

How to build effective implementing partner relationships

This guide offers advice on how to form a strong research partnership with an implementing partner based on the experiences of J-PAL staff and researchers.

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This guide offers advice on how to form a strong and successful relationship with implementing partners

Working with a strong implementing partner lays the foundation for being able to implement a successful RCT¹. In this guide, the term ‘implementing partner’ refers to the organization implementing the policy, program, or platform that you would like to evaluate. This could be a government department, non-profit organization, or private company. While there are cases where the researchers evaluating a program are also involved in its implementation, the vast majority of randomized evaluations are implemented by a separate organization. Aside from the implementing partner that delivers the intervention, researchers usually partner with a separate data collection partner (e.g., J-PAL regional office, IPA country office, local survey firm) to measure outcomes for participants in the treatment group who receive the intervention and non-participants in the control group who do not receive the intervention. This resource focuses on the relationship between the research team and the implementing partner delivering the intervention rather than the data collection partner.

There can be variations in the level of involvement of the research team in the design of the intervention. In some cases, researchers devise a research question based on a review of existing literature and have their own ideas for a new intervention they think could be effective. In such cases, the researchers may search for implementation partners with experience implementing similar programs and explore their willingness to implement a new intervention tailored to the research question from the research team. In other cases, implementers (e.g., government agency, NGO) may have an existing program that they want to partner with researchers to evaluate without any significant adaptation.

Many evaluations fall somewhere in between. For example, researchers may have a general idea of the type of intervention they want to evaluate but don’t yet have a specific treatment design in mind. In such cases, researchers may contact a number of potential implementing partners in search of one with overlapping evaluation interests and openness to designing a new intervention collaboratively. Most J-PAL-funded evaluations fall in these latter two scenarios where the intervention is designed or co-designed by the implementing partner, in part because J-PAL only

¹ Randomized evaluations (also known as randomized controlled trials or field experiments) are a type of impact evaluation method where study participants are randomly assigned to one or more groups that receive different types of real-world interventions known as “treatment groups” and a comparison group that does not receive an intervention. Researchers then measure outcomes of interest in the treatment and comparison group.

offers funding for the cost of the evaluation and not the intervention. If researchers want to evaluate a novel intervention that is designed and implemented by the research team, they will need to raise additional external funds to cover intervention costs, which are typically much more expensive than evaluation costs, in order to conduct the RCT.

The relationship between researcher and implementer is crucial to the success of an evaluation. A recent J-PAL evaluation shows that the quality of implementation by individual partners can significantly affect the outcomes of large-scale interventions (Avdeenko, Frölich, and Helmsmüller, 2024). In the longer term, a strong partnership on one study can lay the foundation to collaborate on future studies, resulting in a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship. Many of the most successful bodies of research come from repeated collaborations such as [Teaching at the Right Level](#), or TaRL, evaluated and rolled out at scale in India and Africa.

In this guide, we provide advice on how to build and maintain a strong relationship with a partner organization that we hope will be useful throughout the planning and implementation of your randomized evaluation.

How to determine whether an evaluation may be valuable from an academic perspective

From J-PAL's perspective, the ideal randomized evaluation will make a significant contribution to both the academic literature and to policymaking. However, the two goals are not always aligned (Masset, et al, 2019, 28). For example, an implementing partner might be interested in an impact evaluation of their program, answering the question of whether the program improved outcomes beyond business as usual. If the program does not have a strong theory of change or if evidence of the impact of the program in similar settings already exists, answering such a question—while important for the implementing organization—can be difficult to publish academically.

Therefore, before launching a collaboration with an implementing partner, it is important to consider whether the evaluation can help answer research questions that are theoretically important beyond the scope of the program itself. For example,

- if a program has previously been evaluated on a **small scale**, consider testing whether it also has impacts at scale;
- if a program has previously been found to have **short-term effects**, consider testing whether the effects are persistent over time;

- if a program has shown to be **effective for a specific group**, consider testing whether it will also be impactful for a different group;
- if you think the program might have positive or negative **spillovers** on non-recipients, consider measuring these specifically; or
- consider testing **different versions of the same program** or **different implementation models** against each other to see which is more cost-effective.

From an academic perspective, the question is not “Is this program important to evaluate or not?” but “Are there any outstanding questions in the academic literature that an evaluation of this program can help answer?” In order to answer this question, it is important to draw up the theory of change and consider the generalizability of the research results.

Similarly, some research questions may constitute a significant contribution to the academic literature but be less useful for informing the design and delivery of concrete policies and programs. For example, estimating risk aversion or a time preference coefficient may be academically interesting but not directly relevant for policy partners. Ideally, you can work with prospective implementing partners to identify research questions that will be interesting and useful to both academic and policy audiences. In some cases, you may be able to design the evaluation to include multiple research questions to directly evaluate the impact of the program and provide evidence that speaks to theoretical debates in the academic literature.

How to identify an implementing partner that is ready for a randomized evaluation of their program

Assessing the partner's program and needs

Before initiating discussions about evaluation with a potential partner, it's important to gain a thorough understanding of the organization's current programs and their evaluation needs (e.g., unresolved questions about a program's impact). This information can determine if the program is suitable for a randomized evaluation and will allow for tailored discussions addressing the partner's specific needs and concerns.

Some areas for initial discussion with a potential partner include:

- **Organizational focus and mission:** Understand the core objectives and mission of the partner organization to see if your research ideas align with their overarching goals.

- **Program details:** Gather specific details about the program including objectives, components, and any previous evaluations done on the program and the results.
- **Program context:** Gain insights into the operational context in which the program operates, including geographical location, community demographics, target population characteristics, and any contextual factors that may influence program implementation or evaluation.
- **Scale and funding:** Gauge the feasibility and scope of potential research activities by assessing the scale of program implementation and funding availability.
- **Evaluation objectives:** Understand the partner's evaluation objectives, including what they hope to learn from an evaluation and the resources available for conducting assessments.

You can also consider what types of questions you may be able to answer through an RCT. In addition to evaluating the impact of a program (e.g., treatment versus control), RCTs can be designed to answer other kinds of research questions, such as:

- **Comparison of different program versions or components:** RCTs can assess which particular program components or versions are most effective in achieving the desired outcomes.
- **Comparison of program impacts under different delivery mechanisms:** RCTs can evaluate how program impacts vary when delivered through different channels or methods.
- **Evaluating the optimal dosage for an intervention:** RCTs can assess variations of a program based on the dosage or degree (e.g., duration or intensity) an intervention is administered to different study groups.
- **Cost-effectiveness of a program:** RCTs can analyze the cost-effectiveness of implementing a program compared to alternative interventions.
- **Accuracy of measurement tools for outcomes:** RCTs can evaluate the reliability and validity of measurement tools used to assess program outcomes.

Assessing the suitability of an RCT

Once you have a comprehensive understanding of the organization and their program(s), you can assess whether they may be an appropriate partner to run an RCT with. You may want to consider:

- **Program eligibility:** Consider who is eligible for the program and whether or not it is possible and ethical to exclude anyone from receiving the program. For example, it usually is not feasible or ethical to exclude eligible participants from entitlement programs (e.g., cash transfer programs). In cases where it is not feasible to administer the program to all eligible individuals at once, you can consider a randomized phase-in design, where the program is rolled out in stages rather than being available to everyone at once. You can also consider expanding eligibility for the program and randomizing within newly eligible individuals. If exclusion is not possible at all, you can consider using an encouragement design that maintains universal access to the program while encouraging take-up in the treatment group. You can also consider evaluating an aspect or component of the program by allowing everyone access to the program but randomizing which version of the program people receive. For more information on these types of evaluation designs, see J-PAL North America's "[Real-World Challenges to Randomization and their Solutions.](#)"
- **Program design:** Assess the complexity of the program and its intervention components to determine if randomization is feasible and appropriate. This involves reviewing the details of the program design to determine if it can be effectively randomized without compromising the integrity of the program or the evaluation. If the program is overly complex, you may want to consider implementing a simplified version of the intervention for the evaluation. It can be difficult to replicate complex programs in other settings and the complexity may limit the generalizability of the study's findings. It can also be mutually beneficial if the program design is not locked-in and the partner is open to adjusting program features based on evaluation findings. Lastly, you should consider [potential challenges](#) that could arise during implementation such as spillovers, attrition, and possible evaluation-driven effects.
- **Program scale:** It is important to consider the scale at which the program can be implemented for the experiment. Programs that can only be implemented at a limited scale may not be sufficiently powered to detect statistically significant effects. Conducting statistical power calculations with the program's available sample can help you determine if

a randomized evaluation of the program is feasible. Please see J-PAL’s research resource on [power calculations](#) for more guidance on determining the appropriate sample size for your study.

- **Study feasibility:** Consider the partner’s resource availability, including funding, personnel, and time needed to implement the intervention effectively. While the partner does not need to have the skills or funding to carry out the *evaluation* (because the researcher typically provides these), ensuring the availability of resources to carry out the *implementation* is crucial for the success of the evaluation. It is also important to consider the partner’s readiness and commitment to engage in a long-term collaboration for the study. This involves assessing factors such as mutual interests, policy orientation, and the capacity for sustained collaboration with the research team. Additionally, assessing the partner’s available resources, technical capabilities, understanding of the methodology, and flexibility in regards to program design are also important to consider.
- **Partner buy-in:** In some cases, the partner may be hesitant to have their program evaluated. For example, the partner might receive government funding to run their program and may have concerns around the evaluation finding that their program is not having the desired impact. Identifying key personnel within the organization to engage with is crucial for securing organizational buy-in and ensuring that partners understand the commitment involved in participating in the study. If possible, it’s best to engage with multiple key personnel in the event that your main point of contact leaves the organization or transitions to a different role.

Not too early and not too late!

It is important to ensure that the potential implementing partner is at the right stage for a randomized evaluation. The table below breaks down a few of the different stages that an organization or program may be at, and whether an RCT is possible at each stage.

Type of organization	For example, An NGO which provides farmers with a digital platform to access inputs...	Ready for an RCT
An established organization with an established program that is not yet implemented at	The platform has been rolled out at the village level but there are still many villages to reach. This allows for a control group which is necessary for an RCT.	Yes

scale		
An established organization rolling out an adapted version of an existing program	The digital platform in the core program already has strong evidence of its effectiveness but a new version has been designed to improve its cost effectiveness or reach a particular subset of recipients.	Yes (for the adapted version)
An established organization with a program rolled out at scale	The digital platform has already been rolled out to everyone in the population of a given region, so access to the program cannot be randomized. However, an RCT may still be possible in two scenarios: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The take-up of the platform is not high, allowing evaluation using an encouragement design. • The platform is going to be implemented in a new region, allowing you to randomize who has access. 	Yes, if take-up is low or if the program is being implemented in a new region, otherwise too late
The organization is still in its proof-of-concept phase	The NGO is still in the process of developing and testing its digital platform.	Too early for a full RCT but could be suited for exploratory work

Factors that facilitate a good match between researchers and implementing partners

Apart from the willingness and suitability of an implementing partner, there are several other factors that make for a mutually beneficial and impactful research partnership:

- Collaborative and strong partnerships are formed when the researchers and implementing partners have mutually-aligned interests.
- It is beneficial when the research is driven by demand from the implementing partner.
- The research is policy-orientated, as this increases the scalability of the research findings and the potential impact of the research.
- Working with a locally embedded and committed implementing partner is highly beneficial because they understand the context well and will be invested in the success of the evaluation.

- It is generally more efficient and lower risk (for intervention implementation and scaling potential) to adapt a program or innovate on the edges of a program rather than developing a program from scratch.

How to pitch randomization to a partner without RCT experience

Many implementing partners may lack familiarity with RCTs or may not recognize the value of running an experiment to evaluate their program. It's important to effectively communicate the advantages of RCTs and address any questions or concerns they have about the methodology.

Discussing the potential benefits of an RCT compared with other evaluation methods

If the program appears suitable for an RCT, initiate discussions with the partner about the potential benefits of adopting this evaluation approach compared to other methodologies. One point to emphasize is that RCTs use random assignment to ensure that treatment and control groups are similar on average, both in observable and unobservable characteristics. This eliminates selection bias and allows for more credible estimates of program impact by creating a clear causal link between the program and outcomes. When compared to other evaluation methods, such as pre-post, difference-in-differences, or matching, which need strong assumptions to hold for accurate conclusions to be drawn about causal impact, RCTs (when done well) do not depend on such strong assumptions.

For example, pre-post evaluations rely on the assumption that outcomes would have remained the same over time in the absence of the program. However, this assumption is often challenged by external factors that could influence outcomes independent of the organization's intervention.

Difference-in-differences accounts for the fact that outcomes often change over time regardless of the intervention you want to evaluate, but relies on the assumption that treatment and control groups would have experienced the same changes over time in the absence of the program. This assumption is difficult to test and may well not hold in reality.

Matching attempts to create a comparison group by pairing program participants to non-participants based on observable characteristics. However, finding suitable matches and accounting for unobservable differences can be difficult. Even with careful matching on several

characteristics, there may be other variables that influence both participation in the program and outcomes, leading to biased estimates of program impact.

Addressing common questions about RCTs

Partners might have questions regarding the relevance and feasibility of RCTs to their programs. It is important to acknowledge any questions or concerns and to address them clearly and as soon as possible.

Here are some common questions and concerns about RCTs and potential ways to address them:

- **RCTs are expensive and time-consuming:** While it is true that RCTs can entail a significant time and resource investment, these concerns are not unique to randomized evaluations. For example, collecting original survey data is often the most expensive part of an evaluation, which is common in most other impact evaluation methodologies. Balancing the costs and benefits of RCTs is essential, considering the rigorous evidence they can provide of a program's impact. Moreover, there are strategies to mitigate the time and expense associated with RCTs, such as leveraging existing data sources and adopting innovative methods that can streamline the evaluation and research processes. Some examples include [using administrative data](#) for baseline or outcome measurement, applying [advanced statistical techniques](#) to test several treatments within a single experiment, and implementing an [adaptive approach to experiment design](#) to more directly target learning goals. There may also be costs to not evaluating a program, such as continuing a program that is not effective when those resources could be allocated to more effective programs.
- **Why do we need a control group?:** Questions about the necessity of a control group in RCTs often arise due to concerns about denying access to interventions for certain individuals. However, it is possible to conduct randomized evaluations without withholding treatment to anyone who would normally receive the treatment by comparing different versions of interventions, implementing randomization among newly eligible participants, or randomizing within a sample that is larger than the program can normally accommodate. [Ethical considerations](#) play a crucial role in determining the appropriateness of control groups and the allocation of resources in RCTs.
- **Can RCTs tell us *why* a program does or doesn't work?:** There might be some concern that RCTs offer limited insights into the underlying mechanisms and processes driving program effectiveness, focusing primarily on whether it works or not. However,

properly designed RCTs can yield valuable insights into the "how" and "why" of interventions by [examining intermediate outcomes](#), [testing various intervention components](#), and [exploring differential impacts across subgroups](#). [Integrating qualitative methods](#) and [local knowledge](#) can further enhance understanding of intervention mechanisms and implementation processes.

- **Are RCT results generalizable to other contexts?:** While RCTs ensure unbiased estimates of intervention impacts in their original context, questions remain about the extent to which findings can be extrapolated to different settings or populations. Addressing generalizability requires careful consideration of contextual factors and looking at replication studies of the intervention of interest. Generalizability concerns are applicable to any impact evaluation method.

Tips for addressing questions and concerns

Broaching the topic of randomization might be more difficult with some partners than others. Some may be open to the idea of running an RCT to investigate the effectiveness of their program but have a limited understanding of the methodology, while others may be skeptical of RCTs in principle. Consider who your audience is and tailor responses to the person's background, expertise, and concerns, ensuring that discussions resonate with their specific interests and priorities. Also, remember to use empathy and respect in communication, acknowledging the partner's expertise and perspective throughout the discussion.

Below is a framework for approaching questions and concerns posed by partners (these steps can be followed in any order):

- **Inquire further:** Ask additional questions to gain deeper insight into their perspective. This approach helps bridge potential gaps in understanding and uncovers the underlying issues driving their concerns. It also demonstrates a genuine interest in understanding their viewpoint.
- **Acknowledge challenges:** Recognize and validate the challenges and constraints they might face running an RCT. Being transparent about these obstacles from the outset fosters trust and shows empathy towards the partner's concerns.
- **Reframe perspectives:** While the initial question may focus on a specific issue, delve deeper to uncover the root concern. Reframing the discussion based on insights gained

during the discussion allows for a more nuanced understanding of the partner's perspective.

- **Provide solutions:** Offer your perspective and share relevant information to address their concerns practically. Present potential solutions and offer viable paths forward.

How to form a strong relationship with implementing partners

Formulate a research question that both parties are interested in

Working with your implementing partner to generate a research question is a great way to get buy-in from the implementing partner from the outset. This can be done through preliminary conversations with your implementing partner where you should demonstrate familiarity with the partner's existing programs and evaluations (if applicable). During these initial discussions it is advisable to ask your implementing partner what they think are the biggest unanswered questions related to their program. This will serve as a starting point to jointly come up with a research question that you and your partner are interested in. It is a lot easier to get buy-in from your implementing partner if they are a genuine partner who is co-developing the research project (even if the researcher already has something specific in mind).

Alternatively, if you already have a very clear and definite research question in mind, you can try to think of why the question you have in mind would be of particular interest to your implementing partner and demonstrate to them why you think so. Ideally, if possible, try to design the evaluation to be able to answer both your research question and a question of interest to the implementing partner.

Investing time in the above process will help to ensure that your partner is incentivized to invest in the success of the project. Additionally, your research results are more likely to inform the program or platform that your partner offers if they are interested in the research question. This will ultimately help to increase the use of evidence in the partner's daily operations.

Getting buy-in at the right levels

You need to ensure that you get buy-in from all levels within the partner organization to help ensure the success of the research project. If you only have buy-in from the very top, it will be extremely difficult to implement research activities on the ground. If you only have buy-in from

junior staff, you might start with research activities that senior management has not approved, which could seriously damage your relationship with your implementing partner going forward.

You should start by building trust and familiarity with your implementing partner. Demonstrating the skills, expertise, experience, and interests of the research team while learning about the partner's needs, interests, and familiarity with impact evaluation methods can help to build the foundation of a strong working relationship.

If you are interested in collaborating with your partner on multiple projects in the future, it may be helpful to build a more general relationship first, which could include knowledge sharing and informal advising if you have sufficient relevant experience and time. For example, you could present findings from research you've conducted on related programs to program staff, or offer to advise more generally on the partner's programs and broader evaluation strategies beyond the specific new collaboration under development. This approach allows the partner to get to know the researcher/research team and may reduce any skepticism the partner has about RCTs as an impact evaluation methodology. This may also assist you in identifying other research questions that you may not have thought of initially. Following these conversations, the research team can put together a pitch for a specific research idea, making sure to incorporate information learned about the partner's priorities in initial conversations.

Thereafter, it is advisable to have a fairly detailed research proposal prepared so that you are able to pitch a specific research idea should the partner decide to proceed with an evaluation. This is also a good way to get high-level buy-in. The proposal should clearly outline your planned research activities, when they will take place, what falls within the scope of the project, what kinds of support stakeholders need to provide to ensure the success of the project, what you plan on evaluating, and what your planned research outputs are. This proposal will not only help you secure high-level approvals for your evaluation but can also serve as a foundation for a letter of support and/or MoU from your partner. Additionally, a research proposal also helps ensure that all parties are on the same page and know what the research team is working towards. It is also helpful to highlight substantive aspects of the research design that you would like to co-create or revise collaboratively with the partner so that they feel empowered to be an equal partner.

Usually, when trying to get buy-in from senior management it is useful for the lead researcher or principal investigator (PI) to do the initial outreach. If the PI is not known and does not have a history with the partner, it may be useful for them to get a referral from a researcher who has

worked with the partner before or another more senior researcher or a policy maker who can vouch for the PI.

To get buy-in from junior staff it is important to communicate that you already have buy-in from senior management and find ways to spend time and engage with staff. For example, you could arrange for a research associate (RA) to work from their offices once a week to help form relationships between you and your partner organization. It is also crucial to ensure that you have more than one champion within your partner organization in case of turnover.

Important topics to discuss with your implementing partner

The research team needs to discuss data-sharing agreements and formal protocols with their partners from the onset of a research project. This will help them to determine if there are any legal agreements necessary for the research activities to proceed and under what circumstances the researcher can collect and publish data from the implementing partner.

Please see [this](#) resource for more information on how to formalize a research partnership and establish roles and expectations.

How to maintain a strong relationship with your implementing partner

Develop a strong communication strategy

A thoughtful communication strategy on how, when and what to share with your partner can help to foster a strong relationship with your partner. Furthermore, good communication ensures that the implementing partner learns from the research and can use results to inform future policies or programs.

Once you have identified a communication strategy with your partner organization, it is important to maintain consistent communication. The frequency and format of your communication will depend on project needs and partner preferences. It is good practice to consider scheduling recurring meetings with your partner on either a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis depending on project needs.

Use these meetings to present any preliminary findings to your partner in order to keep them engaged and interested in your project, especially given that the project timeline might be long and

partners may become disinterested if they are not updated throughout the project. This ensures that the partner feels like they are benefiting from the research project, which will motivate them to work with you to ensure the success of the project.

The types of insights that you should share with your partner include:

- Demographic characteristics of their program recipients
- Interesting findings from the needs assessment
- Preliminary study findings, taking into account that results may not be accurate and may change over time as the project progresses and more data is collected.
- Results at the end of the study
- Thoughtful recommendations to the partner at the end of the study on the policy relevance of the results

It is important to share results in formats that are easy to understand and engage with. For example, given that many partners may not have the same scientific or statistical background as the research team, sharing results in a regression table may not be very helpful. Additionally, avoid communicating with partners using economic jargon that might not be easily understood. A good idea is to use easily understood visuals such as bar graphs, pie charts, and histograms that you could present to and share with partners in a PowerPoint presentation. Try to make meetings with partners as interactive as possible so that both parties can learn from each other.

Sharing results with partners is an opportunity to get valuable feedback on how you could improve the research project or make the results more useful for them. For example, they may want you to add a question to your survey instrument or have a suggestion on the intervention or randomization method. As far as possible, try to incorporate the ideas you receive from your partner as long as it does not compromise the integrity of the study. This will ensure that your partner feels their input is valued and is more likely to be invested in the success of your study.

Signs that something might be going wrong

The implementing partner stops being responsive in communication

Continue to reach out to your implementing partner and, if feasible, visit your partner in person. It is particularly helpful if a senior member of the research team is part of the visit. This signals to

the implementing partner that they are valued and creates the space for strategic and sometimes sensitive conversations to take place.

The implementing partner is not transparent about the implementation of the program or the randomized assignment of participants

One way to address a lack of transparency on the implementation of the program or randomization strategy is by establishing a process monitoring protocol before starting the implementation of the project. This [J-PAL guide](#) provides detailed guidance on implementation monitoring.

Retroactively, it would be advisable to set up meetings with your implementing partner to discuss concerns that you have with program implementation. Field visits are a good way to assess why the program is not being implemented as it should and how to correct it. Alongside field visits, it might be helpful to conduct focus groups with implementers and participants to identify where the program implementation is deviating from the original design. These conversations will help reveal issues such as challenges in delivering the intervention, pushback from local stakeholders or community members, and constraints faced by the implementing partners. Gathering this type of information will help the research team find solutions to these problems and/or account for the deviations in the implementation in their analysis.

Appendix

Useful information to include about your implementing partner in funding proposals

Below we have compiled a list of important information to include in your research proposals where applicable:

- Link to the implementing partner's website if available
- Number of people ever reached by their program
- Any pre-existing findings on the impact of the program
- The component(s) of the program you would like to evaluate

- Geographical areas where the program has been implemented
- The target group of the program
- Any experience the partner has running research on their own programs or experience taking part in a research project
- Any past work you have done with this partner
- How much you already engage with your partner
- If you are required to submit a letter of support, where possible please ask the partner to state that they are committed to allowing the results to be published and would be willing to randomize their program.

Additional resources

- [Assessing the viability and building relationships](#)
- [Formalize research partnership and establish roles and expectations](#)
- [Implementation monitoring](#)
- [Communicating with a partner about results](#)
- [Chapter 5 - The Practicalities of Running Randomized Evaluations: Partnerships, Measurements, Ethics, and Transparency by R. Glennerster.](#)
- [Successful Impact Evaluations: Lessons from DFID and 3ie](#)