Principles for reviewing a project monitoring system

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Summary of five principles

This paper provides reference material related to five monitoring principles. The five principles are listed first, followed by discussions of the first four principles. The fifth principle is discussed in a separate paper.

Principle 1

The terms "standards" and "indicators" are used in different ways in the development literature and in community development agency discourse. A statement in one context can be regarded as a standard, but in another context the same statement can be regarded as an indicator result. There are no right definitions for the two concepts, but they should be used in the same way in a particular discussion. Take time to agree on what each term will mean in a particular discussion.

Principle 2

There are different types of standards and indicators to serve different functions. Within a particular monitoring system identify the primary function to be served, and limit the system to those types of standards and indicators. If necessary, use another system for other types of standards and indicators.

Principle 3

Keep each monitoring system simple, even though measurement procedures may be complicated.

Principle 4

The strength of a monitoring system rests in feedback loops. When indicator readings show that there is a gap between actual conditions and acceptable conditions, describe what adjustments will be made to close the gap.

Principle 5

Organize standards and indicators into a monitoring system.
[Note 2014. See the companion document, "Creating a monitoring system," for discussion of this principle.

End: Note 2014 ....]

Principle 1: Clarify fundamental concepts

[Note 2014. To clarify a concept it is <u>defined</u>, a <u>format is provided</u> for including the key elements of the definition in a written description of the concept applied to particular situation, and a <u>checklist</u> is given for reviewing the quality of the written application. In numerous workshops with field staff from many countries I have found this approach to clarifying concepts effective.

You cannot know if a statement out of context is representing a project objective, work standard, or indicator result. Understanding this principle helps development facilitators avoid shallow discussions based solely on content of a statement, and engage in meaningful discussions to sharpen the focus of planning development activities.

I have included work standards in this discussion because often they are not included in a monitoring system. In transformational community development meeting behavior standards is at least as important as achieving project objectives.

End: Note 2014 ....]

The following exhibit shows how the same statement ("50% of the households attend community meetings") in three different contexts can be regarded as a project objective, a work standard, or the result of using an indicator to measure progress toward an objective.

Exhibit 1. When Is a Statement a Standard?

(From *Principles for Monitoring Transformational Community Development*, 1996)

Objective	Standard	Indicator Result
Community members have more capacity to manage their own development.	Community members participate in decisions about development activities.	**50% of the households attend community meetings.**
Community members participate in decisions about development activities.	**50% of the households attend community meetings.**	Check marks against names on a list of households made by the project committee secretary.
50% of the households attend community meetings.	In community meetings people express their opinions without fear.	Responses by a sample of people who attended the last meeting to the question: Did you say what you thought about issues that mattered to you?

Definition, format, quality checklist for Standard

A standard describes the characteristics of performance or conditions that must be attained for a situation to be rated as acceptable. Standards are not necessarily ideals or ultimate aims. They represent realistic levels of performance or conditions that can be attained with the resources at hand.

A general format for a written standard includes a description of the performance or conditions, followed by the criterion for acceptability. For example:
* Community meetings where program decisions are made (*performance*)
* shall have at least half of the men and half of the women present who live in the community (*criterion*).

A checklist of five items can be used to check the quality of a standard. Remember the five items as SMART features of standards: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Tested.

Exhibit 2. SMART Checklist for the quality of a standard.

- S = Is the central idea of the standard described specifically and clearly?
- M = Is the criterion measurable, or observable?
- A = Can the criterion be achieved in the typical project situation, with the resources that are usually available? Is the appropriate phase of the project for this criterion specified?
- R = Is the central idea in the standard relevant for transformational sustainable community development? Is it consistent with the ethos of the development agency as expressed in core documents such as the Mission Statement, Vision Statement, and Core Values?
- T = Is the content of the standard tested against appropriate knowledge and experience? Does knowledge and experience support the proposition that compliance with the standard will produce the desired outcome?

A similar checklist can be used for the quality of a project goal or objective. The difference is that "T" represents a tested standard and a time-bound objective.

Exhibit 3. SMART Checklist for the quality of a project goal/objective.

- Specific – the desired level of achievement, or the target, to be attained is described in detail.
- Measurable – there are meaningful numbers that can be used to tell if the goal or objective has been achieved. If there are no meaningful numbers, then there are specific conditions that can be observed that are used for this purpose.
- Achievable – the desired level of achievement, or target, can be achieved within the lifetime of the project.

- Relevant – the goal or objective is relevant to the stated needs or problem, and it is relevant to the communities and the project staff. For transformational development another aspect of relevance is the way that achieving the goal or objective allows people to experience transformation. (Some authors use the term "realistic" here to mean that the goal or objective is related to actual [real] needs. Since "realistic" also means "achievable, I prefers to use "relevant" to highlight the fact that there are five different characteristics.)
- Time-bound – For an objective there is a clearly stated time-frame in which it will be accomplished.

Definition, format, quality checklist for Indicator

An indicator provides information about the status of some aspect of program implementation related to achieving an objective or meeting a standard. It is a standardized procedure that often includes using some tool or instrument

A general format for describing an indicator includes a description of the information, or evidence, to be collected, and the procedure for getting the information or evidence. For example:

* To determine the proportion of men and women present at the meeting (*information*),
* The monitor counts the men and women present at the meeting, and computes the proportions by using the total men and total women living in the community (*procedure*).

A checklist of four items can be used to critique the description of an indicator.

Exhibit 4. Checklist for the quality of an indicator

- Is the information that will be obtained described clearly? Will this information convince you that the situation matches the standard?
- Is there enough detail in the description of the procedure for collecting the information that independent monitors can do it in the same way? Does the description describe
  - who
  - does what
  - using what apparatus or tool
  - when
  - with whom
  - where
- Is the information produced by the procedure dependable, or reliable?
  - Will two independent observers using the procedure in the same situation get the same results?
  - Will the apparatus or tool remain the same over time?
- Is the information produced by the procedure accurate, or valid?

The characteristics for SMART objectives have an analogue in s-m-a-r-t indicators. The two sets of characteristics are compared in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5. SMART goals/standards and s-m-a-r-t indicators: determining progress more objectively

Characteristic	Objective SMART	Indicator s-m-a-r-t
Specific	Both the sector target to be achieved and the development standard guiding the process of achievement are described in detail.	The type of information to be produced by the observation or measurement process for both the sector target and the development standard are described in detail.
Measurable	The sector target is described in meaningful numerical terms. If there are no meaningful numbers, then specific conditions for the desired sector target are described.	The process for making measurements or observations is described in detail, along with instruments that will be used. This is true for indicators for sector targets and development standards.
Achievable	Required resources will be available to achieve the objective. Obstacles can be overcome.	Staff and partners have the necessary knowledge and skills to use the indicator properly.
Relevant	Project staff and community members agree that achieving the objective will alleviate a stated need or problem. The process for achieving the sector target is consistent with allowing people to experience transformation.	Information produced by the indicator is directly related to determining the extent to which the objective was achieved or the standard was met.
Time-bound	The time-frame for achieving the objective is described.	The frequency for using the indicator is described, along with any other details about the timing.

Principle 2: Clarify levels for standards and indicators

"Standards" and "indicators" are not simple concepts. There are different functions for standards and indicators, there are different levels (international, national, and local) of standards which reflect the context for work, and there are different work areas (finance management, development process, development sectors such as agriculture, health, schooling, etc.). Attempts to simplify complex concepts lead to confusion. Standards can have different functions, and there are different forms of accountability associated with meeting standards that have different functions. Tim O'Shaughnessy, World Vision Australia, has analyzed different functions of standards and indicators in a helpful way.

Performance standards and indicators.

Standards can be used in a variety of ways to judge whether performance is excellent, satisfactory or unacceptable. For program performance this generally involves measuring the extent to which goals or objectives have been achieved on schedule and within budget. Program management and staff are directly accountable for making adjustments as monitoring information indicates that implementation is not producing satisfactory results.

Situation standards and indicators.

Standards can be used to determine if there are needs, issues or problems in the situation surrounding a program. Indicators provide information about the situation, not about program performance. When some aspect of the situation is not up to standard, stakeholders decide whether some adjustment in program design or operations should be made to change the situation.

Exemplary standards.

A standard may describe an example or model of something. We keep that example or model in view as we do our work, moving toward it as best we can. We accept the standard as valid on the basis of some authority, custom or general consent, and we monitor and report our status regarding the standard. If the context within which we work is complex, we define success as making reasonable effort to attain the standard. Failure to attain the standard leads to analysis of our effort to determine if it was reasonable. If not, then adjustments may be made so that our work produces results that are closer to the standard.

The cost of doing quality ministry is a limiting factor that will not go away until global economics are transformed on the basis of equitable and just distribution of resources. To have integrity, a development agency must limit its claims to what can be accomplished by the resources it can allocate to achieving those standards. For example, if an agency sets as a standard that 90% of the children in a province will be immunized, when in fact it only has resources to enable or promote immunization for 50% of the children, the claim represented by the standard has exceeded the agency's capacity to achieve it.

Definition – Index

An index is a combination of indicator readings. Several indicator readings may be inserted into a mathematical formula to produce the value of the index -- multiple linear regression is one technique that can be used. Or several indicator readings may be discussed by a knowledgeable group of persons until a consensus emerges about a meaningful value of the index.

Definitions – Different Levels of Indicators

It is useful to distinguish different levels of indicators according to their basic function.

Primary Indicator -- provides information about project results or impact on communities and beneficiaries of interest to partnering communities, people outside and inside the development agency. This information is useful to partnering communities and the

agency for improving and maintaining quality ministry (i.e., ministry that meets certain standards). It is useful to people outside the agency in determining whether or not its performance is acceptable to them.

Secondary Indicator – provides information about project outputs or results of interest to partnering communities and people within the development agency. This information, which may include features of project staff, or other agencies directly related to project activities, is useful for improving and maintaining quality ministry.

Tertiary Indicator -- provides information about inputs or activities that support project activities. This information is useful for monitoring project implementation against plans and providing evidence for accountability. In these ways it can be used to improve and maintain quality ministry

Principle 3: Keep it simple

I have reviewed monitoring systems that contained more than one hundred standards and indicators. Those systems were not used – they were too complicated to keep in mind as project implementation progressed.

Collecting and processing information is expensive in terms of staff time. In particular, a high degree of precision in data is very costly. Often a high degree of precision is not needed to make sound operational decisions. Monitoring becomes more effective as the ability increases to know when approximate information rather than precise data is sufficient.

Resources allocated to monitoring cannot be allocated to directly facilitating goal accomplishment. Emphasis should be placed on collecting information that is immediately relevant for keeping implementation on schedule, or consistent with the overall aims for development.

Principle 4: Use feedback loops

The dynamics of a monitoring component can be diagrammed as a balanced feedback loop. At the center of the loop is the question: "Is there a gap between what should be and what is?" The essence of monitoring involves identifying gaps between standards and actual situations as described by indicators. If there is no gap for a particular standard, then monitoring continues for other standards or for the same standard at the next scheduled time.

If there is a gap, then there is creative tension to reduce the gap. The monitor reports the gap in a way designed to initiate appropriate adjustments to the situation that will reduce the gap to an acceptable size. After a suitable time period during which the adjustments can have the desired effects, an indicator is applied to determine if there is still a gap. This closes the loop. (In most cases the same indicator will be applied. In some cases a more precise or limited indicator may be used.) The dynamic continues until the gap is reduced satisfactorily.

A description of a monitoring component is a detailed description of each element in this feedback loop. The focus is on the complexity of the dynamic for a particular standard, rather than the complexity of keeping track of the details for monitoring a large number of standards. This is appropriate, for in development work the cause-effect linkages are very difficult to identify. Each effect has multiple causes, and each cause may have multiple effects. Moreover, the time periods between causal action and observable effects vary and often are long. Development work is more accurately described by feedback loops than linear cause-effect relationships.

Definition -- Adjustment Procedure

An <u>adjustment procedure</u> describes corrective action for closing a significant gap between desired conditions described in a standard or objective, and actual conditions shown by an indicator.

A monitoring component that has only a standard and a set of indicators is like a thermometer. The component simply describes the status of the project in relation to the standard, just as the thermometer describes the temperature of its environment in relation to some desirable state.

If an adjustment procedure is included in the monitoring component, then the component is like a thermostat. In addition to describing the status of the project in relation to the standard, the component initiates corrective action for specific conditions. This is similar to the air conditioner being turned on by the thermostat when the temperature rises above a specific level (the "standard" or desired temperature).

A monitoring system that acts more like a thermostat than just a thermometer is more likely to maintain the desired level of project quality.

The adjustment procedure should describe five things as shown in this <u>format</u>:

* The amount or type of discrepancy between the indicator result and the criterion in the standard that initiates the adjustment procedure,
* The people who will be involved in the procedure,
* A specific reporting action to be taken,
* The time period within which the reporting action should be completed, and
* A time interval after which follow up monitoring should be done.

For example:
- If the percentage of men or women present at the meeting is less than 40%,
- then the project coordinator
- will help project committee members create a plan to increase attendance
- at the next meeting.
- Use the same indicator at the next meeting.

A <u>checklist</u> of five items can be used to critique a description of an adjustment procedure.

1. Is the discrepancy or gap between the standard and the situation clearly described that means some adjustment should be made?
    a. The difference between the criterion and the situation that will initiate an adjustment may be described, or
    b. The number of times a discrepancy is observed before making an adjustment may be specified.
2. Is the action clearly described? Typical actions include:
    a. Appropriate stakeholders create an action plan to adjust the situation.
    b. Appropriate monitors get more detailed information, perhaps by conducting a limited evaluation.
    c. The monitor advises stakeholders about the gap and continues monitoring the situation.
    d. The monitor alerts key decision makers about the problem so that they can take appropriate action.
3. Are the people identified who will be involved in the adjustment procedure?
4. Is the schedule for completing the procedure described?
5. Is the time interval specified for follow up monitoring? If a different indicator is needed for the follow-up, is it described?

Principle 5: Use a monitoring system

[Note 2014. See the companion document, "Creating a monitoring system," for discussion of this principle.]