

INDICATORS

Indicators are used in social development projects and programmes to provide evidence of progress or change. They play an important role in most monitoring and evaluation systems and approaches. There are many kinds of indicator, but most are either quantitative or qualitative. They can be developed in different ways, according to the context.

Indicators are defined in different ways by different organisations. Two definitions are shown below, but there are many others:

“A quantitative or qualitative factor or variable of interest, related to [an] intervention and its results, or to the context in which an intervention takes place.” (OECD, 2022)

“An observable change or event which provides evidence that something has happened – whether an output delivered, immediate effect occurred or long-term change observed.” (Bakewell, Adams and Pratt, 2003, p21)

Indicators may be designed to reflect a project or programme’s activities, or desired changes at different levels from outputs (deliverables) through to long-term impact. They can also be used to help identify organisational (internal) change, or changes in the external environment.



Indicators should not be confused with the things they are trying to measure. An indicator is designed to provide evidence that shows whether or not, or how far, a change has happened or progress has been made. It is not the desired change itself.

Different types of indicators

There are many kinds of indicator. The most commonly used ones are quantitative and qualitative indicators.

- **Quantitative indicators** are reported as numbers such as units, prices, proportions, rates of change and ratios.
- **Qualitative indicators** are reported as words in quotes, statements, descriptions or case studies.

It is not the way in which an indicator is defined that makes it quantitative or qualitative, but the way in which it is reported. If an indicator is reported using a number then it is a quantitative indicator. If it is reported using words then it is qualitative. A widespread misconception is that a qualitative indicator measures the quality of an activity or change. This is not always true.

Quantitative and qualitative indicators have different strengths and weaknesses, and often both are needed within a project or programme. For example, a detailed case study on changes in individuals' livelihoods due to a project may not mean much unless the reader has some idea of how many people were supported through the project. Similarly, reports counting the number of people affected by a project may need to be supplemented by descriptions of what has actually changed in their lives. Some of the key differences between quantitative and qualitative indicators are outlined below.

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Expression	Numbers	Words
Coverage	Provide information on scale and scope of work	Provide in-depth information on changes at strategic points
Analysis	Analysed through statistical data methods	Analysed through qualitative analysis methods
Limitations	Often need to be interpreted through qualitative enquiry	Often apply only to a small number of people or situations, and may not be representative

Other kinds of indicators include the following.

- **Mixed or hybrid indicators** contain an element of both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, ‘# and description of policies changed’. These indicators can be used to show both the scale and depth of change. In this example, reporting on the number of policies changed would give the scale of change, and individual descriptions could show which policies had changed, how and why.
- **Scoring and rating indicators** are quantitative indicators. They are sometimes collected directly, but may also be generated from qualitative data. For example, training participants might be asked to rate their satisfaction according to pre-defined categories such as ‘very satisfied’, ‘satisfied’, and ‘unsatisfied’. Alternatively, an evaluator might interview participants, and then develop a rating based on their answers.

- Simple ‘yes/no’ or **binary indicators** can be used to define whether something has happened or not. For example, ‘*a new law on forced migration is enacted before the end of 2025*’.
- In some circumstances, **pictures** can be used as indicators. Along with words and numbers, pictures can contain information that provides evidence of change. For example, photographs taken before and after a project can show how the physical environment of a village, school or urban area has changed.
- **Proxy indicators** measure change in an indirect manner. In other words, a proxy indicator does not measure something directly. Instead, it measures it through a related factor. For example, the distribution or acceptance of condoms is sometimes used as a proxy measure for reduced rates of transmission of HIV. It is a valid proxy because there is a known and accepted correlation between the increased use of condoms and lower HIV transmission rates.
- **Framing (or basket) indicators** are used when it is difficult to exactly predict the changes resulting from a development intervention. They define the domain in which change is expected to occur. For example, ‘*changes in the way marginalised groups engage with local government agencies*’. Framing indicators are not usually used to *measure* change, but instead are used to collect and bring together different *examples* of change under a common theme. They are discussed further in the M&E Universe paper on programme indicators.

Defining indicators

In the past, many indicators were developed according to the Quantity, Quality, Time and Place (QQTTP) protocol (see figure 1). This meant that an indicator would include numeric targets, such as ‘*300 people trained*’ or a ‘*30% increase in literacy levels*’.

Although some organisations still define indicators in this way, a new industry standard has emerged where indicators increasingly appear as neutral statements (e.g. ‘*number of new jobs created*’, not ‘*50 new jobs created*’). The reason is to ensure that indicators remain neutral criteria providing evidence of change, rather than targets to be achieved.

Figure 1: An Example of the QQTTP Protocol

Q uantity	300 midwives
Q uality	300 midwives trained in traditional birthing techniques
T ime	300 midwives trained in traditional birthing techniques by the end of 2021
P lace	300 midwives in Southern Uganda trained in traditional birthing techniques by the end of 2021

Organisations that use neutral indicators often choose to link them up with baseline, milestone and target statements. If indicators are quantitative then the baselines, milestones and targets contain numbers. If they are qualitative then the baselines, milestones and targets contain words. Some simple examples are shown in figure 2 below.

Whether neutral or not, a good indicator is still expected to be as specific as possible under the circumstances, so that it is not left open to different interpretations.

The relationship between indicators and sources of information

Some indicators can be collected using many different methods of data collection and analysis. However, many indicators only have meaning when they are linked to the specific tools or methods used to collect them. For example, if a survey is designed to ask a question such as ‘*would you rate your engagement with the local school as high, medium or low?*’ then an indicator might be ‘*# and % of respondents that say they have a high engagement with the local school*’. Without having first developed the survey, the indicator would be meaningless.

Consequently, the order in which indicators and tools are developed sometimes needs to be reversed. In some circumstances it makes sense to develop an indicator first, and then identify which sources of information could be used to generate the required information. In other cases it makes sense to develop or select tools of information collection and analysis before defining an indicator.

Figure 2: Baselines, Milestones and Targets

Indicator	Baseline	Milestone 1	Milestone 2	Target
% of girls in project areas who report living free from violence over the past year	10%	25%	35%	50%
# of boys / girls completing one year of basic primary education in project-supported schools	0	300 / 200	350 / 300	400 / 400
Capacity of supported partner to develop its own project proposals	Partner has no ability to develop project proposals	Partner can develop proposals with assistance from supporting agency	Partner is capable of developing independent project proposals	Partner can produce independent, high quality proposals
Policy on use of common grazing land introduced by the end of 2030	No policy supports the use of common grazing land	Development of new policy placed on agenda of local government	A new proposed policy is outlined and sent out for consultation	Policy is adopted by local government

Disaggregation

Indicators, especially quantitative ones, are often disaggregated. Disaggregation means separating out information to show differences between distinct groups. Common criteria for disaggregation include gender, youth, disability, and people living with HIV&AIDS.

Within social development it is now standard practice to disaggregate indicators wherever possible, especially according to gender. This can apply not only to indicators focusing on people, but also to indicators such as ‘# of organisations supported through capacity strengthening’, which could be disaggregated according to whether organisations are women-led, youth-led, etc.

Where indicators are disaggregated, associated information such as baselines, milestones and targets also needs to be disaggregated, as in the example below.

Figure 3: Disaggregated baselines and targets

Indicator	Baseline	Target
% of targeted children suffering from diarrhoea in the past 2 weeks in programme areas, disaggregated by gender	40% (35% boys) (45% girls)	30% (30% boys) (30% girls)

Selecting and using indicators

Indicators can be developed or selected in many ways. Some of these are described in the box below.

Methods of selecting indicators

- Indicators might be developed by project or programme staff on their own.
- They may be selected through brainstorming with a wider group of stakeholders.
- Many organisations involve project/programme participants in selecting indicators. This is often a key aspect of participatory monitoring and evaluation.
- Some organisations develop checklists or menus of common indicators to select from.
- Some organisations require standard indicators to be set for specific programmes or sector areas (especially if they wish to aggregate information).
- Some donors require specific indicators to be used by organisations that receive their funds.
- In some areas of work, such as health or water and sanitation, there are industry-specific indicators.
- In some types of work there are approved guidelines for setting indicators (e.g. SPHERE indicators for programmes involved in humanitarian programming).

Generally, the more stakeholders that are involved in selecting indicators, the greater their ownership. This helps ensure the indicators make sense to them, and are seen as useful. In turn, this means the indicators are more likely to be collected accurately and analysed properly. However, a

disadvantage is that the process of identifying, selecting and refining indicators often takes much longer.

Frequently, whatever process is used leads to the development of a large number of potential indicators – often far too many to collect and analyse effectively. Once a range of possible indicators has been developed it is useful to ask a few questions to help establish whether they are realistic or not. Sometimes the answers to these questions may lead to indicators being discarded. This helps to ensure that the remaining indicators are realistic. Some suggestions for questions are as follows:

- Will you be able to collect information on your indicator? If so, where will you get the information from?
- Is the information likely to be accurate (credible)?
- How much will it cost to collect the information in terms of staff time, project participants’ time and/or money?
- How often will you have to collect the information?
- Does it require baseline information? If so, can you get this information?
- Do stakeholders have the capacity (or desire) to collect the information honestly and accurately?
- How far will you be able to attribute the indicator to your efforts?
- Will the information tell you anything you do not already know?
- Will the information help you make decisions to improve future performance?
- Will it help you to be accountable to different stakeholders?
- How else will it help you (if at all)?

Once the indicators have been selected, the final step is to operationalise them by defining them clearly, and stating who will collect the information, when, how often, and which tools or methodologies will be used. This is explained further in the M&E Universe paper on M&E plans.

It is also important to recognise that some new indicators may emerge over the course of a project or programme, and other indicators may need to be removed or adjusted. This might be because the indicators prove too difficult or expensive to use, or because of changes in the external socio-economic environment, or because they simply don’t work as planned. A good monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system or approach will allow for the addition, removal or adjustment of indicators from time to time as a matter of course.

“An objective that cannot be measured may still have value as a guiding or inspiring objective. An indicator that cannot be collected is a worthless parasite.”

Further reading and resources

Chapter 5 of the INTRAC book *Sharpening the Development Process: A practical guide to monitoring and evaluation* (see reference below) is dedicated to indicators. Other papers in this section deal with setting objectives, and outputs, outcomes and impact. There are also papers that discuss linking indicators between different levels of an organisation and developing M&E plans. These papers can be accessed by clicking on the links below.



Setting objectives



M&E plans



Outputs, outcomes and impact



Programme indicators

INTRAC has produced a concise guide to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), intended specifically for use by small non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Written by Anne Garbutt, the toolkit is one of five produced as part of the Strengthening Small Organisations with Big Ambitions project (2021-22), which aimed to strengthen small UK-based NGOs working in international development. However, it can be used by any small NGO looking to develop their MEL practices. The toolkit contains a short section on indicators, and is available at <https://www.intrac.org/resources/monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-a-toolkit-for-small-ngos/>

References

- Bakewell, O.; J. Adams and B. Pratt (2003). *Sharpening the Development Process: A practical guide to monitoring and evaluation*. INTRAC, UK.
- OECD (2022). *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management: 2nd Edition – prepublication version*.

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INTRAC is a values-based, not-for-profit organisation with a mission to strengthen civil society organisations. Since 1991, 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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