

## INDIA RESEARCH CORPS

### CLIENT GUIDE TO FRAMING S.M.A.R.T. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

#### Why SMART questions matter

At India Research Corps, we aim to match research scholars with questions from clients that are actionable — producing evidence that can inform policy, project design, community interventions, or systems change.

The SMART framework helps:

- Focus the question clearly.
- Ensure the research can yield measurable, interpretable results.
- Keep the scope realistic and time-bound, aligned with typical scholar engagement periods (often 6–9 months for mentors and scholars at IRC).

#### What does “SMART” stand for (in our context)?

- **Specific** — the question should target a clearly defined issue or relationship (who / what / where / when).
- **Measurable** — the variables/outcomes should be defined in a way that can be measured or quantified.
- **Achievable** — the question should be feasible with available data, methods, resources, and within the time frame.
- **Relevant** — it should matter to the client’s objectives (policy, programme design, community action), and align with IRC’s thematic areas (water, environment, land, livelihoods).
- **Time-bound** — include a clear time horizon (when the study starts/ends, or the period of analysis).

#### What to do as a potential IRC Client submitting research questions:

1. Identify the problem or decision you need evidence for.
2. Frame the question — start with “What ...”, “To what extent ...”, “How ...”, or “To what degree ...” which help us quantify and be specific.
3. Specify the variables (e.g., water abstraction volume, groundwater level, farmer income, adoption rate) so that measurement is possible.

4. Confirm that data (or data collection) is plausible within ~6–9 months (or reasonable period).
5. Indicate expected outcomes/users: how you will use results, and for what decision or action you are seeking this question to be answered.

### A few examples of SMART questions that IRC can answer for you:

*Over the next 12 months in Watershed X, how does adopting community-led water-use schedules (e.g., rotational irrigation, crop-planning agreements) affect pre- and post-monsoon groundwater levels (metres), and how can these findings guide the village watershed committee in designing more effective water-sharing rules for the next cropping season?*

#### **Why this works:**

It helps *Village Watershed Committees* or *FPOs* decide:

- whether rotational irrigation or shared schedules actually conserve groundwater;
- which villages need stricter community rules;
- where to prioritise **check-dams, recharge pits, or demand-management efforts**.

**The “so-what”:** Directly strengthens **collective water governance**, something grassroots groups can implement.

*During the upcoming Kharif season (June–November 20XX), what proportion of smallholder farmers (<2 ha) in Cluster Y adopt community-supported seed diversity practices (e.g., seed banks, seed-exchange events), and how does this influence the number and diversity of traditional crop varieties cultivated per farm? How can these insights shape village-level seed bank management and farmer training for the next season?*

#### **Why this works:**

Helps *NGOs* decide:

- whether **community seed banks** improve on-farm diversity;
- which training or awareness strategies actually shift adoption;
- how to target **women farmers, marginal farmers, or tribal communities** in seed-distribution drives.

**The “so-what”:** Enables grassroots organisations to design **better seed-saving programmes** and promote **local agro-biodiversity**.

*Between 2023 and 2025, how has the participation of women’s SHGs and farmer groups in village NRM committees affected the implementation rate (%) of agreed soil–water conservation activities (e.g., contour bunds, farm ponds, tree planting), and how can these findings help refine community mobilisation or committee-formation strategies for upcoming Gram Panchayat development plans?*

**Why this works:**

Helps community-facing organisations understand:

- whether **community mobilisation** is translating to actual NRM work on the ground;
- how SHG or farmer-group representation influences **compliance and follow-through**;
- which villages need additional facilitation support.

**The “so-what”:** Evidence feeds directly into **Village Development Plans (VDPs)** and **Gram Panchayat resource planning**, which grassroots NGOs regularly support.