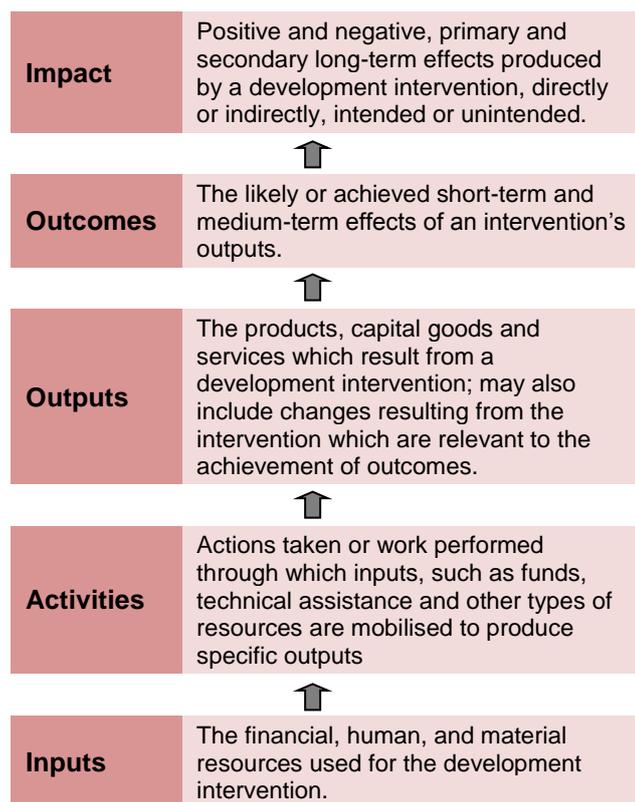


Outputs, Outcomes and Impact

Outputs, outcomes and impact are terms that are used to describe changes at different levels from the delivery of goods and services to long-term, sustainable change in people's lives. Whilst the terminology is in common use, there is great inconsistency in how the terms are interpreted.

Most organisations understand the key difference between the things they do (activities) and the ultimate changes they wish to help bring about (impact). But the distinction is not always helpful. In order to achieve desired long-term changes, there may be many steps between an organisation's activities and the desired impact. The results chain (see below) attempts to categorise these steps by breaking them down into manageable stages – inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact.

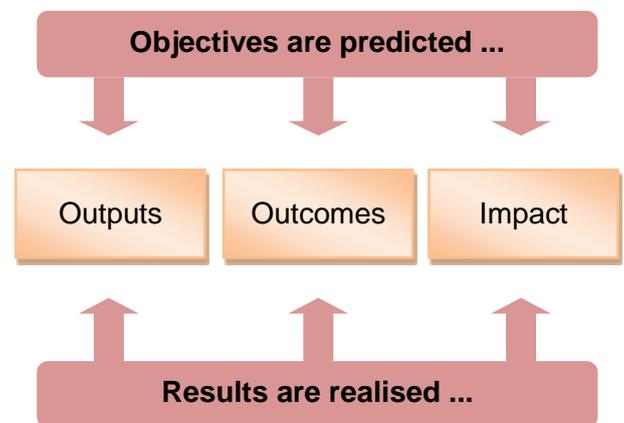
The table below shows the results chain using a set of definitions originally developed by OECD DAC in 2002 (OECD, 2010). But it is important to note that different organisations may use different definitions, and there may be little consistency between these different definitions.



include travelling to the field to deliver seeds and, possibly, conduct training with farmers. The outputs could be the seeds distributed and the people trained. The outcomes could be that the farmers plant the seeds, the seeds grow into crops, the crops are harvested, and then eaten or sold. This might contribute to the impact, which would be a better standard of living in the long-term for farmers and their families.

Another term that is commonly used is *results*. *Results* is defined by OECD DAC as the “*output, outcome or impact (intended or unintended, positive and/or negative) of a development intervention*”. ‘Results’ is defined differently by different organisations. Some only use it to describe actual achievements whilst others use it to describe predicted change.

A simplified diagram of how these different terms relate can be found in the diagram below. It will not satisfy every organisation or situation but it will work as a rule of thumb for M&E practitioners.



Potential Confusions

Although in theory these different areas are easy to distinguish, in practice it can be more difficult. There are three areas of overlap where there is often confusion.

Firstly, there is sometimes confusion between activities and outputs. Some activities are clearly not outputs; for example mapping terrain, talking to different villagers to find out where a well might be situated, negotiating with potential suppliers of parts, etc. But when it gets to the level of ‘digging a well’ it is easier to see how there might be confusion. The act of ‘digging a well’ is clearly an activity whilst the actual well dug is often considered an output as it is a product (deliverable) of

In this results chain, inputs are used in order to carry out activities. Activities lead to services or products delivered (outputs). The outputs start to bring about change (outcomes) and eventually this will (hopefully) contribute to the impact. For example, if an organisation was providing seeds to farmers, the seeds themselves, any transports costs, staff costs etc. would be inputs. Activities undertaken would

a project or programme. This confusion is surprisingly common, and many projects or programmes feel unfairly treated when their outputs (or output indicators) are criticised for being too activity-based.

The second confusion is between outputs and outcomes, and here the difference can be more subtle. The OECD DAC definition tacitly acknowledges this by allowing that an output “*may also include changes resulting from [an] intervention which are relevant to the achievement of outcomes.*” For some, outputs can only ever be the deliverables of a project or programme, whilst others interpret initial changes (such as enhanced knowledge or understanding following a training course, or community organisations engaging with government following community mobilisation meetings) as outputs.

There is no real solution to this difficulty and M&E practitioners need to deal with it on a case-by-case basis. Even when an organisation has very clear definitions and guidelines on the difference between outputs and outcomes, different staff and departments may still interpret the terms differently.

The third confusion is between outcomes and impact, and here it is largely a matter of judgement. This confusion appears to matter less as few organisations are really judged on their impact, so the difference becomes largely an academic argument. In this case a great deal depends on the definition. For example, the OECD DAC definition (*‘positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended’*) allows for long-term changes in institutional capacity or policy change to be classed as impact. However, the preferred definition for many NGOs is *“lasting or significant change – positive or negative, intended or not – in people’s lives brought about by an action or a series of actions”* (Roche, 1999), which would put the onus more onto assessment of change at individual or household level.

The preferred solution of the author, in a desire for a less complicated life, is to define outputs as the services or products delivered that are largely within the control of an agency; impact as the lasting or significant changes in people’s lives brought about by an intervention or interventions; and outcomes as everything in between.

Working with outcomes

Outcomes are usually very important for an M&E system. This is because they provide early information on whether a project or programme is on course or whether any desired changes are beginning to happen. For instance, if a deliverable of a project is to provide seeds to farmers, an early outcome might be that 90% of the seeds have been planted by farmers. This does not mean the project or programme has achieved its desired impact, but it means that it is on track to realise that impact. If the farmers are not planting the seeds, this lets project staff know that

remedial action is required and the ultimate impact is not likely to be achieved.

On the other hand, if an organisation waited to measure the ultimate impact of the project or programme without bothering to look at the outcomes, by the time they found that farmers and their families had not improved their living standards because they had not planted or harvested the seeds it would be too late to do anything about it.

Any M&E system or process designed to feed into management decision-making needs to assess outcomes on a regular basis. The danger otherwise is that an M&E system purely looks at what is being delivered on the assumption that if products or services are delivered properly they will automatically translate into change. This is rarely the case.

It is also important to remember that whilst there might be one single stated purpose of a development intervention, there will usually be many different layers of outcomes. In the example above, it is hoped that increased seed use will lead to improved yields, better harvests, increased cash for farmers, and ultimately better livelihoods for their families. An M&E system at project or programme level would usually hope to identify all the different layers of outcomes and assess changes on a regular basis.

Different perspectives

One of the things that confuses M&E practitioners the most is that something can be an output (deliverable) and an outcome (change) at the same time, depending on different perspectives.

For example, if an intermediary NGO were to undertake capacity building with a Southern NGO it would be reasonable to consider the training itself as an output, and any improvement in the Southern NGO’s work, such as improved engagement with marginalised groups, as an outcome. But for the Southern NGO itself the engagement with marginalised groups would be an output (deliverable) of its work. The improved engagement could therefore be seen as both an output and an outcome at the same time – depending on whose perspective is being considered.

This is also a dilemma for many large organisations and donors that try to draw up complex sets of indicators and classify them into ‘output’ and ‘outcome’ indicators. In case 1 in the example below, an organisation might carry out eye operations in the field (outputs) in order to improve sight (outcomes/impact). But it might also train local partners to carry out the operations (case 2) to a higher standard – in which case the training is the output and the carrying out of effective operations by partners an outcome. So what on first inspection seems to be a clear deliverable – the carrying out of effective eye operations – may be an outcome of an organisation’s work in different circumstances.

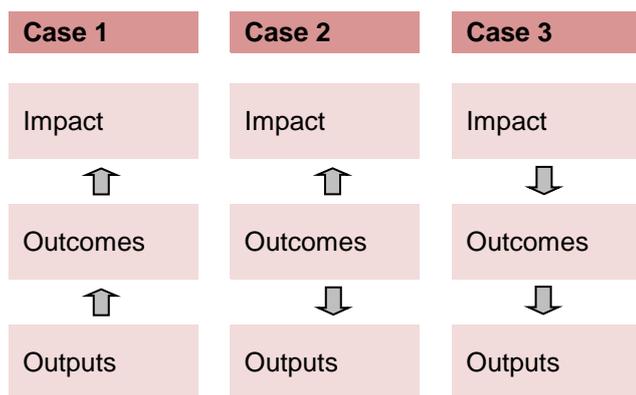
Case 1		Eye operations carried out to standard <i>(output)</i>	Improved eyesight for patients <i>(outcome)</i>	Improved quality of life <i>(impact)</i>
Case 2	Eye surgeons trained by partner <i>(output)</i>	Eye operations carried out to standard <i>(outcome)</i>	Improved eyesight for patients <i>(outcome)</i>	Improved quality of life <i>(impact)</i>

In this case it would not be possible to generically classify 'eye operations carried out to standard' as either an output or an outcome, as it would always be dependent on the context.

This is not such a problem when using planning or M&E methods that are designed to deal with complexity, such as theories of change, Outcome Mapping and Most Significant Change. But in complex programmes it can be a real problem when attempting to develop results chains using more linear tools such as the logical framework, which are usually developed from a single perspective.

Level of focus for M&E systems

Almost any M&E system or approach would be expected to consider both outputs and outcomes, and some go further to look at impact. But in larger projects and programmes the direction of M&E also needs to be considered. The table below shows three different choices.



In the first case, a project or programme could examine its outputs, and seek to trace changes upwards from these outputs into the outcomes, and from there to the impact. This has one great advantage in that attribution is much easier to assess. This is because any outcomes or impact identified are clearly related to the outputs delivered. This case is also the most likely to involve assessment of the quality of

deliverables. However, it does not always show the cumulative results that different areas of an organisation's work (e.g. advocacy, capacity building, and direct services) might have on a target population. And it may result in a collection of small-scale examples from different initiatives that might be used to *illustrate* changes resulting from an organisation's work, but do not give an overall *assessment* of that change. The logframe approach is normally based on this first case.

In the second case, an organisation could measure outcomes directly. This is harder to do well, as it involves assessing changes in people's lives, or supported organisations, directly. But it does give a better indication of whether there are real changes at this level, and the extent of these changes. The main implication of this approach is that linkages have to be traced backwards (to see whether, or how far, any changes are the result of a programme's work) and forwards (to see what the impact might be). Outcome Mapping and most significant change – indeed any complexity oriented tool – are normally based on this case.

The third case involves assessing impact directly and then tracing back to seek to identify the contributions to that impact. This is difficult to do well, and it requires a programme not only to assess long-term changes, but then show how these changes were linked to the outcomes of its work, and from there to the actual outputs. This case is least likely to be useful for drawing conclusions about the relevance and quality of the outputs of individual projects and programmes. However, it may be the most useful for assessing aggregate changes in peoples' lives.

In practice many projects and programmes base their M&E mostly on the first case, whilst some base M&E on the second case. Hardly any start by trying to measure impact and then trace results backwards; and this approach is normally reserved for more in-depth impact assessments or multi-agency studies.

Of course the best technical solution would be to pursue all three cases and then triangulate the findings to reach an overall assessment of what has changed and what might have contributed to that change. However, this would require a level of resources that is beyond many programmes.

References

- OECD (2010). *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluations and Results Based Management*. OECD, 2002, re-printed in 2010.
- Roche, C (1999). *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies*. Oxford: Oxfam/NOVIB.

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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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