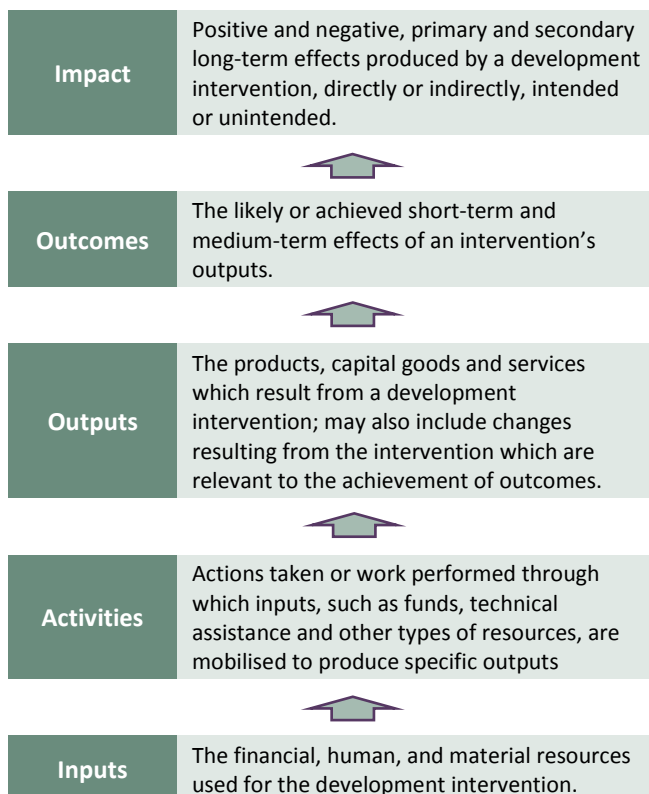# OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Outputs, outcomes and impact are terms used to describe change at different levels. Outputs are the products, goods and/or services which result from a development intervention. These are designed to produce outcomes – the short- to medium-term effects of an intervention – and eventually impacts. Whilst the terms are in common use, there is great inconsistency in how they 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 definitions below were developed by OECD DAC in 2002 (OECD 2010). But it is important to note that different organisations use different definitions, and there may be little consistency between them.

| Impact	Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.
Outcomes	The likely or achieved short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention's outputs.
Outputs	The products, capital goods and services which result from a development intervention; may also include changes resulting from the intervention which are relevant to the achievement of outcomes.
Activities	Actions taken or work performed through which inputs, such as funds, technical assistance and other types of resources, are mobilised to produce specific outputs
Inputs	The financial, human, and material resources used for the development intervention.

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

transport costs, staff costs etc. would be inputs. Activities undertaken would 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 would contribute to the desired impact, which might 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 to each other 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.
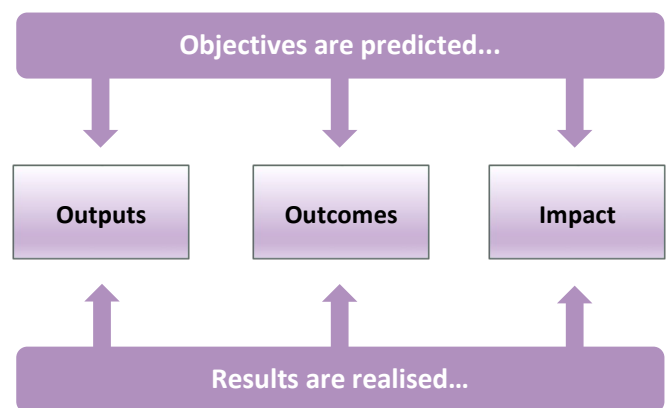
Potential Confusions

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 taking photographs of possible locations for a new well, talking to different villagers to find out where it 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 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. Some definitions of output only include 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. The OECD DAC definition, for example, allows that an output *"may also include changes resulting from [an] intervention which are relevant to the achievement of outcomes."*

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 people may still interpret the terms inconsistently.

The third confusion is between outcomes and impact, and here it is largely a matter of judgement. Again, 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 CSOs 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 focuses more on 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, and 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 remains on track. If the farmers are not planting the seeds, this lets project staff know that adjustments are 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 it 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 M&E focuses only on what is being delivered, assuming 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 these 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 CSO it would be reasonable to consider the training itself as an output, and any improvement in the Southern CSO's work, such as improved engagement with marginalised groups, as an outcome. But for the Southern CSO 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.

> *"There is no objective way of saying whether something is an output or an outcome. It depends partly on which angle you look at it from."*

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 shown on the next page 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 an output and the carrying out of effective operations by partners an outcome. So what at first sight 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 *(output)*	Improved eyesight for patients *(outcome)*	Improved quality of life *(impact)*
Case 2	Eye surgeons trained by partner *(output)*	Eye operations carried out to standard *(outcome)*	Improved eyesight for patients *(outcome)*	Improved quality of life *(impact)*

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 a large problem when using planning or M&E methods that are designed to deal with complexity, such as Outcome Mapping or the Most Significant Change technique. But in complex programmes it can be a real problem, especially when using linear tools such as the logical framework, which are usually developed from a single perspective.

Further Reading and Resources

Further information on the difference between outcomes and impact can be found in the M&E Universe paper on impact assessment. Another related paper in the planning section of the M&E Universe deals with setting objectives.

▶ **Impact Assessment**   ▶ **Setting objectives**

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 not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.