

30 minutes

→ **To define the purpose of your session, ask yourself these questions. Base your answers on the evidence you want to understand more about:**

- What do you want to learn or understand better?
- How will this learning help you make decisions, take actions or adapt?
- Who are the people (users or stakeholders) that should be involved?
- What evidence or information will you discuss?

Use this template to organise your thoughts:

We want to learn about... Clearly state the topic/issue you want to understand better.	
This will help us to... Explain how this learning will support decision-making, actions or problem-solving.	
We will invite these people: List the participants (users/stakeholders) who should be involved in the session.	
We will discuss this evidence or information: Identify the specific evidence (e.g. reports, survey results, stories, insights) you will analyse together.	

Tool 3 Step by step process

By clarifying these questions you can then determine other session considerations:

Key question	Considerations
Should the session be part of an existing process, platform or meeting?	Team meetings, conference, workshop, community of practice, town hall meeting.
Should the session be online or face to face?	This will depend on the practical logistics of where your participants are located, internet access and the availability of digital tools.
What is the best time for the session?	Consider the participant time zones.
How accessible can your session be?	Using simple language, accessibility to workshop (eg, physical access, interpreters etc. If online, is it colour-blind suitable, live-caption enabled, screen-reader compatible etc?
Who are you participants? What are their knowledge/ skills/ attitudes/ beliefs?	Consider whether different sessions are needed for senior and implementing staff. Would the power imbalance hinder all participants from speaking? Do participants have the same levels of knowledge to analyse the evidence collectively? How do you address different levels of knowledge?
What material or resources will be needed?	eg, documents, technology, posters etc.
What language(s) should the session be in?	Are translators or interpreters needed? Are sign language interpreters needed?
How many participants should be included?	This is dependent on the depth of discussion desired, the number of co-facilitators available, the size of the room. In general, no break-out group should be larger than six people for discussions.
Do you need multiple sessions to ensure everyone can participate fully?	Should you hold separate sessions for different groups, such as men and women, young people and adults, different ethnicities, different languages?
How long does the session need to be?	Consider the content, engagement levels and participants' time constraints. (Allowing time for internet or software issues if online).

2

Collective sensemaking

1-2 hours

→ **In order to run the session you need to organise your evidence in a way that it is easy for your participants to digest and discuss. There are many ways of doing this depending on the evidence you are using. However in all cases you should think about the following:**

- **Select relevant evidence:** Choose the most important pieces of evidence that relate directly to your session's purpose.
- **Summarise key points:** Create simple, easy-to-read summaries of the evidence so participants can understand it quickly.
- **Use visuals where possible:** Present data through charts, graphs or infographics to make complex information easier to digest. But be careful to place them within the context they are demonstrating.
- **Prepare a session agenda:** Outline the flow of the session to keep it organised and on track.
- **Share materials in advance:** Send the materials to participants before the session, so they have time to review.
- **Provide clear context:** Explain why the evidence is important and how it relates to the session's purpose. Place the evidence within the context it should be interpreted in.
- **Prepare questions or prompts:** Develop a few questions to help guide discussion around the evidence.

Here are some examples of how you might think about organising your evidence for the session.

For survey results:

Pick the results you want to explore further. Print out or create a way of sharing the results in graphic form (eg, a pie chart, graph or table).

Develop one to three questions that you want the participants to discuss about the results.

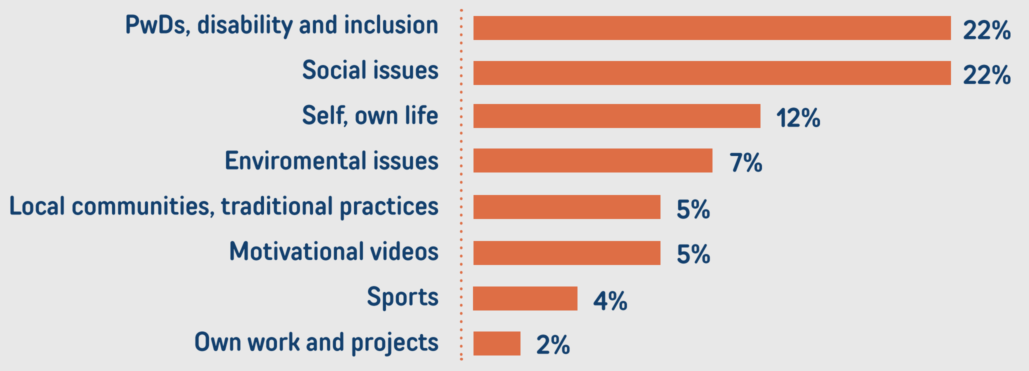
Example

203 participants trained in digital storytelling were surveyed at the end of the training.

In the survey 54% of respondents wanted to make video-stories about social issues affecting them and their communities. Respondents were interested in making videos about social issues and disability and inclusion.

Step by step process

Figure 15: Story themes for making videos



→ We want to explore:

- Have you made any videos since the training?
  - If so, on what themes?
  - If not, why not? What have been the barriers?
- As group rank (list from most to least) what are the main barriers from using the training (making videos).

→ For stories or case studies:

- Review the stories/case studies that you have and ensure to group them around the purpose of your session. You can share them in advance and/or if you have time, have copies that people read in the session. It's crucial to organise your case studies and prepare summaries or key points that can be easily discussed by participants.
- Provide the case studies in advance but also make time to present each case study with a clear context and the key questions that need exploration. Use visual aids or summaries to make the content more accessible and to encourage engagement. Facilitate reflection. Allow participants to share their initial interpretations of the case studies. Create an open space for diverse perspectives and encourage them to consider different angles or questions they may not have thought of before.
- Break participants into smaller groups (if the group size is large) to allow for more focused discussions. Each group can focus on a different case study or analyse the same case from different perspectives. After discussing each case, guide participants to identify patterns, themes, or shared challenges across the case studies. This step involves synthesising information, where participants connect the dots and make sense of the information collaboratively.
- Wrap up the session by summarising the insights generated and discussing how these insights could inform future actions. You might also want to plan a follow-up session to dive deeper into specific findings.

Tool 3 Step by step process

→ For multiple/ different types of evidence: A walking gallery

Organise the evidence/data around the themes or learning questions you want to explore. For example you might have survey results, stories and sections/quotes from anonymised transcripts about one theme on one section of the wall.

- Pair people up to review the data together with key questions to discuss. For example:
- What's interesting?
- What's important?
- What improvement or learning should we draw from the evidence?

Come back together, where pairs present their reflections. When reflections are similar to others they are clustered together.

After the key themes are identified through this process, ask participant groups to draw conclusions about what the understanding or learning means for adapting the innovation, decision-making, or implementation.

3 Facilitate the session

1-3 hours

→ It is important that you use a confident and skilled facilitator who will encourage reflection, discussion and group analysis of the evidence.

- See the top tips on facilitating a session for further guidance.

4 Record the key points

part of the session

→ During the session, ensure that important ideas and findings are recorded. There are multiple ways to do this:

- Use poster paper, PostIt notes or GoogleDocs where participants can record their reflections. Photograph any offline methods so that summaries can be captured afterwards.
- If online, or with computer literate participants, use an online shared document during the session and get participants to capture the main points as they go.

A template that can be adapted to record the session is available here.

5

Feedback to your participants

1-2 hours

→ **To close the feedback loop, encourage buy-in and understand what has happened it is important not to forget this key step. Suggestions for delivering feedback include:**

- Summary Report: Which clearly states what you 'heard' and what you are going to do next. This can be shared via email or shared folder along with the materials produced within the session.
- A poster: Usually a visual representation or summary of the insights captured and what actions and recommendations are going to be taken forward. Miro, Canva or PowerPoint are useful ways of creating visual summaries.
- Town Hall Meetings or follow-up meetings: To summarise the findings of what you heard and the agreed next steps. This is also an opportunity to validate if the participants agree on the way forward.
- Recorded recap: A video or audio recording summarising the main points shared electronically with participants.

Using a combination of these methods can ensure comprehensive and clear feedback that participants can easily reference and act upon.

Case study: words. rhythms. images.

Background to the innovation

words. rhythms. images. (WRI) is a group of storytellers, content creators and filmmakers who use words and images to tell powerful stories about topics that are often ignored. Their goal is to connect people, spark conversations and make art a tool for positive change. Supported by a grant from the HIF, WRI developed the 'Digital Storytellers for Social Change' project.

This initiative trains community members and social change makers, including people with disabilities and older adults, to use smartphones to create impactful videos highlighting local issues, such as barriers in accessibility, emergency situations, water scarcity and flooding. By equipping individuals with video-making skills, WRI enables them to share their experiences and advocate for solutions, fostering inclusive and community-led responses to the challenges they face.

Testing the tool

In January 2025, WRI tested the collective sensemaking tool with six people who had participated in WRI's digital storytelling training between July and September 2024. WRI staff facilitated the two hour sensemaking session via Zoom with six participants from across India. The session was conducted in a mixture of English and Hindi.

After each training, participants were asked to fill out a short survey to gather their feedback. While the results were mainly positive, it was not possible to tell from the data why participants had responded in the way they had. To better interpret the survey data, WRI decided to use the sensemaking tool, allowing previous participants to reflect on their lived experience of the training and provide deeper insights. The aim of the sensemaking session was to better understand how and why participants found the training useful. They specifically wanted to explore whether "useful" meant that participants could apply what they had learned in the session to their current work and/or life.

With support from merl, WRI prepared a discussion pack for the participants prior to the sensemaking session and a detailed facilitation guide (see below).

What went well?

- The facilitators found the tool easy to use and preparing a tailored facilitation guide helped them get the most out of the session (see below).

Case study: words. rhythms. images.

- The process produced useful insights into what participants had done since the workshop, why they found the training useful and provided feedback on how to improve the training.
- Although the participants had been on the training more than three months earlier, they were able to remember many details from it and had valuable insights to share.

What did we learn?

It was difficult to reconvene participants after the programme ended. WRI invited people to volunteer their time over a large WhatsApp Group and only a few people came forward. They reflected that compensating participants for their time would have encouraged more engagement. Moving forward, they plan to integrate sensemaking into future project plans, proposals and budgets.

Ideally, a sensemaking workshop should be integrated into the project from the beginning so that participants are aware of their involvement upfront. This would help prevent a disconnect between the sensemaking process and workshop participation.

The facilitators conducted the discussion using audio only, without visuals or interactive voting activities. They believe that sharing their screens, displaying graphs and incorporating voting features could have helped generate deeper insights.

“This was the first time I was facilitating a session which was more kind of looking at the data piece and saying, what do we understand from this and going deeper. Usually, we run more feedback sessions, not having people help interpret the data. It was really useful.”

Discussion Pack for sensemaking participants

When
13th January

Location/ Link
On zoom

Facilitators

Purpose
To better understand what participants meant when they said that the training was "very useful"

Why attend?
To help design the next steps of our project. We want to ensure that participants can take what they learn and use it in their real-life. If we understand better how exactly they found the training useful we can think about what tweaks and additions might be needed to the training session and what the post-training action from our side should be.

The discussion will focus on three questions drawn from the survey data:

- How was the training 'very useful' to your life or work?
- What have the participants done since this training? Is anyone making their video stories? If not, why not? If so, what?
- What are the main ways the workshop could be improved?

Discussion outline

From July to September 2024 we trained 203 participants in digital storytelling. At the end of the training we asked participants to fill in a survey. Your responses were gathered on different aspects of the training.

1. Survey respondents found the training useful or very useful, how was it useful to your life or work?

From the survey results - 80% of respondents found the training to be "very useful", with 59% saying it was useful as it was new learning, knowledge and skills.

We want to explore:

- What are the main reasons it is useful?
- How was the training useful to your life?
- How was it useful to work?

2. What parts of the training have you used since the workshop?

In the survey 54% of respondents wanted to make video-stories about social issues affecting them and their communities. Respondents were interested in making videos about social issues and disability and inclusion.

We want to explore:

- Have you made any videos since the training?
  - If so, on what themes?
  - If not, why not? What have been the barriers?
- As group rank (list from most to least) what are the main barriers from using the training (making videos).

3. What were the main ways the workshop could be improved?

The survey results showed that 37% of respondents felt that time was the biggest challenge in the training. This was broken down into:

- We want to explore:
- Where was more time needed?
- Was time the biggest challenge for you?

Tool 3 Facilitation Guide (2 hours)

Time	Activity	Purpose
15 minutes	**Welcome and introductions** – Introductions – The purpose of the session – Ground rules - how to participate **Consent to be involved:** – Voluntary participation – Do not have an answer a question if they don't want to – Consent to be recorded – How the information they share will be used – Consent to take part **Icebreaker: (ideas here)**	Understand the purpose of the session and build trust and rapport to talk at ease.
30 minutes	**Discussion 1: How useful was the training to your life or work?** Explain the survey results (above) on how respondents felt the training was useful, but say you want to explore that further. (5 minutes) Ranking exercise: (10 minutes) – Ask participants to say one way the training was useful to their life or work (what new learning was useful to them). Not to repeat each other, to think of something different each time. – As they say, write down what they are saying on post-it notes on a virtual white board they can see. – As a group decide together what is the most useful to least useful out of what has been listed. Group discussion: (15 minutes) – Why did you choose XX as the most important? – Does the list change if it is about work or life? – Is there anything missing from the list? – How could we make the training more useful?	To understand what the group has done since the training and if they have not used the training - what are the barriers to video making?

Tool 3 Facilitation Guide (2 hours)

30 minutes	**Discussion 2: What parts of the training have you used since the workshop?** Explain the survey results (above): (5 minutes) Ask: (15 minutes) – Have you made any videos since the training? – If so, on what themes? – If not, why not? What have been the barriers? – Ask the participants to list out the barriers to making videos. – As group rank (list from most to least) what are the main barriers from using the training (making videos). Group Discussion: (10 minutes) – Why have you put xx as the biggest barrier? – How can the training be improved to overcome these barriers?	To understand what the group has done since the training and if they have not used the training - what are the barriers to video making?
30 minutes	**Discussion 3: What were the main ways the workshop could be improved?** Explain the survey results: (5 minutes) Ask: – What parts of the training needed more time and why? – What were the biggest time challenges for those who participated? Are they the same as the survey results?	Gather feedback on which areas of the training need more time.
15 minutes	**Wrap up and next steps** – Coming to the end of the session – Summary of the main points you heard – Do they have any final feedback? – Explain what will happen next and how their inputs will be used. Explain how you will feedback how the training has been adapted based on their inputs. – Thank them for participating.	To gather final feedback and ensure everyone knows next steps.
	Close	

Evidence-based
decision-making
**Useful tools to
help innovators**

3. Documenting learning and decisions

3. Documenting learning and decisions

Innovation is a continuous learning process. Over the course of the innovation journey, innovation teams accumulate valuable learning knowledge about their context and solutions, but this goes undocumented. By systematically documenting learning and decisions, teams can make this information more accessible and transparent, improving continuity and shared decision making.

This chapter introduces two tools that provide practical steps to capture, share and apply lessons in real time. By focusing on structured learning processes, they help teams avoid 'reinventing the wheel' by reflecting and building on past insights and making informed decisions about next steps. Through purposeful reflection, teams can create a cycle of continuous learning and bring different ideas and perspectives into planning and decision making processes.

Tool 4 Before and after action reviews

Purpose of this tool:

To help project teams and broader stakeholders reflect on what they already know before starting a project by recording your goals, identifying potential challenges and building on past lessons learned.

Enable project teams and broader stakeholders to learn quickly during a project or after key milestones, focusing on improving results through reflection on what worked, what didn't and what should be adjusted going forward.

Establish a continuous learning cycle that encourages strategic planning and adaptation based on actual results, strengthening the ability to meet goals and improve outcomes.

Who uses it?

Innovation project teams, project managers, anyone leading or implementing key project activities, teams responsible for planning and implementing research activities, pilot studies, events, or stakeholder engagement. It can also be facilitated with partners and other stakeholders to develop and document a shared consensus on a project's goals and learning.

Who can the session be facilitated with?

Before and after action reviews are typically facilitated with core project team members (ideally two to ten participants). They can also be facilitated with key stakeholders and partners involved in implementation.

When to use it?

Use this tool before and after any significant project milestone, for example:

- Launching a new pilot phase.
- Carrying out a desk review.
- Convening stakeholder meetings.
- Holding a training event.
- Before and after important events or conferences.
- During regular project cycles to build a continuous learning practice.

Time needed:

2 hours for before action review.
2 hours for after action review.

Resources needed

→ A physical whiteboard/flipchart, or digital copy of the BAR tool template and AAR tool template.

Sources

→ Emergent Learning
→ USAID Learning Lab
→ UNICEF After Action Review
→ Building a Learning Practice

Tool 4 Step by step process

The Before and After Action Review is a light touch, structured reflection tool that helps innovation teams document their learning and adapt. It enables teams to define their success before taking action, draw on existing knowledge and past experiences and reflect on results to improve future outcomes. **Each review involves four key steps:**

Before Action Review (BAR)

1 Prepare the BAR session

Download the BAR tool template. Gather the team and assign a facilitator and note-taker. A BAR should involve people who are or will be involved in the task or activity. If some people can't attend, it is more valuable to hold a BAR with some people who can be there than to cancel it.

2 Facilitate a discussion using the questions below:

Together, discuss the following questions:

1. What are we hoping to achieve?

Summarise what you are setting out to do. This can be as simple as reviewing the goals for an initiative launch or stakeholder meeting. It helps establish a clear, shared intent.

2. How will we know if we've been successful?

In the BAR, you will use this to compare your intended results to your actual results. Measures of success can be quantitative (meeting deadlines or number of people reached) or qualitative (having a clear idea of who will do what by when or hearing stakeholder feedback).

3. What challenges might we face?

This is an opportunity to draw on the group's expertise and experiences to anticipate potential obstacles and proactively plan solutions. Think about delays, bottlenecks or setbacks that might occur or aspects your team might struggle with in its current capacity.

4. What have we learned from similar situations in the past?

Have a think about past activities your team or organisation implemented or individuals on your team may have implemented in the past and if there's anything you could learn related to your intent and anticipated challenges. Focus on practical lessons that you could incorporate to improve your approach.

5. What will make us successful this time?

Drawing on this learning, identify some actions or strategies that you think could have the greatest impact on your results. Treat it as an experiment: in the AAR, you can reflect and ask, "Did this contribute to success?"

Tool 4 Step by step process

After Action Review (AAR)

1

Prepare the AAR session

Download the AAR tool template. Convene the same group as soon as possible after the activity.

2

Facilitate a discussion using the questions below:.

Together, discuss the following questions:

1. What were we hoping to achieve?

If you did a BAR, have a look at this and restate what you agreed to (Question 1 of your BAR). If a participant questions the intent, rather than debating it here, include this as a topic for the third question.

2. What actually happened?

Compare your results to your original goals and success measures (Question 2 of your BAR): "We planned to do X. Did we achieve it?" Keep the focus on outcomes and facts, deeper discussions about 'why' will be explored in the next question.

3. What contributed to these results?

This is the main part of the reflection process. Have a think about what factors led to the successes or challenges. This can be a broad reflection. Also refer back to Question 5 of the BAR and reflect on whether you were able to implement these ideas as planned and if this did lead to success as anticipated, or, if not, why not?

As the facilitator, guide the discussion with a focus on positive learning. The idea here is not to point blame. Ground the AAR in acknowledging that everyone tried their best in the circumstances and that this a positive opportunity to learn and improve together.

3

Document your discussion and action plan

As the facilitator, guide the discussion, ensuring everyone is able to share their ideas and that they are written down. You could use sticky notes for everyone to share their ideas in writing and/or verbally. You may need to synthesise these ideas into a simple description or set of bullet points, so that it is clear and easy to refer back to and use in the AAR. This synthesis can be done during or after the session.

4

Set a date for your After Action Review

This should be no longer than a month after the main activity or activities are complete.

Tool 4 Step by step process

4. What should we continue doing?

Look at what contributed to success under Question 3 – reflect on what you could take forward to maintain or improve performance in your next activities. This might apply to other activities too, not just the same one.

5. What should we change or adapt?

If something didn't work well or didn't go to plan, brainstorm together what you need to change and, if needed, the next steps to take to make that change. Some of these may be big things – like changes to your innovation. Others may be small adjustments you could make to your planning process or internal communication, for example.

When is our next opportunity to test what we have learned?

Use this section to identify the next project, phase or activity where lessons from this AAR can be applied and tried out. Think about timing, the scope of the project and any specific actions needed to make this happen.

3

Document your discussion and action plan

As with the BAR, document your discussion and action plan in a way that can be shared with the team and referred back to easily.

4

Set a date for your next Before Action Review

Based on the opportunities you identified, set a date for a Before Action Review.

Tool 4 Example 1: Innovation team in Bangladesh

An innovation team in Bangladesh, specialising in disability-inclusive technology and mobile applications, is about to undertake a research project to understand the challenges around access to emergency information for people with disabilities.

Before Action Review

What are we hoping to achieve?

To compile a detailed analysis of the challenges people with disability face in accessing timely information in humanitarian settings and identify two to three potential solutions that could be tested.

How will we know if we've been successful?

- Our team has an improved understanding of the main challenges and priorities for information access for PwDs and a clear route forward, through:
- A complete report that draws on five to ten peer-reviewed studies, five expert consultations and ten focus group discussions with PwDs.
- The report proposes two to three solutions that are validated by experts and PwDs and are feasible for the team to develop and test.

What challenges might we face?

- Limited availability of relevant peer-reviewed studies in Bangladesh.
- Logistical and accessibility challenges in setting up focus groups.
- Potential biases in interpreting qualitative feedback from focus groups.
- Tight project timelines that might compromise the depth of analysis.

What have we learned from similar situations in the past?

- Early engagement is needed to address logistical issues and access constraints.
- Local disability organisations can help broker relationships with PwDs.
- We need a good understanding of accessibility needs of participants (e.g. sign language).
- Including PwDs in the analysis of data improves our understanding and buy-in.

What will make us successful this time?

- Partnering with local disability organisations.
- Training focus group facilitators on inclusive data collection and analysis methods.
- Running a sensemaking workshop with PwDs to discuss the results of the review and consultations.

Example 2: Local NGO in Uganda

A local NGO in Uganda is preparing to test a newly designed child-friendly handwashing station prototype in a refugee camp school setting. The pilot aims to explore whether the new design supports independent and regular handwashing practices among children.

Before Action Review

What are we hoping to achieve?

To test the usability and engagement of a newly designed, child-friendly handwashing station with 70 children and gather insights on if and how it supports effective handwashing practices among children aged 5-12.

How will we know if we've been successful?

- At least 80% of children are able to use the handwashing station independently with minimal instruction.
- Observations show children voluntarily use the station after using the bathroom and before eating.
- Feedback from children and caregivers highlights that the design is fun, easy to use and culturally appropriate.
- We have clear data on areas for improvement and design adjustments.

What challenges might we face?

- Ensuring participation across diverse groups of children, including those with disabilities.
- Survey fatigue.
- Mixed school attendance and difficulties accessing children and caregivers at home may mean we can't reach the full sample.

What have we learned from similar situations in the past?

- Prototypes designed with user input from the start are more likely to succeed, so involving children during testing is key.
- Caregivers and teachers play a pivotal role in shaping children's practices - their buy-in is important.
- Working closely with local partners and community leaders improves trust and participation.
- Children find it difficult to answer long surveys.

What will make us successful this time?

- Involve leaders, head teachers and caregivers in planning and sampling to ensure buy-in and consent.
- Start with a sample of 85 children in case there is drop out or poor attendance.
- Incorporate games into children's feedback to improve engagement.
- Include focus groups with teachers.

Example 2: Local NGO in Uganda

After Action Review

What were we hoping to achieve? (Review your Before Action Review)

To test the usability and engagement of a new, child-friendly handwashing station with 70 children, assessing its effectiveness in promoting independent, consistent handwashing practices.

What actually happened?

We gathered data from 73 children, 38 caregivers, three teachers and one head teacher. We found that:

- 85% of children successfully used the station independently after minimal instruction.
- Children demonstrated high levels of engagement, some spontaneously returned to the station during breaks to use it again.
- Feedback from children and caregivers showed the station was seen as fun and easy to use.
- Suggestions were made for improvement, including adjusting the height for smaller children and improving water supply and flow speed.

What contributed to these results?

- Playful, hands-on demonstration session encouraged active participation and quick learning.
- Teachers helped facilitate the demonstration session and feedback which made children comfortable.
- Children participated in the gamified feedback tool.
- Difficulty coordinating with some caregivers.
- We had some challenges with inconsistent water flow due to supply issues.
-

What should we continue doing?

- Combine feedback with observations.
- Continue developing child-friendly feedback tools.
- Continue engaging with head teachers and education partners to explore pilots in other schools.

What should we change or adapt?

- Implement in non-school settings to include out of school children.
- Adjust height of stations.
- Work with camp WASH partners to address water supply issues.
- Explore longer term engagement by observing behaviour over a longer period of time.

When is our next opportunity to test what we have learned?

- In the next phase, test an improved prototype with a larger group of children in schools and communal areas over a six week period.

Tool 5 Emergent learning table

Purpose of this tool:

To facilitate groups to have a learning conversation, providing a structure to explore your data and experiences and use this to spark new ideas for decision-making and action planning.

It is a way to 'bring the team around the table' and hear diverse perspectives. The tool encourages teams to reflect together on their different experiences and interpretations of the data and learning.

The process helps groups slow down and record their thinking process and decision-making, making explicit links between what they have learned, what opportunities exist and next steps.

It visualises and articulates the collective knowledge of the group. The table is a documented record of what data is known, what that evidence means and links to next steps. It helps apply past lessons to future actions.

Who uses it?

Anyone who wants to facilitate a process to gather multiple perspectives and views on thinking about the past and what that means for the future.

Who can the session be facilitated with?

- Other team members.
- Innovation users- people who directly use your innovation.
- People ultimately impacted by your innovation (people living in crisis/affected communities).
- Relevant key stakeholders (funders, government bodies, researchers, partners, affected communities and their representative organisations etc).

Tool 5 Emergent learning table

When to use it?

Use this tool when you want to reflect on a shared question, a set of past experiences, data or research findings, learn from past events and apply learning to opportunities coming up. This tool is useful when you want to take stock and plan for the future, for example:

- When moving to a new phase of your innovation journey.
- At the end of a testing phase.
- During strategic planning.
- As part of an evaluation.
- Within other planning and decision-making moments.

Time needed:

→ 5-6 hours to prepare, run the session and synthesise the findings.

Resources needed

→ A physical whiteboard/flipchart, or virtual whiteboard if facilitating online – the tool template image can be copied into Miro or Mural.

Sources

This tool was adapted from Fourth Quadrant Partners drawing on the following resources:

→ Emergent Learning Table Conversations
→ Introduction to Emergent Learning Tables
→ What will it take to learn fast to save lives during COVID-19?
→ Data Placemats & Emergent Learning Tables

Tool 5 Quick start summary

An Emergent Learning Table is a tool to enable groups to collectively consider a single framing question. Emergent Learning Tables have four quadrants which help guide the participants through a process of reflection, brainstorming and decision-making:

Framing question

Past ← What will it take to ... such that ... ? → **Future**

Thinking ↑ / Facts & Events ↓

2. What have we learnt? What insights can we draw from our evidence and experiences?	**3. What actions could we take?** What possible new ideas could we try out to reach our goals?
1. What are the facts? What stories, research, lived experiences, data or statistics do we know?	**4. What are the opportunities** What existing events or new initiatives could be used to take these actions?

It involves seven key steps:

Before

1. Schedule and prepare for the session
2. Define you framing question

During

3. Write down what you know - your 'ground truths'
4. Consider what you have leart - what's new
5. Brainstorm what ideas and actions you could take
6. Identify existing/new opportunities to take actions

After

7. Share the table and feedback with participants

You may also want to assign people to actions during the session

Step by step process

1

Preparation

1–2 hours

- **Define the purpose:** Clarify the purpose and goal of the session. Are you trying to solve a problem, reflect on past experiences for programme planning or planning for the next stage of the innovation journey? Ensure this purpose is communicated clearly to all participants.
- **Allocate a facilitator:** Ensure there is an allocated facilitator who is prepared and experienced to run the session. Ensure the facilitator possesses the skills to foster meaningful participation from all respondents, creating an inclusive environment where every participant feels encouraged and able to express their perspectives. [Icon linking to facilitation section]
- **Think about who to invite:** Ensure the group reflects diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. Diversity in thought, expertise and identity is essential to emergent learning as it enhances the richness of insights.
- **Logistics and materials**: Organise a neutral, inclusive space (virtual or physical) that allows for active participation. Prepare the necessary materials (sticky notes, whiteboards, digital tools) in advance. If in person, four pieces of poster paper can be used as each of the four quadrants. For an online session, you may want to use Miro or Mural – this tool template image can be copied onto a Miro or Mural board and used as an underlying template which virtual 'post-it notes' can be added to.
- **Ask participants to prepare for the session:** Emphasise the importance of preparatory work before the session, such as reading a report or preparing to share a story/research findings, etc. The conversation's quality will be proportional to participants' readiness to contribute.
- **Allocate time and space appropriately:** Determine the session's duration based on the group size, question complexity and the amount of evidence and experiences to be shared. Sessions may range from an hour to several days and can capture data over time to support ongoing reflection and experimentation.

2

Develop your framing question

30 minutes

This step can be before the session begins or at the start of the session. This depends on the time you have available. Our suggestion is to ensure the participants are clear on the purpose of the session and to bring a draft framing question which the participants can edit if needed.

The session will be facilitated around the framing question. This creates a focus for collective learning by asking:

What will it take to... such that...?

This is an open, forward-focused, action-oriented challenge to the group.

A well-crafted framing question helps the group focus on a shared goal and clarifies how each person can contribute to achieving it. A good framing question has the ability to 'train a group's attention in collective inquiry' that leads to action.

The framing question does not have to be time-bound. Often a timeframe is implicit in a framing question, but you might want to make that explicit in the purpose of the session or the framing question.

We recommend sending the draft framing question out to participants and gathering any feedback in advance. This saves time in the faciltiated session.

For example:

- What will it take to develop user cases of our product such that they reflect different experiences of our pilot communities?
- What will it take to create a space to share innovation learning such that it supports peer to peer learning and collaboration?
- What will it take to ensure that data on the barriers and enablers for older people to access humanitarian assistance is considered in planning such that humanitarian action can be made more inclusive and accessible?
- What will it take to encourage participation of children such that WASH facilities are child-friendly?

Troubleshooting tips for framing question formulation

Challenge	Solutions
The question is vague or lacks enough specificity, making it difficult to focus the discussion.	Add context or scope to be more specific about the focus while keeping it forward-looking. Ensure the question focuses on what the group or organisation can contribute to or influence directly.
The question is overly specific, leaving little room for exploration or creative thinking.	Broaden the scope to address the underlying challenge rather than focusing on a single solution.
The question feels theoretical or reflective rather than actionable.	Focus on a forward-looking challenge that invites action and innovation.
The question includes jargon, technical terms or multiple layers, making it hard for participants to engage.	Simplify the language and focus on the essence of the problem and how it relates to the shared purpose of the session.
The question tries to address multiple issues simultaneously, causing confusion.	Break the question into multiple, more focused questions or prioritise the primary goal.
The question places blame or makes participants defensive.	Reframe to emphasise opportunities for improvement and collaboration.

Tool 5 Step by step process

3

Exploring past facts and experiences related to the framing question

30-45 minutes

Firstly, introduce the session. Tell the participants what you are doing and the purpose of the session.

If you are drafting the framing question together, do this now. If you have a draft framing questions ready, ensure the participants are happy with and understand the framing question. The facilitator then places the framing questions at the top of the table.

First, the facilitator focuses the discussion on the bottom left-hand corner of the emergent learning table by asking:

→ **What evidence do we have about the framing question? What stories, research, lived experiences, data or statistics do we know?**

Ask participants to add their points to the bottom left-hand quadrant of the emergent learning table, on physical post-its or on the virtual whiteboard. It's okay if it gets messy! There is no strict limit on the number of ideas added - use the time you have available.

If you are working in a large group, you may want to assign people to smaller break out rooms and then come back together to share highlights with the group.

→ **Managing time and inputs during the session:** Especially with a large group, it may be difficult to discuss everyone's ideas and inputs and to address conflicting ideas.

- If you're able to, we recommend running a 2.5 hour workshop with 30 minutes per quadrant. However, you may want to adjust this depending on the size of your team, means of facilitation and time constraints. This is the facilitators discretion and should be part of the planning process. Allocate at least 15 minutes to introducing the session and then equal time allocations for each quadrant.
- Use sticky notes or a virtual whiteboard so that everyone can participate and add their ideas. You may not be able to discuss all of them, but this way they are documented and the facilitator can take these into account when synthesising the findings after the workshop.
- Use a visible timer, either a clock or phone timer if in person, or if online, make use of Miro's timer function or share your screen with a timer window on Zoom or call platform. This way everyone knows how much longer is left and you can help wrap up discussion and move on to the next quadrant.

For example:

1. Youth unemployment in Region X is three times higher than the national rate.
2. There is mistrust in the health system.
3. There is a lack of local organisations participating in / influencing national decision making.
4. Children prefer not to use the current WASH facilities due to location and poor lighting.

During the session, the fa
everyone is aware of the

4

Exploring insights and learnings

30 minutes

Once the main evidence and experiences are recorded about the framing question. Move to the next quadrant. Asking:

→ **What have we learnt from our evidence and experiences?**

What insights are there? What differences of opinion or what is surprising to the group?

Ask participants to add their points to the top left-hand quadrant of the emergent learning table. Encourage participants to reflect on the successes and challenges they have experienced. Remind participants that this should reflect on past insights - the idea generation will come at the next stage. If participants start to add new ideas, the facilitator can ask why this new idea or action is needed - what is then described will give an indication of the problem, need and learning.

For example:

1. Young people are eager to connect with each other and the world around them.
2. Importance of indigenous knowledge and culture and knowledge transfer from elders.
3. Larger organisations hold power in advocacy and decision making.
4. Children are enthusiastic to problem solve.

5

Future thinking – possible actions

30 minutes

Once the group has finished reflecting on the past, the group moves into action-orientated future thinking. Here, we are creating 'hypotheses', what new ideas or actions could we take based on this learning. Asking:

→ **What possible actions could we take? What new ideas or actions could we take, based on this learning and aligned with the framing question?**

Ask participants to add their points to the top right-hand quadrant of the emergent learning table.

Getting stuck? It's normal to feel uncertain during this process. Remind participants that this is an opportunity to explore and get creative, rather than a problem that needs an immediate fix. One of the advantages of going through an emergent learning table as a group, rather than as an individual, is that it often takes hearing others' ideas to build on them and spark new ideas. Here's some tips:

- As the facilitator, have a go at preparing some of your own ideas in advance to use as inspiration.
- Encourage participants to focus on a specific post-its they added in the previous quadrants, or one that resonated with them, rather than trying to fix 'everything'.
- Allow time for silent thinking and note taking without feeling pressured to fill the silence. This allows people to think and read others' ideas as they add them.
- 'I/We don't know' is a valid response. It may indicate a gap in your data or knowledge that needs to be filled before you can generate solutions – your 'action' here might be to do some more research, or speak to people who might have the answers.

For example:

1. Engage young people as social media ambassadors.
2. Bring elders and young people together to design healthcare solutions.
3. Connect larger organisations with representative organisation to share their data and advocacy resources.
4. Use creative techniques to involve children in designing new WASH facilities.

Tool 5 Step by step process

6

Explore the opportunities

30 minutes

Based on the new ideas and possible actions, explore what opportunities exist to take those actions. Asking:

→ **What are the opportunities to take those actions? What events, programmes, strategic reviews, funding opportunities, can we use to take actions?**

Ask participants to add their points to the bottom right-hand quadrant of the emergent learning table.

An optional extra step at this stage could be to draw arrows from the actions in quadrant three (possible ideas) to the opportunities and next steps. This helps identify connections and mark which actions are possible within the current opportunities, capacities and timelines available and which might need to be revisited in the future. Multiple 'ideas' may link to one 'opportunity' and vice versa. (Note: Arrows might get messy during the session, but you can map this out more clearly in the summary afterwards.)

Finally, ensure the learning tables are captured

For example:

1. Digital and social media skills training.
2. Reciprocal learning event.
3. Set up resource sharing sessions as part of monthly Community of Practice sessions.
4. New round of children-centred consultation and design workshops.

7

Consolidate and feedback

15 minutes in session, 30 minutes after.

End the session by reflecting on the overall process and asking participants what they learned. Encourage them to share any new questions or ideas they'll carry forward. You may want to spend some time in the session assigning responsibilities for the actions and opportunities you have brainstormed in order to take these forward and establish ownership.

→ **After the session, document the process and the decisions made:** Share a summary of the session, including key insights, emerging patterns and proposed actions/decisions. Provide participants with access to the table and any materials or tools used during the session. For example, if you ran the session in person, you could take photographs of each quadrant and share these via email.

→ **Support continuous learning:** Encourage ongoing reflection and adaptation after the session. Create opportunities for participants to check back in, share updates and continue to refine their insights.

Case study: icddr,b

Background to the innovation

icddr,b is a health research organisation based in Bangladesh. With funding from the Humanitarian Innovation Fund, icddr,b is taking a User-Centred Community Engagement (UCCE) approach to designing child-friendly WASH facilities in refugee camp settings. The approach centres on inclusive, participatory design that enables children to identify their problems and needs and co-create solutions.

Testing the tool

In December 2024, icddr,b tested the Emergent Learning Table as an internal team. A remote 90-minute session was facilitated with three core team members. As the session was remote, the team used a Miro board to document their ideas and facilitate collaboration (see the completed tool below).

The team discussed the current stage of the project and its future ambition and developed the framing question for the session: What will it take to expand child-friendly WASH interventions such that they reach new and different communities? The team then discussed each of the four quadrants of the Emergent Learning Table, spending 5-10 minutes of silent working time to reflect on the question and adding to the post-it notes, followed by 5-10 minutes of shared discussion, guided by the facilitator.

What went well?

The team had recently completed implementation and had generated new evidence and insights. The timing of the session enabled the team to draw and reflect on this learning.

The team particularly enjoyed the third quadrant (What possible actions could we take?), which encouraged creative thinking about next steps and felt it was valuable to have this documented in one place to refer back to.

The small group size enabled productive discussion and reflection within the 90-minutes. A larger group would need more time to allow the same type of interaction.

Miro was a useful tool for remote engagement and created a shared, visual record of the session. The facilitator spent a few minutes at the start demonstrating how to add post-its.

Case study: icddr,b

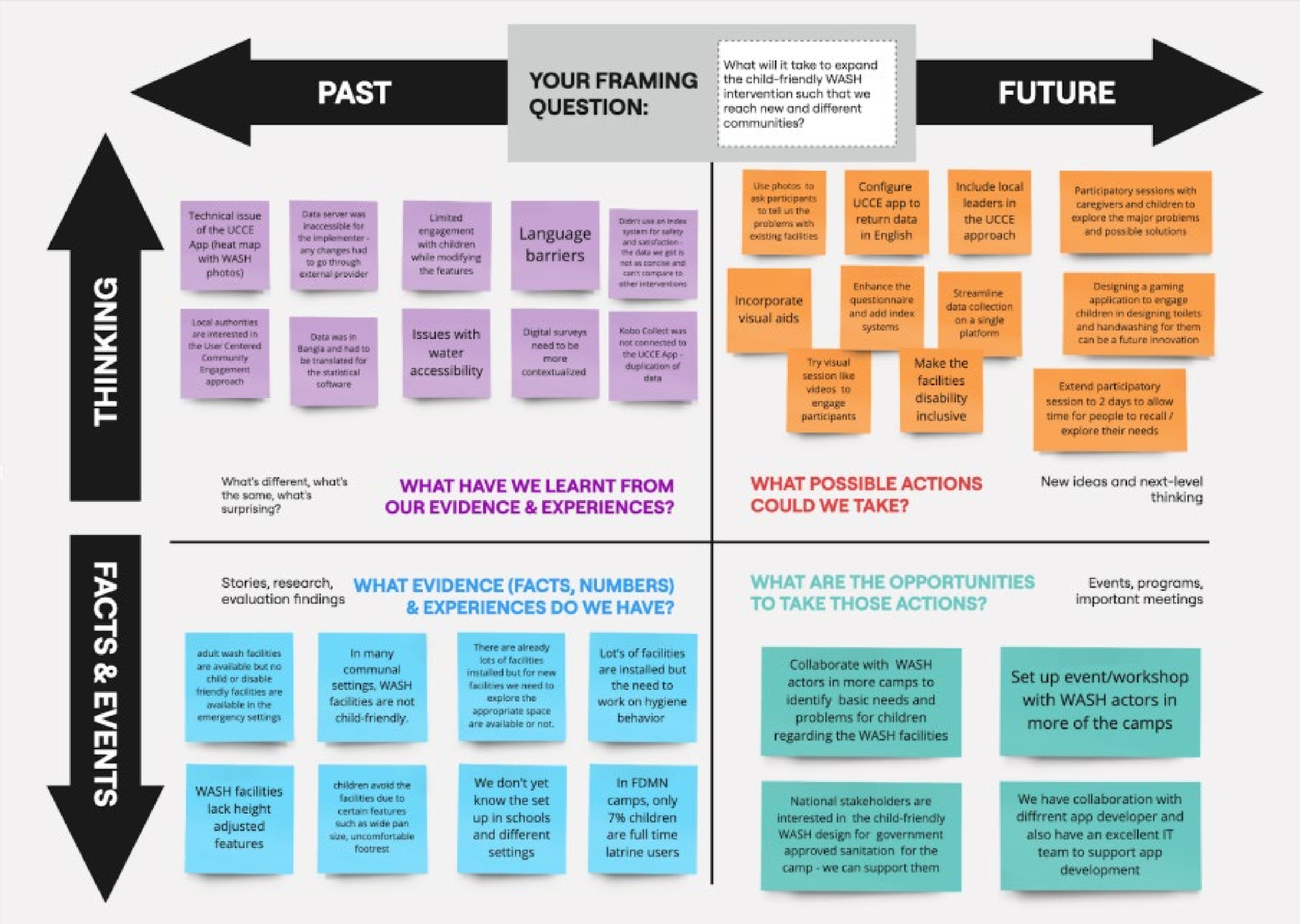
What did we learn?

In the second quadrant the team often added new ideas/ solutions rather than focusing on past learning. To address this, the facilitator asked why this solution was needed and added this to the post-it. The ideas added were valuable, but were moved to the third quadrant (possible actions). For example, one person wrote "We should use an index system for data collection". Discussion indicated that the underlying issue was an inability to compare the intervention to others, which commonly use standard indices. This clarification allowed the idea to be reframed as a challenge in the second quadrant and a potential solution in the third.

Time for the fourth quadrant was limited. A two-hour session would have allowed more time for this, but this could also be something the team revisits together in another meeting, or independently once they have had time to read and reflect on the third quadrant.

"It was a great session, especially the possible actions segment. Now I have sight of everything written here – we have a great scope for improvement and scale-up. The board is clear and everything is easily understandable. We will definitely use this again in our other brainstorming sessions."

"This type of session might be very helpful for the community participants to identify their real problems and explore possible solutions. It was a great session, thank you for bringing us this idea."



This is screenshot of icddr,b's completed Emergent Learning Table, tested in December 2024 during a remote 90-minute Miro session with the core team. The exercise helped the team reflect on evidence and experiences from implementing child-friendly WASH facilities in refugee camps, explore possible future actions, and identify opportunities for scale-up. The framing question was: "What will it take to expand the child-friendly WASH intervention such that we reach new and different communities?"

Case study: Syria Bright Futures

Background to the innovation

Syria Bright Future (SBF) is a non-profit humanitarian organisation working to improve psychological and social well-being in Syria. SBF implemented Roots of Resilience: Environmental Therapy for Psychosocial Wellbeing, a project that addresses the interconnected challenges of environmental degradation, psychological distress and socio-political struggles in Northwest Syria.

Recognising that environmental decay not only exacerbates physical health issues but also significantly impacts psychological well-being, the project aimed to leverage the healing potential of nature to strengthen individual resilience and enhance community well-being, particularly for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees. By integrating environmental therapy into psychosocial support, the initiative sought to create sustainable coping mechanisms for displaced populations.

Testing the tool

In December 2024, members of the team came together to participate in an Emergent Learning session. The session was 90 minutes long and was held online. It included a facilitator and three team members. At the start of the session the team collaboratively developed a 'framing question' for the discussion: What has been the impact of the project on the targeted communities, and how effectively has it been implemented? The facilitator then walked through the four emergent learning questions, inviting discussion and making notes.

What went well?

- The facilitator found the instructions and guidance in the tool clear and easy to follow, particularly the visual aids, which illustrated each step.
- Participants were able to answer all the questions and generate insightful and valuable responses.
- The team identified and discussed ideas for new projects, together with actionable ways to improve the current initiative.
- The team felt it was a useful tool for monitoring and evaluation. They plan to use it again in the future and apply it to other projects to enable reflection, capture learning and generate new ideas.

Case study: Syria Bright Futures

Discussion notes

Framing question: What has been the impact of the project on the targeted communities, and how effectively has it been implemented?

→ Segment 1: What evidence (facts, numbers) and experiences do we have?

Clear alignment with the agricultural cycle is critical for success.

- Psychological benefits and active community engagement, including people with disabilities, were strong points.
- The challenge with children unintentionally harming trees indicates a need for tailored environmental education.
- A greater emphasis on environmental awareness for children is essential.

→ Segment 2: What have we learnt from our evidence and experiences?

- Early involvement of community leaders (e.g., mukhtar) is crucial for gaining local support.
- Transparency about permissions can prevent misunderstandings within the community.
- Online awareness efforts need to be complemented by direct engagement with involved communities.

→ Segment 3: What possible actions could we take?

- Technology provides innovative solutions for environmental challenges, such as tree protection and awareness.
- Combining tech solutions with local focal points can enhance project sustainability in remote areas.

→ Segment 4: What are the opportunities to take those actions?

- Modern techniques must be paired with resource investments for local communities.

Physical awareness sessions during activities like tree planting create a stronger link between environmental and psychological benefits.

What did we learn?

- Encouraging participants to provide more detail was challenging at times and required additional prompts or examples to guide deeper reflection. Some answers were also repeated, particularly between questions 2 and 3, as well as 3 and 4. In such cases, the facilitator provided an explanatory example to help participants differentiate between the questions.
- Taking notes manually during the session was challenging for the facilitator, as it required multitasking and sometimes led to missed or incomplete details. In the future, it would be helpful to record the session and/or have a note-taker.

Case study: Syria Bright Futures

What did we learn?

- Encouraging participants to provide more detail was challenging at times and required additional prompts or examples to guide deeper reflection. Some answers were also repeated, particularly between questions 2 and 3, as well as 3 and 4. In such cases, the facilitator provided an explanatory example to help participants differentiate between the questions.
- Taking notes manually during the session was challenging for the facilitator, as it required multitasking and sometimes led to missed or incomplete details. In the future, it would be helpful to record the session and/or have a note-taker.

“The tool could be used again—not only for innovation but also as an organizational approach towards monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for projects that we aim to replicate in different areas and improve to reach a wider audience.”

“The tool's descriptions were comprehensive, and the instructions provided for the facilitator were clear and easy to follow, ensuring smooth implementation.”

Evidence-based decision-making
Useful tools to help innovators

4. Tips for facilitation

4. Tips for facilitation

Learning and decision-making are collaborative processes. Many of the tools in this guide are designed to bring together groups of people, from innovation teams and users to partners and affected communities. Effective facilitation is essential to creating a safe and engaging environment where these methods can be most impactful.

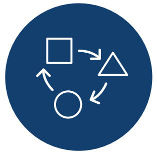
In this section, you'll find top tips and best practices for facilitation, along with a practical checklist to guide you through each step of the facilitation process. These top tips are framed around five interconnected principles:

Create and inclusive environment

Clearly define your purpose and outcomes

Guide, don't dominate

Use clear and effective communcation



Adapt and stay flexible

4. Tips for facilitation

Create an inclusive environment

- **Set ground rules together**, such as respectful, active listening, not interrupting each other, openness to multiple perspectives and encouraging inquiry over debate.
- **Create a welcoming and safe environment** where all participants feel respected and valued. Try to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their ideas (this might be having options for group discussions and individual inputs). Highlight that the goal is to have multiple perspectives to enrich understanding.
- **Ensure accessibility** so everyone can contribute equally (language, disability, digital connectivity). Provide alternative ways to engage if needed (eg, using chat instead of a whiteboard).
- **Value all expertise equally.** Acknowledge that people may interpret the same experiences differently and derive different lessons.
- **Ensure participation.** Facilitate group and plenary sessions so that participants from different backgrounds and experiences have opportunities to share their perspectives. Be mindful of power dynamics and intervene if certain voices dominate the conversation. Use facilitation techniques such as "go-rounds" to ensure everyone has a chance to speak. (See the additional resources- facilitation guides)
- **Use breakout groups.** Break larger groups into smaller discussion teams to allow for more focused conversations. Smaller groups encourage participation and can help shy participants speak up. This can be done for both online and face to face sessions.

Clearly define purpose and outcomes

- **Clearly state the purpose of the session** and what you want the participants to achieve. This helps everyone stay focused and understand their role.
- **Focus on common goals.** Remind participants of the workshop's shared objectives. Reframing the discussion around common goals can help participants see each other's interpretations as valuable rather than opposing.
- **Be action-oriented:** Close the session with actionable takeaways. Summarise insights and agree on next steps to ensure concrete outcomes.
- **Capture key insights.** Have a notetaker or use digital tools to capture important points, emerging patterns and key insights. These notes will be valuable for post-session reflection and action planning.

4. Tips for facilitation

Guide, don't dominate

- **Facilitate, don't dominate.** Guide the conversation while avoiding sharing too many of your own opinions. Encourage participants to lead discussions.
- **Use structured discussion techniques** such as round-robin sharing (give each participant equal time to share their interpretation without interruptions), pros and cons exercise (ask participants to identify strengths and limitations of each interpretation, promoting a balanced view of different perspectives), "Yes, and" approach (encourage participants to build on each other's ideas, which can help integrate conflicting interpretations constructively). (See the useful resources - facilitation guides for more examples.
- **Use the group's real-life experiences** and past actions as the foundation for learning. Encourage participants to share what they've tried, what worked and what didn't. This process allows the group to identify patterns and assumptions.
- **Frame conflicts as opportunities for learning rather than problems to be solved.** Diverse groups often have conflicting viewpoints, which can be a powerful driver of learning if managed well. Encourage inquiry and reflection on underlying assumptions rather than escalating debate.
- **Seek patterns and connections.** Ask participants to identify areas of overlap or patterns across interpretations. This can reveal shared insights or complementary aspects that bridge different perspectives.

Use clear and effective communication

- **Use simple and clear instructions.** Provide clear, step-by-step instructions for activities or discussions. This helps avoid confusion and keeps the session on track. Break complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps so participants can easily follow.
- **Pose open-ended questions** or a prompt that encourages reflection or exploration. These should stimulate curiosity, invite multiple viewpoints and allow the group to explore uncertainties and unknowns. Questions like "What patterns do you notice?" or "How does this information change your perspective?" encourage deeper thinking and richer conversations.
- **Leverage visuals and summaries.** Visual aids (charts, diagrams, whiteboards) help participants grasp complex ideas quickly. Summarise key points frequently to keep everyone aligned.
- **Encourage data transparency.** Clarify the source, context and limitations of the data. Sometimes conflicts arise from differing assumptions or understanding of the evidence itself, so examining the data together can help clarify ambiguities.
- **Acknowledge all perspectives.** Start by validating each participant's interpretation. Acknowledging all viewpoints encourages open discussion and reduces defensiveness. If the group remains divided, suggest prioritising the most critical assumptions to test further. This allows participants to focus on resolving high-stakes differences without needing full agreement on every point.
- **Document conflicting views**. If consensus is not possible, record the differing interpretations and their reasoning. This preserves valuable insights and may serve as a reference for future decision-making.

4. Tips for facilitation

Adapt and stay flexible

- **Adapt to the flow.** Stay flexible and adapt if the discussion takes unexpected but valuable turns. Adjust your facilitation approach as needed.
- **Consider cultural differences** in communication styles and adjust your techniques accordingly to meet diverse group needs.
- **Ensure time management** by allocating time for all parts of the session. Be prepared to "park" issues if needed to stay on track.
- **Be prepared to adapt your plan** based on what arises during the conversation. Encourage participants to follow interesting threads of inquiry, even if unplanned.

Facilitator's checklist

3-4 weeks before the session:

- ☐ Define workshop purpose and goals and ensure you consult with others for their inputs.
- ☐ Decide who will facilitate the session - this person (or persons) will run the session and needs to prepare in advance.
- ☐ Select your participants.
- ☐ Set date and time.
- ☐ Book a venue or set up a virtual meeting link.
- ☐ Invite your participants and share an overview of the workshop which clearly states the purpose of the workshop and what you hope to achieve through it.
- ☐ Consider the accessibility and language needs of your participants (book translators or ensure AI translation is available if online).

If online:

- ☐ Consider and select the online platform you want to use - there are a number of options: Miroboard, Zoom whiteboard, Mural.
- ☐ Test online tools before sharing with your participants.
- ☐ Have a back-up if the facilitators' Wifi fails (a co-facilitator who can take over).

4. Tips for facilitation

One week before the session:

Confirm who is attending.

- ☐ Send out the agenda and ask if anyone wants to add to it. (Send out any video instructions on how to use the online whiteboard if needed, for example Miroboard have a 3 minute introductory video).
- ☐ Prepare and send relevant pre-reading (such as templates, data or evidence).
- ☐ Prepare materials (posters, post-its and pens). If online, prepare the virtual workspace (e.g. Google Sheets, Miro or Mural) and test it (ensure editing rights, ensure facilitators know how to use it).
- ☐ Assign roles: ensure you have an allocated notetakers to capture the rich discussion that will take place. (For larger groups or online you may have to assign additional roles like timekeepers, note-takers or tech support).
- ☐ Prepare ground rules.

During the session:

- ☐ Explain the purpose of the workshop and what's required.
- ☐ Talk through the ground rules and invite participants to add to or edit these.
- ☐ Give clear instructions on how to participate (if online, how to raise your hand, unmute, write in comments, etc).
- ☐ If online, ensure everyone knows how to use online platforms at the start of the sessionUse the step by step processes to facilitate the session.
- ☐ End the session by summarise the main findings and learning and next steps.

After the session:

- ☐ If in person, take photos of physical resources (such as post it notes).
- ☐ Create a workshop summary, including next steps and actions.
- ☐ Share the completed tools and workshop summary with participants, as well as relevant team members or stakeholders. If it is to be published, ensure you have consent and credit appropriately.

5. Useful resources

5. Useful resources

The scoping research for this toolkit revealed a wide array of existing tools and guidance documents already published on evidence generation and evidence-based decision-making for humanitarian innovation. However, many are lengthy and technical documents and it can be difficult to find the right tools and know where to begin.

The section below provides a short library of resources to supplement and complement the five tools included in this guide. Further resources on a variety of data collection methods, analysis techniques and evaluation approaches can also be found in the Better Evaluation Tools and Resources library.

5. Useful resources

Community feedback mechanisms

Direct input and reflections from crisis-affected communities helps ensure innovations are aligned with real needs, preferences and the local context. It is also critical to providing Accountability to Affected Populations, part of the Core Humanitarian Standards. Affected communities are the people ultimately affected by humanitarian programmes and initiatives and have a right to "be in the driving seat of the decisions that affect their lives"[3]. Below are some guides on how to set up community feedback mechanisms and closing the feedback loop.

- IFRC Feedback Kit, IFRC | This comprehensive resource provides five modules to guide teams through setting up community feedback mechanisms, including collecting feedback, analysis, returning findings and acting on feedback.
- How to Establish and Manage a Systematic Community Feedback Mechanism, IFRC | A step by step guide to establishing and managing community feedback using the Ground Truth Solutions' Constituent Voice™ methodology. It focuses on migration programmes but can be adapted and used for other programmes and contexts.
- Digital Community Feedback Mechanisms for Faster and Better Response and Learning: A Learning Brief, ALNAP | This paper outlines the lessons learned by GOAL in their efforts to digitise their community feedback processes, utilising commonly used mobile apps for data collection and storage.
- Accountability, feedback & complaints mechanisms in humanitarian responses to migration, Start Network | This guidance document provides an overview of accountability to affected people and where feedback and complaints mechanisms fit. It is also available in French and Spanish.
- Mitigating Ethical Risks, Airbel Impact Lab | This document provides guidance on ethical data collection in humanitarian contexts, ensuring the minimisation and mitigation of risks for those involved.

3 To note, this principle will be less relevant for problem recognition research.

5. Useful resources

Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data can help provide rich, contextual insights into the experiences, needs and challenges of affected communities and actors working in the humanitarian system. Unlike quantitative data, which offers broad trends and numerical metrics, qualitative data captures the nuances and emotions that shape how people experience crises and respond to new interventions. It can also help triangulate and bring to life quantitative data or survey data by delving into the 'why' behind these numbers. Typical methods include interviews and focus groups, but other creative methods such as observations, transect walks, community maps and photovoice, can help engage communities and explore their experiences.

- Participatory Research Toolkit for Social Norms Measurement, UNICEF | A 'how to' toolkit of different qualitative research and evaluation methods.
- Human-Centred Design Field Guide, IDEO | A toolkit on human-centred design; an approach focused on understanding people's needs and co-creating solutions. The document provides tools for different stages of innovation, including guidance on secondary research (page 37), interviews (39-43), co-creation sessions (109) and community feedback (126). The tools are light touch but provide tips and inspiration and an overall approach to applying human-centred design principles.
- An Introduction to Interviewing, UNICEF
- Conducting an In-depth Interview, University of Florida
- Focus Group Fundamental (Webinar) | Focus group discussions bring stakeholders together to have a group conversation and share their opinions, experiences and ideas on a specific topic, allowing for shared discussion and different perspectives. This one-hour video walks through the fundamental aspects of conducting an effective focus group discussion.
- Conducting Focus Groups, Oxfam | This three page guide offers a brief overview of conducting focus groups, including how to prepare, techniques and facilitation tips.
- Assessment Toolkit, MSF (Slide 20-25) | This is a lengthy guide that explores broad approaches to assessing humanitarian crises and health. Section 3.3 on data collection methods provides an introduction to several methods, including several different participatory approaches.
- Photovoice Guidance, Save the Children | Photovoice is a participatory research method that enables individuals to directly document their experiences and perspectives through photography, often followed by discussions or storytelling. This guidance document walks through why and how to implement a photovoice project, through the lens of including children in data collection. The same guidance can be useful and relevant for including adults and young people and other groups, through photovoice.

5. Useful resources

Storytelling

Storytelling can be a powerful data collection and communication tool for humanitarian innovation. Storytelling centres people affected by crises and real-life challenges and needs, an essential component of designing effective solutions. It helps translate complex lived experiences into relatable narratives, making it easier for audiences to understand the purpose, value and impact of your innovation. It also creates space for creativity - storytelling can take different forms, including narrative stories, photos and art.

- Innovation Storytelling, UN Innovation Network | This tool provides guidance on using an innovation storytelling tool to tell the story about your innovation to stakeholders in a compelling way. The steps involve identifying your target audiences, developing a theme for the story and choosing the right methods, with an example from UNICEF.
- Dignified Storytelling Handbook, Dubai Cares | This longer resource explores principles of dignified and ethical storytelling and key aspects to consider as you are recording, re-telling and sharing the stories of people affected by crisis.

Implementation/learning logs

Tracking, documenting and reflecting on implementation can get lost in day-to-day activities and information about this is often kept in people's heads. Journals or logs are record-keeping tools that can help document real-time information about activities, outputs, results and learning.

- Reflective Diaries, AdvanceHE
- Tips: Setting up implementation 'logs' or 'diaries' for implementing team members can be a useful way to build a regular habit around recording activities and reflecting on progress. Data can be collected using a simple Google Form, a physical journal, or even WhatsApp, with a member of the team responsible for sending reminders, collating and storing the information on a regular basis. For example:
  - On a daily basis during specific activities, such as convening events or training exercises. Questions could include 'Number of people trained', 'What went well?' and 'What challenges did you have and how could this be solved next time?'.
  - On a weekly basis, asking more generally 'What activities were implemented this week?', 'What went well?', 'What challenges did you have?' or 'Did anything new or surprising come up this week?'

5. Useful resources

Offline and remote data collection

Digital tools have vastly improved the ease and efficiency of data collection, but the internet is often a barrier to using these. Offline and remote tools can help teams gather critical information on the ground or in remote settings without the need for continuous connection and sophisticated tools.

- Basics of Kobo Toolbox | KoboToolbox allows users to collect data offline and then sync it once a connection is available. It is a simple survey tool that can be downloaded from the Playstore and accessed remotely on mobile devices.
- SurveyCTO | Mobile data collection platform for offline contexts (requires a paid subscription).
- ActivityInfo | Information management software for data collection and reporting (requires a paid subscription).
- Viamo Digital Surveys | Viamo has set up a service to engage audiences directly on their mobile phone to provide real-time feedback. They have partnered with NGOs and humanitarian organisations to support data collection.

Evaluation approaches

When commissioning an evaluation, it is useful to consider methodologies that align with the adaptive and often unpredictable nature of this field. Traditional evaluation approaches, which often focus on static, predefined objectives and outcomes and a well-understood Theory of Change, may not fully capture the rapid, iterative changes and emergent learning that characterise innovation activities. The following approaches use more adaptive and responsive methodologies that are suitable for dynamic and complex contexts and embrace continuous improvement.

- Developmental Evaluation, Intrac | Developmental evaluation is characterised by ongoing, long-term relationships between evaluators and project or programme staff, where learning and feedback is provided on an ongoing basis. It is particularly appropriate for projects or programmes working in complex or uncertain environments and is designed to support learning and management decision-making. This two-page guide explores when to use this approach, how it works and some of the challenges.
- Rapid or Real-time Evaluation, Rapid Research Evaluation and Appraisal Lab | Real-time evaluation is designed to provide immediate feedback to those planning or implementing a project or programme, so that they can make improvements. This feedback is usually provided during the evaluation field work, rather than afterwards. This website provides tools and guidance to conduct real-time evaluations.
- Introduction to Outcome Harvesting, Plan International | This video is the first in a three-part series on Outcome Harvesting, a participatory evaluation approach that focuses on identifying and analysing what changes have come about in a particular context. Instead of measuring progress against specific, predefined objectives, this approach works backwards to understand what happened, how, why and who was involved. This can be useful in complex or unpredictable contexts where cause and effect is not well known. This module is followed by Part 2 and Part 3.

5. Useful resources

Facilitation guides

There are many useful resources available for learning more about good facilitation techniques. Here are a few examples:

- The Barefood Guide to learning practices in organisations and social change | Provides an excellent overview of design and facilitation principles and facilitation techniques and exercises.
- Remote Humanitarian Facilitation: Guidance Note, Humanitarian Advisory Group | Provides useful guidance on how to adapt and think about remote (online) facilitation in humanitarian contexts.
- Facilitation: The essentials, Seeds for Change | This 4-minute video includes essential tips on facilitation basics. Seeds for Change also have a facilitation guide full of tools to choose from.

Evidence-based decision-making
Useful tools to help innovators

Annexes

Annex 1. Toolkit scoping findings

An initial toolkit scoping was conducted to collate current best practices in evidence-based decision-making in innovation practice and the humanitarian sector and to identify grantees' challenges and needs related to evidence generation and use. The scoping used the following approaches:

- Five consultation interviews with Elrha staff.
- Desk review of Elrha and HIF documents, such as the Humanitarian Innovation Guide and a sample of grantee reports.
- Desk review of 20 papers, toolkits and guidance documents on evaluation and evidence-based decision-making in humanitarian innovation.
- Survey of 14 current HIF grantees.

The scoping identified the following findings, which informed the subsequent development of the toolkit:

Findings	What does this mean for the toolkit?
There is already a significant amount of information and guidance that is available on data collection and decision making. However, innovators often don't know where to look or where to start and many tools are long and complex and require technical research skills.	– This toolkit should adapt and make use of existing tools. – The toolkit should be clear and concise and should be usable for busy people working in difficult contexts. – The toolkit should focus on providing simple how to guides, rather than general background information.
Humanitarian innovation is a process of iterative learning within a complex, evolving and unpredictable environment.	– Use systems thinking approaches and methods suitable to contexts where cause and effect is not well understood. – Focus on documenting learning, including emergent learning and capturing tacit knowledge. – Qualitative approaches are critical to understanding complexities and nuances of a context, differences in outcomes and unintended or negative consequences.
Evidence is needed for future funding, but stakeholders have varied requirements.	– Incorporate stakeholder mapping to help innovators understand the ecosystem, relationships and evidence needs of different stakeholders. – Personal stories and insights bring data to life - this is important not just for internal learning but also in sharing evidence with decision makers
There is a lack of feedback loops and accountability to affected populations.	– Incorporate participatory approaches and tools that support innovators to meaningfully engage communities in data analysis and decision making.

Annex 2. Using the tools at each innovation stage

Use the visual below to match which stage you are at in your innovation journey with how each tool can be used.

INNOVATION STAGE	TOOL 1: MAPPING YOUR EVIDENCE NEEDS	TOOL 2: ASSESSING CONFIDENCE IN YOUR EVIDENCE	TOOL 3: COLLECTIVE SENSEMAKING	TOOL 4: BEFORE AND AFTER ACTION REVIEWS	TOOL 5: EMERGENT LEARNING TABLE
PROBLEM RECOGNITION AND SEARCH	Use this tool to identify stakeholders' working on this problem, and identify their evidence needs at the outset	Early in the exploration phase, use this tool to assess the quality and gaps in existing evidence about the problem.	Use this tool to build a better understanding of the problem and existing data together with relevant stakeholders and affected communities.	Use these tools before and after research activities, such as a desk review or data collection exercise.	Use this at the end of this phase to document what you have learned about the problem in your context and identify next steps.
INVENTION OR ADAPTATION	Revisit your map as you explore potential solutions, updating and refining it based on new or changing stakeholders.	Check the reliability of the evidence you have available, to help support adjustments as you develop or adapt your solution.	Bring your data and ideas about your potential solution to your stakeholders and community to find out what might work for them.	Use these tools before and after developing or adapting your solution to document challenges and adjustments.	Reflect on what you're learning as you develop your innovation and identify new pieces of evidence.
PILOT AND TESTING	Review your mapping to help inform what kinds of data to collect and prioritise when testing.	Update after each testing phase to add new evidence, to support adjustments and assess the quality of the case to expand your innovation.	Make sense of the data collected during testing with your stakeholders and community to identify the right adaptations and create buy-in.	Collectively define and document the goals of your testing phase, and reflect on what happened, what want well and what you learned.	Reflect on what you're learning as you test your innovation and identify new pieces of evidence to inform adaptations and opportunities.
SCALING	Add to the mapping as you expand, identifying new stakeholders and assessing their needs.	As you increase your evidence base about your innovation, continue to add new reports or analyses to your map.	As your expand into new contexts, continue to make sense of what you're learning with new communities and stakeholders to ensure contextual relevance.	Define your goals, intentions and learning objectives as you expand into new contexts and learn what it takes to drive adoption and scale.	Document what you're learning about new contexts and the scaling process, and identify new opportunities.

We are Elrha.

A global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world.

Through our globally recognised programmes, we have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response.

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