PROGRAMME INDICATORS

Some programme indicators are designed to be collected at programme level. Others are designed to capture, summarise or aggregate information collected at project or partner level. It is important to clarify how information on indicators is transmitted between different levels of a programme.

Indicators are routinely developed, collected and analysed in most social development projects. They can also be developed and used at programme level. Programmes may range from a collection of a few projects working on a common theme to large global, regional, country or sector programmes. Sometimes programme indicators are not designed to be collected directly, but instead rely on information collection at lower levels. This is often true of strategic indicators – indicators set against strategic objectives in global, regional, country or sector plans.

If a CSO plans to use programmatic indicators it is important that it develops and clarifies processes that enable information on indicators to be transmitted between different levels of the programme. The risk otherwise is that nobody takes responsibility for collecting the indicators, and the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system for the programme falls into disuse as a result.

The five cases below illustrate ways in which programmatic indicators can be defined and collected. The principles can be applied at any level from a simple programme working in one locality through to a large global, regional, national or sector programme. The first three cases are the most common.
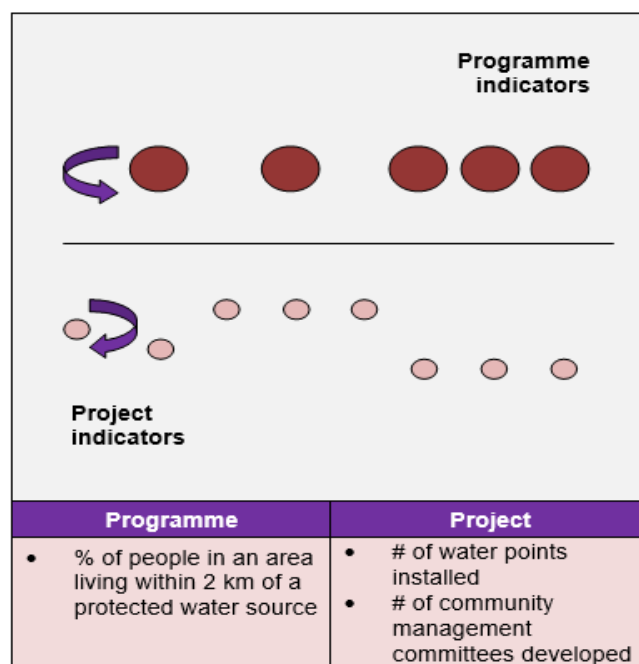
Case 1: Independent indicators

In the first case the two sets of indicators (programme and project indicators) are collected independently. Programme indicators are selected that can be collected by programme staff using their own resources. In the example shown in the diagram opposite, 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 might then collect their own indicators, such as the *'number of water points installed'* or *'number of 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.

Case 2: Framing or basket indicators

Framing (or basket) indicators are not specific and 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.
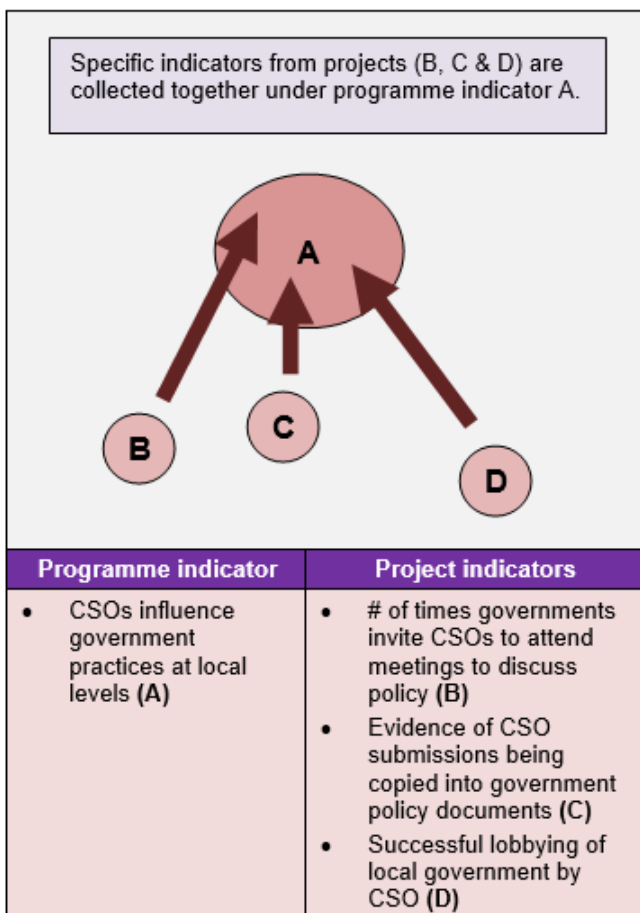
Case 1: Independent indicators

Programme	Project
• % of people in an area living within 2 km of a protected water source	• # of water points installed • # of community management committees developed

In the example shown on the following page a programmatic framing indicator might be *'CSOs influence government practices at local levels'*. 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:

- *# of times government invites CSOs to attend meetings to discuss policy*
- *Evidence of CSO submissions being copied into government policy documents*
- *Successful lobbying of local government by CSO*

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 change 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 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.

Case 2: Framing or basket indicators

Specific indicators from projects (B, C & D) are collected together under programme indicator A.

Programme indicator	Project indicators
• CSOs influence government practices at local levels (A)	• # of times governments invite CSOs to attend meetings to discuss policy (B) • Evidence of CSO submissions being copied into government policy documents (C) • Successful lobbying of local government by CSO (D)

When using framing indicators, project indicators may be quantitative or qualitative. They need not necessarily be indicators at all, and information on unexpected or negative changes can also be mapped onto the programme indicator. One big advantage of using framing indicators is that project staff are free to collect indicators which are useful to them and reflect their own needs without referring to the programme indicators. Indeed, there is no theoretical reason why project staff should know about the existence of the programme indicators at all.
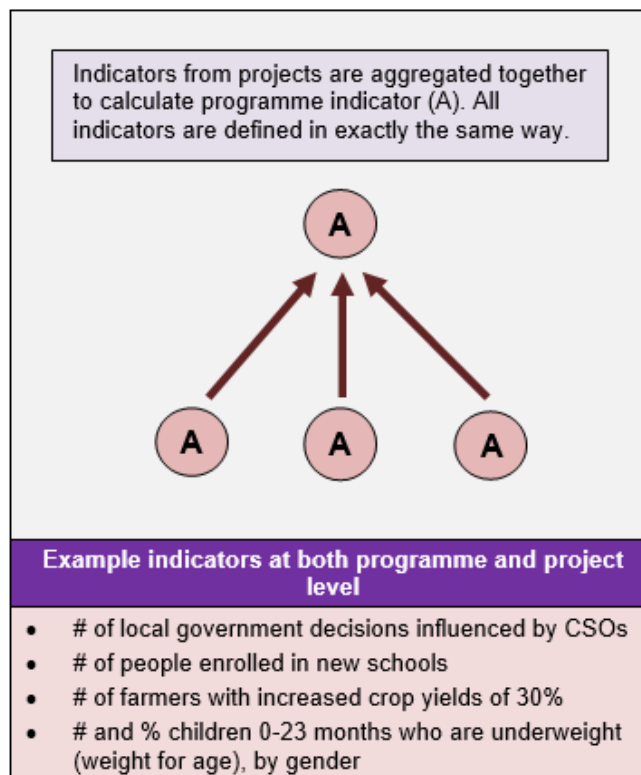
Case 3: Aggregated indicators

Indicators from different projects can also be added together at programme level to provide an aggregated indicator. In this case the indicator must be defined in exactly the same way at both project and programme level. An example of this is *'# of farmers with increased crop yields of 30%'*. Aggregated indicators are always quantitative.

If a programme intends to aggregate indicators it needs to ensure that any indicators are defined and used in the same way throughout all the projects covered by the programme. In practice this often means using common tools and approaches to collect the indicator, over similar timeframes. 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 risk otherwise is that different numbers are added together to produce a meaningless total. 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 an increase in crop yield.

CSOs often want to aggregate information across multiple projects as it enables them to summarise performance across different interventions. However, aggregating indicators is never as easy as it sounds. In practice, it is essential to ensure that indicators are comprehensively defined at the start of a programme, so that all project staff work to the same indicator definitions. Indeed, a major implication of this approach is that all relevant partners and projects need to be told (or persuaded) to use the standard indicators. Some examples of aggregated indicators can be found in the diagram below.

Case 3: Aggregated indicators

Indicators from projects are aggregated together to calculate programme indicator (A). All indicators are defined in exactly the same way.

Example indicators at both programme and project level
• # of local government decisions influenced by CSOs • # of people enrolled in new schools • # of farmers with increased crop yields of 30% • # and % children 0-23 months who are underweight (weight for age), by gender

The challenge of aggregation is significant when applied to output indicators. Even more complex difficulties are faced when programmes attempt to aggregate information at outcome or impact level. The more complex and intangible the outcome, the greater the difficulties in aggregation, and the more work needed beforehand to ensure that different projects use the same definitions and procedures when collecting information on the indicators. Although INTRAC
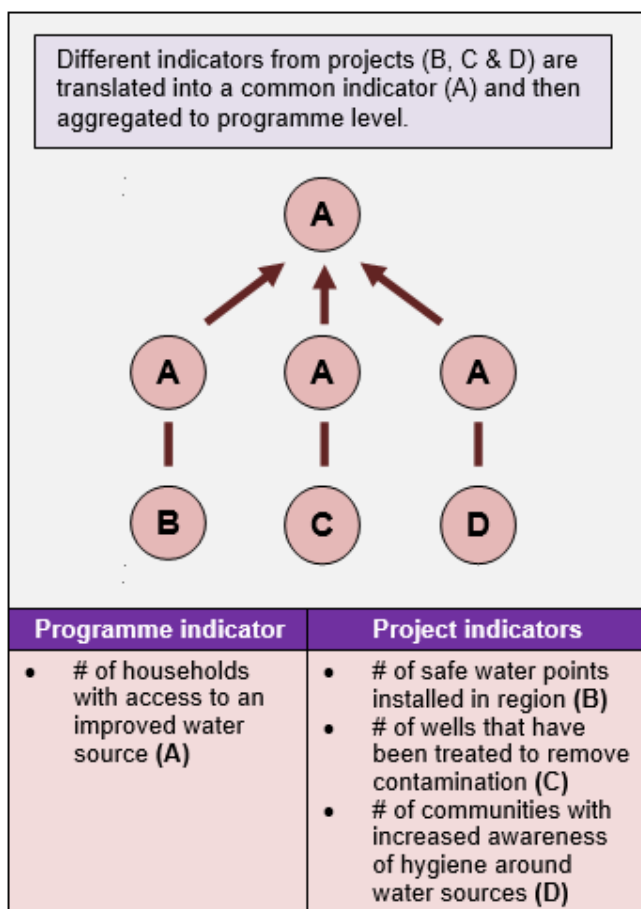
has seen attempts to aggregate indicators after the event (for example, taking indicators developed independently within a large number of projects and seeking to aggregate them) it has never known this to be done successfully.

Case 4: Translated indicators

Translated indicators are 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 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 indicator before being aggregated. For instance, programme staff could measure or estimate the number of households with access to newly installed water points (the first project indicator). They could also measure or estimate the number of households being served by wells treated for contamination (the second project indicator). The two numbers could then be aggregated under the common programmatic indicator *"# of households with access to an improved water source"*.

Case 4: Translated indicators

Programme indicator	Project indicators
• # of households with access to an improved water source (A)	• # of safe water points installed in region (B) • # of wells that have been treated to remove contamination (C) • # of communities with increased awareness of hygiene around water sources (D)

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 (the third project indicator in the example). Such estimates would have to rely on some assumptions, e.g. that increased awareness is reflected in behaviour, and that improved behaviour leads to improvements in the quality of water sources. However, with some effort this should not be too difficult an exercise.

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 or social return on investment, 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 additional number of years of healthy life for a person.

- 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 and then aggregated into a programme indicator.
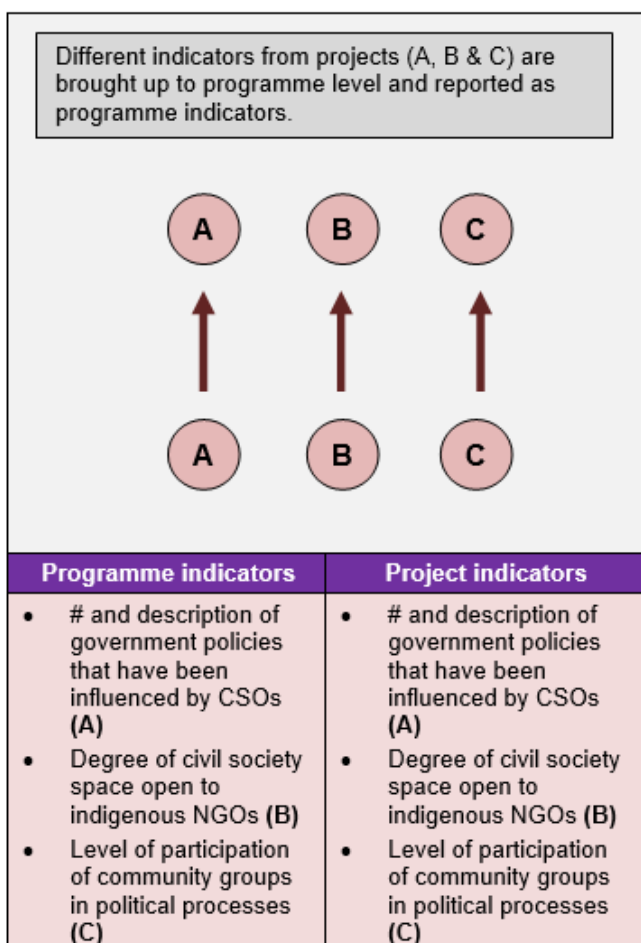
However, using translated indicators is seldom an easy exercise, and – as with aggregation – should not be undertaken lightly. There is a significant risk that the value of some project indicators may be lost in translation; for example through placing arbitrary economic values on social benefits. The main advantage 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: Cluster indicators

In the final case, some programmes define indicators that are basically project indicators which have been brought up to programmatic level. This is often the case in cluster programmes, where programmes have little or no added value and are really only collections of projects brought together for marketing or communications purposes. In the example provided, three different indicators collected by projects have been brought up to programme level. Each indicator, when reported at programme level, only covers the work of an individual project.

"If a CSO 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 5: Cluster indicators

Different indicators from projects (A, B & C) are brought up to programme level and reported as programme indicators.

Programme indicators	Project indicators
• # and description of government policies that have been influenced by CSOs (A)	• # and description of government policies that have been influenced by CSOs (A)
• Degree of civil society space open to indigenous NGOs (B)	• Degree of civil society space open to indigenous NGOs (B)
• Level of participation of community groups in political processes (C)	• Level of participation of community groups in political processes (C)

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 project 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.

Further reading and resources

Further information on how to aggregate and summarise information across different levels of an organisation can be found in the M&E Universe paper on aggregation and summarisation.

▶ **Aggregation and summarisation**   ▶ **Indicators**

The material in this paper is mostly taken from a paper called *"Summarisation of Portfolio Change"* by Nigel Simister, published in 2016. This can be found on INTRAC's website at https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Summarising-portfolio-change-results-frameworks-at-organisational-level.pdf.

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