Baselines

In order to understand the changes brought about by a project or programme it is necessary to understand what the original situation was. This is known as the baseline. Baselines can range from simple exercises to large, expensive surveys. They are an important part of many Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems. Some projects and programmes combine the use of baselines with control groups. Baselines are normally carried out at or near to the start of a project or programme.

Most projects or programmes contain objectives and indicators that seek to define the changes they are trying to bring about. In order to assess progress it is necessary to understand the original situation, which means collecting and recording information on these objectives and/or indicators at the start of the project or programme. This is called the baseline. In theory, the same data is then collected later in the project or programme, and change is compared. Without a baseline it is much harder to evaluate progress, because changes cannot easily be compared with the original situation.

Baselines can range from largely informal exercises – sometimes as simple as writing down what is already known – through to large-scale surveys or studies. Baselines are normally carried out at or near the start of a project or programme, and can be seen as the last element of the planning process of an M&E system. If a baseline is carried out at household or individual level then it is normally conducted after the target households have been selected. In practice, this means the baseline is finalised after the design phase of a project or programme has been completed.

The primary purpose of a baseline is to allow a project or programme to evaluate performance by establishing what changes have occurred. However, a good baseline can also be used for other purposes since it provides useful information on the target population. For example, it may become apparent that the indicators established at the beginning of the project need some adjustment or refinement. Baselines can also provide a good basis for the setting of targets and milestones.

All projects and programmes should carry out at least some baseline work (even if only recording what is already known), but a formal baseline study is most useful when:

- there is a clear understanding beforehand of the changes a project or programme wants to achieve;
- there is a clear rationale for how any changes observed can be linked to the work of a project or programme;
- there are sufficient resources and expertise to do the work properly;
- there is a clear plan for how to follow up the baseline study in the future; and

- the benefits of conducting a baseline study, and measuring the same variables later in order to assess change, outweigh the costs.

Sometimes organisations have to conduct baseline studies as a condition of funding, and therefore have no choice in the matter.

Baselines for different interventions

In some cases, the identification and recording of baseline data may be fairly straightforward, particularly when assessing service delivery work. Examples of baseline information could include the number of children in school at the start of a project or crop yields under traditional cultivation. But in other cases it may not be so straightforward. For example, programmes that seek to raise awareness of human rights or promote inclusive civil society may have much greater difficulties in establishing a clear baseline (Taylor, 2001). A general rule of thumb is that the easier it is to devise appropriate indicators of change, the easier it is to develop the baseline.

The type of intervention also needs to be considered. Service delivery work does not require the same kind of baseline data as policy influencing work or work involving capacity development. The type of questions asked at baseline might be very different (see box next page), as well as the methods to collect the information.

Clearly, the type of intervention will also give an indication of which particular tools and methodologies might be used. For example, in a capacity development programme an organisational assessment might be used as a baseline, whereas a set of interviews with policy-makers and/or a straw poll of members of the public might be more useful for a policy influencing project. It is important to remember that the same tools and methodologies need to be used at a later date if information is to be comparable.

In some cases (such as the examples above) there may only be a small number of organisations or policies in which a project or programme is interested. In these cases baselines may be modest affairs costing very little. But where there is a large population – such as in a mass health or livelihood programme – a more extensive baseline survey may be needed.

Area of work	Sample questions for baselines
Service delivery	Which services do people currently have access to? How many (and which groups of) people have access to particular services? How often do they use them? What is the quality of the services? How reliable are the services?
Capacity development	What areas of capacity do organisations wish to improve? What is their current capacity in these areas? What are the key capacity gaps? What other work is being carried out around these key capacities?
Policy influencing	What is the current status of a policy or the way it is implemented? Which key decision-makers are interested in the policy? Which external actors are interested, and what are they doing? What is the public attitude towards the policy?

Within social development, baseline surveys can be carried out at individual, household, or community levels. In some cases a population is small enough that everyone can be covered by the survey. In most cases, though, baseline surveys are designed to cover a sample of the population. There are many different techniques that can be used to define a sample.

A large-scale baseline survey can be difficult to do well, may be costly, and can require significant expertise. This makes it all the more important to plan it properly from the outset to ensure the resources are not wasted on an exercise that may prove to be of little value.

Alternatives to baselines

There may be circumstances in which a proper baseline cannot be afforded, or where a project or programme is under way and an appropriate baseline has not previously been carried out. In these cases there are alternatives that can be applied.

- If a situational analysis was carried out, or any other kind of prior assessment in the project/programme area, this may include data on the scale or characteristics of a problem a programme or project is seeking to address. This information can be included as baseline data.

- People involved in a project or programme, especially targeted populations, will often have knowledge of what a situation was before a project or programme began. This knowledge is usually accessible after the event, and can be used to establish what is known as a

retrospective baseline (a baseline established at a later date).

- Other organisations might also have records that can be used to establish a retrospective baseline. For example, there may be government records, or the records of local institutions such as schools or hospitals.

- Some methods of data collection and analysis, such as most significant change (MSC), are designed to be used in situations where change cannot easily be predicted, and therefore baselines cannot easily be generated or used.

One other method often used to supplement a baseline in order to establish more reliable evidence of causality is a control group. A control group is a group that is as identical as possible to a target population, but that is not receiving any support or assistance. Theoretically, a control group overcomes the problem of establishing whether any changes from the baseline are actually due to a project or programme, as change can be compared between people receiving and not receiving support. Control groups are used extensively in quasi-experimental methodologies.

It is important to note that there are also some kinds of change where baselines may be of little use. Social development work often has unexpected consequences, and by their nature these cannot be measured by comparing against a baseline. Any follow-up work designed to compare against a baseline therefore also needs to allow for the unexpected. In addition, where objectives or indicators have been modified or added during the life-time of a project or programme, there may be no baseline to compare against.

Challenges with baselines

It is a sad truth that much of the money spent on baselines around the world proves to be wasted. This may be because projects and programmes change, making the baseline redundant or incomplete. However, it is mostly because staff have not properly thought through how the baselines will be used in the future.

Common problems include collecting too much data that is not needed, forgetting about the baseline once it has been completed, collecting data that is too general, and collecting data on people and locations that are not targeted by the project or programme.

Many if not most of these problems can be avoided with good planning and forethought. However, some problems are associated with the length of time between the development and use of baselines. For example, if there is a requirement to carry out an external evaluation on a project or programme it is likely that the external evaluators will want to establish progress against the baseline. However, it is unlikely they will have had any involvement in the

establishment of that baseline. Equally, staff may change over the course of a project or programme and institutional memory might be lost.

This is why it is important for organisations to keep baseline records that outline clearly why decisions were taken, how baselines were conducted, which particular groups or households were involved, which sampling techniques or tools were used, and why. It is also why keeping the amount of data to be collected manageable, and ensuring methods of data collection are easily reproducible, is so important. (Some do's and don'ts of baselines are shown in the table below.)

Do ...	Don't ...
- Identify what realistically you expect the project or programme will achieve – the expected changes – in order to decide what to measure in the baseline - Assess the costs and benefits of doing a baseline study and make pragmatic decisions based on financial, human and time resources. - Carry out the baseline near the start of the project or programme, as it may reveal information that requires you to change your objectives. - Make firm plans for how you intend to use your baseline during future impact assessments or evaluations. This will involve deciding who is likely to carry out that work, how and when. - Ensure that specific target groups are properly represented and identified in the baseline. - Record any methodologies or sampling techniques used so that these can be replicated at a later date - Ensure that you use the results of your baseline to adjust and refine objectives and indicators if necessary.	- Select data for the baseline that is primarily dependent on external circumstances. - Assume that any changes recorded against a baseline will be down to the project or programme intervention. - Collect data you do not intend to use (or do not have a clear plan for how you intend to use it). - Interview people who are not members of the target population (unless they are part of a control group). - Forget to record the name and location of communities and individuals who have been interviewed in case you or someone else needs to revisit them. - Forget to ensure that all records, including any completed surveys or questionnaire sheets, are stored appropriately so they can be easily retrieved at a later date. - Lose the baseline!

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INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, INTRAC has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on monitoring and evaluation. Our approach to M&E is practical and founded on core principles. We encourage appropriate M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts, and we work with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs.

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