
THE RESEARCH QUALITY PLUS (RQ+) ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

Original Version from June 2014

Updated December 2017

The RQ+ instrument is the result of an intellectual collaboration between IDRC's internal evaluation team and evaluators Zenda Ofir and Thomas Schwandt, based on extensive input from IDRC staff and grantees.

INSTRUMENT PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

This document presents a framework and practical guidelines for assessing the quality of research for development. Referred to as the “RQ+”¹ assessment instrument, it serves as a tool to guide the work of external evaluators hired by IDRC.

“RQ+” is based on the premise that a credible, balanced and comprehensive assessment of the quality of research for development requires the consideration of elements beyond the research outputs only, or the use of conventional metrics. These additional elements include important aspects of the research process related to design, execution and the sharing of findings. For this reason, RQ+ indicates an approach that straddles output and research project assessment.

RQ+ was used first in a set of IDRC’s external program evaluations in 2015. Since then, it has been adapted for formative evaluation, monitoring, and other evaluation processes within IDRC and in other organizations. This document lays out the steps for using RQ+ in future summative evaluations. It is a revision from an original guidance document from 2014. This revision clarifies a number of the RQ+ rubrics, while maintaining as much consistency as possible with the 2015 assessments. Our intention is to use RQ+ in a consistent way to allow for further meta-analysis about research quality over time.

The design of RQ+ was influenced by the following considerations about the nature of the research that IDRC funds:²

1. IDRC funds primarily use-inspired research that has unique features:

- Problem-focused and solution-oriented, based on local priorities
- Policy relevant
- Multi-, inter- or trans-disciplinary, sometimes across disparate fields
- Primarily using mixed methods
- Addresses complex and integrative problems, requiring systems-based approaches
- Sensitive to, respectful of, and including local voices, knowledge and contexts in the global South, and
- Displays sensitivity to risk for vulnerable individuals and societies, and fragile institutions, systems and contexts.

2. IDRC provides research for development support that involves:

- Strengthening research capacities of individuals and institutions, often through long-term investments
- Taking risks, for example by supporting entirely new fields of work, engaging with complex regional or global challenges, and supporting work in conflict-ridden, poverty-stricken or institutionally weak environments

¹ RQ+ stands for Research Quality Plus

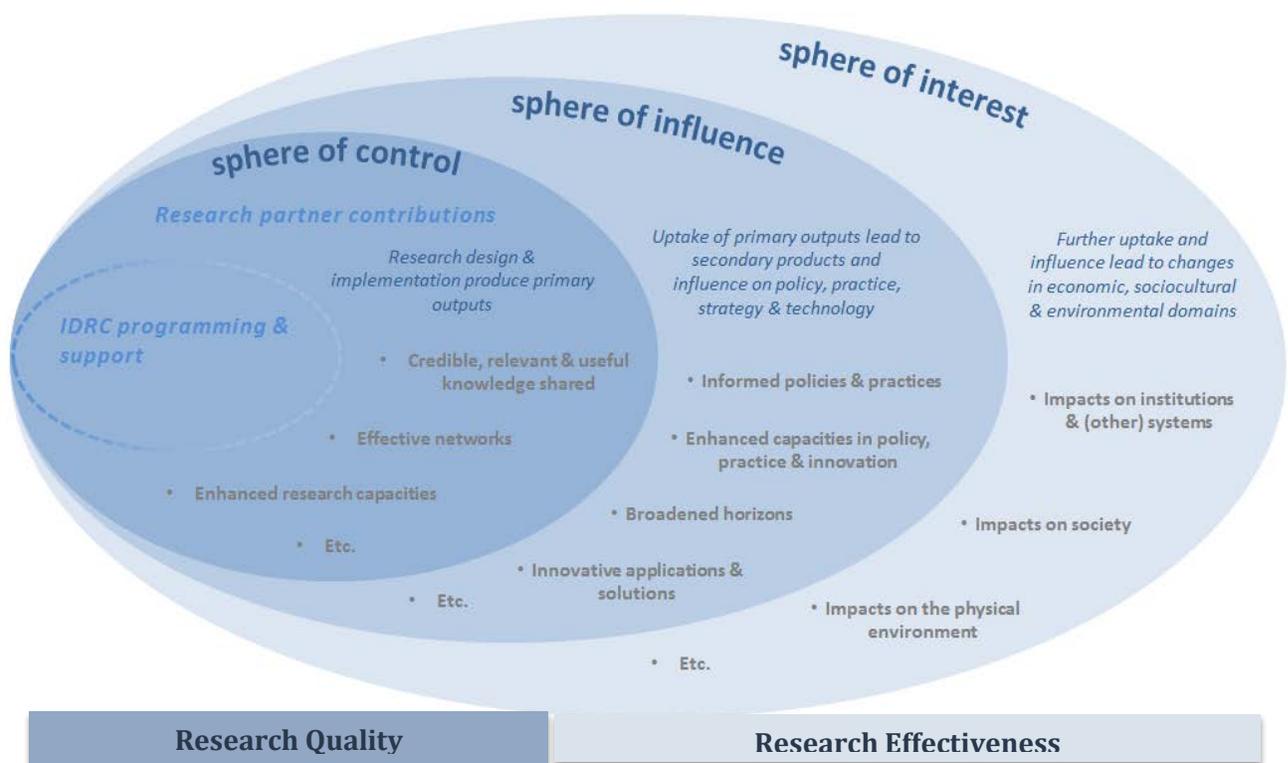
² Studies conducted in the previous phase of IDRC’s “Strategic Evaluation for Research Excellence” (Ofir & Schwandt, [“Understanding Research Excellence at IDRC: Final Report,”](#) December 2012; Singh, et al., [“Excellence in the Context of Use-Inspired Research: Perspectives of the Global South,”](#) 2012) yielded several insights that formed the background for the development of this instrument.

- Encouraging knowledge generation in and for the global South
- Facilitating research networks, research to policy linkages and access to resources
- Building constituencies and networks for change
- Targeting changes in policies, practices, institutional systems and technologies, and
- Partnering as mentor, advisor, peer and/or broker.

3. IDRC believes excellence in research for development includes both technical quality and research effectiveness

IDRC believes that excellent research has technical merit (e.g., methodologically sound, empirically warranted conclusions) and is effective, where the latter refers to use, influence, policy relevance, “relevance for development”, actionable knowledge, or impact. It understands that technical quality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an overall determination of research excellence. Yet IDRC as a research funder also recognizes that the assessment of research quality focused on what is within its sphere of control is critical, in addition to its typical emphasis on evaluating outcomes in the sphere of influence. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. The spheres of control, influence and interest in the assessment of research excellence



As shown in Figure 1, technical quality of research is within the control of IDRC and its research partners. However, the uptake, use, influence and impact of research are not under their control because of the interaction of multiple actors, agencies, and socio-political circumstances.

It is unrealistic to hold IDRC and its research partners accountable for what they cannot control. However, it is not unreasonable to hold them accountable for taking steps to increase the likelihood that the research will be used - in other words, for positioning the research findings for influence and impact.

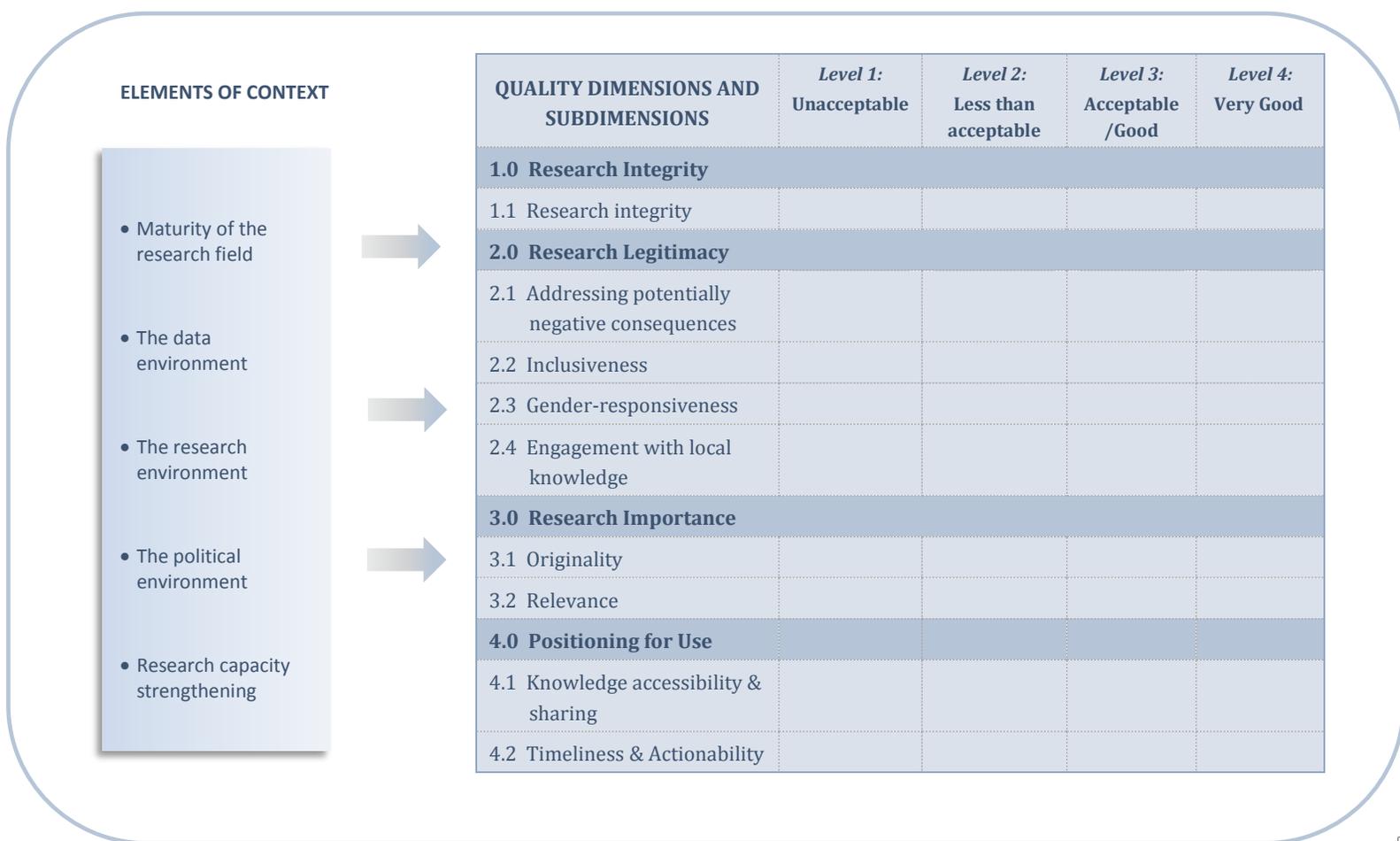
Thus, this instrument is a guide to assess the technical quality of the research IDRC funds in light of the way that research is designed and positioned for uptake and use; hence, the label, “RQ+.”

THE RQ+ ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The RQ+ Assessment Instrument is based on the RQ+ Assessment Framework, which encompasses three components:

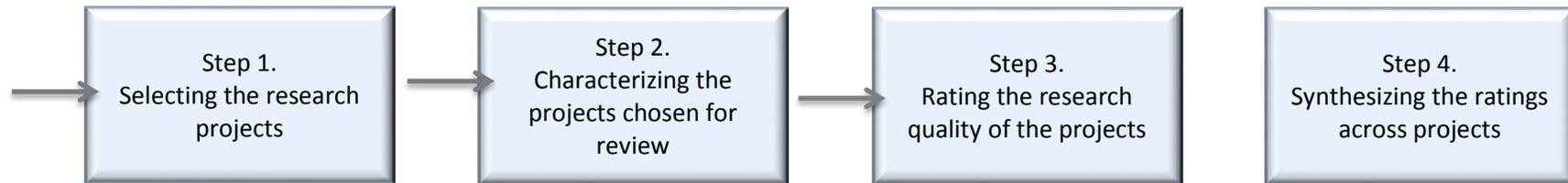
1. Key contextual factors that have significant potential to effect the quality of research for development. These need to be taken into account as part of the assessment.
2. Dimensions and sub-dimensions that characterize research quality, as relevant in the context of IDRC-funded research for development.
3. Ratings on a scale defined by rubrics, to indicate the level at which a project performs per dimension or sub-dimension.

Figure 2. The IDRC RQ+ Assessment Framework for Research for Development



THE RQ+ ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

The RQ+ assessment involves four primary activities:



STEP 1. SELECTING THE RESEARCH PROJECTS IN THE PORTFOLIO

Most IDRC program portfolios consist of too many grants and outputs for a comprehensive assessment of the research performance of all. Moreover, not all grants are research projects; a number of grants in a portfolio fund events, training opportunities, evaluation, and so on. Thus, a sample of projects primarily devoted to conducting and producing research has to be selected for closer examination.

This will require a study of strategic program documents and project grant proposals. A discussion with the program teams will also be helpful to understand how the program was conceptualized and how the program portfolio evolved over time.

Evaluators will be expected to create a sample of projects to review for research quality, and record and defend the rationale for their selection. Here are some guidelines to consider:

- Identify the research projects (RPs) from the program portfolio.
- Generate a list of outputs per project. Select projects that have academic outputs. These will probably detail the methodology of the research more clearly than other types of outputs. However, care should be taken to ensure that this does not create a bias where projects with a pure applied focus are totally excluded, for example, a project aimed solely at policy influence where the outputs might be policy briefs, blogs, etc.

Reviewers can apply the RQ+ assessment to a whole project, but there will be times that it will make more sense to apply RQ+ at a sub-project level. Reviewers will have to use their judgment in conversation with the program team about the portfolio. The following are some examples.

Apply RQ+ to the whole project



Apply RQ+ to individual subprojects

Some projects are straight forward – a single recipient in a single country, a coordinated work plan and influence strategy, with a set of outputs that summarize the research.

Some projects are multi-site, multi-country, multi-recipient, with a coordinated methodology, substantial meta-level analysis, coordinated influence intent and joint publications.

Some projects are networks in which a central coordination hub selects a series of sub-projects; the network hub coordinates joint analysis and synthesis into meta-level research outputs. A book or journal special edition summarizes the research. There is an influence objective at the level of the network, in addition to influence objectives for sub-projects.

Some networks support a set of independent research projects. There is minimal coordination or synthesis or influence intent at the network level. The network's role is to support the subprojects.

Some projects are “umbrellas” – a central fund from which the program issues a call for proposals. The projects funded are called “components” of the overall project. The components are independent projects, with limited connection or synthesis among them. Each individual project has a substantial budget and research outputs relate to the component. There may be workshops or a final event that bring the components together, but joint analysis or influence is not a central objective.

STEP 2. CHARACTERIZING THE RESEARCH PROJECTS

Once a sample of projects has been assembled, reviewers should attempt to characterize the context of each project and prepare a chart as shown in Table 1. Considering the context will ground the assessment and serve two purposes: (1) to define the program portfolio by identifying project clusters by contextual factors. Scatter diagrams, or similar visual aids can be used to show profiles of the program's grants, also enabling comparison across programs; and (2) to understand patterns of performance in different contexts. Consistent characterizations of context allowed useful insights to be developed through the meta-analysis of 2015 RQ+ scores.

There may be cases in which the reviewer may feel he/she has insufficient information to do this characterization. In these cases, the reviewer should consult with the IDRC Program Officer responsible for the project or another member of the Program team.

2.1 Maturity of the research field

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

(1) *Established field*

Well-established and recognized theoretical and conceptual frameworks, a substantial body of conceptual and empirical research, discernible outlets (journals, conferences, curriculum) and the presence of a vibrant corps of experienced researchers all characterize the field.

(2) *Emerging field*

Recognized by members and non-members, with a discernible body of work, theory and practice, and discernible outlets, and a modest body of active researchers who easily associate with the field, and recognize each other.

(3) *New field*

The field of research has a very limited theoretical or empirical knowledge base that is still debated or rapidly changing, is not widely recognized, has no dedicated journals or academic programs, and only few active researchers, seeking to be recognized.

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible:

2.2 The data environment

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

(1) *Developed*

Instrumentation and measures for data collection and analysis are widely agreed upon and available; the data environment is well developed, stable and data rich

(2) *Emerging*

(3) *Under-developed*

Instrumentation and measures for data collection and analysis are not available; the research activities are conducted in severely underdeveloped, unstable and/or data-poor environments

Please provide an explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible:

2.3 The research environment

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

(1) *Supportive*

Research environment - institutional priorities, incentives, facilities, etc. - is established and supportive

(2) *Moderately Supportive*

(3) *Not supportive*

Research environment is weak or largely under-developed, and not supportive

Please provide an explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible:

2.4 Political environment³

This refers to external risk related to the range of potential adverse factors that could arise as a result of political and governance challenges and that could affect the conduct of the research. These range from electoral uncertainty and policy instability to more fundamental political destabilization, a violent conflict, or a humanitarian crisis. Alternatively, the nature of a research topic may be politically contentious within its context.

(1) *Stable*

Stable political environment with established governance practices, no conflict, etc.

(2) *Weak/Uncertain*

(3) *Unstable/Volatile*

Very unstable or volatile political environment with weak governance practices, conflict, etc.

Please provide an explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible:

³ Alina Menocal, “It’s a Risky Business: Aid and New Approaches to Political Risk Management.” London: ODI, 2013.

2.5. Research Capacity Strengthening

Research capacity strengthening refers to financial and technical support given to grantees so that they can increase their ability to identify and analyze development challenges, and to have the ability to conceive, conduct, manage and communicate research that addresses these challenges over time and in a sustainable manner.

(1) *Low focus*

Research capacity strengthening is not an objective, or is a low priority in this project

(2) *Medium focus*

(3) *Strong focus*

Research capacity strengthening is an objective in this project

Please provide an explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible:

The output of the classification of key influences will be a table or similar visualization that lays out the numbered graduation of each influence; for example, this could be cells labeled with numbers related to the influence (1-3) or simply color-coded:

Light green = low maturity of the research field

Olive green = emerging research field

Dark Green = well established field

Table 1. Using Key influences to Characterize Research Projects

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	Etc.
Maturity of the field							
Risk in data environment							
Research environment risk							
Political environment risk							
Research capacity strengthening							

STEP 3. RATING RESEARCH QUALITY

The instrument for rating the quality of research in each project consists of four dimensions (with sub-dimensions) rated on an 8-point scale from “unacceptable” to “Very Good.” Ratings are based on the examination of relevant evidence. When it comes to Research Legitimacy, it might be appropriate that a sub-dimension might not be a central focus of the project. For instance, inclusiveness of vulnerable populations would be a central focus in a participatory project to decrease gender-based violence. However, in a project relying on secondary data to understand salt consumption levels, attention to vulnerable populations is important, but might not be the same central focus. The assessment should still be done, but evaluators can note the level of focus for that sub-dimension. There may be cases in which there is not enough information available to make a credible assessment of a sub-dimension. In either case, no numerical rating will be assigned.

Sources of evidence for the assessment in each dimension may include project documentation (e.g., Project Approval Document, Progress Monitoring Report, Project Completion Report, Final Technical Report, etc.), research outputs (e.g., research articles including peer reviewed and other publications, policy briefs, research reports, conference papers, final technical reports), and interviews with IDRC program staff, research project leaders or research team members (grantees), plus where appropriate, external stakeholders.

Dimension 1: Research Integrity

This is an assessment of the technical quality (technical merit), appropriateness, and rigor of the design and execution of the research as judged in terms of commonly accepted standards for such work (e.g. standards for experimental research, ethnography, survey research, etc.). *Although the quality of the research design as evident in proposals is important, evaluators should be primarily concerned with the execution of the research, and the extent to which attention to integrity is reflected in the research outputs.*

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

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

This dimension has a single rubric associated with it. That does not mean it is in any way less important than the other dimensions that have multiple sub-dimensions. It is critical. That said, if a project fails on integrity, IDRC encourages evaluators to carry on with the rest of the RQ+ assessment. We value understanding the other dimensions of quality in addition to scientific integrity. For both efforts to improve all areas of research quality, and for meta-analysis, we would like a full set of scores for each project.

DIMENSION 1.0: RESEARCH INTEGRITY							
Level 1- Unacceptable		Level 2 – Less than acceptable		Level 3 – Acceptable/Good		Level 4 –Very Good	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
The research has little to no scientific merit. The defensibility of the design is questionable. There are severe lapses in methodological rigor of literature review, data collection and data analysis.		There is evidence of efforts to meet methodological standards but the efforts do not fully succeed. There are shortcomings in design and execution of the research.		Accepted methodological standards in the design and execution of the research are met.		The scientific merit is without question. There is evidence of exceptional thoroughness in the research design and all phases of research execution. The project could serve as an exemplar of what it means to achieve this criterion.	

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment.

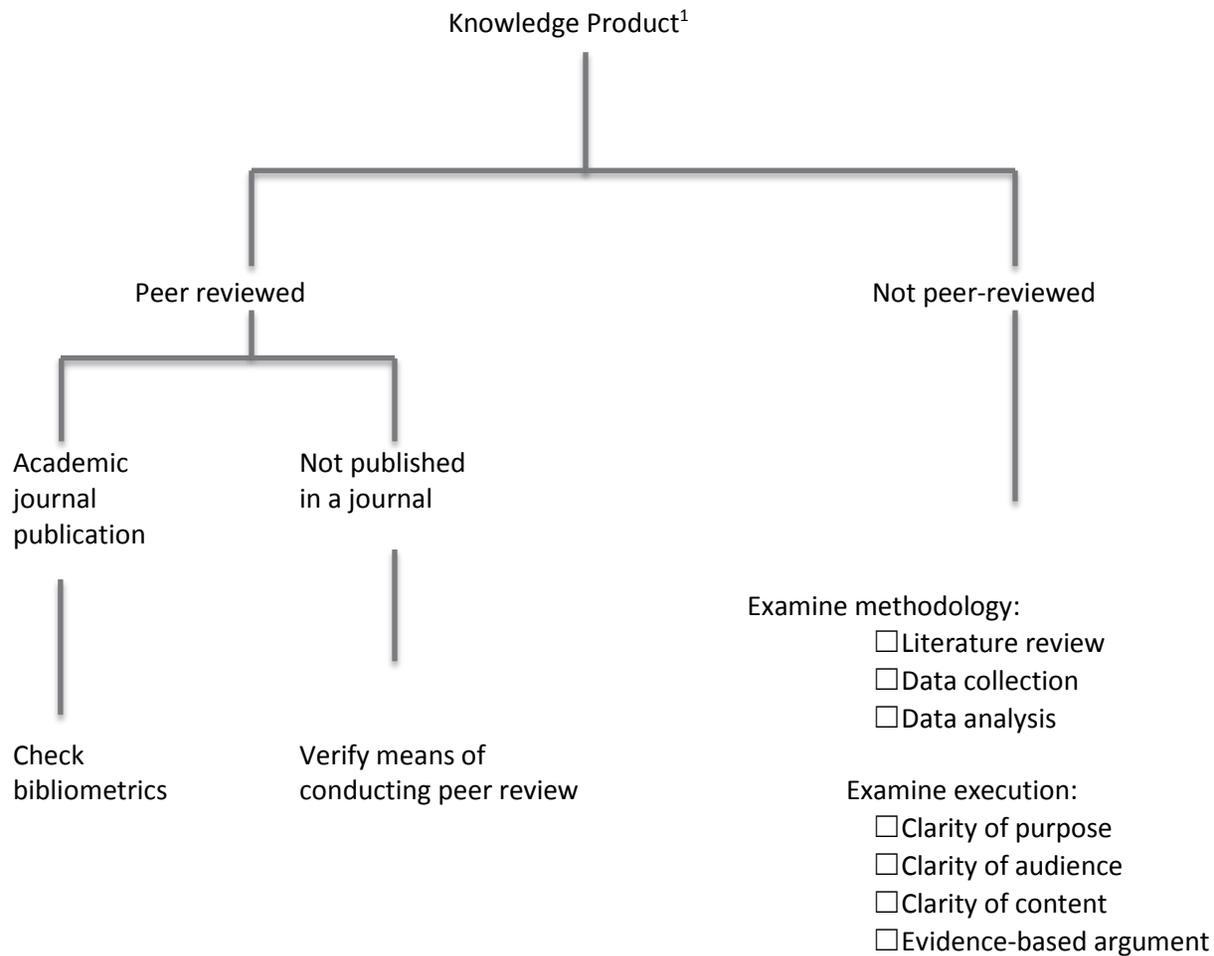
To facilitate the process of making this assessment of several kinds of knowledge products, the review team can follow the flowchart shown in Figure 3.

It is important for external reviewers to recognize that in some cases they can use research products as proxies to assess research integrity. In this respect, there are three options:

- (1) **Products that have gone through peer review and were published in an academic journal.** We assume that a research product published in an established, academic, peer-reviewed journal has gone through an assessment of whether it meets methodological standards and exhibits scientific merit. Established academic journals do not simply include mainstream, top-tier journals. External evaluators will be knowledgeable about reputable journals across the world in their respective fields. Peer reviewed products published in an academic journal for an audience of (largely) researchers might be further examined using bibliometrics. Care needs to be taken when reviewers are using bibliometrics to comment on the reach or uptake of research. In some cases not enough time will have elapsed for research to have reached such outlets; in other cases, the project may have chosen other outlets to publicize research findings (e.g. blogs, policy maker fora, etc.)
- (2) **Products that were peer reviewed but published in some other outlet** (e.g., book chapter, proceedings, book, etc.). If a peer-reviewed knowledge product did not appear in a refereed journal, then the review team should attest to the *integrity and legitimacy of the process by which the product was peer reviewed*. Again, we assume that the review team would have, or can readily obtain, the knowledge necessary to make this judgment. In some cases peer review would have been conducted within a network of peers established as part of the project. In such cases the merit of the review process should be carefully considered.
- (3) **Products that were not peer reviewed.** In examining non-peer reviewed knowledge products, external evaluators should check the quality of the literature review, data collection and data analysis procedures indicating whether the evidence for each is sufficient, insufficient or absent. The external reviewer should also examine the composition of the product in terms of whether the purpose of the document is clearly stated, the audience is clearly identified, the content is clearly written and logically composed, and that claims made in the knowledge product are based on evidence. The quality should be checked against the description of the methodology *as executed*, rather than what has been captured

in the project proposal. Where the description is insufficient to make an assessment, program and research grantee teams can be consulted.

Figure 3. Decision Tree for Evaluating the Integrity of Research Products⁴



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

Dimension 2: Research Legitimacy

Research legitimacy involves assessing the extent to which research results have been produced by a process that took account of the concerns and insights of relevant stakeholders, and was deemed procedurally fair and based on the values, concerns and perspectives of that audience. Audiences tend to judge legitimacy based on who participated, who did not, the process for making choices, and how information was produced, vetted and disseminated. ‘Localizing’ knowledge, and respecting local traditions and knowledge systems are also important. Mistrust between the researchers and potential users of the research can also affect its legitimacy (and, hence, ultimately its reach).

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

Evaluators should look first for evidence of research ethics approval and oversight by an institutional or alternative research ethics board. Often (but not always) project files will include a record of Research Ethics Board review and approval. Evaluators should look for evidence of strategies employed by the research grantee team (particularly in cases in which there appears to have been no REB involvement) to address the risk of potentially negative consequences of either research processes or outcomes for affected or targeted populations. Wherever applicable, evaluators should in particular, look for signs that appropriate measures have been taken to ensure compliance with the free and informed consent processes and privacy of research participants. This includes looking for evidence of procedures employed by research teams to avoid any undue coercion or influencing of a vulnerable person, community or population through for example incentives, inducements, financial benefits or financial costs for participants that might not be appropriate in the cultural context.

In addition, the researchers should anticipate potential consequences of the research execution and outcomes. For example, if a new product or technology is likely to have serious side effects or affect the wellbeing of vulnerable populations, information should be made available and precautions proposed when the results are made public.

Such potential problems should be systematically identified during the course of the research process. Although negative consequences or outcomes are frequently dependent on how the research results are used and therefore out of the control of the research team, those involved need to attend to this issue where it can reasonably be done, and solutions or precautionary measures suggested.

Evidence of performance under this dimension is likely to be found in project documentation (monitoring reports, etc.) and/or from key informant interviews.

**SUBDIMENSION 2.1 ADDRESSING POTENTIALLY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES AND OUTCOMES
FOR AFFECTED POPULATIONS**

	Level 1- Unacceptable		Level 2 – Less than acceptable		Level 3 – Acceptable/Good		Level 4 – Very Good	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Insufficient Information to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	There has been no apparent effort to address what could be serious negative consequences from the research process or results. The researchers appear to have been insensitive to this aspect of the research.		The research was sensitive to this issue. Some efforts were made to address what could turn into negative consequences or outcomes, but they were not as comprehensive or thorough as they should have been. Informed consent was not adequately assured, and coercion of vulnerable populations was not adequately avoided.		The research was sensitive to this issue. Appropriate and timely measures have been taken in almost all instances to eradicate or mitigate foreseeable negative consequences or outcomes of the research. Measures have been taken to ensure compliance with the free, prior and informed consent processes and privacy of research participants. There is no sign of coercion of a vulnerable person, community or population.		Appropriate and timely measures have been taken to eliminate or mitigate foreseeable negative consequences or outcomes of research. There was a systematic effort by the research team to mitigate negative consequences and outcomes. Measures have been taken to ensure participants' free, prior and informed consent and to ensure their privacy. There are no signs of coercion of a vulnerable person, community or population.	

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or a full explanation, based on your expert knowledge, of the reasons an assessment was not applicable, necessary or possible:

2.2: Inclusiveness of vulnerable populations

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

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

- Ensure that inclusion and exclusion criteria match the context of the research question

- Be inclusive in selecting research participants or potential beneficiaries – not excluding anyone on the basis of culture, language, religion, race, economic status, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, linguistic proficiency or age - unless there is a valid, defensible reason for the exclusion. (Gender is considered in a separate sub-dimension)
- Ensure that the interests of vulnerable, marginalized communities or populations are a priority, unless there is a sound justification for the contrary.

SUBDIMENSION 2.2 INCLUSIVENESS

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

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or a full explanation, based on your expert knowledge, of the reasons an assessment was not applicable, necessary or possible:

2.3: Gender-responsiveness

Each IDRC project approval document (PAD) encourages program officers to consider gender: “There is no such thing as a gender neutral project.” No project should be gender blind, but projects may be appropriately gender aware, gender sensitive, gender responsive or gender transformative⁵. There should be evidence in project design and procedures for data collection and analysis and in research products that the project addressed issues of sex, gender roles, norms and identities. Aspects covered include:

- Project design is sensitive to the needs and special situations or people of different genders
- Collection of data sensitive to, and disaggregated by gender
- Engagement with research participants using a gender lens, including in using safety protocols
- Sensitivity to the impact of gendered power relations
- Systematic gender differentiated analysis of research activities and findings
- Solutions that are cognizant of the different situations, responses and needs their gender in society

SUBDIMENSION 2.3 GENDER-RESPONSIVENESS

Area of focus	Level 1 – Unacceptable		Level 2 –Less than acceptable		Level 3 – Acceptable/Good		Level 4 – Very Good	
Yes (gender responsive / transformative) No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<p>Insufficient Detail to Assess Not enough information available to make a credible assessment</p>	<p>The project was gender blind. There is no indication that gender was a consideration in the project. There has been insufficient attention to gender in the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. The research might therefore reinforce previous or existing gender based discriminations, without any new insights into the gender aspects of social or technological change.</p>		<p>Gender was considered in a limited way in the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. However, there were significant weaknesses.</p>		<p>Gender was adequately considered across almost all aspects of the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings.</p>		<p>Gender was considered with great care and detail across all aspects of the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings.</p>	

⁵ Categories in Project Approval Documents: **Gender aware**: Gender (the differentiated and intersectional experiences of women, men, boys, and girls) is considered in the research project’s rationale, but is not an operative concept in the design and methodology; **Gender sensitive**: Gender is considered in the research project’s rationale and is addressed in the project design and methodology, but does not (yet) extend to analysis and action to address gender inequalities; **Gender responsive**: Gender is considered in the research project’s rationale, design, and methodology and is rigorously analyzed to inform implementation, communication, and influence strategies. Gender responsive research does not (yet) address structural power relations that lead to gender inequalities; **Gender transformative**: Examines, analyzes, and builds an evidence base to inform long-term practical changes in structural power relations and norms, roles and inequalities that define the differentiated experiences of men and women. Gender transformative research should lead to sustained change through action (e.g. partnerships, outreach, and interventions).

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or a full explanation, based on your expert knowledge, of the reasons an assessment was not applicable, necessary or possible:

2.4: Engagement with local knowledge

This sub-dimension asks evaluators to consider how contextually grounded the research is in relevant knowledge systems. This should be considered relative to the scale at which the research was designed, whether that be community-level, national, regional or global. It refers to the need to

- Address well identified needs and/or priorities, given the scale of the research
- Engage communities, populations or stakeholders in an appropriate and credible manner, including indigenous and minority ethnic or social groups, and building their capacities where appropriate
- Respect traditional knowledge, wisdom and practices, as well as local contexts, researchers and contributors to the research; and
- Ensure, to the extent possible, appropriate benefits for stakeholders from their participation in the research process (such as access to research findings in appropriate formats and through appropriate processes).

SUBDIMENSION 2.4 ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

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

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or a full explanation, based on your expert knowledge, of the reasons an assessment was not applicable, necessary or possible:

Dimension 3: Research Importance

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

3.1: Originality

Originality refers to the generation of new insights and knowledge for theory and practice given the current state of knowledge in a given field. It may involve: Building on existing knowledge in a field in a unique and imaginative way; making connections that advance understanding in minor or major leaps; breaking ground in a completely new field of work; making iterative yet useful changes to existing technologies and techniques. In certain contexts, especially in science and technology R&D, such advancements in knowledge, whether major leaps or small iterations, are referred to as *innovation*.

SUBDIMENSION 3.1: ORIGINALITY							
Level 1- Unacceptable		Level 2 – Less than acceptable		Level 3 – Acceptable/Good		Level 4 – Very Good	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
The research fails to build on and extend on existing knowledge. It does not break new ground, or make improvements in existing technologies and/or methods.		The research marginally adds to what is already known in the field .The research is not innovative, and is not well connected to what is already known.		The research presents fresh ideas, brings an innovative approach to solving existing challenges, and/or deals with a new, emerging issue worth pursuing. It challenges taken-for-granted assumptions, builds on existing knowledge and is well connected to what is already known.		The research is innovative and ground breaking. It builds on existing knowledge in a substantive way, making significant advancements to technologies and techniques.	

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible:

3.2: Relevance

Research is salient (important) to user decision-making. Relevance can be affected by the scalability of findings as well as their timely availability in addition to the alignment of the research with pressing social and economic problems. Relevant research is more likely to resonate with one or more audiences, and to link to issues on which policymakers, business or civil society organizations focus. There will thus be evidence that the research objectives and research questions are targeted at real-world needs, priorities and challenges, especially in

- Solving a problem that is a proven priority for key development stakeholders, and/or
- Aligning with key development policies, strategies and priorities, and/or
- Focusing on emerging problems that are likely to demand solutions in the foreseeable future.

SUBDIMENSION 3.2 RELEVANCE

Level 1- Unacceptable		Level 2 – Less than acceptable		Level 3 – Acceptable/Good		Level 4 – Very Good	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
The research does not contribute to a key development priority, or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the foreseeable future. Justification for the work is absent or unconvincing.		The research makes little contribution to a key development priority or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the foreseeable future. A justification for this area of work is not well substantiated.		The research contributes to a key development priority, or an emerging area of some significance that might demand solutions in the near future. This area of work is justified.		The research makes an important contribution towards a key development priority, or an important emerging area that is highly likely to demand solutions in the near future. This area of work is well justified.	

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible:

Dimension 4: Positioning for Use

Determining whether uptake of research findings and products actually occurred (and how) as well as tracking their influence and impact is largely outside the scope of this assessment of research quality. However, it is reasonable to assess the extent to which the research process has been managed and research products prepared in such a way that the probability of use and influence is enhanced. This requires attention to user contexts, accessibility of products, and ‘fit for purpose’ knowledge mobilization strategies. ‘Fit for purpose’ strategies refer to careful consideration of the best platforms for making research outputs available to given targeted audiences and users. Positioning for use, in some cases may also call for strategies to integrate users into the research process itself.

4.1: Knowledge accessibility and sharing

An important consideration here is evidence of strategies used in a given project to target potential users. This criterion is concerned with the extent to which research findings, processes and products (a) are targeted to and engage user groups (e.g., scholars, business and industry leaders, government officials, civil society organizations), (b) reflect an understanding of the contexts of potential users, and (c) match the ways potential user groups access and engage ideas and information (e.g., policy briefs for policymakers; workshops, open access publication outlets). Equally important is an examination of whether the concerns, perspectives, knowledge and assumptions of those producing the research differ markedly from those of potential users. Such a gap can adversely affect uptake and impact.

SUBDIMENSION 4.1 KNOWLEDGE ACCESSIBILITY AND SHARING							
Level 1- Unacceptable		Level 2 – Less than acceptable		Level 3 – Acceptable/Good		Level 4 – Very Good	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
The research was not initiated and conducted with use in mind, i.e., no evidence of understanding of the context(s) within which the results are likely to be used; no evidence of stakeholder or user mapping. There has been no attention or engagement to making research findings available in formats and through mechanisms suited to well-targeted audiences. Potential users will struggle to know about, and access these knowledge products.		There was insufficient effort to map, understand and engage stakeholders or key potential user groups, and limited engagement with understanding the larger context within which they operate. Insufficient attention has been paid to making research findings available in appropriate formats and through appropriate mechanisms to well-targeted potential user groups.		The project research mapped, understood and engaged stakeholders and potential user groups. Researchers appear to have a credible understanding of the context within which key potential users/user groups operate. Research findings were made available to different potential user groups in user-friendly formats		The research was initiated and conducted with use in mind, and with an emphasis on engaging with the contexts of potential users. The research included sophisticated/highly differentiated stakeholder mapping and engagement. Research findings were appropriately available to well-targeted and influential potential user groups in highly accessible and user-friendly formats. Mechanisms for use have been explored.	

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment:

4.2 Timeliness and Actionability

The potential for use, influence and impact of research depends in part on whether researchers have analyzed and reflected upon the knowledge receptivity environment. The timing of the release of research findings may therefore influence their uptake. It is often impossible to predict whether research has been well timed for use, or can be considered actionable. Yet if the research is to be useful for advancing debates (within a research community) or for decision-making and problem-solving beyond the academic or research environment, it is necessary for researchers to think about contingencies in the institutional and political environment that influence efforts to position research for uptake into policy or practice. In assessing this dimension of research quality, evaluators should look for evidence of whether researchers have examined potential for positioning research for use within a particular user setting or at a particular moment in time, by considering contingencies and developing strategies to address them. These might include:⁶

- Stability of existing decision-making institutions
- Capacity of policymakers or practitioners to apply research
- Structure of political decision making (i.e., decentralization or tight control)
- Unique (and particularly timely) opportunities to influence policy or practice in view of current conceptual debates and/or in light of political, social, and economic conditions
- Economic crisis or other pressures on research and policy actors, shocks that often provide crucial windows of opportunity in which the research community and decision makers suddenly become open to new ideas and answers.

SUBDIMENSION 4.2 TIMELINESS AND ACTIONABILITY

Level 1 - Unacceptable		Level 2 – Less than acceptable		Level 3 –Acceptable/Good		Level 4 – Very Good	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
The research did not include any relevant analysis of user environment including institutional, political, social or economic contingencies. The plan to support research use was inadequate and the team was not responsive to emergent opportunities.		There is evidence that some analysis of the user setting was undertaken; however, consideration was incomplete and did not adequately inform the translation of research to user groups. The strategies or plans to move the knowledge to policy or practice were weak, unresponsive and not fine-tuned.		There is evidence that the user environment and major contingencies have been examined and reflected upon and connected to strategies and plans for moving the research into policy or practice in an effective and timely manner.		The analysis of the user environment and contingencies is exceptionally thorough, well-articulated and dynamic. There is evidence of careful prospective appraisal of the likelihood of success of strategies designed to address contingencies. The research could respond to emerging opportunities for influence. There was thoughtful translation of the implications of research for user groups.	

⁶ For additional information on these contingencies and how they might be addressed, see F. Carden, *Knowledge to policy: Making the most of development research*. IDRC in cooperation with New Delhi: Sage, 2009

