

Understanding work standards, project objectives and indicator results

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This material is from a monitoring manual:

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Some material specific to World Vision International has been omitted to emphasize the material that I believe is useful for development facilitators in other agencies. With permission I have added some notes that are clearly marked, and I have formatted the content to stand alone.

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Monitoring system modules or components

A monitoring system is a group of modules or components that are related to some important aspect of program implementation. There are three items that are described in each module of a monitoring system:

- Standard or objective for performance or conditions
- Indicators to describe actual performance or conditions to be compared with standard or objective
- Adjustment procedure when actual performance or conditions deviate from the standard or objective

This approach to monitoring is a normative approach. It provides information regarding the match between conditions as they actually are, and conditions as they should be. Some evaluators argue that monitoring should be restricted to describing conditions as they are. For them, including norms or standards in the approach changes monitoring into auditing. The normative approach is recommended in this paper as a way of working for quality ministry.

This approach is also a systemic approach. The dynamics of a monitoring component can be diagrammed as a balanced feedback loop. Monitoring begins by 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. (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.

Standards

[Note 2014. A format for writing standards and a checklist for examining the quality of a written standard is in the post, "Principles for reviewing a project monitoring system."

End: Note 2014]

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.

As an ideal I would like to have all adults in a community attending community meetings where important decisions are made. In some communities, a realistic standard for meeting attendance may be 75%, while in other communities a realistic standard may be only 25%.

Standards, goals and objectives

Standards are similar to goals or objectives, because each of these statements describes the way things should be. Consider the following example.

GOAL: To provide appropriate education for all community members.

OBJECTIVE: To build a three-room classroom block in Narok community by Sept. 1994.

While achieving this objective it is expected that various STANDARDS for facilitating transformational development will be maintained. For example:

- The construction costs should be within the approved budget.
- All financial transactions should conform to established policy and procedures.
- The labor should be performed by community volunteers.
- The structure should comply with government regulations.
- Construction progress should be monitored by community members.
- Parents' commitment to schooling for their children should be reinforced.

Another example.

GOAL: To maintain an effective primary health care system.

OBJECTIVE: To immunize all children ages 0-5 in Katoba community against preventable diseases by September 1996.

Some examples of STANDARDS to maintain while working toward this goal by achieving the objective are:

- The cold chain for vaccines must be maintained.
- Volunteer community health workers should educate parents about the importance of immunizations.
- The relationship between Ministry of Health staff and community leaders should be strengthened.
- Basic costs should be paid by parents and the community.

Goals and objectives are worded to show actions that can be taken to change a particular situation. Standards are worded to describe desired conditions in many situations, including conditions related to development processes that often are not specified in project objectives. As long as statements of standards describe desired conditions or performance, there is no problem if they overlap with statements of goals or objectives.

The criterion in a standard may vary over time in a project. For example, the criterion for community meeting attendance in the early years of a project may be less than 50%, while in later years it may be more than 70%. Examine your experience in typical community development projects to determine appropriate criteria for standards in different phases of a project.

Indicators

[Note 2014. A format for writing indicators and a checklist for examining the quality of a written description of the indicators is in the post, "Principles for reviewing a project monitoring system."

End: Note 2014]

In a general sense, an indicator is something that points to or signifies the condition of something else. It is used to determine where something is on some scale of measurement. It is something that indicates the degree of progress that is being achieved toward some goal or objective or meeting some standard.

Within the context of program monitoring, an indicator is an explicit procedure, which often includes some apparatus or tool or instrument that yields a result that points to the status of some aspect of program implementation. Knowing that status is necessary to determine if

there are problems with those aspects of program implementation that are the focus of the monitoring procedure.

Example. Suppose a project objective or standard is that all children are immunized as required by the Ministry of Health protocol. An indicator for this objective or standard is the number of children with an immunization card that shows the child is up to date on immunizations, as observed by the community health worker, regardless if the number is 10% or 80% of the children in the community. (Note. If children are not immunized, then the project committee may create an objective to have children immunized within a specific time period. Then it may create another objective to create procedures for enabling parents to immunize children at the appropriate age. The committee may create yet another objective to monitor births in the community and whether or not immunizations are completed. This set of objectives is related to maintaining the standard that all children are immunized, which is related the goal that there be an effective primary health care system in the community.)

Various definitions

"Indicator" is used in different ways by evaluators. Sometimes "indicator" is used to refer to an operation for producing information. For example, two people will count the men and women present at the community meeting.

Sometimes it is used to refer to the type of information that is to be obtained. For example, the proportion of men and women in the community who attend community meetings.

Other times it is used more in the sense of a standard to refer to a specific desirable result. For example, 50% of the men and women living in the community should be present at community meetings.

Any discussion of indicators should clarify which sense is being used. In this paper, "indicator" is used in an inclusive way to refer to both the operation and procedure for collecting information and the information that it produces. In development work, changing the procedure used to collect the information often changes the information that it produces. Therefore, it is recommended that "indicator" be used to refer to both the information and the procedure for collecting the information.

In some contexts it is convenient to describe only the type of information obtained without describing the procedure in detail. "Indicator" is not used to refer to a specific result in this paper.

The technical definition of "indicator" given above is consistent with the general definition of the term. The verb "to indicate" has several meanings. Its primary meaning is "to point out" or "to point to" with more or less exactness.

There are two essential features in this primary meaning:

- Point out, point to -- There is something visible to another person, or there is something which can be experienced through the senses by another person who follows a prescribed procedure.

One way of judging the adequacy of an indicator is to examine the description of operations to be followed by the observer as he uses prescribed instruments. If the operations followed by the observer as he interacts with the instruments are described explicitly so that they can be duplicated by another skilled observer, this necessary condition for adequacy is met.

- More or less exactness -- The procedure produces information that is trustworthy.

Trustworthy information

Trustworthy information regarding indicators has two aspects: dependability and accuracy.

Dependability. One form of trustworthiness involves dependability of information. A procedure is dependable when it yields the same result when the conditions in the setting are the same.

There are two aspects of dependability that are very important in monitoring aspects of transformation, or any other relatively intangible characteristic of development work.

- Observer dependability. A procedure has observer dependability when two different observers using the same instrument obtain the same reading or result when observing the same performance. In other words, the reading or result is independent of the observer.
- Instrument dependability. A procedure has instrument dependability when the same observer using the same instrument obtains the same reading or result when observing the same performance. In other words, the reading or result is independent of the age of the instrument.

Accuracy. Another aspect of trustworthiness is accuracy. A procedure that produces the same false information under the same conditions is dependable, but not trustworthy. The information must be accurate or true to be trustworthy.

Describing an indicator

There are no universal indicators for the implementation of community development projects because the process of change is influenced by such things as the mix of resources available, the cultural and historical background of the project population, and the personalities and predispositions of the project staff. Thus it is important to select indicators carefully for each project.

To make accurate comparisons of actual performance or conditions against a standard, the standard must be described in some detail; the indicator itself must be described in some detail; the logical relationship between the standard and the indicator must be described; and the readings or observations made with the indicator must be described.

There are four elements about an indicator that need to be described:

1. observer -- intentions or motives, skill in using the instrument
2. apparatus or instrument -- what it does, possible results or readings
3. object of observation
4. actions performed by the observer with the instrument

There are four sources of information that are commonly included in indicator procedures.

1. Direct observation of conditions or performance by the monitor.
2. Reviews of project records (e.g., finance records, committee meeting minutes, health clinic logbooks, etc.).
3. Interviews of project committee members, community leaders, project staff or others that provide development services in the community.
4. Discussions with community members (both direct and indirect beneficiaries).

Additional thoughts about indicators

[Note 2014. The information in this section is from Cookingham, 2002, "Guidelines for Project Monitoring Based on Logical Framework Analysis, World Vision International. It is inserted here with permission.

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In thinking about transformational development I find it helpful to differentiate among targets for sector objectives, development standards, and indicators. A sector objective describes desired results, and a development standard describes a desired quality associated with achieving one or more objectives.

I regard indicators as observation processes that provide information about the extent to which a planned sector objective or development standard was achieved and desired transformation occurred. For example, a health sector objective is to immunize at least 85% of the children in the coverage area by the time that they are 13 months old.

- A development standard for this objective is: community residents manage the immunization campaign.
- The indicator for the 85% target is the percentage of children under 13 months that have received the national protocol of immunizations, as determined by an appropriate survey or analysis of health clinic records.
- A pertinent indicator for the development standard is the number of households informed about the need for immunization by community residents; another is the description of actions taken by community members to ensure that each child was immunized.

Most logical framework descriptions describe sector objectives without describing relevant development standards. It is recommended that the program design document include a description of pertinent development standards. An indicator is a way of collecting evidence to show (indicate) that progress toward objectives is being achieved, or standards are being maintained. It is the descriptive information about the situation that is compared with the

objective or standard. When the description matches the predetermined conditions called the target, then the relevant aspect of the objective is declared to have been achieved, or the standard is declared to have been met. The description of an indicator should allow two independent qualified observers to arrive at the same conclusion regarding the status of achievement.

There are different ways that an indicator is used. The way that an indicator is stated affects the way that the related objective or standard and the means of verification are stated to avoid confusion. Three of them are described here for reference.

Neutral indicator

The description of a neutral indicator only shows the type of information that is to be obtained about the actual situation. The standard of performance is included in the statement of the related objective. Example – *the proportion of men and women in the community who attend community meetings*. The following diagram shows the relationship between an objective, a neutral indicator, and means of verification.

statement of objective	statement of indicator	means of verification
describes in detail the measurable target to be accomplished in a time-frame, assuming the target is relevant and achievable	the information to be collected about actual conditions related to the objective	general process and specific procedures for collecting the information, or secondary source of the information

Target indicator

The description of a target indicator includes the target that is to be achieved to signal that an objective has been achieved or standard has been met. Example – *by the end of 2003 at least 50% of the people attending community meetings are women who speak up and are heeded as decisions are being made*.

This example is very instructive because it includes a participation target (50% women) and a participation standard (women who speak up and are heeded as decisions are made). The following diagram shows the relationship between the statement of the objective, target indicator, and means of verification.

statement of objective	statement of indicator	means of verification
describes what is to be accomplished in a way that shows it is relevant to other elements in the framework, and it is achievable	describes the measurable sector target to be accomplished in a time-frame; describes the acceptable development qualities that must be present as the target is achieved	general process and specific procedures for collecting the information for both the sector outcome and the transformation occurring as the outcome is achieved, or secondary source of the information

Measurement indicator

The description of a measurement indicator includes the information that is to be collected to be compared with the target in the objective, and the general process for collecting it. Example – *the proportion of men and women attending community meetings, as documented by Village Development Committee meeting records.*

statement of objective	statement of indicator	means of verification
describes in detail the measurable target to be accomplished in a time-frame, assuming the target is relevant and achievable	the information to be collected, and the general process for collecting it	specific procedures for implementing the measurement or observation process, or secondary source of the information

Adjustment procedures

[Note 2014. A format for writing adjustment procedures and a checklist for examining the quality of a written description of an adjustment procedure is in the post, “Principles for reviewing a project monitoring system.”

End: Note 2014]

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

Actions

Typical adjustment procedures for a monitoring component include creating an action plan to resolve the problem, getting more detailed information, and alerting a designated manager. These actions should be planned with development aims in mind. Members of the community or partner agency should be encouraged to plan and implement appropriate adjustments. The monitor should act in a way that facilitates development, rather than personally making adjustments to close the gap between the standard and the actual situation.

In most cases the action will be to have the appropriate person or group create an action plan for resolving the problem indicated by the discrepancy from the standard. That action plan will include investigation of the problem, consideration of feasible alternative solutions, selection and implementation of a solution, and monitoring the effectiveness of the solution.

Sometimes the action to be taken is to obtain more detailed information about the discrepancy from the standard. This is especially important in facilitating development, since so many factors can influence the measurement or reading given by a single indicator. A discrepancy from the monitored standard can initiate a more detailed monitoring procedure that includes several related standards, with more than one indicator for one or more of those standards.

In some cases the action is to alert a particular manager to the problem indicated by the discrepancy. The manager may choose to review the appropriateness of the performance

standard, or to initiate some other monitoring procedure. For example, if a discrepancy is found from a particular set of finance standards, the manager may initiate a project audit.

Discrepancies

Different types or levels of discrepancies between acceptable and actual levels of indicators may call for different actions.

In some situations, the action may be to continue monitoring the same standard to see if the discrepancy changes. If the discrepancy increases, or it remains constant for a specific period of monitoring, then remedial action of some sort may be initiated.

In some situations action may not be warranted unless there is discrepancy for several indicators related to a standard, not just one or two of them.

Actor

The person who will initiate the action should be identified in the adjustment procedure. Needless to say, there must be agreement that this is the appropriate person for such an action. The monitoring system is not intended to usurp anyone's authority; it is intended to facilitate the exercise of proper authority.

Time

The time period for completing the action should be stated. A fixed time may be indicated; for example, "within two weeks ..." In some cases a relative period is more appropriate; for example, "Before the next meeting of the project committee ..."

Follow up

A suitable interval needs to be allowed for the adjustment procedure to have the desired effect. Then follow up monitoring should be done to see if the situation is more like the standard. In many cases the same indicator will be used after a suitable interval. In some cases a more precise indicator should be used; this should be described in the adjustment procedure.

No matter how rapidly information can be acquired, immediate corrective action based on that information is not possible except in very simple situations. This is because it takes time to analyze deviations, design appropriate corrective action, implement that action, and determine if it is effective. Therefore, monitoring procedures focus more on inputs and process than on outputs or results.

The monitoring procedure should identify exceptions at critical points. The action triggered by an exception at one level may be to collect more detailed information on that area which can be used to diagnose the problem.