



# **AN EVALUATOR'S GUIDE TO COVID-19**

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Using Evaluative Thinking to  
Learn and Adapt Programs



**COVID-19**

# Evaluating Programs during a Pandemic

As COVID-19 disrupts lives around the world, it is having a significant impact on development programming. In response, funders and program implementers are adjusting their programs' strategies, designs, and implementation approaches. They—and we, the evaluation community—need to understand how effective these strategic and programmatic changes have been in meeting the new and emerging needs of stakeholders and participants.

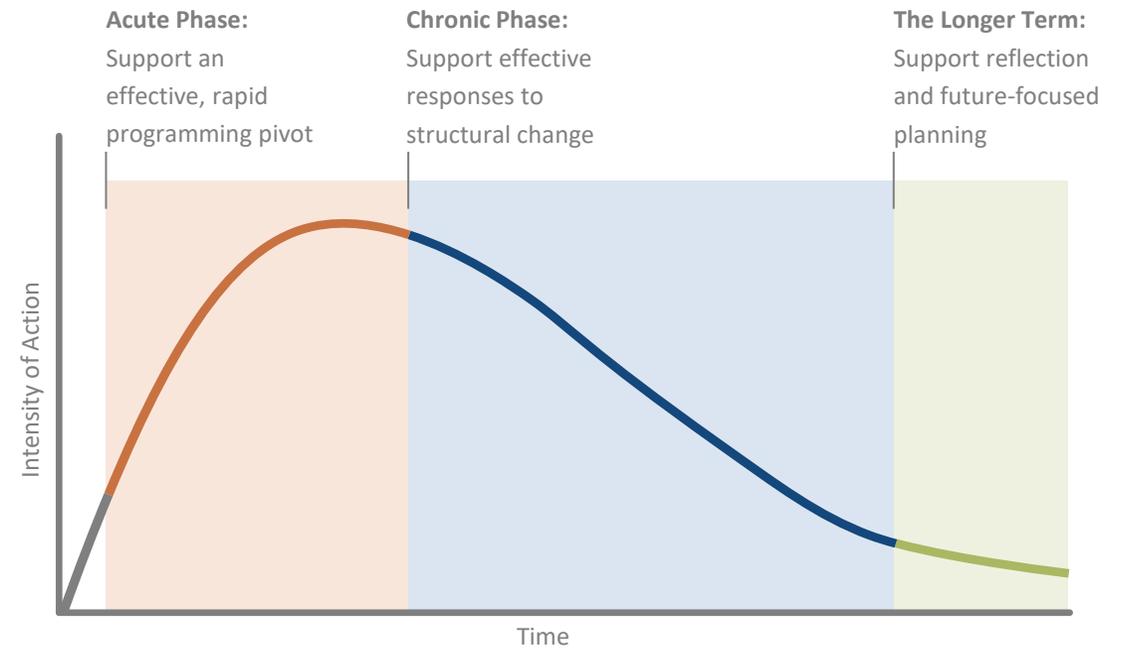
This note lays out recommendations for how funders and program implementers can apply evaluative thinking to assess their COVID-19–related pivots. Evaluation can provide an essential service to programs during this pandemic because it helps programs pivot effectively based on real evidence and information. The aim is to capture the right data to assess the effects of the changes on strategies and programs, learn from the data, make course corrections, and adapt future activities.

This guidance note is designed for teams who find themselves needing to pivot programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Funders, evaluators, and development practitioners in general will also benefit from the discussion of evaluative approaches.

# Actions for Three Phases of the Pandemic

Each phase of a crisis such as this one requires different levels of action:

- In the *acute phase*—the early stages of the pandemic—programs make initial pivots and there is a need for rapid learning.
- In the *chronic phase*, responses to structural changes continue in the context of an ongoing situation.
- In the *longer term*, decision makers reflect on their strategic and/or programmatic shifts from the acute and chronic phases and think about the long-term planning that needs to occur.



## Actions for Three Phases of the Pandemic

# Evaluative Actions for Each Phase

Throughout this note, we use two hypothetical program experiences to illustrate the actions in each phase. Although the examples are from the democracy and governance and health sectors, keep in mind that this guidance is not sector specific. Similarly, although the examples discuss programs that are already underway, some of these evaluation and adaptive management techniques can (and indeed should) be built into the design of future programs.



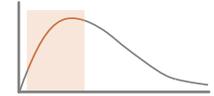
### *“Fight Racism”*: A program supporting civil society organizations with antiracism actions

The Fight Racism program supports civil society organizations in the United States to foster positive communication among members of different races and create bipartisan community networks to support antiracist activities. Fight Racism has been operating for 3 years and has 20 grantees. Early evaluations found that the program had identified new allies from across partisan, faith-based, and cultural groups committed to antiracist action, brought voices of Black communities and other communities of color to the mainstream media, and increased community-level knowledge about racism.



### *“The RH Project”*: A U.S. government program providing health services in fragile states

The Reproductive Health (RH) Project is a 5-year, USAID-funded initiative that provides high-quality sexual and reproductive health services to the most marginalized populations in fragile states. The RH Project, in its second year, has made inroads in ensuring provision of a Minimum Initial Services Package by engaging stakeholders through community dialogues and social media messaging. The aim is to build awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues—including critical services such as postpartum care and clinical care for rape survivors—while changing social norms around male partner engagement in reproductive health and mitigating gender-based violence.



## What can evaluators do?

# The Acute Phase – Support effective programming pivots

Evaluators can help organizations determine how to rapidly adapt their programming in response to a crisis. In the context of COVID-19, evaluations can provide data on what is working and what is not, identify intended and unintended consequences of the pandemic and of a pivot, and generate learning on optimal responses to the crisis in real time.

### *Questions evaluation can help answer:*

- Is a pivot in our programming necessary and/or desirable? If we don't pivot, might there be any unintended negative (or positive) consequences?
- Is the pandemic affecting different sub-populations differently? How do we respond to the differential impact?
- How would the intended outcomes and impacts of the program (or the portfolio) change with a pivot?
- Which pivoting strategy is producing desirable outcomes? What unintended outcomes are associated with different pivoting strategies?

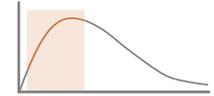
### *Evaluation approaches:*

- *Developmental evaluations* support innovation and adaptation in dynamic environments and aim to produce rapid, real-time feedback that nurtures learning.<sup>1</sup>
- *Formative evaluations* collect data before and/or during implementation of an intervention, aiming to improve and inform program (re)design by meeting specific needs of people benefiting from the intervention.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Patton, M. Q., *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Frey, B. B., Formative Evaluation. In: *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement and Evaluation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018).

## What can evaluators do? | Actions in the Acute Phase



### Fight Racism

The COVID-19 crisis has a significant potential impact on Fight Racism's work. The pandemic could create new divisions or reinforce existing ones among members of different races, requiring the grantees to change their strategies to fulfill the program objectives. The pandemic affects people of color more acutely than the others, which may require additional interventions to help them strengthen their resilience.

Some program modalities may also need to change. In-person meetings between different groups has been one of the hallmarks of Fight Racism's work. With the pandemic, in-person meetings are not possible, so grantees' projects likely need to pivot toward virtual meetings. This pivot raises other questions: Do we need to change our messages as we move to a virtual platform? How could this shift affect the participation of certain sub-groups?

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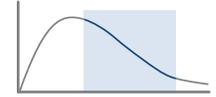
**How evaluation can help:** Developmental and/or formative evaluation can help program implementers make critical decisions about how the program needs to change and adapt rapidly to respond to this new context and learn what the initial results reveal about different design and programmatic changes by collecting and analyzing real-time data. Evaluation at this early stage can save resources from being expended on theories or assumptions that are incorrect and promote those with the greatest potential to achieve impact.

### The RH Project

The pandemic has affected The RH Project's ability to convene community members to discuss issues around sexual and reproductive health. Meanwhile, direct clinical care provision is affected as facilities are overstretched with COVID-19 patients, and increased incidents of gender-based violence are prompting a need to expand services. Despite these challenges, The RH Project is committed to continuing to provide services. The team will continue providing clinical services in the facilities, but its programming pivot involves a shift to virtual service delivery whenever possible, offering consultations via telemedicine and relying on social media to conduct community outreach.

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**How evaluation can help:** The pivot to virtual engagement for non-essential services raises questions about the program's effectiveness—for example, in reducing gender-based violence—and whether messages and approaches need to be further modified to enhance effectiveness. If so, what changes need to be made? Further, is the pivot reaching sub-populations equally or in the most effective way? Evaluations at this early stage can help the program answer these questions.



## What can evaluators do?

# The Chronic Phase – Support effective response to structural change

As the pandemic transitions from an acute crisis to a chronic, longer-term reality, organizations will face different kinds of pivots that require examination in the face of a more stable but still precarious situation. Programs need to think about how to effectively fulfill their mandates without increasing the risk of COVID-19 transmission or going against local policies, such as mandates around social and physical distancing. Data captured during this phase are crucial for adaptive management that is informed by both program and COVID-19 data.

### *Questions evaluation can help answer:*

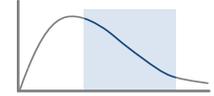
- Is the program achieving a balance between meeting its objectives/goals and continuing to reduce staff's and participants' risk of exposure to the virus?
- Are the programmatic adjustments meeting the needs of the people the program intends to reach, including across sub-groups?
- What are the successes and challenges in addressing the changes required by the COVID-19 crisis? What programmatic changes are needed to build on successes and address the challenges?
- How have intended outcomes and impacts been affected by the pivots?
- What additional pivots are needed to improve outcomes?

### *Evaluation approaches:*

- *Data monitoring* is the process of proactively reviewing and evaluating data to monitor your program's performance to ensure the data align with the program's goals.
- *Process evaluations* determine whether program activities have been implemented as planned and whether the preliminary results show the expected progress; they help teams improve future programming.
- *Performance evaluations* assess the effectiveness of development programs using predetermined criteria. They can be conducted at various stages of the program cycle. They also can be conducted with a comparison group to better isolate the outcomes that are directly related to implementation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rutenberg, N. and A. C. Heard, *Integrating impact evaluation and implementation research to accelerate evidence-informed action*, 3ie Working Paper 32 (New Delhi: 3ie, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.23846/WP0032>

## What can evaluators do? | Actions in the Chronic Phase



### Fight Racism

Fight Racism has pivoted from in-person activities to virtual meet-ups for members of different groups. The program's grantees have also added a nuance to their narrative by highlighting the structural inequalities evidenced by disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on communities of color. They have increased the use of virtual spaces (especially Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook), email distribution lists, and other platforms to amplify their messages.

Early data gathering has revealed that the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of color has hampered their ability to participate in Fight Racism's new activities; faced with multiple crises, some community members do not have the bandwidth to engage with Fight Racism's grantees. Fight Racism has also found that some groups have not been able to participate in virtual meetings, and so have become disconnected from the program. However, the grantees' messages on structural inequalities have resonated with the mainstream media, which has started investigating these issues in more detail. Grantees have also observed that race relations in the United States have fundamentally changed as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

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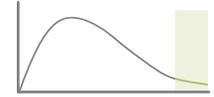
**How evaluation can help:** Process and performance evaluations and data monitoring can help Fight Racism's program team and grantees understand how the pivots they implemented in the acute phase have worked and how they can translate the pivots into semi-permanent design changes. By identifying and highlighting the challenges in achieving the desired impact, these evaluative activities also support decision making and design changes, if necessary. For example, evaluation and monitoring can help answer the following questions: What can our program do to ensure people of color are able to engage with Fight Racism despite their lower bandwidth during this continuing crisis? How can this program build on the learning about how the messaging on structural inequalities is resonating and has become an accepted argument in the mainstream media?

### The RH Project

The RH Project has used WhatsApp to convene virtual community meetings for 3 months. In that time, the team has gathered quantitative data on the degree of participation and has noted that fewer men are participating, impairing the program's ability to address gender-based violence and male partner engagement in changing reproductive health norms.

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**How evaluation can help:** What further pivots are needed to effectively address issues around harmful social norms? The RH Project has continued to provide clinical services at the facility level but has observed a decline in postpartum care visits. In response, the program has begun exploring home-based care, in which a nurse from the facility travels with a community health worker to ensure women and their newborns receive these essential services. How has this adjustment affected key reproductive health outcomes? Findings and lessons from evaluation will help The RH Project tailor its work to meet the changed needs of participants.



## What can evaluators do?

# The Longer Term – Support reflection and future-focused planning

When a vaccine and/or an evidence-based treatment for COVID-19 is available, restrictions on movement will relax, allowing programs to resume more in-person service delivery. At that point, it will be appropriate to reflect critically on the overall impact of the pivots made during the acute and chronic phases; this will inform future thinking about how to respond more effectively to crises.

### *Questions evaluation can help answer:*

- What effects have the pivots had on key outcomes of interest?
- How did intended participants or those receiving services perceive the pivots and their effects?
- What kinds of long-term changes in the context (due to COVID-19) might require permanent changes to the program?
- What learning has the pivot generated that can be used to inform future programming?
- What systems or processes are needed to more effectively respond to future crises?

### *Evaluation approaches:*

- *Ex-post evaluations* assess the effectiveness of a program and the sustainability of its results and impact. These evaluations are usually conducted after the program ends.
- *Quasi-experimental evaluations* analyze the program's effect on outcomes and impacts of interest and can establish causal links between interventions and outcomes/impacts. These evaluations require data collection before program implementation begins and after the program has ended.
- *Observational studies* allow researchers to observe the effects of various aspects of the program on the participants and provide lessons for future implementation.

These evaluations can all be designed using mixed methods and can be supported by data collected throughout the acute and chronic phases.



## What can evaluators do? | Actions for the Longer Term

### Fight Racism

As restrictions on movement and in-person meetings relax, Fight Racism has resumed in-person meetings, conferences, training deliveries, and other events that require large gatherings. Learning generated by evaluations during the first two phases of the pandemic has led to permanent changes in the program's structure, activities, and objectives. For example, the messaging pivot brought on by COVID-19 has led the grantees to new understanding about which messages and mediums work. The landscape of race relations in the United States has also changed as a result of this crisis, requiring permanent changes to the program.

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**How evaluation can help:** Ex-post evaluation can provide an analysis of key outcomes and how the changes in implementation approaches in response to COVID-19 may have mediated these outcomes. For example, an ex-post evaluation can shed light on whether and how virtual meetings affect relationship-building across groups. It can also identify lessons and provide evidence-based recommendations for future programming in the face of other crises.

### The RH Project

The RH Program has resumed “normal” programming, including in-person community meetings. Throughout the acute and chronic phases, the team continued collecting data for key indicators, such as service utilization data disaggregated by type, incidence of gender-based violence, and male partner engagement.

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**How evaluation can help:** Using a quasi-experimental design, program staff can assess the effect of the reduced in-person service delivery on these indicators of interest. Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, the program can learn about the effect of virtual engagements on addressing harmful gender-based norms and gain insight into other ways to continue service delivery in times of crisis.

# Learn and Adapt Now for Easier Pivots in the Future

COVID-19 has disrupted development programming, but despite the complexity of operating in this environment, evaluations must continue. This is true not only for the current pandemic, but also for the other crises we know will come—new epidemics, displacements, natural calamities, war, conflict. When programs' needs and priorities change in these circumstances, capturing data can help implementers meet the emerging needs while generating learning for better responses to future crises.

Evaluation is an essential strategy that helps funders and program implementers make more effective use of their data, funds, and human resources.<sup>4</sup> Evaluation that fits the changing circumstances helps practitioners learn from crisis and tailor their programs for the people they serve—during this pandemic and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Catsambas, T. T., and Franco, L. F., *Mapping Outcomes: Embedding evaluation in the life of an organization for improved social change programming* (Rockville, MD: EnCompass LLC, 2019), p. 26. <https://encompassworld.com/resource/mapping-outcomes/>

<sup>5</sup> EnCompass LLC, *The Virtues of Virtual MEL* (2020). <https://encompassworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Virtues-of-Virtual-MEL.pdf>



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