

BASELINES

To understand the changes brought about by a project or programme, it is important to know what the original situation was. This means collecting and analysing information at the start of a project or programme, so that progress can be compared later on. This is called a baseline. Baselines can range from simple data collection exercises through to large, expensive surveys.

Most projects and programmes define objectives and indicators that aim to identify and measure change. In order to understand the changes brought about by a project or programme, it is important to know what the original situation was. This means collecting and analysing information on the objectives and/or indicators at the start of a project or programme. This is called the **baseline**. A baseline can be defined as:

“An analysis describing the situation prior to a development intervention, against which progress can be assessed or comparisons made.” (OECD, 2022)

If a baseline has been carried out, information on the same objectives and/or indicators can be collected and analysed later in the project or programme. If this is done at the mid-point of a project or programme it is sometimes known as a **midline**. If done at the end of a project or programme it is called an **endline**. Without a baseline it is harder to assess progress because changes cannot easily be compared with the original situation.

Baselines can range from largely informal or ‘light-touch’ exercises through to large-scale surveys or studies. They are normally carried out at, or near to, the start of a project or programme. If a baseline is carried out at household or individual level then it is normally conducted after the target households or population have been selected. In practice, this means a baseline is often done after the design phase of a project or programme has been completed.

The main purpose of a baseline is to allow a project or programme to evaluate performance by establishing the changes that have occurred between the start and the mid- or end-point. However, baselines can sometimes be used for other purposes. For example, information collected during a baseline with project or programme stakeholders, such as community groups, may reveal that the objectives or indicators established during the design phase need to be adjusted. Baseline information can also be used to set milestones and targets.

All projects and programmes should carry out at least some baseline work. However, a formal baseline study is most useful when:

- there is a clear understanding of the changes a project or programme wants to influence;

- there are sufficient resources and expertise to do the work properly;
- there is a clear plan for how to follow up the baseline study in the future; and
- the benefits of conducting a baseline study, and repeating the exercise at a later date to assess change, outweigh the costs.

Sometimes organisations have to conduct baseline studies as a condition of funding, and therefore have no choice.

Context analysis

Some development practitioners may refer to a ‘baseline’ when talking about a context analysis or needs assessment. A context analysis is an analysis of a situation within a geographic location or sector. It normally includes an assessment of the challenges in that location or sector, and an analysis of who is currently working on those challenges. It also involves an assessment of the external socio-economic and/or political environment. A context analysis is often designed to identify the needs of a targeted population, and the different groups within it.

Information collected during a context analysis can be used as baseline information in some circumstances, and may provide a broad overview of the situation of a target population, prior to an intervention. However, because a context analysis is normally carried out before a project or programme has been designed, and before objectives and indicators have been developed or target populations identified, it may be necessary to develop a more focused baseline afterwards.

Baselines for different interventions

In some circumstances, defining, collecting and analysing baseline information can be fairly straightforward, especially when projects or programmes are focused mainly on service delivery. Examples of baseline information could include the number of girls and boys attending school at the start of a project, or crop yields of supported farmers.

However, sometimes it is not so straightforward. For example, programmes that seek to raise awareness of human rights or promote inclusive civil society may find it much harder to establish a clear baseline. In general, the

easier it is to define measurable indicators of change, the easier it is to develop a baseline (Taylor, 2001).

The type of information covered by a baseline also depends on the strategies adopted to influence change. Projects aimed at supporting the livelihoods of rural households do not require the same kind of baseline data as those designed to influence government policies or strengthen the capacity of organisations. Indeed, the type of questions asked at baseline may be very different (see box below).

Type of project	Sample questions for baselines
Project aimed at livelihoods development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What assets do households have? • What is their disposable income? • Who decides how that income is used? • How many meals a day do household members eat, and is this different for men and women? • Are children within the households sent to school, and is this different between boys and girls? <p>(Note that baseline information of this type should always be disaggregated according to gender and/or other groupings)</p>
Project involving capacity strengthening of partner organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which areas of capacity do partners wish to improve? • What is their current capacity in these areas? • Who is supporting them in these areas? • How else are they currently addressing capacity gaps?
Project designed to influence a government policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the policy currently under development or review? • Which key decision-makers (if at all) are interested in the policy? • Which external actors are involved, and what are they doing? • What is the public's attitude towards the policy?

The type of intervention also influences the tools and methodologies used to collect and analyse baseline information. For example, in a capacity strengthening project an organisational assessment might be used as a baseline. By contrast, a set of interviews with policy-makers and a survey of members of the public might be more useful for a policy influencing project. In many circumstances, the same tools and methodologies will need to be used at a later date (at midline or endline) to compare progress against the baseline.

Some projects and programmes only deal with a small number of cases, such as a limited number of government policies or a few partners receiving capacity strengthening support. Where this happens, a baseline is likely to focus in detail on those individual cases. But if support is provided

to a large population (as might happen in a mass livelihoods or health programme) a more extensive **baseline survey** may be needed.

Baseline surveys can be carried out at individual, household, or community levels. Sometimes, a supported population is small enough that everyone can be covered by the survey. However, most of the time, baseline surveys are designed to cover only a sample of the population. Many different techniques can be used to develop a sample, and these are covered in a separate paper within the M&E Universe.



A large-scale baseline survey can be difficult to do well, is often costly, and may require expertise. It is very important to plan it properly from the start. Plans should not just cover the baseline itself, but should also focus on when and how it will be followed up at a later date.

Baselines and causality

The main purpose of carrying out a baseline is to compare the situation at the beginning of a project or programme with the situation at a later date, in order to assess what has changed. Sometimes, it is reasonable to assume that a change was largely due to a development intervention. For example, if a project introduced a new water purification technique to a community, it is probable that any changes in water quality observed since the baseline were caused by the project.

But sometimes it is not so clear. Targeted populations, communities or organisations may have received support from other agencies, and/or may have been affected by changes in the external social or political environment. Therefore, it cannot always be assumed that any change observed since a baseline was wholly caused by a particular project or programme, and additional work may be needed to identify contribution to change. This can be done in many ways, some of which are described below.

- Sometimes, causality can be established through statistical analysis. For example, if a project aimed to improve farmers' livelihoods through supporting their knowledge of intensive farming techniques, it might be possible to demonstrate a statistical correlation between the support provided and better livelihoods.
- Some projects or programmes use control or comparison groups which do not receive the same support as the targeted population. Baseline and endline (or midline) data is collected from the control or comparison group as well as the group receiving support. Any changes from the baseline can then be compared between the different groups to isolate the contribution of the project or programme from other factors.

- Sometimes, organisations try to show the contribution of a project or programme by carefully mapping out the theory linking an intervention with any observed changes. Once a change has been satisfactorily demonstrated, evidence is generated at each level of the theory to identify exactly how a project or programme contributed. Two of these methods (contribution analysis and process tracing) are covered in other papers within the M&E Universe.

Whichever method is chosen, it is important to clarify how a project or programme intends to identify its contribution to change *before* a baseline is conducted. This is because it will affect decisions over the type of baseline data collected, who it is collected from, and how it is collected and analysed.



It is always important to consider the needs of the different stakeholders involved in a baseline, and to avoid simply extracting data from people. Wherever possible, the participation and perspectives of different groups (according to gender, ethnicity, age etc.) should also be sought.

Alternatives to baselines

If a proper baseline study cannot be afforded, or a lot of work has already been completed before a baseline has been conducted, some alternatives can be considered.

- As stated previously, if a context analysis has been carried out, or any other kind of prior assessment in the project/programme area, it may include information on the scale or characteristics of the problem an intervention is trying to address. This information can sometimes be used as baseline data.
- People involved in a project or programme usually remember what a situation was before an intervention began. Their memories can be used to form what is known as a retrospective baseline (a baseline established at a later date).
- Other organisations might have records that can be used to establish a retrospective baseline. For example, there may be government records, or records belonging to local institutions such as schools or hospitals.
- Some methods of data collection and analysis, such as the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique and outcome harvesting, do not require baselines, and can be used in situations where baselines are not appropriate or have not been conducted.

It is important to note that some kinds of change cannot be assessed with reference to a baseline. For example, where objectives or indicators have been modified or added during the life-time of a project or programme, there is no baseline to compare against.

Indeed, some kinds of projects and programmes are designed to be deliberately adaptive. This means they are designed to constantly evolve in response to emerging evidence or changes in the external environment. Baselines may be of less use in these kinds of interventions because objectives and indicators are constantly changing.



Social development work often has unexpected consequences, and by their nature these cannot easily be compared with a baseline. Therefore, any follow-up work designed to compare expected changes against a baseline should also search for unexpected change.

Challenges with baselines

Sadly, much of the money spent on baselines by civil society organisations (CSOs) is wasted. Sometimes this is because projects and programmes change, making the baseline redundant or incomplete. However, it is mostly because staff have not properly thought through how the baselines will be used in the future.

Common mistakes include collecting information that is not needed, forgetting about the baseline once it has been completed, collecting data that is too general to be useful, and collecting data on people and locations that are not targeted by the project or programme.

These mistakes can mostly be avoided with good planning and forethought. However, challenges associated with the length of time between the development of baselines and their follow-up at midline and endline may be harder to overcome. For example, if there is a requirement to carry out an external evaluation on a project or programme it is likely that the external evaluators will want to establish progress against the baseline. However, it is unlikely they will have had any involvement in the establishment of that baseline. At the same time, internal staff may have changed over the course of the project or programme, with institutional memory lost as a result.

This is why it is so important for organisations carrying out baseline work to keep records that outline clearly why decisions were taken, how baselines were conducted, which particular groups or households were involved, and which sampling techniques or tools were used.

SOME DOs and DON'Ts OF BASELINES



DO

- Identify what changes you hope a project or programme will influence before deciding what to measure at baseline.
- Properly assess the costs and benefits of doing a baseline study, and make decisions accordingly.
- Carry out the baseline near to the start of a project or programme, as it may reveal information that requires you to change your plans or objectives.
- Make firm plans for how you intend to follow up your baseline during future reviews or evaluations.
- Ensure that different target groups (e.g. women, youth, specific marginalised or vulnerable groups) are properly represented and identified in the baseline.
- Record any methodologies or sampling techniques used so that these can be replicated at a later date.



DON'T

- Automatically assume that any changes recorded against a baseline are due to the project or programme intervention.
- Collect data from people who are not members of the target population (unless they are part of a control or comparison group).
- Collect data if you are not sure how you will use it.
- Forget to record the name and location of communities and individuals who have been interviewed in case you or someone else needs to revisit them (bearing in mind confidentiality and data protection requirements).
- Forget to ensure that all records, including any completed surveys or questionnaire sheets, are stored appropriately so they can easily be retrieved at a later date.
- Lose the baseline!

Further reading and resources

Other papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with setting objectives and indicators. A paper on sampling is included in the data collection section, and a paper on quasi-experimental methods contains more information on the use of control and comparison groups.



Setting objectives



Indicators



Sampling



Quasi-experimental approaches

A very useful paper on the development of baselines has been produced by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. It is called *Baseline Basics* and, at time of writing, is available from the Better Evaluation website at: https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/Baseline_Basics_2013.pdf

References

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