TOWARDS RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FOR DEVELOPMENT:

THE RESEARCH QUALITY PLUS (RQ+) ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

Version 1 - June 2014

The RQ+ instrument is the result of an intellectual collaboration between IDRC's internal evaluation team and evaluators Zenda Ofir and Thomas Schwandt.

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 as part of the External Review process for prospectus-based programs.

"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+ is designed to provide the external reviewers with a more systematic approach for answering question 2 of their charge:

> *"Overall, was the quality of the research supported by the program acceptable?* Assess the main research outputs produced by a sample of completed projects in order to judge the overall research quality and the significance of the research findings to the field of study/research area. Take into account:
>
> i. Methodological and scientific standards
> ii. The context in which the research was conducted and disseminated
> iii. The intended purpose of the research
> iv. Potential for application to policy and/or practice
> v. Any other influential factors."

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

[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.

- Displays sensitivity to risk for vulnerable individuals and societies, and fragile institutions, systems and contexts.

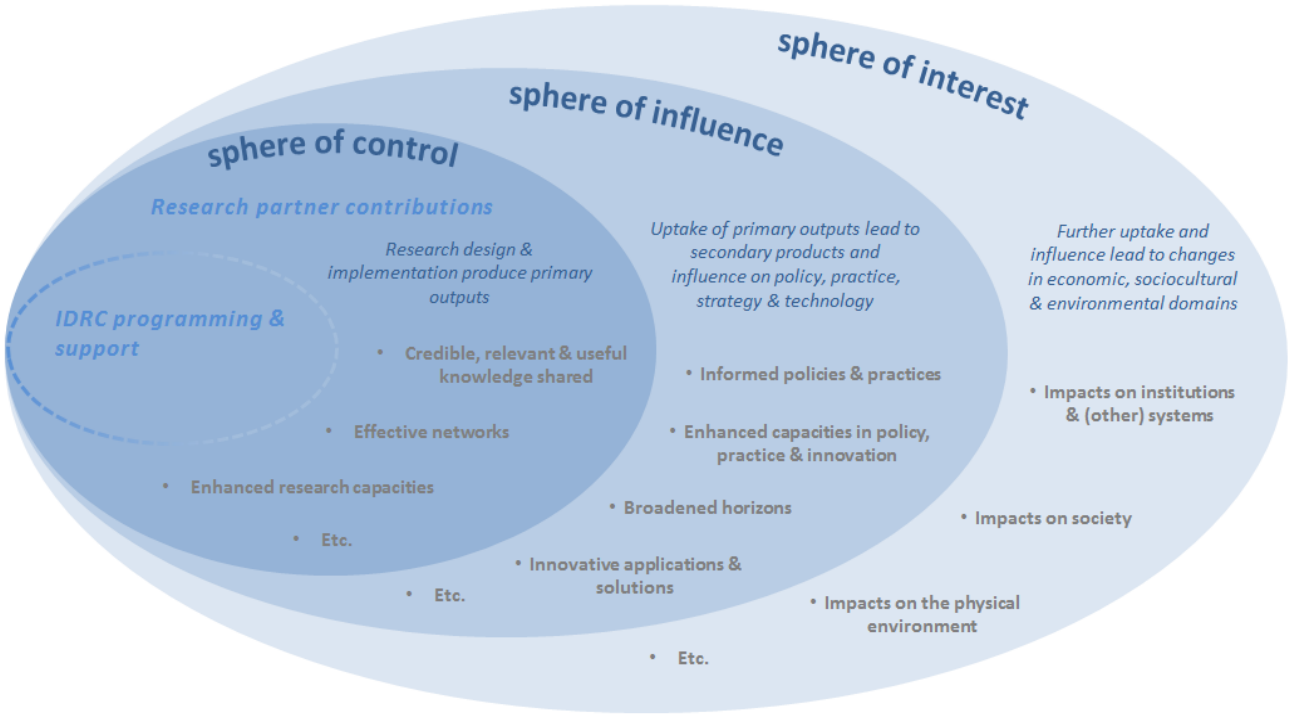
2. **IDRC provides research for development support that involves:**

   - 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
   - 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 direct control of IDRC and its research partners. However, the uptake, use, influence and impact of research are not under their direct 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.

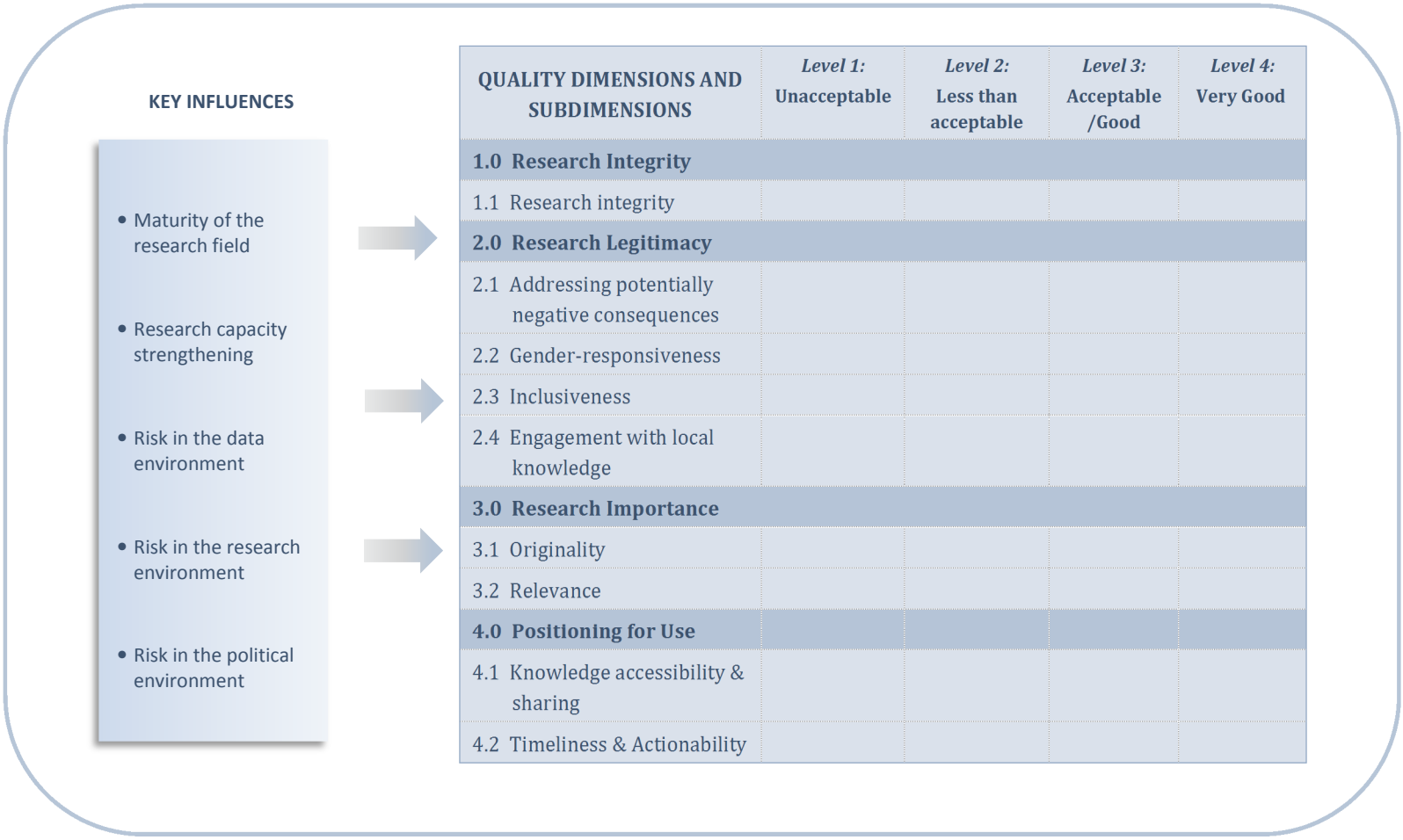
Thus, this instrument is a guide to assess the technical quality of the research IDRC funds in light of the way that research is designed and positioned for uptake and use; hence, the label, "RQ+."

THE RQ+ ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

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

1. Key influences 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.

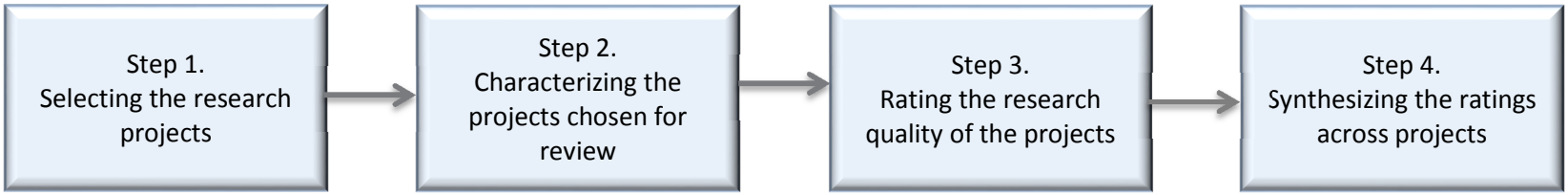
Figure 2. The IDRC RQ+ Assessment Framework for Research for Development



QUALITY DIMENSIONS AND SUBDIMENSIONS	*Level 1:* Unacceptable	*Level 2:* Less than acceptable	*Level 3:* Acceptable /Good	*Level 4:* Very Good
1.0 Research Integrity				
1.1 Research integrity				
2.0 Research Legitimacy				
2.1 Addressing potentially negative consequences				
2.2 Gender-responsiveness				
2.3 Inclusiveness				
2.4 Engagement with local knowledge				
3.0 Research Importance				
3.1 Originality				
3.2 Relevance				
4.0 Positioning for Use				
4.1 Knowledge accessibility & sharing				
4.2 Timeliness & Actionability				

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. In fact, a number of grants in a portfolio are additions to existing research projects, such as funding for 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.

The external review team will be expected to record and defend the rationale for their project selection.

As reviewers, create a sample of projects to review for research quality. Here are some guidelines to consider:

- Choose projects that are research projects (RPs) from the dashboard spreadsheet.
- If one of the program outcomes is “knowledge generation”, “filling knowledge gaps” or something similar, select projects that have a high percentage relevant to that outcome. It is more likely that the primary focus of these projects will be on the actual generation of research findings.
- From the dashboard spreadsheet tab labeled “research outputs”, 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 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, probably 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 show up as "components" of the overall project. The components are basically 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 a workshop that brings the projects 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 these considering the key influences outlined below and prepare a chart as shown in Table 1. Identification of key influences are meant to ground the assessment in a reflection of contextual and risk factors and serve two purposes: (1) to define the program portfolio by identifying project clusters according to the types and levels of key influences for each project. Scatter diagrams, or similar visual aids can be used to show the influence profile of the program, also enabling comparison across programs; and (2) to understand better the performance along a certain trajectory towards high performance in the quality or effectiveness of the research.

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 consider consulting with the Program Officer assigned to the project in question or another member of the Program team. External reviewers will then take these key influences into account and rate research quality in light of these considerations.

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*	☐ *(2) Emerging field*	☐ *(3) New field*
Well-established and recognized theoretical and conceptual frameworks, a substantial body of conceptual and empirical research, discernable outlets (journals, conferences, curriculum) and the presence of a vibrant corps of experienced researchers all characterize the field.	Recognized by members and non-members, with a discernable body of work , theory and practice, and discernable outlets, and a modest body of active researchers who easily associate with the field, and recognize each other.	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. 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 inexistent or is a low priority in this project	☐ *(2) Medium focus*	☐ *(3) strong focus* Research capacity strengthening is an important priority in this project alongside other equally important priorities and intentions.

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

2.3 Risk in the data environment

Risk here 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) Low risk* 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) Medium risk*	☐ *(3) High risk* 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:

2.4 Risk in 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) Low risk*	☐ *(2) Medium risk*	☐ *(3) High risk*
Research environment - institutional priorities, incentives, facilities, etc. - is established and 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:

2.5 Risk in the political environment[3]

Risk here refers to the stability of the political environment in which the research is conducted. This is external risk related to the range of potential adverse factors that could arise in a certain context 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.

☐ *(1) Low risk*	☐ *(2) Medium risk*	☐ (3) *High risk*
Stable political environment with established governance practices, no conflict, etc.		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.

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

Emerald Green = well established field

Red = high political risk

Yellow = moderate political risk

Green = low political risk, etc.

Table 1. Using Key influences to Characterize Research Projects

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

STEP 3. RATING RESEARCH QUALITY

The instrument for rating the quality of research in each project consists of four dimensions (some with sub-dimensions) rated on an 8-point scale from "unacceptable" to "Very Good." Ratings are based on the examination of relevant evidence. It may be that in some cases, reviewers judge that a particular sub-dimension is not applicable to the project in question. When this is the case, reviewers are asked to record a full assessment, based on their expert knowledge, of why this sub-dimension is not applicable (e.g. gender responsiveness, etc.) Similarly, 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, external 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 and explicit discussion of means of data collection and analysis.
- 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).

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 approach 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 major shortcomings in the justification for the choice of research design and methods.		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.	

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.

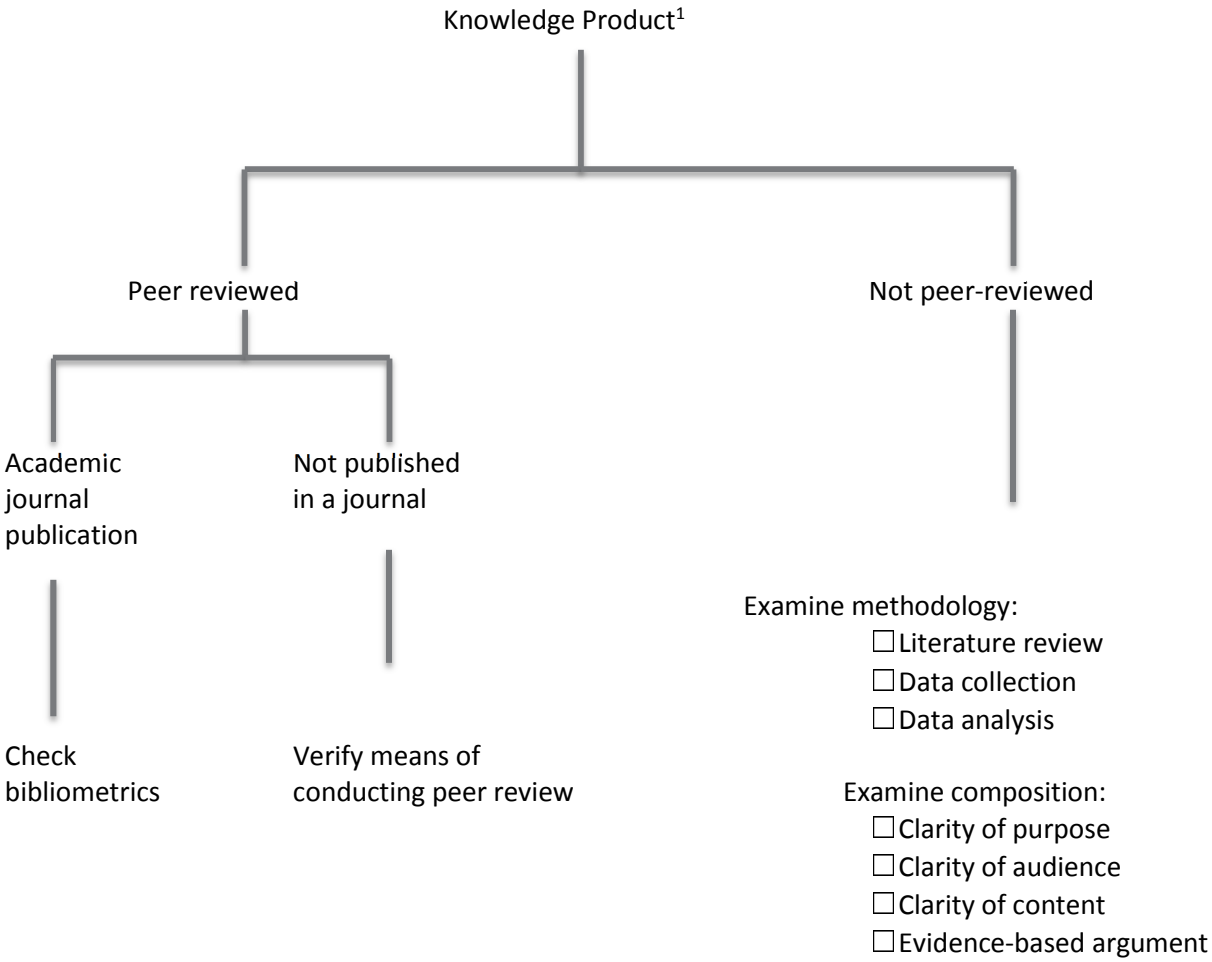
It is important for external reviewers to recognize that in some cases they can use research products as proxies to assess research integrity. In this respect, there are three options:

(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. We assume that external reviewers are 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 Products[4]



[4] Research integrity also includes the ethically responsible conduct of research. We assume that prospective ethical review was conducted before a research project was undertaken, and that a statement to the effect that such a review was conducted is available in the project documentation

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 all products in that category using a simple average of ratings for all products within a given category as shown in Table 3 below. Other types of outputs, such as patents and other forms of intellectual property, will require an assessment tailor-made for the product.

Table 2. Composite Rating of Knowledge Products by Product Category

Composite Rating (Scale of 1-8) on Product Category	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	Etc.
Conference Proceedings	$\overline{x}$	$\overline{x}$							
Journal Articles	$\overline{x}$	$\overline{x}$							
Technical Reports	$\overline{x}$	$\overline{x}$							
Etc.	$\overline{x}$	$\overline{x}$							

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment, or the reasons if an assessment was not possible in a given category of knowledge 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. Evidence of performance under this dimension is likely to be found in project documentation (monitoring reports, etc.) and/or from key informant interviews.

For example, if research processes are not sensitive to local traditions or to local authorities, relationships within a community or with powerful authorities might be seriously damaged. If significant strategic activities or large amounts of funding bypass a legitimate system without integrated planning, the execution of national plans may suffer. If a new product or technology is likely to have serious side effects or affect the wellbeing of vulnerable populations, information should be made available and precautions proposed when the results are made public. Such potential problems should be systematically identified during the course of the research process. Although negative consequences or outcomes are frequently dependent on how the research results are used and therefore out of the control of the research team, those involved need to attend to this issue where it can reasonably be done, and solutions or precautionary measures suggested.

SUBDIMENSION 2.1 ADDRESSING POTENTIALLY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES AND OUTCOMES FOR AFFECTED POPULATIONS							
Not Applicable	**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 nature of the research is such that negative consequences or outcomes are extremely unlikely. Or, no apparent risk in this regard has as yet emerged. **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 or outcomes from the research process or results. The researchers appear to have been insensitive to this aspect of the research.		There are signs that the researchers were sensitive to this issue. Some efforts were made to address what could turn into negative consequences or outcomes. The extent to which this was successful is not quite clear; there may be a need for more attention to this issue.		The researchers were 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.		Appropriate and timely measures have been taken to eliminate or mitigate foreseeable negative consequences or outcomes of research. There are indications that this was the result of a systematic effort by the research team to mitigate negative consequences and outcomes, to the extent possible for the research team.	

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: Gender-responsiveness

Each IDRC project approval document (PAD) encourages program officers to consider gender: "There is no such thing as a gender neutral project." Thus, there should be evidence in procedures for data collection and analysis and in research products that the project in question was aware of and responsive to the needs of and issues affecting women and men. Aspects covered include:

- Sensitivity to the needs and special situations or women and/or men, as relevant, in the project design
- 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 gender power relations
- Systematic gender differentiated analysis of research activities and findings on women and men
- Solutions that are cognizant of the different situations, responses and needs of men and women in society

SUBDIMENSION 2.2 GENDER-RESPONSIVENESS

Not Applicable	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 nature of the research is such that gender aspects do not need to be taken into account. **Insufficient Detail to Assess** Not enough information available to make a credible assessment of whether gender differentiated	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.		Gender was a consideration in the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. However, not enough was done to address previous or existing gender based discriminations, or to understand the gender aspects of social or technological change.		Gender was considered across all aspects of the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. Some issues related to the gender aspects of social or technological change might, however, need further examination.		Gender was considered with great sensitivity across all aspects of the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. It has brought significant new, highly credible insights that can be used to address gender discrimination, and facilitate social or technological change.	

analysis was considered in the research design, execution and findings

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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: Inclusiveness of vulnerable populations

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, gender or age - unless there is a valid, defensible reason for the exclusion
- Avoid any undue coercion or influencing of a vulnerable person, community or population through for example incentives, inducements, financial benefits or financial costs for participants that might not be appropriate in the cultural context
- Ensure that the interests of vulnerable, marginalized communities or populations are a priority, unless there is a sound justification for the contrary.

SUBDIMENSION 2.3 INCLUSIVENESS								
Not Applicable	**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 nature of the research is such that inclusiveness does not need to be taken into account. **Insufficient Detail to Assess** Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	Inclusiveness is not a focus in the research design, execution or findings. Relevant selection processes and the prioritization and safeguarding of vulnerable or marginalized communities have not received sufficient attention. It is not clear that undue coercion or influencing of a vulnerable person, community or population can be, or has been prevented		Inclusiveness has been 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. It is not clear that undue coercion or influencing of a vulnerable person, community or population can be, or has been completely prevented.		Inclusiveness has been intentionally and appropriately addressed in research design, execution and findings. Few if any weaknesses remain in selection processes, and/or the prioritization and safeguarding of vulnerable or marginalized communities. There is no sign of undue coercion or influencing of a vulnerable person, community or population.		Inclusiveness has been intentionally and systematically addressed in the research design, execution and findings. There are no apparent weaknesses in relevant selection processes, and/or the prioritization and safeguarding of vulnerable or marginalized communities, or signs of undue coercion or influencing 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:

2.4: Engagement with local knowledge

This sub-dimension may not be relevant for all research projects in all aspects. It refers to the need to

- Address well identified local needs and/or priorities
- Engage local communities or populations 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 local benefits 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								
Not Applicable	**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 nature of the research is such that local knowledge and engagement do not need to be taken into account. **Insufficient detail to Assess** Not enough information available to make a credible assessment	Engagement with local contexts has been neglected during the research process. Several major weaknesses can be found, related to how research needs and questions were identified, local communities or populations engaged, local contexts and knowledge systems considered, and local benefits from the research process assured.		Local contexts and engagement have been considered during the research process, but some weaknesses remain related to how research needs and questions were identified, local communities or populations engaged, local contexts and knowledge systems considered, and/or local benefits from the research process assured.		Local context and engagement have been a focus in the research process. Few, if any, minor weaknesses remain related to how research needs and questions were identified, local communities or populations engaged, local contexts and knowledge systems considered, or local benefits from the research process assured.		Local context and engagement have been a clear and systematic focus in the research process. Research needs and questions were appropriately identified, local communities or populations engaged, local contexts and knowledge systems considered and respected, and local 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							
Not Applicable	**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 nature of the research is such that it is not intended to advance existing knowledge or generate new insights (e.g. systematic reviews)	There is little or no evidence that the research reflects originality in terms of building on and extending existing knowledge, breaking new ground, or making improvements in existing technologies and/or methods		The project is pertinent and significant but not particularly novel, original or ambitious. It is primarily concerned with adding to what is already known in the field (via extension, new applications, critique, etc.). While the research is not innovative, it is useful because it adds to what is already known.		The entire project is reasonably ambitious. It presents a fresh, groundbreaking idea, brings an innovative approach to solving existing challenges, and/or deals with a new, emerging issue worth pursuing. It challenges taken-for-granted assumptions. There has been no previous funding for the same focus (unless follow-up funding explicitly sought from appropriate schemes).	There is strong evidence of (a) novelty of substantive ideas, information, problems, and interpretation; (b) originality in relation to existing related research (approach/paradigm, techniques, theoretical or conceptual framework, use of evidence); (c) promise (ideas that are likely to stimulate further research and development); as well as (d) potential for a substantial contribution to theory and/or practice.	

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

3.2: Relevance

Noteworthy development research is salient (important) and relevant 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, to be responsive to local conditions and concerns (even when aimed at regional or global challenges), 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
There is little or no evidence that the research might contribute to a local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the foreseeable future. Needs assessments and justification for the work are absent or unconvincing.		There is some evidence that the research might contribute to a local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the foreseeable future. A focus on this area of work at this time appears sufficiently justified.		There is good evidence that the research might contribute to an important local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an emerging area of some significance that might demand solutions in the near future. A focus on this area of work at this time has been well justified.		There is good evidence that the research is already recognized as having the potential to address a critical local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an important emerging area that is highly likely to demand solutions in the near future. A focus on this area of work at this time puts the researchers at the cutting edge of an active and/or important field of work.	

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' dissemination 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

This criterion is directly concerned with the extent to which research products (a) are directly targeted to potential 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) are rendered in formats that match the way potential user groups access information (e.g., policy briefs for policymakers; open access publication outlets). An important consideration here is evidence of strategies used in a given project to target potential users. 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
There is little or no evidence that the research was 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 is little or no evidence that there has been attention 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.		Documents show an effort to map and understand stakeholders or key potential user groups, and some engagement with understanding the larger context within which they operate. There is evidence that some attention has been paid to making research findings available in appropriate formats and through appropriate mechanisms to well-targeted potential user groups. However, the findings are relevant only to one particular user group. Little effort has been made to develop appropriate outputs for potential users in other sectors		Documents show significant efforts to map stakeholders and potential user groups. Researchers appear to have a credible understanding of the context within which key potential users/user groups operate. There is evidence of a significant focus on making research findings appropriately available to different potential user groups. Different types of user-friendly formats have been prepared. There may be some question as to whether the mechanisms for dissemination are sufficient to enable easy access for a variety of users to the findings. (*Alternatively*, although different modes of dissemination have been used, it is not clear that the formats are well tailored to make them user-friendly and attractive to different user groups)		There is evidence that the research was not only initiated and conducted with use in mind, but with an emphasis on engaging with the contexts of potential users. There is evidence of a significant focus on making research findings appropriately available to well-targeted and influential potential user groups in different sectors. Different types of user-friendly formats have been prepared for the different groups. Significant efforts have been made to identify and use mechanisms that make the findings highly accessible in user-friendly formats, including (or in particular) to those identified as particularly influential.

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:[5]

- 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
There is little or no evidence that any analysis of relevant user environment was undertaken and that institutional, political, social or economic contingences were considered.		There is evidence that some analysis of the user setting was under undertaken; however, consideration of is incomplete and, furthermore, the analysis is not accompanied by discussion of actual strategies or plans to move the knowledge to policy or practice.		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 a timely manner.		The analysis of the user environment and contingencies is exceptionally thorough and well-documented or articulated. There is evidence of careful prospective appraisal of the likelihood of success of strategies designed to address contingencies.	

Please provide a brief explanation for the assessment and indicate sources of evidence.

[5] 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 Dehli: Sage, 2009

4. SYNTHESIZING THE RATINGS

Aggregating research project ratings to arrive at a portfolio level assessment will be challenging. Care needs to be taken to ensure that over all numeric ratings are underpinned by strong qualitative narratives. The rubrics provided above are meant to encourage clear performance language and criteria and to help balance these two types of judgement. The ratings for each research dimension can used and synthesized to provide an assessment of the program portfolio. It can be done per dimension or sub-dimension, or across the dimensions.

Overall ratings of a portfolio of projects can be prepared using Table 4 shown below. Mean scores are entered for the dimension "Research Integrity".

Table 4. Synthesis of Ratings across Projects

Dimensions (Scored on Scale of 1-8)	**P1**	**P2**	**P3**	**P4**	**P5**	**P6**	**P7**	**P8**	**Etc.**	**Overall Program Rating by Dimension** ($\bar{x}$)
1.0 Research integrity										
2.1 Addressing potentially negative consequences										
2.2 Gender-responsiveness										
2.3 Inclusiveness										
2.4 Engagement with local knowledge										
3.1 Originality										
3.2 Relevance										
4.1 Knowledge accessibility & sharing										
4.2 Timeliness and Actionability										
Overall Project Rating ($\bar{x}$)										

Alternatively, in the cells of Table 4, instead of using the scale scores of 1-8, in order to facilitate synthesis towards a better understanding of the classification of projects in a portfolio, one could note the four different levels of performance:

Level 1 = Unacceptable

Level 2 =Less than acceptable

Level 3 = Acceptable/Good

Level 4 = Very Good

To understand how the key influences interface with and affect research quality ratings, all projects and their scores can be sorted as shown in Table 5. For example, all projects identified as low in maturity of the field and high on all the other project characteristics are listed and scores for Research Quality (using the scale of 1-8, or levels 1-4 shown above) are compared. In this way, one can look for patterns in the data.

Table 5. Relationship between Low Maturity Projects & Research Quality

Ex. Key influence: Research maturity (low, medium, high)	Research integrity	Addressing potentially negative consequences	Gender-responsiveness	Inclusiveness	Engagement with local knowledge	Originality	Relevance	Knowledge accessibility & sharing	Actionability
P1	4								
P2	2								
P3	7								
P4	6								
P5	7								
P6	6								
P7									
Etc.									