

SETTING OBJECTIVES

Objectives describe the changes a project, programme or organisation seeks to achieve or influence. They can be set at different levels from broad strategic aims through to specific project objectives. They can be simple deliverables that are under the control of a project or programme, or long-term goals dependent on many 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, Sumberg and Farrington, 1994). A good monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system cannot make up for poor project or programme design. If objectives are unclear or unrealistic then M&E can become very difficult. By contrast, if objectives are clear then the task of an M&E system is much easier. Part of this task 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.

An objective usually 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 is doing.

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. Often, these objectives are linked. For example, project objectives may be required to feed into programme objectives, which in turn might be expected to align with country, regional or organisational objectives.

Three broad 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 against diseases. These reflect the outputs (deliverables) of a project or programme.
- Objectives can also reflect desired changes within a project or programme’s lifetime. A project or programme would normally expect to have a significant influence over these changes, although they might be subject to other influences as well.
- At the other end of the scale, a goal or aim is a wider and longer-term change. Many other organisations and factors might also contribute to the goal or aim, and it may be designed to be achieved long after the end of a development intervention.

Measuring objectives

Some people believe 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.)

S pecific	<i>The objective should define exactly what needs to change</i>
M easurable	<i>It should be capable of being measured or verified</i>
A chievable	<i>It should have a realistic chance of being achieved</i>
R elevant	<i>The objective should be appropriate for the intervention</i>
T imebound	<i>It should be defined within a specified period</i>

A SMART objective is defined in a way that enables a project or programme to know exactly how and when to measure it. This enables certainty about whether or how far the objective has been achieved. Clearly, it is much easier to set SMART objectives for a very specific project than for a large programme or the work of an entire organisation. However, some argue that all objectives should be SMART.

Others argue that this is too limiting, and that it may be unwise to set SMART objectives when working in areas such as conflict resolution, empowerment or governance where some things are too difficult to measure, or where there is no clear agreement about what success looks like. They argue that if all objectives must be SMART, organisations may avoid working towards 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. increased enrolment of children living in South Sudan*) and then measured through specific indicators.

INTRAC believes that it is sometimes appropriate to develop SMART objectives. But sometimes it may be more appropriate to develop broader objectives, and attempt to assess progress using specific indicators. There may even be occasions when it is useful to develop broad, guiding objectives that are designed to inspire and shape the design and implementation of a project or programme, but which cannot accurately be measured.

There are no hard rules in this area, and context is important. 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.

Finally, 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 of doing so means it is not considered worthwhile.

The ambition of objectives

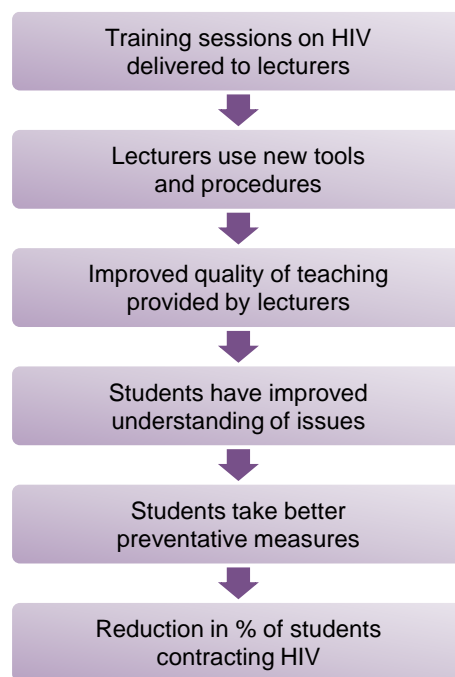
In most projects and programmes there is a variety of potential objectives at different levels ranging from short-term, small-scale changes through to longer-term, wider changes. This can present challenges for project or programme planners when defining objectives at the start of a development intervention.

The example in figure 1 illustrates this, using a set of objectives derived from an HIV&AIDS awareness-raising project in South Africa. 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.

At the beginning of the project, staff were expected to select one single purpose statement to fit into a project proposal and logical framework. However, they found this difficult because there were different levels of ambition, designed to be achieved across different timescales.

In this scenario there are two potential solutions. The first is to set one objective but then to develop a range of

Figure 1: Hierarchy of Objectives in an HIV&AIDS Project



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 objective 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
- # and % of students taking preventative measures

The second option would be to develop a theory of change, objectives tree, problem tree, or similar tool that can show all the different objectives and the relation between them. This could then be presented alongside a proposal or logical framework to show the complexity of the project or programme in greater detail. It could also be used as a more useful and worthwhile basis for monitoring and evaluation.

Setting Objectives for different purposes

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. 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. In the example provided in figure 1, this might mean stating the objective as a reduction in the % of students contracting HIV. On the other hand, if 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 much lower level (e.g. lecturers use new tools and procedures).

These are often the realities of life within social development, and there is no point in insisting that people set realistic objectives if doing so means they can'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 wasting resources trying to measure objectives that are unlikely to be achieved in the project period, or are dependent on too many external factors. In the second case, the objectives might be achieved easily, but might not represent sustainable or meaningful change.

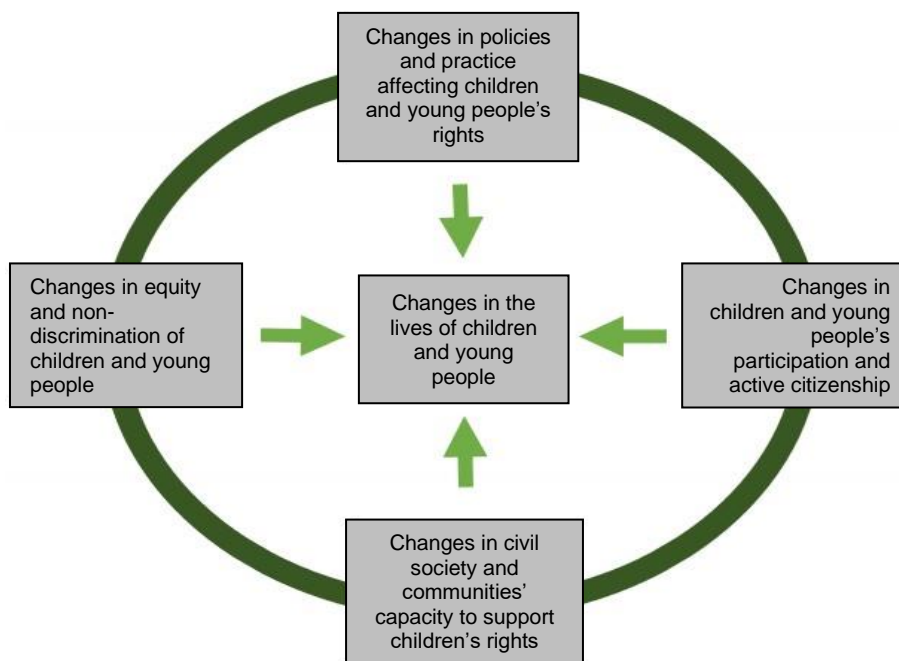
Dimensions of change

Many large, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) require different projects and programmes to develop specific objectives, and then link them to broader, strategic objectives. Increasingly, organisations or large programmes are going further and are developing **dimensions of change**. These are sometimes known as **domains of change**.

Dimensions of change are broad areas of change to which different interventions within an organisation or large programme are expected to contribute. The dimensions normally represent the areas of change an organisation or large programme believes it should and could be influencing. They are broad and generic, as they are designed to be applied in multiple contexts. By contrast, objectives set within interventions at lower levels, e.g. projects, 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 in the diagrams (see CDKN, 2010 and Save the Children UK, 2004).

Dimensions of change are often very useful for guiding planning. This is because they ensure that the objectives of different interventions align with organisational or programme objectives. Some organisations also develop

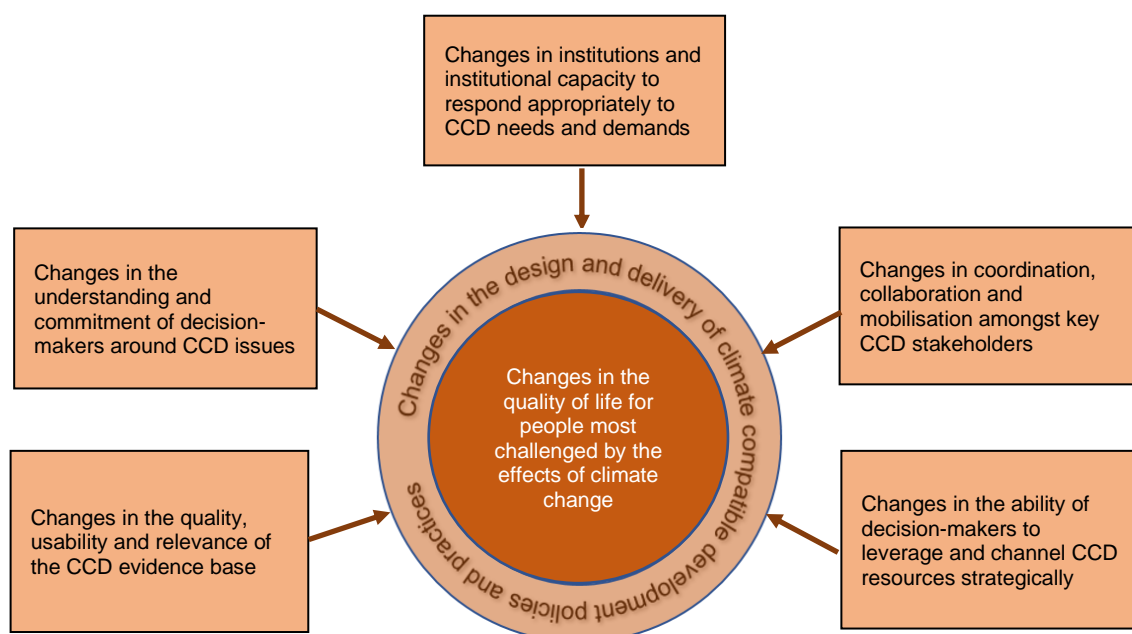
Figure 2: Save the Children UK Dimensions of Change



and use dimensions of change because they believe 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, dimensions of change are not *measurable* as such. Often, the best that can be done at organisational or programme level is to collect together a series of examples of change from different projects (or smaller programmes) under each dimension to illustrate the type of changes that are occurring

Figure 3: CDKN Programme on Climate Compatible Development (CCD) Dimensions of Change



Further reading and resources

Further information on setting objectives at different levels can be found in the associated M&E Universe paper on outputs, outcomes and impact. Another paper in this section of the M&E Universe deals with indicators. These papers can be accessed directly by clicking on the links below.



Outputs, outcomes and impact



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 NGO looking to develop their MEL practices. The toolkit is available at <https://www.intrac.org/resources/monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-a-toolkit-for-small-ngos/>.

References

- CDKN (2010). *Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) M&E Plan*. M&E Department, CDKN, 2010.
- Okali, C.; J. Sumberg and J. Farrington (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 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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