

An objective describes a change a project, programme or organisation wants to achieve or contribute to. Objectives can be set at many different levels from broad strategic objectives to specific project objectives. They can range from simple deliverables that are within control of a project or programme's management to much wider goals that are dependent on many external factors. The ability to set good objectives is critical for effective monitoring and evaluation.

'A meaningful plan for monitoring and evaluation can only exist in relation to clearly defined objectives and strategies' (Okali et al 1994). Even if a project or programme has a good M&E system it will not make up for poor project or programme design (although it may help to show up these weaknesses). If objectives are unclear or poorly designed then monitoring and evaluation becomes much more complex and difficult. In contrast, if objectives are clear then the task of the M&E system is also clear. That is to:

- establish how far objectives are being met;
- assess what else is changing; and
- establish what changes need to be made as a result.

In a broad sense, an objective describes what a project, programme or organisation wants to achieve. Objectives are known by many different names. These include goals, aims, purposes, outcomes, overall objectives, specific objectives, results and (sometimes) outputs. However, whatever terminology is used, an objective should be more than an activity. It represents what an organisation is trying to achieve or change, not what it does.

Three types of objectives are commonly used within projects and programmes:

- Some objectives are set that are mostly within an organisation's control, for example ensuring that people are trained or children inoculated. These usually reflect the outputs (deliverables) of a project or programme.
- Objectives can also be designed to reflect the changes that are hoped for within a project or programme's lifetime. A project or programme would be expected to have a significant influence over these changes, although they would normally be subject to other influences as well.
- At the other end of the scale, a goal or aim might be a much wider change that is not designed to be achieved within the lifetime of a project or programme, and might depend upon the contribution of many different organisations and external factors.

Objectives may also be set at many different levels within an organisation. These can range from broad strategic objectives at international, national or sector level down to very specific project objectives.

Sometimes these objectives may be closely linked. For example, project objectives may be required to feed into programme objectives, which in turn might be expected to feed into organisational objectives.

Measuring objectives

Some argue that objectives should be SMART, as shown in the table below. (Note that some organisations use different words. For instance, achievable may be replaced by appropriate; relevant by realistic, etc.)

Specific	<i>Defining exactly what needs to change</i>
Measurable	<i>Ensuring the change can be measured or verified</i>
Achievable	<i>Ensuring the required objective can actually be achieved</i>
Relevant	<i>Appropriate to the specific intervention</i>
Timebound	<i>Designed to be achieved within a specified period</i>

This means that objectives should be set so that a project or programme knows exactly how they can be measured and when to measure them. In theory this enables certainty about whether or how far an objective has been achieved.

Clearly, this is much easier to do when setting objectives for a very specific project than it is for a set of broad strategic objectives. But for some it should be an aspiration for all objectives.

Others argue that this is too limiting, and that there are dangers associated with trying to be too specific about objectives when working in areas such as capacity development or governance where many things are simply too complex to be measured or where there is no clear agreement about what might constitute success. They argue that if objectives have to be measurable, this can lead to an organisation not attempting to bring about important changes just because they are not easily susceptible to measurement.

There are also different ways in which an objective can be 'measurable'. An objective can be timebound, and contain numbers that allow it to be measured directly

(e.g. 12,000 children enrolled in school by the end of 2018 in South Sudan). Or it can be expressed in more vague terms (e.g. *improvement in quality of education of children living in South Sudan*) and then measured through the use of very specific indicators.

However, just because something is *measurable* does not mean it will actually be *measured*. Many things can be measured with an appropriate mix of data collection and analysis tools and indicators, but the expense or difficulty of measuring them might not be considered worthwhile, especially where organisations have to carefully allocate M&E resources across many different projects and programmes

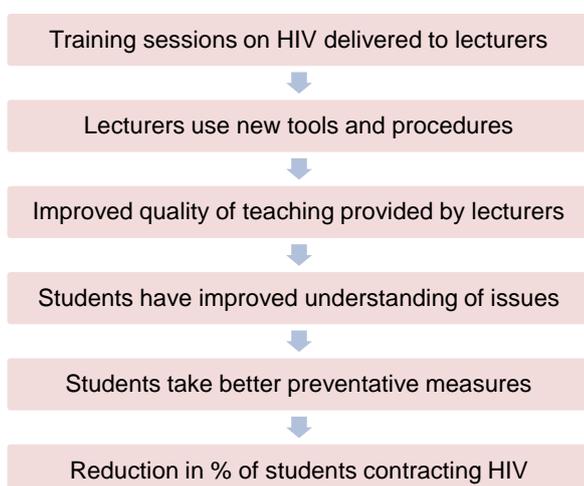
INTRAC believes that it is sometimes appropriate to develop very specific (SMART) objectives. But in some cases it may be appropriate to develop fairly broad objectives and attempt to assess progress through the use of more specific indicators, which might change over time. In other cases there may be some value in developing guiding objectives – objectives that are designed to inspire and shape, but which are not really susceptible to measurement.

There are no hard rules in this area and context is key. A guideline would be to develop a set of objectives and associated indicators that in combination are as specific as possible about any desired changes, given the particular conditions and circumstances.

Ambition of objectives

In any project or programme there is likely to be a hierarchy of objectives at different levels ranging from small-scale changes to wider changes resulting from a project or programme. This can cause problems for project or programme planners when setting objectives at the start of a piece of work.

For instance, in the example below, training sessions on HIV are provided to university lecturers in order to enable them to improve the information they provide to their students. In turn, this is expected to result in better understanding amongst students, and eventually in changed behaviour leading to lower infection rates.



Some planning, monitoring and evaluation methodologies are designed to cope with this level of complexity (e.g. objectives or problem trees, Outcome Mapping, impact pathways). However, in many cases project or programme staff are asked to select one objective to fit into a project proposal or logframe, and it can then be very difficult to identify the right level of ambition.

Unfortunately, objectives are not always developed with M&E - or even project or programme planning - in mind. For example, where people are trying to get approval for a project or programme they are sometimes tempted to set objectives at a very high level (e.g. reduction in percentage of students contracting HIV). This might make a proposal look more ambitious, which could mean it is more likely to gain approval or funding, even if achievement of the objective is dependent on many other factors. On the other hand, where it is known that resources will be allocated according to whether or not objectives have been achieved, project or programme staff might be tempted to set objectives at a very low level (e.g. lecturers use new tools and procedures).

These are the realities of life, and there is no point in insisting that people set realistic objectives if doing so means they don't get the funding necessary to try and achieve them! However, as far as good M&E is concerned, neither of the two scenarios described above is helpful. In the first case staff risk trying to demonstrate the achievement of objectives that simply prove too difficult to realise. In the second case, the objectives might be achieved easily, but fail to bring about real change because the objectives did not represent significant or lasting change.

As far as possible, a good M&E system tries to ensure that realistic objectives are set at different levels, against which progress can then be assessed. Where this proves difficult there are two main options open to staff.

The first is to set one objective (such as 'reduction in % of students contracting HIV') but then to develop a range of indicators to assess progress towards the objective at different levels. In the example provided this might mean setting a single overall objective, and then turning the remaining objectives statements into indicators, as follows.

- # of training sessions provided
- extent of use of new tools and procedures
- quality of teaching on HIV provided by lecturers
- % of students with improved understanding of issues
- # and % of students taking preventative measures

The second option would be to develop an objectives or problem tree, or to use a similar tool that could show the different hierarchy of objectives and the relation between them. This could then be attached to a proposal or logframe to show in greater detail the complexity of the project or programme. It could also

be used as a more useful and worthwhile basis for monitoring and evaluation.

Dimensions of Change

Many development agencies produce broad strategic objectives and then expect lower-level objectives at programme or project level to contribute to them. Increasingly, organisations are going further and are developing dimensions or domains of change.

Dimensions of change are broad areas of change to which different levels of an organisation are expected to contribute. The dimensions normally embody the areas of change an organisation believes it should and could be contributing to. The dimensions themselves are often very broad and generic as they are designed to be applied in very different contexts and at different levels. However, country, programme and project objectives are then set that are specific to the local context, but which directly reflect the relevant dimensions. Two examples of different sets of dimensions of change used by different organisations

are provided in the table below (see CDKN, 2010 and Save the Children UK, 2004).

Dimensions of change are often considered very useful for guiding planning. Some organisations applying dimensions of change also believe that they can provide a focus for M&E, and can help summarise progress or achievements across a range of different types of development interventions in different locations. However, others have argued that this has less to do with a real desire to measure impact across an organisation and more to do with marketing and fundraising (e.g. Giffen 2009).

Based on experiences to-date there appears little doubt that using dimensions of change can help focus the work of an organisation, programme or project at the design and planning stages. It is less certain whether using dimensions of change adds much to monitoring and evaluation in any meaningful way. A dimension of change is not 'measurable' as such, and often the best that can be done is to bring together a series of examples under each dimension to illustrate the type of changes that are occurring.

<i>Save the Children UK</i>	<i>Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in the lives of children and young people. • Changes in policies and practices affecting children's and young people's rights. • Changes in children's and young people's participation and active citizenship. • Changes in equity and participation of children and young people. • Changes in societies' and communities' capacity to support children's and young people's rights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in the quality of life for people most challenged by the effects of climate change. • Changes in the design and delivery of climate compatible development (CCD) policies and practices. • Changes in the quality, relevance and usability of the CCD evidence base. • Changes in the understanding and commitment of decision makers around CCD issues. • Changes in institutions and institutional capacity to respond appropriately to CCD needs and demands. • Changes in coordination, collaboration and mobilisation amongst key stakeholders. • Changes in the ability of decision makers to leverage and channel resources strategically.

Further reading and resources

Further information on setting objectives at different levels can be found in the associated paper in this series on outputs, outcomes and impact.

References

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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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