Identifying Indicators

An indicator is defined as a measure used to track progress, reflect change, or assess project performance, providing important information to help managers make decisions. It is easy to imagine how critical is the definition of these indicators in the M.E.A.L. process. They are the building blocks of the M.E.A.L. planning and implementation. To identify indicators, ask yourself: "What information do I need and why do I need it?". You may need data to understand how and why changes are happening or to comply with donor reporting requirements. You may also need data to appreciate the level of project progress and achievement or to share and discuss results with community groups, government agencies, or other organizations.

Type of indicators

The type of indicator you choose also depends on the type of objective statement the indicator is intended to track. There are three levels of indicators:

- Indicators for strategic objectives reflect change that is sought, they measure progress against statements like "reducing the impact of something" or "improve access to something";
- Indicators for intermediate results reflect the expected change(s) in identifiable behaviors of a specific group or the expected change(s) in systems or policies. They measure progress against statements like "new policies enacted or implemented", "people practicing new skills and knowledge" or "institutions implementing new operational guidelines";
- Indicators for outputs represent tangible goods and services delivered by the initiative. They measure progress against statements like "people trained with increased knowledge and skills", "quality roads built", etc.

Remember that some objective statements may not require indicators. For example, unless specifically mandated by your organization or a donor, a project logframe would not include indicators at the goal level. This is because goal-level objective statements reflect longer-term impacts that are usually not achieved through the completion of a single project. The same is true for activities unless they are requested by a donor. In fact, logframe models do not typically develop indicators to track the completion of activities. This is because activity indicators are often stated in the descriptions of the activities themselves.

How many indicators?

Each objective statement will require at least one indicator. Sometimes more than one indicator is needed. For example, your donor might require a specific indicator to inform its reports, while you might need a different type of indicator to inform your decision-making and to provide updates to communities. In this case, you would need at least two indicators. But remember that collecting data takes time and money, so it is important to understand how many indicators you need also in relation to your budget availability. The key to a good set of indicators is their quality, achievability, and usefulness.

Now let's take a closer look at the tools that can be used for useful and quality data collection.

Creating SMART Indicators

In the previous article the concept of indicators was introduced and broadly explained. Now, let's see on which criteria a data collection is based.

S.M.A.R.T is an acronym that identifies 5 criteria according to which the indicators should be:

- Specific: indicators must be very closely related to the desired areas of improvement expressed in the objectives statements they represent. They should specify what is to be achieved (quantity and quality), the geographic boundary (location) of the expected achievements, and the target population;
- Measurable: indicators should be written in a way that promotes an accurate assessment of progress;
- Achievable: indicators must be attainable given the budget, time, and resources available;
- Relevant: indicators must measure the change your project needs to track.;
- Time Bound: indicators must identify the timeframe within which the change is expected to occur.

Now let's see in which forms the indicators are developed.

Standard or Custom Indicators?

Based on these criteria, you can start collecting data, but before spending time and money on this activity, consider whether it is possible to use standard indicators.

Standard indicators are those indicators already built by large international agencies and have several benefits: they save time and money and provide quality. In fact, the standard indicators have already been tested in previous projects and in multiple contexts, being recognized worldwide for their quality. Moreover, they have a track record of providing valid and reliable data. Sometimes they are required by the donor, for that reason always remember to review your funding agreements to confirm whether donors require the use of specific indicators. Finally, standard indicators facilitate data aggregation. This is because their use helps organizations compare data across multiple sectors and makes it possible to compare results and communicate them across multiple projects.

Currently, there are hundreds of standard indicators (for example, the ones provided by USAID). In general, it is recommended to use standard indicators. However, in some cases, these indicators are not available or do not meet the specific information needs for the project. In these cases, a custom indicator must be developed.

Direct or Indirect Indicators?

When constructing indicators, it is also important to distinguish between direct and indirect (proxy) indicators.

The direct indicators track change by directly examining what you are trying to measure. For example, in a school project, if you want to know how many classrooms have been built or how many students reached, you can measure progress using a direct indicator (e.g. by the third year of

the project, 80% of the youth in the village will be enrolled in school). When it is difficult, expensive, or impossible to measure change directly, proxy indicators can be used, to obtain an approximate measure of change. Proxy indicators are indirect indicators that track change by examining markers that are generally accepted as an approximation of what you want to measure (e.g. youth involvement in school activities is consistent).

Quantitative or Qualitative Indicators?

When looking for indicators to include in the logframe, it is important to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative indicators, because they work differently in tracking the project outcomes.

Quantitative indicators are measures of quantities or amounts. They are useful to measure the project progress in numerical information, including numbers, percentages, rates (e.g. mortality rate), and ratios (e.g. the number of young people to the number of old people).

In contrast, qualitative indicators measure judgments, opinions, perceptions, and attitudes toward a given situation or topic. These are important because they help explain how things are changing and why. When used together, the two types of data can offset each other, being used to improve their ability to track project progress and make decisions as the project progresses.

The SPICED Approach

Let's explore a useful approach to quantitative data collection, before moving on to look at measurement methods.

There is a real benefit to developing project goals and indicators in close collaboration with local communities, using participatory methods. This is because community members have better knowledge and experience in identifying what needs to be changed and how to understand and measure that change. The SPICED framework was created with this in mind, in order to help teams collaborate with communities to develop indicators. In the view of this approach, collaboratively developed indicators are stronger when they have specific qualities:

- Subjectivity: perspectives and experiences are subjective. Individuals in the community have experiences that give them unique perspectives that can give high-value feedback to the researcher, making what may seem obvious or irrelevant to others a critical fact;
- Participation: indicators should be developed involving both the final beneficiaries of the initiative as well as local staff and other stakeholders;
- Interpretability and communicability: objectives and indicators defined at the local level and created through participatory methods must be interpreted to make them clear to all stakeholders and the broader public;
- Cross-checking and comparability: evaluations should be validated using a cross-checking technique, comparing different indicators and progress, and using different sources of information, methods, and researchers;
- Empowerment: the participatory process of defining and evaluating indicators should empower the individuals involved, making them reflect critically on the evolution of the situation;

- Diverse and disaggregated: an effort should be made to try to collect indicators from as many groups as possible, especially between men and women, and this information should be recorded in such a way as to see the differences change over time.

Using this approach to achieve greater participation by encouraging individuals to collaborate increases the quality of the indicators identified.

This insight concludes our analysis of logframe indicators. Up next we will see how the measurement methods are characterized.

How to identify the Measurement Methods

In addition to the indicators, there is a "new" element in the logframe that we do not find neither in the Results Framework nor in the Theory of Change: the measurement methods.

Factors to consider

The last column of the logframe is about the methods you use to collect data. When choosing a measurement method, you need to consider two factors: whether you want to use primary or secondary data, and whether you want to use quantitative or qualitative methods.

Primary data is collected directly from the project team and stakeholders. Generally, primary data sources provide more reliable and appropriate data to measure progress. On the other hand, secondary data are those data that are already available through other published or unpublished sources. For example, secondary data sources are existing records, statistics, and reports. The advantage is that collecting data in this way costs less and reduces the risk of duplication of effort. However, access to this data is often limited and it can be difficult to find data that directly address the precise needs of your project.

The other aspect to consider is how you want to collect data to track project progress. You can use a quantitative method, which consists of collecting data that can be counted and analyzed statistically. As the term indicates, quantitative methods measure quantities and are used in development projects, because they give an accurate measurement and because they are easy to compare over time (or between projects). Alternatively (but we will see later that they can be mixed), you can use a quantitative method, which collects data by capturing participants' experiences through questions that stimulate reflection, ideas, and discussion.

Qualitative data are analyzed by identifying themes, topics, and keywords that are intended to track changes in participants' attitudes and perceptions, identify why and how change is occurring. This method is used to collect data that answers the question, "How and why is change happening?". This can be accomplished by using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation.

Quantitative or Qualitative Methods?

When choosing which method to use for data collection, it is important to remember that both have merits and demerits and that the choice should be guided by the type of progress you want to track and by your context.

The strength of quantitative methods is that they are scalable, generalizable, objective, and standardized. Also, they are compatible with data collection and analysis on digital devices. Conversely, a point of weakness is that the results do not capture the depth and complexity of a problem and are not well suited to identify and explore unforeseen or unexpected factors.

In contrast, we can say that the strengths and weaknesses are reversed for qualitative methods. In fact, through interviews and participatory observation, it is possible to understand the depth and complexity of a situation and unexpected factors or factors that had been taken for granted. In addition, it is possible to understand why people act a certain way or make some decisions. However, qualitative data are difficult to generalize to a large population and are difficult to transcribe directly to digital devices.

Next, we will learn how to can minimize the weaknesses of these approaches to create quality indicators using a mixed approach.

Make data collection more effective

Mixed-Methods Approach

The ability to use both quantitative and qualitative measurement methods gives you a way to answer different questions about the same indicator.

By using a mixed-methods approach, you gain the ability to deepen your understanding of the project, providing more complete and integrated data to track progress, analyze results, and make decisions. It can give a direction and the extent of change along with an understanding of what it contributed to. In addition, this approach, when incorporated with a process called "triangulation," has the ability to strengthen data analysis and interpretation.

Triangulation leads to data validation by cross-checking more than two sources. Project teams by triangulating the collected data (qualitative and quantitative) reinforce its validity. The triangulation method makes it possible to overcome some of the weaknesses of the individual methods.

Balancing Cost and Complexity

As we already know, data collection activities can be expensive and often consume a significant portion of a project's M.E.A.L. budget. For these reasons it is important to choose measurement methods that provide quality data, minimizing the weight of costs and efforts. As you identify the measurement methods you will use to collect indicator data, weigh the trade-offs between the quality and the cost as well as the complexity of each option.

If you are interested in knowing more about project writing and evaluation, and would like to have the assistance of professionals, you can email us at ssr@signis.net. At SIGNIS Services Rome we are experts in the sector and have been involved in project writing for the creation and development of communications projects all over the world for decades.

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