

Indicators at programme level or higher may be designed to be collected directly in the same way as project indicators. However, they may also be designed to capture, summarise or aggregate information collected at project or partner level. In these circumstances it is important to consider how information on indicators can be transmitted between different levels of an organisation.

Indicators are routinely set and collected in most development projects. If an organisation is operational it will normally collect and report on indicators itself. If working through partners it will normally expect partners to collect the information. But organisations may also set indicators at programmatic levels, which can include global, regional, country or sector programmes. In these cases indicators may not be designed to be collected directly, but may instead rely on information collection at lower levels. This is often the case with strategic indicators – that is indicators set against strategic objectives in global, regional, country or sector plans.

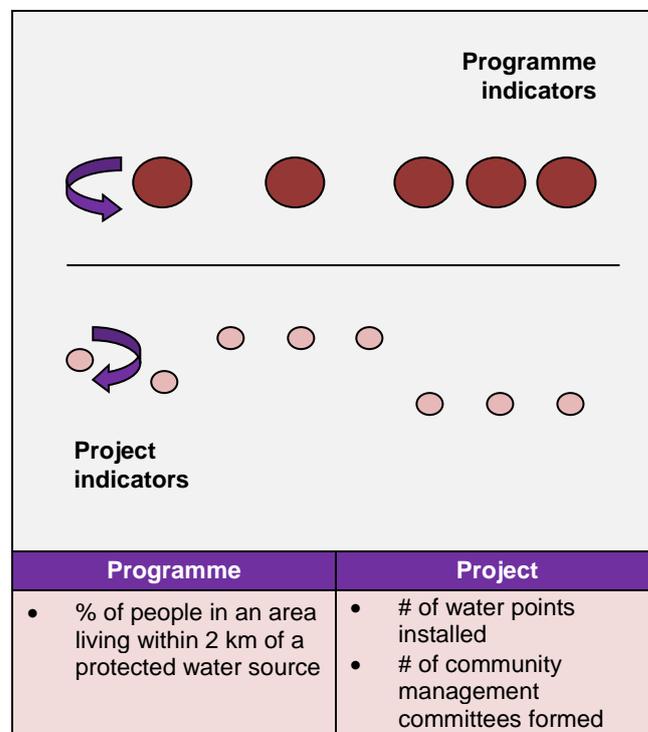
In order to do this it is important that organisations develop processes that enable information on indicators to be transmitted between different levels. The risk otherwise is that nobody takes responsibility for collecting the indicators, and the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system falls into disuse as a result.

The cases below show five ways in which programmatic indicators might be defined and collected. The cases are based on a water and sanitation programme comprised of several different projects. However, the principles can be applied across any levels of operation. The first three cases are the most common.

## Case 1: Independent indicators

In the first case the two sets of indicators are collected independently. Programme indicators are selected that can be collected by programme staff using their own resources. In the example given, the ‘% of people in an area living within 2km of a protected water source’ could be collected via a survey, or by using a system of water point mapping. Projects may collect their own indicators such as the number of water points installed or community management committees formed. Even though the results at programme level may depend partly on activities carried out at project level the two sets of indicators are not formally linked.

*“If an organisation wishes to link indicators across different levels then it needs to create the mechanisms to do so. It will not happen on its own. Indicators are not magnets.”*



## Case 2: Framing or basket indicators

Framing (or basket) indicators cannot be collected directly at programme level. Instead they are used to identify broad areas or domains of change. More specific indicators at project level are then captured and summarised under the framing indicators.

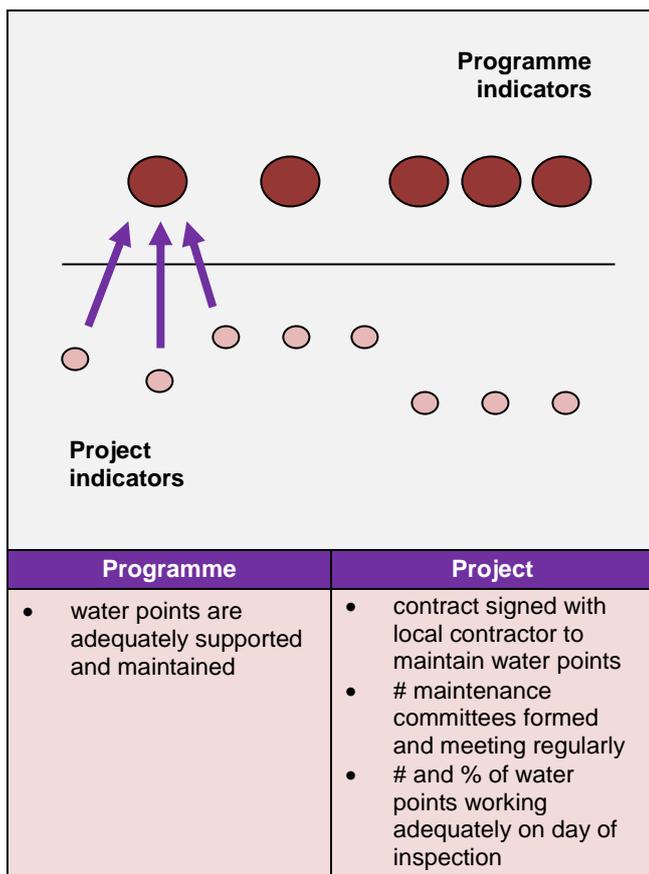
In the example shown a programmatic framing indicator might be ‘water points are adequately supported and maintained’. This kind of indicator cannot be collected directly as it is too vague. Instead, it relies on specific, tangible indicators or evidence being produced from project level, such as:

- contract signed with local contractor to maintain water points
- # of maintenance committees formed and meeting regularly
- # and % of water points working adequately on day of inspection

These three tangible indicators from different projects could all be collected under the one framing indicator at programme level, as examples of the type of changes that a programme is achieving.

However, it is important to recognise that this kind of indicator can rarely be used to *measure* programmatic change. Instead, it is used to generate a number of examples or illustrations of the type of changes that are occurring within a programme. The indicator is basically a mechanism for collecting together and summarising a number of specific changes under a common theme.

Note also that in this case the wording of the indicators may look very different at programme and project level. Indeed, there is no technical reason why a project should know about the programme indicator at all.

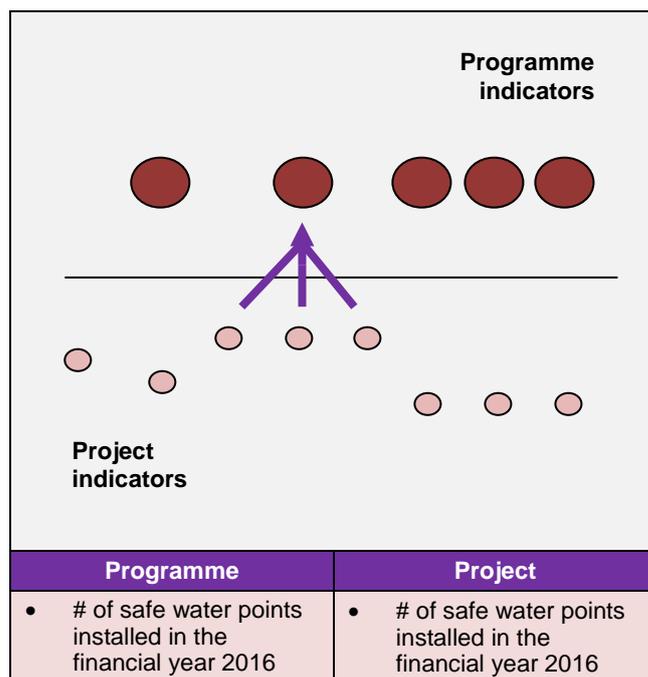


### Case 3: Aggregated indicators

Indicators from different projects can also be added together at programme level (or higher) to provide an aggregated indicator. In this case, the indicator has to be defined in exactly the same way at both project and programme level. An example of this could be '# of safe water points installed in the financial year 2016'. Note that if they are to be aggregated, the indicators need to be quantitative.

If a programme intends to aggregate indicators in this way it needs to ensure that all projects define and use the indicator in the same way as the programme. In practice this often means using common tools and approaches to collect the indicator, over similar timeframes. The risk otherwise is that different numbers may be added together that are meaningless.

For instance, in the example provided it would be meaningless to add together numbers from different projects if there were different understandings of what was meant by a 'safe' water point.



This kind of aggregation is often desired as it enables organisations to measure performance across different interventions. However, aggregating indicators in this way is never as easy as it sounds. In practice, it is usually essential to ensure that indicators are comprehensively defined at the start of a programme, so that project staff at lower levels work to the same indicator definitions. Indeed, a major implication of this approach is that all relevant partners or parts of an organisation need to be told (or persuaded) to use the standard indicators.

The difficulties are significant when applied to output indicators. Even more complex difficulties are faced when organisations attempt to aggregate information at outcome or impact level. This is the Holy Grail for many International NGOs that would allow them to measure performance across different sectors and regions. But the difficulties of such a task, especially when aggregating further upwards to country, sector or organisational levels, should not be underestimated. Specifically:

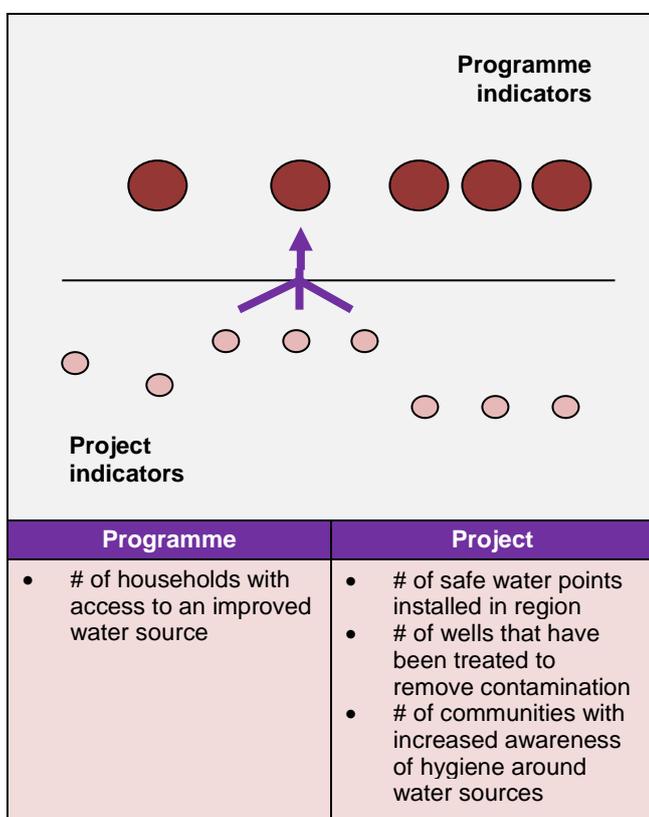
- the same indicator definitions need to be used;
- all relevant projects need to collect the information;
- change needs to be assessed over similar timescales;
- the same (or similar) tools and methods need to be used;
- the quality of information collection needs to be consistent; and
- contributions to change should be similar.

The more complex and intangible the outcome, the greater the difficulties in aggregation, and the more work needed beforehand to ensure that different levels are working to the same standards and procedures. Although INTRAC has seen attempts to aggregate indicators after the event (for example, taking indicators developed independently within a large number of projects and seeking to aggregate similar ones) it has never known this to be done successfully.

### Case 4: Translated indicators

This case is less common, and can be seen as a halfway house between cases 2 & 3. Projects still report on different indicators (as in case 2). However, those indicators are then 'translated' into a common indicator (as in case 3) later on in the process. Theoretically, this could be done by project staff, but in practice the translation is more commonly the task of programme staff.

In the example shown below, three different project indicators are all converted into a common programmatic indicator before being aggregated. For instance, it should be possible for programme staff to measure or estimate the number of households with access to newly installed water points (project indicator 1 below). It should also be possible to measure or estimate the number of households being served by wells treated for contamination (project indicator 2 below). The two numbers could then be aggregated under the common programmatic indicator "*# of households with access to an improved water source*".



Of course, this may be easier in some cases than others, and programme staff may find it much harder to estimate the number of households benefitting from increased awareness of hygiene around water sources (project indicator 3 in the example). Such estimates would need to rely on a number of assumptions (e.g. that increased awareness is reflected in behaviour, and that improved behaviour actually leads to improvements in the quality of water sources). However, with some effort this should not be too difficult.

There are many examples of where these kinds of indicators have been used within planning and M&E work. Some of the most common are as follows.

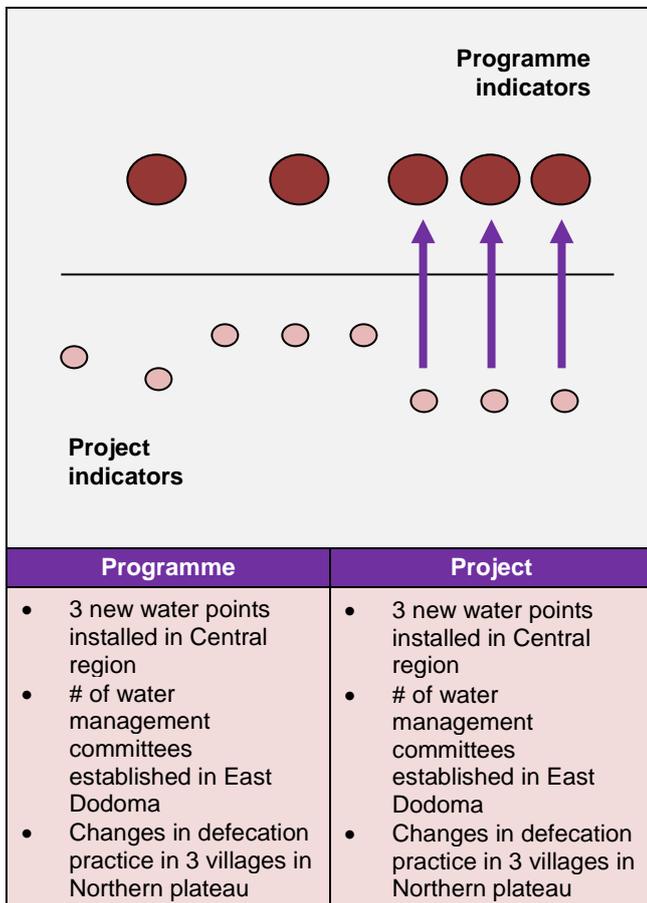
- In cost-benefit analysis, different kinds of social benefits are routinely translated into monetary values to enable aggregation and comparison.
- Health programmes often convert different indicators collected within projects into DALYs (disability-adjusted life years) – understood as the number of years of healthy life.
- Ranking or rating indicators may be used to aggregate and compare performance based on different project indicators. For example, project performance expressed in terms of different project indicators can be translated into a RAG (red, amber, green) rating.

Using translated indicators is seldom an easy exercise, and – as with simple aggregation – should not be undertaken lightly. There is a significant risk that the value of some project indicators may be lost in translation; for example through placing arbitrary economic values on social benefits. However, the main benefit of using translated indicators is that some level of aggregation can be achieved even if project indicators have not been defined or collected in the same way from the start of a programme.

### Case 5: Using the same indicators

In the final case, some programme frameworks contain indicators that are derived from a single project. These programme frameworks contain indicators that are basically project indicators that have been brought up to a different level.

This is often the case in cluster programmes, where programmes have little or no additional value and are really only collections of projects brought together for marketing purposes. In the example provided, three different indicators collected by projects have been brought up to programme level. When these indicators are reported at programmatic level, they will only cover the work of individual projects.



## Summary

Programme indicators are not always defined and used in the same way as project indicators. In some cases a great deal of thought needs to go into developing programme indicators and ensuring they are linked to indicators at lower levels. Programmes often use a combination of the five cases shown above to provide a range of information, some of which is reliant on information coming through project indicators and some of which can be collected independently at programme level.

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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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