Using the LEAP Framework
Developing Outcome Indicators

What Are Outcome Indicators?

Outcome indicators are measures that describe how well we are achieving our outcomes. They help us know whether things are changing in the way we intended.

Whereas outcome statements (step 1) identify what we hope to accomplish – outcome indicators tell us specifically what to measure to determine whether the outcomes have been achieved.

Indicators can be quantitative (numbers or quantities) or qualitative (based on people's experience, perceptions etc)

Remember, **"Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted." (Albert Einstein)**

Why Are Outcome Indicators Important?

Outcome indicators define the evidence to be collected to measure progress and enable actual results achieved over time to be compared with planned results. They help us to learn about the process of change; what is working and what is not therefore, how to become more effective and efficient

Selecting Outcome Indicators

- Clarify the outcomes- Good outcome indicators start with good specific outcome statements that people can understand and agree on.

- Carefully consider the change that is desired. Review the precise wording and intention of the outcome statement.

- What exactly does it say?

- Avoid broad results statements. Sometimes outcomes are so broadly stated it is difficult to identify the right indicators. For example, rather than using a broad statement like "improved capacity", clarify exactly what it is that "needs to change" for example "more local people are involved in local decision making processes".

- Be clear about what type of change is implied. What is expected to change -a situation, a condition, attitudes, behaviour? Who is expected to change – services; communities; individuals?

Measures and indicators

Both **indicators** and **measures** can be used to assess change.

Measures are used when we need, or can get, direct information about an outcome – for example the number of people whose income is below 50% of average national income is a measure of poverty.

An indicator is a proxy measure used when the outcomes cannot be directly measured – for example, parents' attendance at school meetings could be used as an indicator of parental involvement with a school.

Sometimes one indicator may be all that is necessary for clear explanation. But often, several indicators may be required. For example measuring improved parental involvement in school may require several different indicators such as:

1.   attendance at school meetings
2.   participation in PTA
3.   calls made to the school
4.   Attendance at school events
5.   Parents feel more involved
6.   Teachers feel there is more input from parents

(Taylor-Powell et al, 2002)

Selecting indicators takes time and careful consideration. You may need to keep refining the indicators until they clearly explain the aspect change that is of interest. There are usually many possible indicators for any desired outcome, but some are more appropriate and useful than others.

Engaging key stakeholders in identifying indicators helps ensure the selection of meaningful indicators.

You may want to consider already existing indicators and the experience of other programmes/projects. But, applying the values and principles of the LEAP approach, means trying to avoid imposing pre-determined indicators. Indicators need to be developed on a case by case basis to reflect the priorities of the stakeholders in an initiative. Indicators that are developed using information from different perspectives and from several different sources, or in different ways, helps us be more confident that we understand what change has taken place

(The LEAP handbooks suggest a framework in which indicators are suggested as a trigger for local development or adaptation)

We need to be selective about the indicators we choose, to make the process of assessment more manageable. Some indicators will help us to understand several different outcomes, and some methods of collecting information will provide evidence on several indicators. Avoid trying to combine too much in one indicator, such as measures of both access and use

The aim is to identify outcome indicators which relate to the following questions:

• How much has changed? (**Quantity**)
• How beneficial has the change been? (**Quality**)
• Who has benefited and who has not? (**Equity**)
• What resources have been used? (**Efficiency**)
• How far have the planned outcomes been achieved? (**Effectiveness**)

It is vital that the stakeholders – in particular the funders, the partners who provide services and support, and the people who benefit – agree on the indicators to be used, and the way they will throw light on whether the activities have the impact expected. Failure to do this may lead to conflicts and problems at a later stage: for example, funders may ask for evidence of change but none can be provided because no records were kept. Projects or programmes that are operating within a context of national targets can find particular problems in this regard. For example, where a project is funded to contribute to national targets on the incidence of heart disease or teenage pregnancy, or is set within social justice milestones, there needs to be a shared understanding of how the outcomes of the project, and the way these are measured, can fall within the wider framework of targets

Assessing the appropriateness and usefulness of indicators

While the LEAP approach advocates the development of meaningful indicators in collaboration with stakeholders the following principles are also useful:

Optimal ignorance: Knowing what is not worth knowing and prioritizing the issues to be evaluated; limiting the collection of data to answering the questions that are most relevant to understanding these issues (Chambers 1993: 18–19). This can be done by carefully selecting one or two questions through which crucial information can be obtained. Key questions can serve as indicators. If community members are to be involved, it is important that they choose the questions and the form and method of measurement and expression (Davis-Case 1989: 25).

Appropriate imprecision: Not gathering data with more accuracy than is needed to understand the priority issues for evaluation (Chambers 1993:20). Avoid using too many indicators. Try to strike a balance between resources available for measuring performance and the amount of information needed to make reasonably well informed decisions.

A useful indicator is:

Measurable: Able to be recorded and analysed either qualitatively or quantitatively.

Precise or accurate: Defined and understood the same way by all people.

Consistent: Not changing over time.

Sensitive: Changing proportionally in response to actual changes in the condition or item being measured.

It is best to identify a set of indicators for measuring progress toward any goal and to identify both qualitative and quantitative measures that will reinforce each other. This will increase the rigour and relevance of the evaluation and the reliability of the results.

Different community groups and individuals will have different indicators. The choice of indicators for measuring progress, changes, success, and failure will be influenced by perceptions of what these terms mean to the various stakeholders; therefore, the indicators used to measure them will depend on who chooses the indicators.

(McAllister & Vernoy, 1999)

References:

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