

# SETTING OBJECTIVES



An objective describes a change a project, programme or organisation wants to achieve or influence. They can be set at many different levels from broad strategic objectives to very specific project objectives. They can range from simple deliverables that are under the control of a project or programme to long-term goals which may be dependent on many different factors. Setting good objectives makes monitoring and evaluation easier and more effective.

*"A meaningful plan for monitoring and evaluation can only exist in relation to clearly defined objectives and strategies"* (Okali et al 1994). A good monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system cannot make up for poor project or programme design. If objectives are unclear or poorly designed then M&E becomes much more difficult. By contrast, if objectives are clear then the task of an M&E system is often straightforward. That is to:

- establish how far objectives are being met;
- assess what else is changing; and
- identify what revisions a project or programme needs to make as a result.

Broadly, an objective describes what a project, programme or organisation wants to achieve or influence. 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.

Objectives may be set at many different levels within an organisation. They 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 country, regional or organisational objectives.

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

- Some objectives 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, as well as external factors.

## 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 for a set of broad strategic objectives. But some people believe it should be an aspiration for all objectives.

Others argue that this is too limiting, and that it can be dangerous to be too specific about objectives when working in areas such as capacity development or governance where many things are too complex to be measured, or where there is no clear agreement about what constitutes success. They argue that if all objectives must be measurable, then organisations may decide not to attempt important changes just because they cannot easily be measured.

It is important to note that there are different ways in which an objective can be 'measurable'. For example 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 using very specific indicators.

INTRAC believes that it is sometimes appropriate to develop SMART objectives. But in some cases it may be more appropriate to develop broad objectives and attempt to assess progress using 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 cannot accurately be measured.

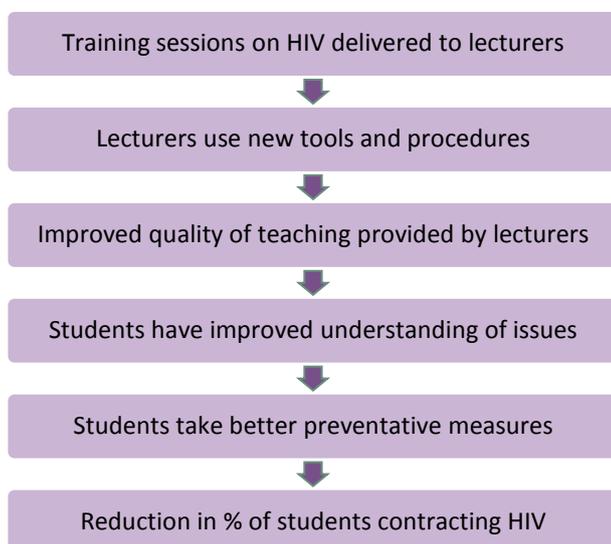
There are no hard rules in this area and context is key. A rule of thumb would be to develop a set of objectives and associated indicators that in combination are as specific as possible about any desired changes, given the particular conditions and circumstances.

It is also important to recognise that just because something is measurable does not mean it will ever actually be measured. Most objectives can be measured to some degree with the right mixture of data collection and analysis tools. But sometimes the expense or difficulty means it is not considered worthwhile.

## Ambition of objectives

In any project or programme there is likely to be a hierarchy of potential objectives at different levels ranging from short-term, small-scale changes through to longer-term, wider changes. This can cause problems for project or programme planners when setting objectives at the start of a development intervention.

The example below illustrates this using a set of objectives derived from an HIV&AIDS awareness-raising project. In this project, training sessions on HIV were given to university lecturers in order to enable them to provide better information to their students. In turn, this was expected to result in better understanding amongst



students, and eventually changed behaviour, leading to lower transmission rates.

Some planning, monitoring and evaluation tools are designed to handle complex sets of objectives at different levels (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 logical framework, and it can then be very difficult to identify the right level of ambition.

Unfortunately, objectives are not always developed with M&E in mind. For example, when trying to get approval for a project or programme people 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 the achievement of the objective is dependent on many other factors or not realistic given the timescales. 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 are unlikely to be achieved in the project period, or are dependent on too many other factors. In the second case, the objectives might be achieved easily, but fail to bring about real change because they did not represent significant or lasting change.

As far as possible, project / programme staff should try 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. The first is to set one objective but then to develop a range of indicators to assess progress at different levels. In the example provided this might mean setting a single overall objective (such as 'reduction in % of students contracting HIV'), 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 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 logical framework 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

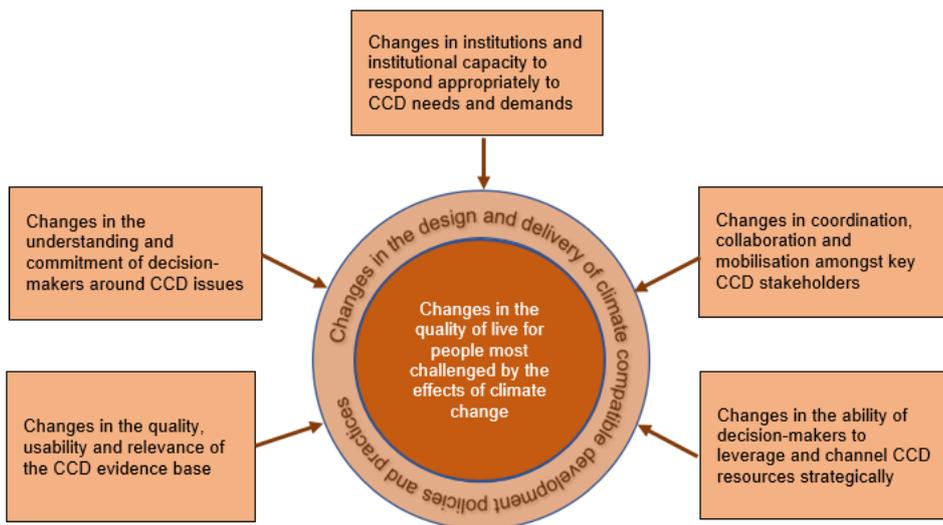
Many large NGOs expect different projects and programmes to develop specific objectives and then link them to broader, strategic objectives. Increasingly, organisations are going further and are developing dimensions or domains of change.

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 influencing. The dimensions themselves are often very broad and generic, as they are designed to be applied in very different contexts and at different levels. By contrast, country, programme and project objectives are expected to reflect the relevant dimensions, but be specific to the local context. Two examples of different sets of dimensions of change used by different organisations are provided below (see CDKN 2010 and Save the Children UK 2004).

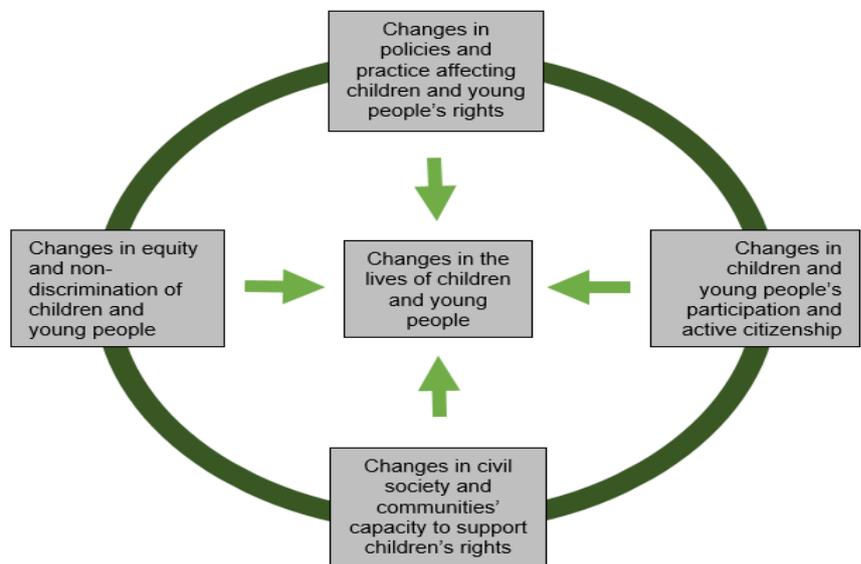
Dimensions of change are often very useful for guiding planning. Some organisations also develop and use dimensions of change because they believe that they provide a focus for M&E, and can help summarise progress or achievements across a range of different types of development interventions in different 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).

The evidence to-date suggests 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.

**CDKN Programme on Climate Compatible Development (CCD)  
Dimensions of Change**



**Save the Children UK Dimensions of Change**



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## Further reading and resources

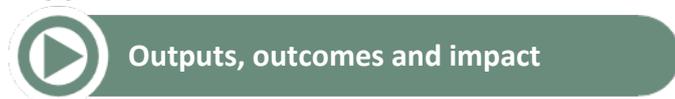
Further information on setting objectives at different levels can be found in the associated papers on outputs, outcomes and impact. Other papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with indicators, developing plans, and influences on the M&E approach.



Indicators



Developing a plan



Outputs, outcomes and impact



Influences on the M&E approach

## References

- CDKN (2010). *CDKN M&E Plan*. M&E Department, CDKN, 2010
- Giffen, J (2009). *The Challenges of Monitoring and Evaluating Programmes*. M&E Paper 5, INTRAC, December 2009
- Okali, C; Sumberg, J; and Farrington, J (1994). *Farmer Participatory Research: Rhetoric and Reality*. IT Publications, London.
- Save the Children UK (2004). *Global Impact Monitoring: Save the Children UK's experience of impact assessment*, by Simon Starling, Marta Foresti and Helen Banos Smith. Save the Children UK, January 2004

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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.

### M&E Training & Consultancy

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